

Exiled Activists Mobilize Online

ANGIE TORRES-BELTRAN | CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Exile—the banishment of individuals from their home country—is a commonly used form of repression against activists, dissidents, and other political opponents. The aftermath of exile usually limits opposition influence and weakens home-country networks. However, while banishment may keep exiles physically away from home, it does not keep political opponents from promoting their agendas from abroad. In a [new article](#) published in the *American Political Science Review*, authors Jane Esberg and Alexandra A. Siegel demonstrate how exile affects political opponents' online activism. Their research highlights the importance of digital technologies and social media as an accessible and powerful political tool.

Although exile removes opposition figures from their normal operations and networks, the rise of digital media technologies has made it easier than ever to promote their content and spread their activism. Indeed, with social media opposition figures can attract a large following from all over the world and amplify their message in diverse languages. Many political opponents that have gone into exile have used online networks to continue their activism. Esberg and Siegel understand exile as having three important effects on activists' political strategies. First, exile will increase political opponents' public support for foreign-led policy solutions. Second, political opponents in exile will focus less on local issues. Third, being away from their home country will make it easier for political opponents to harshly criticize their government.



To test their theory, Esberg and Siegel focus on opposition figures from Venezuela. They developed a dataset of opposition speech used online. Specifically, they collected the exile status and Twitter history of activists and political opponents dating back to January 2013. The Twitter data allowed the authors to compare how exiled and

Angie Torres-Beltran is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government at Cornell University. Her research interests include the comparative study of gender, violence, political participation, state-society relations, and justice.



A person stands at the Venezuelan boarder (Getty/[mirsad sarajlic](#)).

non-exiled opposition figures promote and spread their activism online.

The results suggest that Venezuelan activists' and political opponents' political discourse changes after exile. After being forced to leave their home country, opposition figures are more likely to discuss and support foreign-led policy solutions to Venezuelan crises, such as diplomacy and sanctions. Exiled activists and political opponents are less likely to discuss local-level issues, such as food shortages, power outages, and protests. Exiled opposition figures are also more likely to accuse their regime back home of narco-trafficking, fascism, Cuban/Russian influence, and repression.

Overall, Esberg and Siegel show how exile changes the ways that opposition figures express dissent. Esberg and Siegel demonstrate how after exile, activists and political opponents become more internationally focused. More importantly, they show how exile increases discussions of and interactions with foreign concepts and audiences. The results highlight the importance of focusing on the political consequences of exile. As digital spaces continue to influence politics, understanding the ways in which opposition figures use it is crucial to advancing our knowledge on repression and activism. ■

ESBERG, JANE, and ALEXANDRA A. SIEGEL. 2022. "How Exile Shapes Online Opposition: Evidence from Venezuela." *American Political Science Review*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422001290>