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HAVE DIGITAL MEDIA PLATFORMS A ROLE IN FOSTERING A POLARIZED PUBLIC DEBATE? EVIDENCE FROM LATIN AMERICA

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Panel Rationale

In recent years, democracies worldwide have experienced a sharp rise in political polarization, coinciding with the global spread of digital media platforms (Yarchi et al., 2021). After the Pink Tide in Latin America, which brought left-wing leaders to power following years of autocratic rule, the past decade has seen a resurgence of a new conservative right, leading to protests and the rise of illiberal populism.

Over the past two years, several Latin American countries have seen an uprising of extreme right-wing political actors and parties. The region's conservative agenda often relies on leader personalization to legitimize political and social issues (Rennó, 2022). In Argentina, Javier Milei's 2023 rise exemplifies this rhetoric. In Brazil, despite Lula Da Silva's moderate government, extreme right-wing sentiments persist, evident in the January 8 Brasília attacks and recent results of local elections. As Chile approaches its 2025 elections, the impact of digital media on politics remains crucial. This phenomenon is not limited to Latin America (Chaguri & Amaral, 2023); Donald Trump's re-election in the U.S. highlights the global link between social media and political polarization, underscoring the need for international attention.

Although research on political polarization is growing, it remains relatively new in Latin America (Bello, 2023) compared to the US, where most studies are concentrated (Marino & Iannelli, 2023). While polarization is not inherently a threat to democracy, destructive political polarization (Esau et al., 2024) can severely harm democratic processes. In such cases, hybrid media ecosystems and their sociotechnical features contribute to the decline of public spheres (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021).

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The studies in this panel explore how social media platforms drive polarization by analyzing platform affordances, user behavior, and the textual elements shaping public debate. Through diverse methodological approaches, the panel offers insights into key issues across Latin American case studies and various social media platforms.

Choucair and colleagues introduce a novel method to identify "otherness" in political speeches by Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, and Peru leaders. By analyzing target identities ("whom") alongside issues, ideologies, partisan choices ("what"), and sentiments and interactions ("how"), the study shows how targets are demonized and vilified as enemies. This approach advances polarization studies by revealing the targets of polarized rhetoric and enhancing our understanding of how discursive strategies shape in-group and out-group perceptions in Latin America.

Soares and Osborne-Carey analyze the discourse of pro-Bolsonaro supporters on Facebook during the 2022 Brazilian elections, highlighting how political narratives contributed to the January 8th, 2023 insurrection in Brasília. The study challenges a narrow binary definition of disinformation, showing that supporters framed their actions as defending and 'restoring' democracy, claiming it was lost with Lula's return. These findings underscore the need to consider such imaginaries when studying political disinformation and the limitations of rigid 'right' vs. 'wrong' information dichotomies.

Tavares examines online comments directed at Brazilian federal congresswomen after the "Rape PEC" (PEC 164/12) proposal to ban legal abortion. Analyzing Instagram comments, the study explores how political alignment shapes discourse and polarization. Right-wing politicians supported the PEC using religious values, while left-wing politicians emphasized women's rights. Social media dynamics and online communities contributed to commenters aligning with posts and exchanging attacks, intensifying the polarized debate.

Paroni, Marino and Giglietto analyze how politicians' visual communication on Instagram influenced destructive polarization during the 2024 São Paulo local elections. The study examines allegations that a mayoral candidate boosted his campaign by paying for viral short videos, leading to high engagement, an imbalanced election environment, and attacks on the opposition. The research underscores the impact of visual media on digital interactions and democratic processes, highlighting the growing role of image-based strategies in political campaigns.

The panel will contribute to the scholarly discourse on political polarization by providing empirical insights and theoretical perspectives with regional and global relevance.

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MAPPING THE TARGETS OF POLARISING DISCOURSES: IDENTIFYING AFFILIATIONS AND OPPOSITIONS IN LATIN AMERICA ELECTIONS

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Introduction

This study introduces a novel framework for analysing discursive polarisation, focusing on the often-overlooked aspect of 'entities' – e.g., individuals, social and identity groups, organizations, nations, institutions - that are the subjects of polarised discourse. By expanding the scope of polarisation studies to include not only the 'what' (issues, ideologies, partisan choices) and 'how' (sentiments, interactions) but also the 'whom' (target entities), we offer a more comprehensive understanding of discursive practices in polarised contexts. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that combines manual with computational content analysis, we examine political speeches made by leaders in five different Latin American countries (Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Peru). Our findings reveal that polarisation can be better understood if the 'whom' is also considered.

Background

During his government (2018-2022), the former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro has made severe accusations and attacks against a wide range of individuals, groups, and institutions. He used terms like “terrorist defender”, “morally bankrupt”, “dictator”, “imbecile”, “idiot,” “liar”, and “psychopath”, and issued threats such as “he will be forced to suffer the consequences”. Such harsh language is unusual for the leader of a democracy, even during the heightened tensions of an election campaign when targeting political opponents. But more important than the language choice is the fact that Bolsonaro directed these remarks at justices of the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF), a fundamental democratic institution.

Another frequent target of Bolsonaro has been the media, a common adversary among contemporary political leaders. For instance, during his 2016 campaign, Trump declared, “The media and establishment want me out of the race so badly - I WILL NEVER DROP OUT OF THE RACE, WILL NEVER LET MY SUPPORTERS DOWN.” This is one of many examples of his repeated attacks on the media, which he frames as

part of the “enemies”, an out-group opposed to him and his supporters. Similarly, in 2018, Bolsonaro stated, “The role of the mainstream media has been to DISINFORM and DECEIVE people! It is a disservice to Brazilians, and a service for the corrupt system!”. In representative democracies based on competitive elections, some level of criticism, even harsh criticism, from politicians and leaders against their opponents is expected. However, it is another problem when political discourse often extends beyond direct rivals to include other individuals, groups, and institutions—such as democratic institutions, the media, science, social and identity groups, and even entire nationalities or nations. These actors can become embroiled in political polarisation if they are drawn into or become part of “us versus them” narratives.

Defining and characterizing political polarisation, including what are its features, has been a major endeavour that scholars have pursued in the last decades. Political Science, Psychology, Media and Communication, and Public Administration are some of the fields that have been explaining political polarisation dynamics through distinct lenses, transforming and complexifying how we understand this phenomenon. A first key transformation has been the transition of focus from ideological dimensions to affective components. Beyond how much the opposing political camps diverge ideologically between each other, it matters the attitudes of those camps towards each other (Iyengar et al., 2012). Another transformation has been the increased scrutiny of how political polarisation manifests through communicative interactions on digital platforms. This shift has introduced concepts such as interactional (Yarchi et al., 2021), interpretive (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) and discursive polarisation (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023). Elements such as how opposing camps frame a given issue and how much they are willing to interact with each other have emerged in the polarisation literature.

Despite so many advancements and the specification of so many different elements, a crucial aspect remains insufficiently explored: the specific delineation of “whom” - identifying precisely who is polarised against whom. This study discusses what does it mean to look at the entities embodied in polarising discourses, how we can do it methodically and why it’s important.

Research Questions

RQ1: Which types of entities do political leaders in Latin America discursively construct as part of the **in-group** in their public discourses?

RQ2: Which types of entities do political leaders in Latin America discursively construct as part of the **out-group** in their public discourses?

Methodology

We applied a two-step methodology we call **Affiliation-Opposition Mapping**. First, we identify all the entities mentioned in every analysed discourse. Next, we classify the level of affiliation or opposition of the speaker towards that entity.

An entity in this study is defined as any formal or informal individual, group, organization, body, or institution. The entity can be human (e.g., politicians, activists,

citizens) or non-human (e.g., political parties, organizations, governments, movements). Abstract concepts, policies, and issues are not considered entities.

The level of Affiliation or Opposition of a given Text towards a given Entity is represented by:

{text} → {entity}: {affiliation/opposition level}

where:

{text} refers to the input text being analyzed.

{entity} is any formal or informal individual, group, organization, body or institution mentioned in the text.

{affiliation/opposition level} represents the degree of affiliation or opposition towards the entity.

The Affiliation-Opposition 7-Point Scale levels are defined as follows:

- **Strongly Opposed (-3):** The entity is portrayed in strongly negative terms, and/or there is a deep antagonism or rejection of the entity.
- **Opposed (-2):** The entity is portrayed in negative terms, but not strongly, and/or the entity is explicitly criticized and distanced from.
- **Somewhat Opposed (-1):** The entity is criticized or distanced from the author of the text in a subtle way.
- **Neutral, Mixed, or Not Assessed (0):** The entity is portrayed in a mixed way, and/or there is no assessment or evaluation. This includes, but it's not limited to, cases where additional context is needed, mentions that are purely informational, locations being mentioned without being treated as actors (purely as locations), and similar cases.
- **Somewhat Affiliated (+1):** The entity is portrayed in mildly positive terms, and/or there is a subtle or cautious connection with the author of the text.
- **Affiliated (+2):** The entity is portrayed in positive terms, but not in an exaggerated way, and/or there is a clear, but not intensely strong, connection with the author of the text.
- **Strongly Affiliated (+3):** The entity is portrayed in strongly positive terms, and/or there is an extremely strong connection with the author of the text.

Preliminary Results

The step-by-step described above was applied to different political leaders in the world in a previous project (Author, 2024). In this phase, we are applying the framework to discourses made by political leaders in Latin America. Figure 1 shows the entities portrayed by Jair Bolsonaro in the Strongly Opposed (-3) level in his Facebook posts during the 2022 Brazilian Elections:

The most frequent entities portrayed by Bolsonaro in the strong opposition camp include the Supreme Court, the Superior Electoral Court, the largest television broadcaster in Brazil, and entire countries. Although all of these may be criticised in democratic

regimes, the focus here is on addressing them as enemies, demonising, or vilifying them.

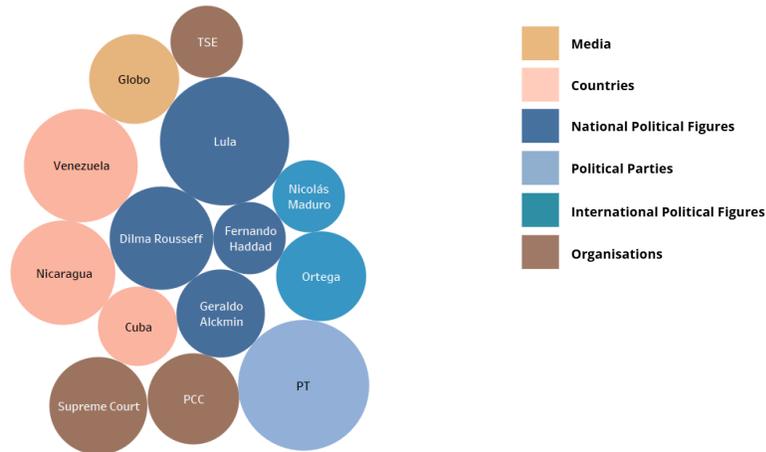


Figure 1: Entities portrayed by Bolsonaro as Strongly Opposed

Building on the preliminary findings, the next phase of the research involves expanding the Affiliation-Opposition Mapping framework to analyze additional political leaders across Latin America. This will allow for a comparative assessment of how different political figures construct in-group and out-group entities in their public discourses.

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HOPE, BETRAYAL AND DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL: EXAMINING PRO-BOLSONARO MULTIMEDIA CONTENT ON FACEBOOK TO EXPLAIN THE 8TH OF JANUARY INSURRECTION

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Introduction

In this study, we analyse pro-Bolsonaro supporters' discourse during the electoral process in the 2022 Brazilian election. The main objective is to understand how political discourse led to the 8th of January 2023 insurrection in the country's capital, Brasília, when former president Jair Bolsonaro supporters broke into government buildings to protest the new president Lula da Silva and claim that the election was rigged. The campaigns were marked by intense polarisation on social media – following the same trend seen in 2018 (Recuero et al., 2020). In this context, the political scenario in Brazil can be described by what Esau et al. (2024) defined as destructive political polarisation, when the dynamics of polarisation becomes a threat to democracy due to the dismissal of information, breakdown of communication, exacerbated space for extreme voices, and similar problematic behaviours. Specifically, this occurs because of the asymmetries between the two sides of the political divide in the country, with the (far-)right-wing engaged in disinformation campaigns and promotion of hyperpartisan content (Soares et al., 2019) - similar to what was described by Benkler et al. (2018).

Through evaluation of the multimodal content political elites and supporters produce on Facebook, we identify a trajectory that traces wavering attachment to the democratic process, as themes of hope and promise are eclipsed by feelings of betrayal, leading to the anti-democratic violence that emerged on the 8th of January, when Jair Bolsonaro supporters assaulted government buildings and claimed for a coup d'état. Recent studies explain that this insurgence was induced by Bolsonaro's authoritarian and anti-democratic attitudes followed by his supporters (Amaral et al., 2024; Finchelstein, 2023) and motivated by claims of an election fraud (Bastos & Recuero, 2023). We reveal that supporters did not simply express anti-democratic sentiment linked explicitly to populist or fascist sympathies, or rely solely on clear-cut identifiable disinformation to justify violence. Instead, our analysis shows a complex relationship with democracy as ideal, where supporters present themselves as the true democrats failed by the pillars of the democratic process.

Considering the findings of this study, a narrow definition of disinformation that relies on a binary dichotomy between true or false is insufficient. Rather, we adopt a broader perspective of disinformation that takes into account the participatory practices in promoting disinformation narratives (Starbird et al., 2023) and how it emerges from collective and ritualist behaviours that are only meaningful when actors involved in the narrative are positioned in a shared reality (Bastos & Tuters, 2023). This means that

more than a simple dichotomy between true or false considering cases of verifiable information, disinformation emerges from long-running beliefs shared by social groups – beliefs which are then mobilised to promote misleading narratives and alternative realities about society (Bastos et al., forthcoming).

Methods

We used CrowdTangle to collect two multimedia datasets based on Facebook posts containing links (n=481,610) or images (n=509,219) during the election runoff, a frenzied window of discursive activity where hopes and fears concerning the result were expressed. For the analysis, we use a quanti-quali digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013) to make sense of this dataset. We used social network analysis (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) to create bipartite networks and identify the most posted links/images among pro-Bolsonaro users, thereby curating the multimodal encounter supporters experience through platform participation. This was followed by a Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) in which we qualitatively reviewed links (n=136) and images (n=161) posted at least 50 times within the pro-Bolsonaro clusters to identify thematic categories characterising the most shared content related to the electoral process. We identified 34 links and 36 images directly related to the electoral process and the narratives that motivated the 8th of January insurrection, which were posted 7158 times and generating almost 1.3 million interactions. The Thematic Analysis of this dataset involved an iterative process in which the first author suggested loose categories in a first round of coding, which were further refined into four broad categories in the second round of coding. The second author joined for the third and final round of coding and discussion that merged the four categories into two overarching thematic categories discussed below.

Findings and discussion

Two main thematic clusters were identified in our analysis. On one hand, Facebook posts communicated “Hope” in the electoral process and Bolsonaro’s victory. These posts highlighted positive opinion polls showing Bolsonaro in the lead and invited supporters to safeguard the election. One common belief in these messages was that if there was no interference in the electoral process, Bolsonaro would emerge victorious. On the other hand, Facebook posts also showed a sense of “Betrayal”, particularly by democracy and democratic institutions. These posts reproduced claims of censorship against conservative media and accused the Brazilian Electoral Supreme Court of favouring the leftist Lula da Silva in what some called a plan to steal the election that indicated a nefarious relationship between politics and media.

One key element of our findings is the somewhat unexpected attachment to democracy among pro-Bolsonaro Facebook users, often classified as fascist and anti-democratic (Amaral et al., 2024; Chaguri & do Amaral, 2023), and how the 8th of January insurrections appeared motivated by a need to intervene and “restore” rather than “dissolve” democracy – in practice, giving power back to Bolsonaro. Our findings show the limitations of looking at disinformation from a narrow perspective that consider binary definitions of right and wrong, true and false (Bastos et al., forthcoming; Bastos & Tuters, 2023). The attachment to democracy among pro-Bolsonaro groups show that

collective imaginaries and shared realities must be taken into account when looking at the context of political disinformation.

Our findings also have important implications for current strategies to mitigate disinformation. The findings resonate with previous studies that highlight the limitations of fact-checking (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022), which relies on clear-cut definitions of true and false; and research examining the effectiveness of flagging social media posts, which has previously been shown to have limited effectiveness among partisan groups (Gruzd et al., 2024). Partisan groups are more at risk of believing disinformation (Soares et al., 2023) and are more likely to rely on alternative realities when making sense of political events (Bastos et al., forthcoming); in our case what appears is a twisted conceptualisation of “democracy” that is only valid when the outcomes are positive for pro-Bolsonaro groups.

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PUBLIC OPINION AND POLARIZATION: THE DEBATE ABOUT THE "RAPE PEC" ON BRAZILIAN CONGRESSWOMEN ON INSTAGRAM

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Introduction

This study analyzes comments directed at Brazilian federal congresswomen who spoke out on Instagram regarding the approval of the admissibility of the so-called "Rape PEC" (PEC 164/12). This proposed amendment to the Brazilian Constitution, which seeks to prohibit legal abortion, was approved by one of the Committees of the Chamber of Deputies on November 27, 2024. The study aims to: a) identify the types of discourse circulating in these digital spaces; b) examine whether the debate is polarized based on the congresswomen's political alignment—whether they supported or opposed the PEC.

To achieve these objectives, we analyzed comments on posts made by Brazilian congresswomen with over 100,000 followers on Instagram following the approval of the PEC's admissibility. Among the 29 congresswomen who met this criterion, only 10 published posts about the proposal: 4 from right-wing parties and 6 from left-wing parties. In total, the 10 posts analyzed in this study received 14,841 comments.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, anchored in the broader discussion on the role of digital platforms in shaping online political discourse. Preliminary findings suggest a significant difference in engagement levels between posts made by right-wing and left-wing congresswomen. The next steps involve lexical and co-occurrence analysis to determine the meanings embedded in the discourse and assess the presence of polarization discourse within the dataset.

Theoretical Approach

Brazil is one of the countries with the highest gender inequality in institutional political representation (Teixeira & Mota-Santos, 2024). The most recent general elections marked a significant moment in Brazilian politics, as the country elected the largest number of female federal deputies in its history—a total of 91 out of the 513 available seats.

However, this quantitative progress does not necessarily translate into an improvement in the quality of female representation in terms of maintaining and expanding women's rights. A significant portion of these female legislators represents the conservative wing (Teixeira & Mota-Santos, 2024), aligning with right-wing parties (Bolognesi et al., 2022) that hold strongly conservative positions. This trend was particularly evident during the approval of the "Rape PEC" in the Constitution and Justice Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, when most right-wing female legislators celebrated the outcome under the religious discourse of the "right to life", while left-wing female legislators viewed it as a setback for women's rights.

The sharp division between the right and the left in this case reflects the broader political and social polarization in the country (Escosteguy-Medronho, 2024), where individuals' political stances have become a core part of their identity and a primary marker of differentiation from the "other" (Nunes & Traumann, 2023). This phenomenon is reinforced by the rise of evangelical influence, which promises to improve living conditions for marginalized populations, and by the lack of regulation of big tech companies, which intensify user segmentation based on individual preferences and facilitate the unchecked spread of misinformation (Escosteguy-Medronho, 2024).

International literature has already identified that political leaders' posts on social media platforms influence their followers' opinions (Alcott et al., 2020; Parmelee & Roman, 2020). Instagram, in particular, has evolved from a simple photo-sharing platform into a powerful space for political expression and debate (Kumar, 2024). Parmelee and Roman (2020) observed that even in the absence of a direct relationship between a political leader and their followers, the influence remains significant, suggesting that Instagram can reinforce beliefs and create ideological echo chambers, strengthening the formation of homogeneous thought communities.

From an ideological perspective, Boulianne, Hoffmann, and Bossetta (2024) found that right-wing users are more likely to post political content across all platforms. The authors speculate that right-wing users perceive these online spaces as more supportive of their viewpoints, making them more likely to post, whereas left-wing users may perceive their opinions as less welcome.

Although many recent studies suggest that social media contributes to political polarization, Alcott et al. (2024) found that access to Facebook and Instagram may slightly increase affective polarization, but the effects are relatively small compared to long-term trends. Further research is needed—particularly within the Brazilian context—to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. This study seeks to address this gap.

Data Collection and Methods

Data were collected between December 3 and December 10, 2024, following the PEC's approval by the Constitution and Justice Committee of the Chamber of Deputies. The research process involved accessing the Instagram profiles of 29 Brazilian federal congresswomen with over 100,000 followers to identify those who had addressed the issue. Among them, only 10 had published posts related to the PEC: a) right-wing representatives - Carol de Toni, Chris Tonietto, Clarissa Tércio, and Julia Zanatta; b) left-wing representatives - Célia Xakriabá, Érika Kokay, Fernanda Melchionna, Jandira Feghali, Sâmia Bomfim, and Talíria Petrone. Some politicians, such as Sâmia Bomfim, made multiple posts; in such cases, the first post published after the PEC's approval was selected.

The data collection was conducted using the paid version of the IGCommentExporter extension for Google Chrome. The 10 posts received a total of over 180,000 likes and 14,841 comments. After collection, the dataset was manually cleaned and organized

into two separate spreadsheets: one for comments on right-wing congresswomen's posts and another for comments on left-wing congresswomen's posts.

For the analysis, we adopted a multi-method approach to achieve the study's objectives: a) identify the types of discourse circulating in these spaces; b) examine whether the debate is polarized based on political alignment—posts supporting versus opposing the PEC. To do it so, we employed Reinert's hierarchical classification and similarity analysis using the Iramuteq software. Reinert's method segments the text corpus into units with similar vocabulary while distinguishing them from other clusters (Salviati, 2017; Camargo & Justos, 2018). Additionally, similarity analysis identifies co-occurrences between words, mapping the connectivity among them to reveal the structural composition of the textual corpus (Camargo & Justos, 2018). The preliminary findings are presented below.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary analysis suggests a significant difference in engagement between right-wing and left-wing congresswomen. Among right-wing congresswomen (4 posts), the total engagement surpassed 100,000 likes and 9,500 comments. In contrast, left-wing congresswomen (6 posts) accumulated approximately 79,800 likes and 5,300 comments. Despite the smaller number, engagement—measured in likes and comments—was nearly twice as high for right-wing congresswomen compared to their left-wing counterparts.

It is noteworthy that all right-wing congresswomen in the study supported the PEC, framing their discourse around religious values and the "right to life". In contrast, all six left-wing congresswomen opposed the PEC in their posts, emphasizing women's rights in their arguments.

Given that digital platforms facilitate the formation of online communities and that users tend to follow politicians with whom they identify (Parmelee & Roman, 2020), we hypothesize that most commenters align with the views expressed in the posts they engage with. However, we also anticipate the presence of critical comments, including potential attacks and insults—especially against left-wing congresswomen, who generally face more online harassment than their right-wing counterparts in Brazilian social media spaces (Sabbatini et al., 2023).

The contrasting stances of the two groups suggest fundamental differences in political discourse occurring on their profiles, contributing to a polarized debate. These aspects will be further explored using Reinert's classification method and co-occurrence analysis through similarity analysis.

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AMPLIFIED EXTREMES: VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND SYMPTOMS OF DESTRUCTIVE POLARIZATION ON INSTAGRAM DURING BRAZIL'S 2024 LOCAL ELECTIONS

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Introduction

This work-in-progress research examines how interaction patterns within politicians' visual communication on Instagram have contributed to destructive polarization manifestations in digital spaces during the 2024 local elections in São Paulo, Brazil.

Polarization in Brazil has been extensively studied, particularly the presidential elections following Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 victory, characterized by intense polarization, the widespread dissemination of misinformation online (Bastos & Recuero, 2023), and the extensive use of social media to promote a plural right-wing and far-right ideological and social agenda (Rennó, 2022; Cesarino, 2019).

Considering this scenario, the study adopts Esau and colleagues' (2024) conceptual framework of destructive polarization, viewing it as a phenomenon that manifests in and through communication practices, shaping digital interactions and influencing political discourse that can significantly undermine democratic processes. According to the authors, destructive political polarization is characterized by five key symptoms: (1) breakdown of communication, (2) discrediting and dismissing of information, (3) erasure of complexities, (4) exacerbated attention to and space for extreme voices, and (5) exclusion through emotions (Esau et al., 2024, p. 8).

Our case study examines how political visual content on Instagram contributed to destructive polarization during the mayoral race, with a focus on the São Paulo elections. The vast majority of research primarily focuses on presidential elections, consequently overlooking local elections. Besides, this case study is relevant given the allegations that a mayoral candidate leveraged a viral short video competition to enhance his political campaign, alongside the increasing centrality of image-based political communication in recent years (Veneti et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, limited research has focused on the visual representation of politics on platforms like Instagram (Farkas & Bene, 2021), even in Brazilian political communication studies (De Lima Santos et al., 2024).

Background

In 2024, Brazil's local elections saw over 155 million voters in more than 5,500 municipalities elect mayors. These elections were the first since the 2022 general elections and the attempted coup in Brasília on January 8, 2023.

São Paulo's mayoral race, with around 10 million voters—the largest in the country¹—featured ten candidates from almost thirty parties and coalitions. The run-off was between incumbent mayor Ricardo Nunes of the centrist Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) and Guilherme Boulos of the left-wing Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL). Pablo Marçal, an influencer with over 12 million Instagram followers, ran for the far-right Brazilian Labour Renewal Party (PRTB), while Congresswoman Tabata Amaral represented the center-left Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). Nunes and Marçal backed Bolsonaro, and Boulos and Amaral supported Lula.

The election drew national attention for its violence and radicalism, expressed in the incident where a candidate hit Marçal with a chair during a live TV debate², and lack of scruples when Marçal promoted a viral video contest on social media with cash prizes, prompting Tabata Amaral to file a legal complaint with the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) accusing him of paying supporters to spread his videos through over 5,000 Instagram profiles³. Marçal's videos consisted of short clips from television debates and divisive videos targeting his opponents, particularly Boulos and Amaral, often using mockery and controversy to criticize them.

The imbalance in media exposure, also highlighted by the TSE decision, aligns with one of the five symptoms of destructive polarization described by Esau et al. (2024): the excessive attention to and amplification of extreme voices. As argued by Esau and colleagues (2024, p. 12), a media system incentivizing extreme views can favor the adoption of extreme rhetoric by politicians and parties. This disproportionate focus on extreme views may contaminate the health of the media system, pushing political actors to flood it with disinformation and hyperpartisan news to obtain political gain, consequently threatening the democratic processes (Stelter, 2021).

The rather heated tones reached in the electoral campaign by the public debate we described above and the popularity of Marçal's visual campaign led the authors to question how citizens reacted to the circulation of these messages. This aspect is relevant, considering that platform algorithms tend to favor content that generates a high number of interactions, further propelling their visibility. The study is thus built on the following research questions:

RQ1. Was there a significant difference in the interaction patterns (likes and comments) and reach (views) across all candidates during the election period?

¹ See: <https://sig.tse.jus.br/ords/dwapr/r/seai/sig-eleicao/home?session=314553070475320>.

² Borba, F., et al. (2024). OVPE Special Report - 2024 Brazilian Municipal Elections. Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Retrieved from <http://guel.uniriotec.br/files/OVPE%20Special%20Report%20n%C2%BA%201%20-%202024%20Brazilian%20Municipal%20Elections.pdf>.

³ See: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/crmwxv04xy9o>.

RQ1a. Are these differences driven by candidates' ideological affiliations?

RQ1b. Are these differences driven by visual clues in the content?

Data and Methods

To answer the research questions, we compiled a list on the Meta Content Library User Interface (MCL UI) containing the official Instagram accounts of all nine mayoral candidates (one had his candidacy refused by the TSE).

Since the platform imposes limitations on data collection⁴, we successfully gathered data for six out of the nine candidates, resulting in a final dataset of 4,926 posts collected between August 1 and November 1, 2024. The time frame covers the official campaign period, beginning on August 15, and includes both the election day on October 6 and the ballot day on October 27. The collected content was categorized as follows: videos (N=4,046), photos (N=465), albums (N=261), and stories (N=154).

This dataset will be categorized following the Farkas and Bene scheme (2021). Multilevel regression models will be calculated to assess what visual tools and candidate characteristics are associated with different interaction patterns.

Preliminary Findings

The analysis conducted so far highlighted that Marçal had the top 39 most viewed posts during this period, which together totaled almost 415 million views and over 20 million interactions. Over the entire time frame, he achieved nearly 2 billion views and almost 80 million interactions. In total, he published 1393 posts. Candidate Boulos, with 10 fewer posts (N=1293), achieved almost 550 million views and around 32 million interactions. Tabata Amaral, instead, has almost 400 million views and around 13 million interactions with 471 posts.

Marçal's posts were closely tied to his electoral campaign, with the most viewed featuring him mocking opponent Boulos by showing an employment record book, accusing him of never having worked in his life. This video was posted multiple times during the campaign. Some of the reels are short videos from television debates. Video content frequently targeted political opponents, using insults and accusations, as Boulos being addicted to cocaine and Amaral labeled a communist. In one video, Marçal insulted Nunes, saying, "If you want to continue living in a sh*tty city, vote for Nunes". Lula and former President Rousseff were also attacked. Some also supported Bolsonaro and included attacks on media outlets like Rede Globo, motorcades (reminiscent of Bolsonaro's), and the TSE and the Brazilian justice system. A notable strategy was the frequent use of call-to-action phrases in his posts ("Click here and

⁴ MCL imposes limitations on data retrieval. There are two options during data collection on the UI. "Downloadable Public Data" subset includes content only from widely-known individuals and organizations (accounts with a verified badge or at least 25,000 followers). "All Available Public Data" subset provides view-only access to content from widely recognized figures (accounts with a verified badge or at least 1,000 followers) as well as public posts from business and creator accounts (Meta, 2025).

follow me”, “What is your opinion on that?”, but also “Mention him [Boulos] in the comments”).

This presentation will present and discuss the findings of the analyses outlined in the methodological section.

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