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# Populism in the Communication Strategy of Lula and Bolsonaro: An Analysis of the Television Debates in Brazil's 2022 General Election

## Abstract

**The 2022 presidential election in Brazil involved two radically different candidates but with broad similarities in their populist discourse and communication strategies. The electoral campaign and the results polarized the country between the supporters of the outgoing president, Jair Bolsonaro, and the incoming one, Lula da Silva. This article analyzes the two television debates that took place in the second round of the presidential election in October. The interventions of the candidates have been studied using the methodology of critical discourse analysis applied by Hawkins (2010). The goal is to discover the degree of populism present in the candidates' discourse in the two debates studied. The results show evidence of the highly populist nature of the discourse of the two leaders in both television events. This characteristic, as well as other important aspects of the campaigns and the narrow margin of Lula's eventual victory, may explain the level of polarization evident in the country. It may also be the reason behind the rejection of the election results by the followers of Bolsonaro and their protest against the change in president.**

## Keywords
**Political communication, election debates, populism, critical discourse analysis, media coverage.**

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *The Brazilian political panorama: Polarization in the 2022 general election*

The citizens of Brazil, polarized to levels never seen before in the country's history, went to the polls in October 2022 to determine who would be their president. Some favored a third choice, but all the voting surveys indicated that the election would be decided between Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and then–President Jair Messias Bolsonaro –Brazil's two most prominent political personalities and the leaders of two conflicting political projects.

The election was particularly important because citizens would be manifesting their opinion on the country's first far–right government. Had the electorate definitively turned to the far right? Or would the left (or center–left) reconnect with voters after thirteen years in power and six in opposition?

A total of eleven politicians ran for president, but the result of the first round (October 1) confirmed that there would be no place for a third candidate. Lula led the vote with 48.43% of

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the votes, followed by Bolsonaro with 43.20%. The other nine candidates accounted for 8.37% of the votes. Brazil was officially divided.

Bolsonaro's result, considerably higher than was indicated by the polls[1], demonstrated the division of the country around two diametrically opposed figures. For some time now, Lula and Bolsonaro have been symbols, and both the press and Brazilian society drew ideological lines centered on these personalities, respectively called: *lulopetismo* and *bolsonarismo*.

*Lulopetismo* is a concept that emerged in the 2000s to explain the governing style of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (the Workers' Party or "PT"). Its most prominent features were expounded in editorials and opinion articles published in the traditional Brazilian press, especially in the newspaper *O Globo* (Gagliardi, 2018). The term had a negative connotation and was normally used when addressing issues of corruption in the federal government. It was also meant to associate the governments of Lula and his successor, Dilma Rousseff, with the external phenomenon of "Bolivarianism[2]," arguing that their "national populist" styles threatened the proper functioning of institutions, politics and democracy as a whole. In 2022, the PT candidate rejected such a radically leftwing vision, suggesting a "broad front" against *bolsonarismo* that would involve various factions of the political spectrum. This brought him the support of numerous parties and personalities from the right, center and center-right, many of them longstanding opponents of the PT.

In contrast, *bolsonarismo* clearly represents the Brazilian far-right that managed to win the 2018 presidential elections. For Cesarino (2019), *bolsonarismo* is an ambivalent term, one that is built around neoliberalism, but emphasizing populist-conservative appeal, a dichotomy summed up in the slogan of Brazil's "new right:" "liberal in economy, conservative in traditions." The press also imbued the term with negative connotations, associating it with a lack of respect for democracy and religious radicalism. Following his winning strategy of 2018, Bolsonaro supported religious and moralist agendas for the 2022 elections with a consistently ultra-conservative filter.

In this sense, the notion of populism permeates the interpretation of these two political personalities. The Brazilian mainstream media views populism as negative in both its political manifestations (Rebouças *et al.*, 2022), but academics tend to be more neutral and seek to isolate its core components, especially in discourse. Along these lines, this article aims to identify the populist discursive elements employed by Jair Messias Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in their two televised debates held during the second round of the election.

The first debate[3] was broadcast by TV Band on October 16, fifteen days before the elections held on October 30. The second debate[4] took place on TV Globo, on October 28, and was considered key because it appeared on the largest free-to-air Brazilian television network, two days before the election. Faced with poll results showing a growing rapprochement between Lula and Bolsonaro during the second round, both campaigns focused their efforts on undecided voters. The country's main research institutes highlighted Lula's six points over Bolsonaro days before the first debate. Before the second, the situation remained stable: there was no notable difference in the polls between the two debates.

Due to the results in the first round of voting, many had begun to mistrust the research institutes. Nevertheless, the polls served as a thermometer for the candidates' campaigns. The

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[1] On the eve of the first electoral round, the scenario announced by the country's main research institutes was: for *Datafolha,* Lula had 50% of voting intentions, against 38% for Bolsonaro; *Globo/Ipec* granted 51% to Lula and 37% to Bolsonaro; *Ipespe* granted 49% to Lula and 35% to Bolsonaro; *Genial/Quaest* indicated 49% for Lula and 38% for Bolsonaro. All the polls had a margin of error between 2% and 3%.

[2] A term associated with Simón Bolívar, a central figure in the liberation of the Spanish colonies in America in the 19th century, but which, in recent years, has been associated with former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his policy of resistance to US imperialism (Gagliardi, 2018).

[3] YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYVk1CeIs60&ab_channel=BandJornalismo.

[4] GloboPlay: https://globoplay.globo.com/v/11072315/.

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debates were key opportunities for the candidates to show their value and skill before the public. After the results of the first round, the campaigns of Lula and Bolsonaro intensified their bellicose tone against their opponents. From that moment on, the election became a duel of opposing ideological positions.

Bolsonaro's focus on moralistic and religious issues also forced Lula to mobilize in the same direction in a dispute over the Christian and evangelical vote. The influence of the Church in the vote of its adherents seemed to motivate this campaign behavior. Thus, through social networks and traditional media, the campaigns became what was called "holy war," with each candidate attacking his competitor on issues of a religious nature and, particularly, as regards Christianity. This confrontation between the two candidates was characterized by the use of disinformation, as had already occurred in the 2018 Bolsonaro campaign.

Analyzing the populist discourse present in these media events –so decisive for the final election result– can help clarify how important this political strategy was for these two ideologically opposed figures. It will also allow this strategy's efficiency in attracting Brazilian voters to be measured.

## 1.2. *Election debates as televised media events*

An election involves a competition between candidates, parties, programs and proposals to win the support of voters –especially undecided voters. Moreover, election debates constitute one of the central milestones of an election, as they are widely viewed by the electorate and are an example of deliberative democracy and the "public sphere" as understood by Habermas (Bondebjerg, 2015; Chadwick, 2013; Habermas, 2006). The very format of such debates lends itself to enthusiastic media coverage, as it generates political confrontation and puts forward a winner –often portrayed as a kind of hero (Marín Lladó & Pérez Tornero, 2020).

Broadcast live to large audiences and with a high impact in traditional media and social networks, the debates are fine examples of the mediatization of politics and an essential part of local, regional and nationwide elections. Due to its reach, television has become the mass communication tool *par excellence*, and it has the capacity to turn debates into media events that entertain as well as inform. For this reason, debates are media spectacles that must be broadcast live, planned well in advance, and executed at the proper time and venue, dramatically representing their participants as epic figures worthy of the viewer's attention (Padilla-Castillo, 2014).

Televised debates marked a turning point in political communication, and Luengo (2013) has explained some of the peculiarities of this medium. First, televised debates are an exception to mediated politics, that is, they do not respond to the parameters of usual media coverage and allow the citizen/voter to directly hear the politician's opinion on campaign issues and perceive his or her qualities as a speaker (López García *et al.*, 2018).

Second, televised debates reach enormous audiences and generate a far greater impact than any other campaign event. They are broadcast at prime time and reach segments of the electorate that do not regularly consume political information and also undecided voters (Santander, Elórtegui & Buzzo, 2020).

Third, they encourage further political discussion on other media platforms, where politicians, citizens and journalists can contribute using digital tools, such as social networks, with the capacity to condition the public agenda (Casero-Ripollés & Feenstra, 2012; Vaccari, Chadwick & O'Loughlin, 2015; Vergeer & Franses, 2016). In short, the study of the electoral debate is complex because it addresses different dimensions that have consequences on the electoral behavior of the audience and voters.

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### 1.3. *A new way of understanding political action: The phenomenon of mediatization*

Debates are an ideal example of how the media operates in politics and they allow us to understand the basic concept of this process: mediatization. This concept relates to the intervention or participation of media companies and their professionals in the traditional framework in which traditional political institutions and their usual forms of representation operate, such as political parties, platforms or associations (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Livingstone & Lunt, 2014). Since the 1990s, in the context of rising globalization, the mediatization of politics has dominated the sociopolitical sphere with a central role for the media (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). With the concept of mediatization, a new paradigm opens up in the study of the influence of the media on political life, with a double-sided activity: on the one hand, as a source of information; on the other, as the main channel of communication and interaction between political representatives and citizens (Strömbäck, 2008).

Politics is made more interesting when its key figures are visible and increasingly present in the media (Canel, 2018). The media, in turn, also acts as a space for the promotion and dissemination of politicians and their ideas, with the participation of journalists and other media figures. The usual space for political gatherings, where information and opinion on current affairs were mixed, has given way to new forums characterized by entertainment where other audience demands are met and politicians are able to be sociable and charismatic, in line with the phenomenon of intensive media coverage experienced by modern society (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). It is a mutually beneficial relationship in which both parties obtain a considerable benefit. On the one hand, the media generates a wider audience due to the relevance of the figures it attracts and the different content that is capable of producing. On the other hand, political leaders are more accessible and closer to citizens, especially during election periods, participating in entertainment programs or interviews of a personal nature.

In the current context, political activity operates within the media and its key figures (political parties, representatives, institutions, and local, regional and nationwide governments) could be considered parts of the media spectrum (Berardi, 2017). Political strategies are designed to be implemented, but also to be communicated by the spokespersons or communication offices of parties and institutions. When public representatives speak before legislative bodies, they are trying to attract the attention of the general public, rather than to establish dialogue, negotiate and reach a consensus with the rest of the members of the chambers. Citizens watch and comment on political spectacles in which their leaders no longer participate as strategists and negotiators, but rather behave like media stars –"influencers"– who prefer to employ personal, sensationalist discourse (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel, 2017; Pérez-Curiel, Jiménez-Marín & García-Medina, 2020). As a result, politics now allows for what has been dubbed "media populism" (Postill, 2018; Thompson, 2016), characterized by manifestations of charisma and leadership that involve more aggressive and emotional discourse.

### 1.4. *Populism: Concept and framing in the field of Political Communication*

Populism has become one of the central concepts in Political Science, Sociology and Communication research in recent decades. Despite numerous attempts to accurately define this fuzzy term, only a few reference frameworks have been offered to explain its main characteristics beyond a purely ideological vision that pits the (virtuous) people against the (corrupt) elites (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). For instance, Gómez-Iniesta (2016) has analyzed it from three different perspectives:

Hawkins (2010) uses the dichotomy between populism and pluralism in his analysis of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and indicates how the term populism is used in connection with two entities. On the one hand, the will of the people (Good), and, on the other, a conspiratorial minority (Evil). These two entities confront each other through warlike language and

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moralizing rhetoric. Hence, populism is understood as a soft ideology based on the struggle between good and evil, the elites and the people, and this emerges in its discourse. Charisma stands out as a central element of political figures, where society perceives extraordinary abilities and almost divine personalities that promise radical change. Charismatic leaders facilitate the success of populist movements because they are capable of establishing guidelines and directing their followers with attractive ideas and language that makes them feel represented.

Laclau (2008) presents a series of relevant ideas to facilitate an understanding of populism and explains it in two ways. On the one hand, it is an ideology or mobilization of a constituted group and, on the other, it is a way of building the group's own unity. He positions himself in favor of the latter and points out that it is necessary to accept its implications, such as recognizing that the people cannot be understood as an ideological expression, but rather a relationship between social agents. It is a means to build unity in the face of the diversity typical of populism (Mouffe, 2005). To build unity based on this perception of populism, it is necessary to identify smaller units within the group and respond to their social demands. Only in this manner will a gulf between the people and the institutional system be avoided.

Jagers and Walgrave (2007) understand populism as something more than a political strategy. It is a communication style that is practiced by many ideologies to mobilize support and obtain electoral gains. It is defined as a style without pejorative and authoritarian connotations, and different from other concepts –anti-system sentiment or intolerance– traditionally linked to this phenomenon. Here, populism should not be considered an ideology, but a communicative style adopted by political figures to show their closeness to the people, using emotion and charisma to emphasize their political will through a narrative that exposes issues such as the threat to security or the dichotomy between friend and foe (Manfredi-Sánchez, Amado & Gómez-Iniesta, 2022). On the one hand, there is the vertical position, which considers anti-elitism to be the main aspect of populism. The distance between the people and the ruling class, the media and economic power would constitute an external threat to the system, and the people responsible for this distance would be the root of society's problems due to their political ineptitude or self-interest. On the other hand, there is a horizontal dimension, where an internal enemy –some group within society– is stigmatized, threatened, treated as a burden, and blamed for the misfortunes of others. An example would be reactionary populism against immigration (Canovan, 1999).

The term populism was associated with Latin America in the mid-20th century (Krause & Hoffmann, 2010). During this particular period, Latin American countries sought to modernize along the lines of the United States, with communism being identified as the greatest threat to liberal democracy (de Castro Gomes, 2022). This experience associated the concept with authoritarian regimes and economic dependence, factors that endowed the term with a negative connotation. In Brazil, President Getúlio Vargas could be considered the first populist. He was president for almost twenty years (1930-1937; 1937-1945; 1951-1954) and was known as the "father of the poor." A charismatic leader and a unified people, identified as a population mass, are hallmarks of "classic" populism (Saes, 1994).

Lula, who rose to political prominence in the 1980s, when he ran for the presidency of the republic for the first time, was also identified by the press as a populist with all the negative connotations that the term entailed (Rebouças *et al.*, 2022). Ricci, Izumi and Moreira (2021) highlight the dualist element (people vs. elite) as a striking feature of Lula's populism, one which manifests in opposition to the inequality between rich (elite) and poor (people, a large part of Brazil's population being considered poor). According to this ideological construct, the people do not enjoy minimum conditions of welfare because a corrupt elite has stolen from them. This would be the expression of an "inclusive populism," typical of Latin America and different from Europe (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Ricci, Izumi & Moreira, 2021).

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Instead, Bolsonaro identifies with elements of a new populist wave associated with the radical right whose fundamental elements are nativism (a combination of nationalism and xenophobia), authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2021). Barbosa and Casarões (2022) provide a more recent contribution to the analysis of the populist profile of the former Brazilian president, identifying him with the concept of the religious-populist radical right. According to the authors, this new category of analysis is justified by Bolsonaro's new traits: a radical right-wing platform built primarily on religious values and supported by transnational religious networks. During his tenure, Bolsonaro ceded political power to religious groups to advance his conservative agenda. In addition, he used religion to shape the image of Brazil in international relations, with the purpose of establishing a new ethnopluralist and religious world order.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. *Research design*

The research attempts to analyze the discourse of the two main Brazilian political figures during the election debates broadcast on television in the 2022 electoral campaign: Lula and Jair Bolsonaro. Likewise, it seeks to identify the most prominent discursive elements linked to the populism of each of the candidates involved in the debates under study.

The main goal will be to identify and detail the arguments most used by the candidates in their interventions during the debates and to determine to what degree their discourse can be considered populist. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions have been raised:

RQ. Can the discourse of Lula and Bolsonaro be considered populist? Which of the two candidates uses the most populist discourse?

RQ. What kind of populist arguments are the most common in the discourse of Lula and Bolsonaro during the election debates? What are the main issues or themes present in the discourse of both candidates?

RQ. Are there significant differences regarding the strategies used by the candidates in each of the two debates analyzed?

The origin of this research concerns the context in which the analyzed discourse is framed –in televised debates and at prime time, shortly before the election, and with the participation of two candidates who are radically opposed ideologically. For this reason, the following working hypotheses have been proposed:

H1. The discourse of the candidates in the two debates analyzed can be considered "very populist."

H2. The discourse of both candidates will be more populist in the second debate due to the proximity of the election date.

H3. Lula and Bolsonaro focus their strategy on arguing about their "relationship with the adversary" and prefer confrontation with the other candidate to explaining their political program.

H4. Lula is the candidate who uses the most arguments relating to his "relationship with the adversary" and his strategy involves blaming Bolsonaro for the country's problems.

### 2.2. *Methodological techniques used*

The first phase of the study involved obtaining a complete overview of the debates and a transcription of the interventions and arguments of the two candidates. After this process, four concept clouds were created using the WorldCloud software, which displayed the most repeated words by each of the politicians in their turn of reply. This strategy provided the researchers with a first observation of the themes and questions that had been most frequently raised, as well as the expressions most used by the candidates, thus revealing the

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first interpretations of their communication strategies. The circumstances of the debates, with the participation of only two candidates, invite us to include an analysis of the most used terms. Given the thematic opening in each of the debates, the recurrence of words offers a vision of the discursive interests and the strategies of each of the participants in the debates.

As a central phase of this study, a critical discourse analysis (hereinafter CDA) was carried out on both interventions. This is a technique with particular characteristics that offers a vision of discourse that transcends the linguistic sphere and is based on hybridization. From the quantitative point of view, this technique allows us to count the populist arguments present in the text or debate, while its qualitative purpose lies in analyzing how the abuse of power, dominance and inequality are practiced, reproduced and occasionally fought by texts and speech in the social and political context. As a mechanism, it tries to denature the language to reveal what ideas, strategies, suppositions or conjectures appear in the discourse, with what frequency and how they can be classified. Thus, knowledge and opinion can be generated to motivate change processes in the aforementioned contexts, in addition to establishing a position with socially driven contexts (van Dijk, 2017). CDA has an interpretive, explanatory and multidisciplinary character because discourse contains intrinsically cognitive, emotional, social, political, cultural and historical dimensions. The interactions between the different elements that make up the CDA will be established at two levels: the micro-level, where the discourse and relationships between social figures are located; and the macro-level, where the social power relations between institutions and social groups are located.

Discourse and its analysis as a product of social interaction should undergo an evolutionary trend and go further. The process must lead to a necessary change in new theories that transform the existing relationships between the actors and stimulate interconnected networks made up of all kinds of social practices, whether economic, political, or cultural, that have semiotic elements with the capacity to transform their structures (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Semiotics, within social activity, constitutes discursive varieties, that is, different ways of producing social life through the discourse of social actors. Along these lines, CDA is located between an approach focused on changes in the orders of discourse and the semiotic production task that arises in the interaction (Machin & Mayr, 2014).

To identify the main discursive arguments of each of the candidates and determine the degree of populism present in each of their interventions, a coding protocol has been prepared in line with the one proposed by KA Hawkins in his critical analysis of Hugo Chávez's discourse in 2010. The following table shows the coding chart that was applied in the coding process for each of the debates:

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**Table 1**. Populist discourse coding protocol.

| Item | Populist | Pluralistic |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Framing of issues** | All issues have a moral dimension and can be reduced to a struggle between Good (the people) and Evil (a conspiratorial minority). Each theme is indicative of widespread malaise. | The framing can be moral or technical, depending on the subject, which is not indicative of anything else. |
| **2. Understanding of society** | One-dimensional. Society or people are a unit and whatever they decide is good. Preferences are understood as homogeneous. | Plural, conflicting. Society is plural, and majority opinion can move depending on the issue at stake. Preferences are understood as heterogeneous. |
| **3. Relationship with the opponent** | Inimical or antagonist (Mouffe). There is someone or a group responsible for problems, usually the minority qualified as "Evil." The adversary must be eliminated and expelled from the community. | Adversarial or agonist (Mouffe). Problems can have multiple roots, adversaries express a different course of action, and, even if it is considered inappropriate, it deserves respect. |
| **4. Proposals and solutions** | Radical change, a rupture with the previous system. Politics of 'hegemony' (Laclau). | The system is fine. What needs to change is the direction of policy on certain issues. Politics of 'differences' (Laclau). |
| **5. Legitimacy *vs.* legality** | Laws are to be violated if they are contrary to the will of the people. The adversary deserves war (surrounding the congress, public denunciations). Legitimacy prevails over legality. | Respecting the law is paramount and the law is understood to be in line with popular preferences. If not, the law should be changed but not challenged with violence and intimidation. |

Source: Own elaboration based on Hawkins (2010).

According to this evaluation, the discourse of each candidate is:

2. Very populist (4 or 5 items)
1. Moderately populist (2 or 3 items)
0. Not populist (0 or 1 item)

## 3. Results and discussion

To discuss the results of the word clouds it is necessary to observe the methodological procedure of the two debates. In this manner, it is possible to find out if, for example, certain terms were repeated more often due to the dynamics established by the television channels.
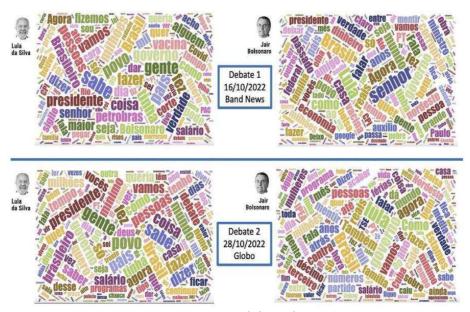
The first debate, on TV Band, lasted 152 minutes and followed two dynamics. In the first, each candidate answered questions from the journalists in a time frame of one and a half minutes. Five questions were asked on the following topics: public budget, separation of powers and interference of the Executive branch in the judiciary, financial aid to the needy population, privatization of Petrobras and fuel price policies, legislation on disinformation, support of the legislature for the approval of reforms and the impacts of the pandemic on education. In the second, candidates were free to choose the topics to be discussed in a maximum time of 30 minutes, divided into two blocks of 15 minutes, which could be administered between questions, answers, replies and counter-replies. To finish, each one had a minute and a half for the final considerations.

The TV Globo debate lasted 120 minutes and was carried out in five blocks. In four of them, the candidates could face each other directly. In these spaces, each candidate had 15 minutes (a full hour in total), which they could also manage freely. In two of those blocks, the topic was undetermined. In the other two, the candidates had to choose one of the six topics previously presented by the station: respect for the constitution, the environment, the fight against poverty, employment, balancing public accounts and racism. The candidates discussed the first four issues. The last block was devoted to final considerations, with a minute and a half for each one.

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Of the issues questioned by journalists in the first debate, only the term "Petrobras," in Lula's cloud, and *auxílio* (aid), in Bolsonaro's cloud, were highlighted. In the Globo debate, the proposed issues are not reflected directly in the word clouds, but in terms within the same semantic universes such as *salário* (salary) and *mínimo* (minimum) in the clouds of both candidates, used to discuss the policy of increasing the minimum wage in the fight against poverty.

Beyond the relationship with the methodology of the debates, it is interesting to highlight other considerations about the results of the clouds. In the first debate, Lula's cloud has the word *povo* (people) in the center because it is the term that the presidential candidate uses the most in his arguments when confronting his adversary. It should be noted that other words present in the same semantic universe also appear prominently in the cloud: *gente, pessoas* (people), *brasileiros* (Brazilians). In the second debate, the word *povo* continues to appear in the foreground, accompanied by the same terms mentioned above. This finding indicates an agreement, a line of reasoning and strategy that Lula maintains in both debates.

**Image 1**. Clouds of concepts most used by the candidates in their interventions in each of the debates. Prepared through the WordCloud tool.



Source: Own elaboration.

As for Bolsonaro, it is striking that his two conceptual clouds have the name of his opponent, Lula, in the center. Since the launch of the PT's candidacy, Bolsonaro's campaign has focused on Lula as his main rival. So much so that the election was characterized by a strongly polarized context between the two politicians, with a first round in which Lula obtained more votes than the incumbent president. In the direct confrontation, Bolsonaro was incisive and constantly repeated the name of his rival, either to get his attention (the two debates took place in a free dynamic, with the candidates themselves asking questions and provoking the reaction of their opponent) or accuse him of causing the problems raised in his discourse.

The word *Brasil* (Brazil) also appears centrally in the two clouds, confirming the already well-known patriotic bias of Bolsonaro's discourse, but the term also appears centrally in both of Lula's clouds, indicating a rapprochement of the discursive strategy of the two candidates. The word *família* (family) also appears frequently in the discourse of both candidates, which is to be expected in the discourse of the then-president, who on numerous

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occasions during his government invoked the slogan of the Brazilian Integralist Movement: "God, country and family"[5].

An interesting finding is that the third element of this triad, *Deus* (God), is more present in Lula's discourse and in the second debate. This can be explained by the fact that the second electoral round was marked by the so-called "holy war," with several accusations made by both candidates focusing on the principles of Christianity, as explained above. As the evangelical electorate was considered key in the dispute for the votes, the PT candidate needed to defend his Christian faith against rumors that he was a member of a satanic sect.

Another pertinent note regarding Bolsonaro's two clouds is the prominent use of the verb *mentir* (to lie), as well as the antonym of its noun: *verdade* (truth). The candidate used a clear strategy to disqualify his opponent by discrediting his claims. In this manner, Bolsonaro tried to build an image of Lula as a lying politician who had just been released from prison and who was still involved in the corruption cases of his past. Thus, he sought to portray himself as a man of God pursuing and possessing the truth. These first observations offer a discursive panorama of populism, with evocations of the idea of the people as a uniform group. And, also, patriotism with an emphasis on the new right-wing populist waves that link it to a conservatism represented by the supposed defense of traditional family values.

Continuing with the critical analysis of the discourse of the two candidates in the debates studied, a numerical count of the frequency of appearance of each of the five dimensions of populism was carried out, according to the proposal of Hawkins (2010). The analysis is not intended to be exclusively quantitative because the method advocates hybridization and a subjective reflection of the meanings included in the discourses. However, the expression of the frequency of appearance of each of the dimensions proved to be an effective mechanism for comparing the candidates and, thus, for better understanding which populist aspects are more present in each of their communication strategies.

The first core finding, based on the evaluation method of Hawkins (2010), indicates that the discourse of Lula and Bolsonaro can be considered strongly populist, as both candidates presented four of the five dimensions of analysis of populism defined by the author.

The research identified that neither of the two politicians used arguments included in the "legitimacy *vs.* legality" dimension, in either of the two debates. On the contrary, both Lula and Bolsonaro approached a pluralist vision regarding this dimension, highlighting in their discourse the commitment to respect Brazil's laws.

**Table 2**. Frequency of appearance of populist discourse.

|  | LULA | BOLSONARO |
|---|---|---|
| **Dimensions of populist discourse** | **Frequency of appearance** | **Frequency of appearance** |
| Framing of issues | 4 | 6 |
| Conception of society | 26 | 3 |
| Relationship with the opponent(s) | 47 | 65 |
| Proposed solution(s) | 5 | 7 |
| Legitimacy *vs.* legality | *Not present* | *Not present* |

Source: Own elaboration.

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[5] According to Gonçalves and Neto (2020, no page), Brazilian Integralism was "the largest extreme right movement in the history of Brazil," which emerged in the 1930s and was considered the political and fascist arm of the Catholic Church.

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**Table 3**. Examples of arguments used by the candidates in their discourse.

| Dimensions of populist discourse | LULA — Examples | BOLSONARO — Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Framing of issues | "The bandits. You know where the bandits are. You know about that neighbor of yours who had 100 guns in his house. And he was not from the suburbs of the Alemão complex. He lived in an apartment on Copacabana Avenue. You should not think that bandits only exist in poor places. The biggest bandits live in rich neighborhoods." | "Let me be very clear: you are not just electing a president of the republic. You are choosing the future of our nation. Whether we will live freely or not; whether the Brazilian family is to be respected. We are 90% Christians; if abortion will continue to be illegal in Brazil or not, we respect life from its conception. We do not want drugs to be legalized in Brazil. Those who defend drugs do not know the suffering of a mother with a child in this world. We respect private property; we are green and yellow, order and progress and not a red flag." |
| Conception of society | "The people [...] will punish you on October 30, so be prepared. My birthday is the 27th and people are going to send you home as a gift to me. That's going to happen because people need someone to take care of them. Someone who takes care of the people, someone who takes care of women and workers."<br>"The people know because […] they lived with me. That's why the people gave me the victory in the first round. Because the people know that if there's someone who knows how to take care of people here, it's me; who knows how to take care of children, it's me; who knows how to take care of workers, it's me." | "Yes, you really are the party of the division. There is a sector for each side to divide: us against them, whites against blacks, homosexuals against heterosexuals, parents against children, bosses against employees […] this party really only serves to divide."<br>"The people are not going to let this happen, our people breathe freedom." |
| Relationship with the opponent(s) | "I am the right person for the job because I was charged so that you could win the election. I was tried by a lying judge. I won 26 cases in federal courts. I won two in the UN, and I won in the supreme court. I am a good citizen. Now you already have 35 court cases lined up, a public prosecutor is going to come after you and you already have 6 criminal processes. Get ready."<br>"Never in the history of any government in the world has anyone played with the pandemic and death like you did." | "You are so loved by drug traffickers and bandits that, in Brazilian prisons, for every 5 voters, you had 4 votes."<br>"You siphoned off a lot of money for corruption. Your government was corrupt to the core. To the core!" |
| Proposed solution(s) | "You know that I am a candidate who intends to rebuild this country, for this country to return to normality, for the institutions to function properly, for Congress to legislate and not deal with the budget, for the government to govern, for the judiciary to fulfill its function, but above all it is necessary to restore agency to the poorest members of society." | "We carried out many reforms. Yes, it was a regulatory framework that created employment in Brazil. It created the conditions for Brazil to follow this path of prosperity, different from yours, Lula, where there was nothing but corruption." |
| Legitimacy *vs.* legality | *Not present* | *Not present* |

Source: Own elaboration.

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In the first debate, one of the journalists present on the set asked about compliance with a law that governs the use of the Union budget, imposing limits on the application of public funds that could prevent some proposals for spending on social programs. Faced with this question, both promised to follow the law and not change it. In the same debate, it was asked how the relationship between the president and the Federal Supreme Court (known by its Portuguese acronym "STF") would develop. Both promised to respect the peaceful coexistence between the Executive branch and the judiciary, without modifying the laws in this regard and thus be able to elect more judges of their persuasion to the court. This issue was the subject of debate because Bolsonaro had stated his intention to increase the number of members of the court in order to exert more influence on judicial decisions. It was yet another example of the tension between the Bolsonaro government and the STF, with the former president frequently questioning the court's decisions and encouraging his supporters to protest against its members. In the debate, his discourse was different, more democratic and pluralistic, committing himself not to launch proposals that modify the current formation of the STF.

The "relationship with the opponent(s)" dimension was shown to be the one with the greatest presence of populism in the discourse of both candidates, with a slightly higher frequency in Bolsonaro's discourse. This result was expected taking into account the scope in which the discourse took place: televised debates, normally in a context marked by confrontation (Marín Lladó & Pérez Tornero, 2020), and where a winner is declared. For this reason, both candidates were expected to seek to defeat their opponent, especially in a runoff debate in which there are only two contestants. In the cases of Lula and Bolsonaro, presented as opposing ideological options and characterized by populist discourse, accusing the opponent of being an enemy, responsible for society's problems and the country's future, is a predictable strategy.

Regarding the "concept of society" dimension, Lula's discourse is markedly more populist than Bolsonaro's. On many occasions, as already indicated in the word clouds, Lula evokes the word "people," referring to a united group, with a uniform thought and whose members share the same desires. Lula presents himself as the only candidate who can solve the problems of Brazilian society and satisfy its desires and demands. The use of terms such as "society," "people" and other similar terms is also associated with a strategy whose purpose is to show closeness to the citizens (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

The idea of national unity and a people that shares the same mindset is also put forward and reinforced by Bolsonaro, who accuses his opponent of trying to divide the people. An example of this is one of his phrases in the second debate: "Us against them, whites against blacks, homosexuals against heterosexuals, parents against children, bosses against employees. This party really only serves to divide."

By addressing the "people," both candidates also position themselves as the only ones capable of making the wishes of the people come true, thus embodying an almost divine personality, as Hawkins (2010) points out. The solutions they present to serve the people are a break with everything their adversary represents: Lula talks about "rebuilding the country" that was destroyed by the Bolsonaro government. Bolsonaro points out that his government carried out numerous reforms, opposing the administration of the PT governments, during which he considers that "there was nothing but corruption." Along these lines, the "proposed solutions" dimension appeared to a lesser extent in the debates, showing that the TV debates were more focused on accusations and attempts to demonize the other candidate than on the proposals for a new government.

Lastly, the "framing of issues" dimension also had a populist tendency in the candidates' discourse, although less frequently so. It should be noted that, by framing important issues for Brazilian society as a struggle between "good" and "evil," the candidates characterized everything represented by their rival as "evil." This strategy caused this dimension to be confused with the "relationship with the opponent" dimension, making the division between

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both categories more sensitive to interpretation. As qualitative analysis is the core of this method, it is less important to neatly separate these dimensions, given that the same fragment of discourse can contain more than one dimension of populist discourse. It is the presence or absence of certain aspects that is most important for the analysis.

## 4. Conclusions

The recent presidential election in Brazil was more disputed than expected and this has led to the polarization of supporters of Lula and Bolsonaro, revealing the divisions present in the country.

Taking into account the Hawkins coding and after the analysis of the two debates, it can be affirmed that the discourse of both candidates throughout the two debates is very populist, since four of the five proposed dimensions are present. This corroborates the first hypothesis. Likewise, the data analyzed does not show any difference between the first and second debates in terms of the greater or lesser populist tendency of the debates, which does not confirm the second starting hypothesis.

Although both candidates used the word Brazil frequently, Lula also used words like people, persons and Brazilians in contrast to Bolsonaro who focused more on his opponent. Hence, the name "Lula" stands out along with other concepts such as "God, country and family," which is also a slogan of the far-right Brazilian Integralist Movement, to which Bolsonaro added another term to create his campaign slogan: God, country, family and freedom. The concepts of people and homeland became a central axis of the discourses connecting populist concepts on the left and right.

Except in the "legitimacy vs. legality" dimension, the two candidates presented highly populist discursive arguments. Although both opponents stand out in the relationship with the opponent dimension, the two candidates presented their rival as an enemy in the context of televised debate, a space for confrontation, taking into account the results of the first round. This verifies the third of the proposed hypotheses. However, it was not Lula who used this dimension the most but Bolsonaro, which does not corroborate the last of the hypotheses.

In the "concept of society" dimension, Lula found a path to follow with the frequent use of the concepts people, persons, or society. These words are also used by Bolsonaro and connected with the divinity and redemptive capacity of the candidate to "save" and lead the people. To this is added the framing of issues dimension, where the struggle between "good" and "evil" contextualizes the debates in the aforementioned "holy war," where morality and religion were a common thread of the second round between the candidates. Religious and moralistic agendas took over the debates with issues such as the religiosity of the candidates, abortion or the gender issue. Likewise, the debates tried to attract the undecided through populist discourse and misinformation, as evidenced in this article. In this sense, television continued to be the central axis of political communication in this Brazilian election.

It is also possible to connect the candidates' strategies, evidenced in the debates analyzed in this research, with the events that followed in Brazil after Lula's narrow victory over Bolsonaro. The latter, in addition to discrediting the Brazilian vote counting system, tried to build an image of Lula associated with crime, corruption and lies, as can be seen in this study. These tactics reinforced the atmosphere of Brazilian polarization, while Bolsonaro's silence on the menacing protests of his followers can be seen as fuel for the events of January 8, 2023, when thousands of Bolsonaro supporters stormed the Praça dos Três Poderes in Brasilia.

Regarding the limitations of this research, it could be said that the sample analyzed was rather small. The debates are held at a specific time and are not repeated until the next election cycle in four years with the two main candidates and excluding the rest of the political formations and their representatives. Likewise, television has lost weight in terms of

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audiences, especially among younger consumers[6]. For this reason, it would be interesting to expand this study from the perspective of social networks, either to differentiate the discourse present in traditional media and on new platforms or even to analyze what is said and manifested on social networks during the debates. On the other hand, the election held in 2022 in Italy and Brazil, as well as the legislative election in the United States in the same year, offer a panorama where misinformation and populism have fueled the strategies of the candidates. This situation may be an opportunity for new research in a similar context before the next election cycle. Spain is an interesting field of work in view of the upcoming campaigns and elections.

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