

Evolution of Brazilian Democracy: Unveiling Election Dynamics in Political Issues, Negativity, and Acclaim

Isabella Gonçalves¹, Mathias-Felipe de-Lima-Santos^{2,3,4}, Vicente Fenoll⁵,
and Yossi David⁶

¹ Department of Communication, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany

² Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

³ Department of Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Language, and Literature, Macquarie University, Australia

⁴ Digital Media and Society Observatory, Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil

⁵ Department of Language Theory and Communication Sciences, University of Valencia, Spain

⁶ Department of Communication Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

Correspondence: Mathias-Felipe de-Lima-Santos (m.f.delimasantos@uva.nl)

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Abstract

In recent years, Brazil, as the world's fourth-largest democracy, witnessed the dominance of polarized and symbolically charged electoral campaigns on social media, culminating in the election of a populist political figure in 2018 and his subsequent defeat in 2022. Extensive research has indicated that political campaigns often sidelined substantive policy proposals in favor of negative and divisive issues. However, a critical gap remains in the absence of temporal investigations contrasting the prevalence of negativity and acclaim campaigns on social media platforms during elections. This study addresses this gap by examining associations between political issues and negative and acclaim campaigns across two Brazilian electoral campaigns. Drawing upon a sample of messages posted on Twitter ($n = 1,191$) during the presidential elections of 2018 and 2022, our study reveals associations between substantive political issues, such as education and health, and acclaim campaign strategies, while the divisive issues of Covid-19 and corruption are associated with negative campaign strategies. Moreover, the results suggest that gender policy is related to both acclaim and negative messages since it is a polarizing issue in Brazilian politics. Our study also shows an increased negativity trend, with the 2022 presidential election campaign more likely to be negative than in 2018. By conducting a temporal analysis of Brazil's political context, our study sheds light on the evolving dynamics of political communication in the age of social media, contributing substantially to the literature on negativity in political campaigns.

Keywords

acclaim; Brazil; elections; negativity; presidential elections; political communication; social media

1. Introduction

Divisive rhetoric and negativity dominate the political landscape in recent years. This trend of negativity is particularly evident in Brazil, where the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 significantly heightened these tensions (Barros Franco & Pound, 2022). Previous studies show that political campaigns often sidelined substantive policy proposals in favor of divisive issues that thrive on negativity in different contexts (Bene et al., 2022), and the discourse of political actors is more negative on online social media (Ernst et al., 2019). Political leaders' use of these platforms has become a prominent means of engaging voters and influencing the public agenda. Platforms such as Twitter (now X) allow candidates to reach voters directly without the news media filter and are used to gain supporters.

Twitter contributes to a collective negotiation of meaning between political actors, journalists, and citizens (Jungheer, 2016). Twitter users tend to be strongly interested in politics (Jungheer, 2016) and use this channel as a tool for political mobilization during election campaigns (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2017). Journalists and opinion leaders use Twitter to evaluate the climate of public opinion, and the political discussions on this platform frequently receive attention in the news media (Parmelee, 2014). Thus, political actors' tweet contents go beyond the limits of this platform and are reproduced in other communication arenas in a "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013).

Twitter is used by 18 million people in Brazil (Statista, 2023), which represents a bit less than one-tenth of the Brazilian population. The debate on this platform is relevant and its influence goes beyond the Twittersphere. Thus, analyzing the content posted by political actors on Twitter is especially important because extending the negativity on this platform to the public debate can increase political polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nai & Maier, 2023).

Yet, most of the research on negativity tends to focus on the case study of a specific electoral campaign. In addition, most studies on this topic are centered in North America and Western Europe (Maier & Nai, 2022). Thus, longitudinal research on negativity in Latin America is lacking. This misses the opportunity to establish whether the trend toward negativity is increasing or whether other factors condition it. Brazil, as the fourth largest democracy in the world, is a good case for understanding the role of Twitter in political campaigns in Latin America.

This study addresses this gap by examining the associations between political issues and the tone of the campaigns during the election campaigns of Brazil's presidential elections held in 2018 and 2022 on Twitter. We employ two binary logistic models with acclaim and negative campaigns as dependent variables, incorporating various political issues and the campaign year as independent variables. Candidates posting political messages are treated as fixed effects. Utilizing multivariate models, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which political issues are associated with negative and acclaim campaign strategies in Brazil?

RQ2: To what extent does the use of acclaim and negative campaign strategies differ between the elections of 2018 and 2022?

In doing so, this temporal analysis allows us to contrast the prevalence of negativity and acclaim campaigns on social media platforms between two different elections. Moreover, in line with Benoit's (2017) functional theory of campaigning, which distinguishes between attack, acclaim, and defense messages, this study emphasizes the critical role of acclaim campaigns and highlights their prominence alongside negative messages. We choose to focus on acclaim and negative messages because they are prominent forms of communication in the context of political campaigning, while defense messages appear to a lesser extent (Benoit & Sheaffer, 2006). Findings shed light on the evolving dynamics of political communication in the social media era, contributing substantially to the literature on the use of negativity in election campaigns and broadening the focus of Global South studies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. *In the Realms of Negative Campaigning*

In past years, social media platforms have evolved into powerful arenas of political campaigning (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Farkas & Bene, 2021). These digital spaces can target specific electorates with messages likely to resonate with these politicians, contributing to audience segmentation and the pervasive tendency of positive bias (Kruschinski et al., 2022). These platforms are also beneficial to these candidates as they can track their engagement in real time, offering ways for politicians to assess the effectiveness of their messages and adjust their campaigns (Bene et al., 2022; Porten-Che   et al., 2018).

Engagement from social media users plays a significant role in the widespread dissemination of political content, often at a lower cost for politicians than traditional media. Voters frequently organically share political content in their networks. Previous findings have shown that political messages appealing to anger and enthusiasm are more likely to spread on social media platforms (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). In this context, substantive political discussions are overshadowed by emotionally charged and sometimes misleading content in the digital environment (Bene et al., 2022). Consequently, political campaigns have become increasingly negative over time (Haselmayer et al., 2019; K  lz et al., 2023). This trend has been partially attributed to negativity bias, as individuals tend to pay more attention to negative content than positive information (Antypas et al., 2023; Meffert et al., 2006; Sch  ne et al., 2021). Furthermore, negative content is more likely to attract the attention of news media, particularly in the political context (Haselmayer et al., 2019).

One of the main issues in contemporary democracies is the rise of negative campaigning on social media platforms (Maier & Nai, 2022). This practice is known by the intentional dissemination of unfavorable information about an individual or a subject to tarnish their public image (Haselmayer et al., 2019), such as the political experience, the level of professionalism, or their characteristics (e.g., appearance, family history, sexuality, religion). The prevalence of negative political campaigns poses contemporary challenges as it contributes to declining public trust in candidates and democratic institutions (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Lau et al., 2007). Some authors have also associated increasing polarization with techniques used in negative campaigning (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nai & Maier, 2023).

The transition towards a more aggressive political discourse is particularly noticeable in an era characterized by the dominance of social media. Previous studies show that spaces where users can have prompt and direct content dissemination and communication are more likely to be associated with negative content like Twitter (Antypas et al., 2023; Schöne et al., 2021). This trend can potentially diminish the quality of democratic discussions by marginalizing substantive debates and citizens' political participation (Klinger et al., 2023; Mubarak, 2022). Simultaneously, the prevailing negativity can intensify animosity among voters and reinforce societal divisions (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

Politicians frequently emphasize negativity by prioritizing emotionally charged content without offering concrete proposals (Kruschinski et al., 2022). These topics are usually symbolic in nature, leading individuals to form extreme viewpoints on them, which in turn fosters polarizing reactions (Lee, 2021). Consequently, instead of focusing on specific political proposals that aim to solve different problems in society, negative campaigning often leads to sensational, divisive and controversial issues (Maier & Nai, 2022), such as criminality, migration, corruption, LGBTQ+ rights, gender policy, and race/ethnicity (Lee, 2021).

Negative campaigning is closely linked to political polarization, and as a result, countries that have recently witnessed polarized elections are more likely to encounter an increase in such campaigns. Previous findings have shown that in competitive and polarized electoral races, political campaigns are more likely to use messages appealing to feelings of anger (Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). This has been the case in Brazil, where, in the last general election, results have been decided by a minor difference of voters ("100% das seções totalizadas," 2022). As a result, negative campaigning has been a prevalent political strategy during past general elections in Brazil, surpassing the discussion over concrete political issues (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021; Joathan, 2019). Despite experiencing growth over the past few decades, Brazil is grappling with significant social, economic, and political crises. Negative campaigning in Brazil often amplifies divisive national issues, feeding broader societal polarization (Joathan, 2019), especially after the Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash) corruption investigations (see Damgaard, 2018; Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020).

The Operation Car Wash investigation uncovered politicians in various capacities involved in corruption, a factor that significantly eroded trust in national political institutions and figures (Mantzaris & Pillay, 2017). To regain the public trust, politicians portrayed themselves as outsiders. Such a strategy was prominent in the political messages of the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro, who amplified a discourse of being a new political force able to solve the corruption scandals in Brazil—even though he has been in politics for more than a decade (Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2021). Moreover, the coverage of corruption investigations conducted primarily by Brazilian legacy news media has made the theme salient in negative campaigns involving various political figures (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Davis & Straubhaar, 2020). Thus, corruption was a theme deliberately utilized by political figures seeking to gain voters' attention.

The salience of corruption issues in Brazilian political campaigns resonates within a specific context of Latin American politics, wherein crime and corruption frequently emerge as significant concerns in public opinion (Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020). However, as demonstrated by previous studies, this observation underscores a broader trend regarding the associations between political messages focusing on divisive issues and negativity (Maier & Nai, 2022). In recent years, other divisive issues salient in different democracies have been civil rights, gender issues, and Covid-19 (Kohler & Koinig, 2023; Kováts, 2018). Specifically, the attention to such matters has contributed to increased populism and polarization across different contexts

(Carothers & Feldmann, 2021; Clifford, 2019). Populist leaders often feature a conservative agenda against women's and LGBTQ+ rights (Kováts, 2018). In addition, they have also systematically denied scientific evidence during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to a decrease in acceptance of vaccination attitudes (Kohler & Koinig, 2023). Such a trend has also been observed in the Brazilian context, where Jair Bolsonaro shared political messages with a populist style during his election campaign and later continued to spread such content during his mandate as president between 2018 and 2022 (Evangelista & Bruno, 2019; Paiero & da Fonseca Bueno, 2022). The focus on divisive issues moves the debate away from substantive political topics, with candidates of different ideologies trying to accommodate such concerns in their political campaigns.

Considering the connections mentioned above between negativity and divisive issues, our first hypothesis is:

H1: Posts about divisive issues (crime, corruption, gender policy, civil rights, and Covid-19) will be associated with negative campaigns.

2.2. Acclaim Campaigning: A Counter Back to Negativity

Acclaim campaigning represents a strategic divergence from the often antagonistic nature of modern political campaigns. Unlike negative campaigns that target political rivals, acclaim strategies highlight a candidate's qualifications, accomplishments, and policy stances (Haselmayer, 2019). This self-promotion rhetoric is designed to craft a favorable public image of the candidate in question (Benoit, 2017). Consequently, political messages often seek to connect with voters by projecting an image of competence, integrity, and alignment with specific values. Previous research has revealed candidates' inclination toward adopting acclaim strategies, primarily due to the absence of a backlash effect—a potent adverse reaction to specific candidates (Benoit, 2017). This phenomenon has been prevalent within the Brazilian context, and acclaim strategies were dominant until recent years, with a shift toward more negative content occurring only during the 2014 elections (Borba, 2019; Joathan, 2019).

Within the realm of social media political campaigning, where candidates frequently resort to negative tactics to garner voter support, acclaim strategies can shift the focus toward constructive politics. Such political campaigns often feature candidates emphasizing their professional qualifications rather than divisive approaches. This approach, especially when emphasizing substantial political topics, can foster a more informed and reasoned public discourse, encouraging voters to choose based on their policy preferences and a candidate's competence in addressing specific political matters (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). Substantial political topics concern essential societal governance and public policy elements, including economic policies, healthcare reform, research funding, educational curricula, environmental regulations, and institutional structures (Lee, 2021). Conversely, acclaim campaigns can be misleading, emphasizing achievements that may not reflect reality. This can also mislead voters and lead to incorrect decisions, similar to the pitfalls associated with negative campaigns (Garrett, 2019).

Misleading acclaim strategies have also been observed in Brazilian political communication (Borba, 2019). In a context marked by corruption scandals leading to accusations and pervasive distrust regarding the honesty of political candidates (Damgaard, 2018; Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020), Brazilian candidates who adopt acclaim strategies often present themselves as trustworthy individuals committed to institutional reform and

reduction of corruption across various institutions and political spheres (Borba, 2019). Consequently, they tend to focus on political messages related to institutional policy issues (Benoit, 2017), including reorganizing governmental structures, constitutional amendments, or measures to enhance government transparency.

Acclaim campaigns have also been used in constructive ways, and candidates may use them to highlight their proposals and political preferences (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). For instance, political candidates often share political messages claiming they are competent in responding to important topics of concern for the general population, such as public health, public education, and economic improvements, mainly related to job security (Haselmayer, 2019). These topics are typically less divisive and are associated with positive evaluations of specific candidates.

We considered the attention towards institutional policy in the Brazilian context for responding to corruption concerns (Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020) and previous findings showing the use of acclaim strategies for substantial political topics in the formulation of our hypothesis (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Haselmayer, 2019). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Posts about substantial political topics (education, health, economy, and institutional policy) will be associated with acclaim campaigns.

Conversely, studies on negativity suggest that political campaigns, particularly in platforms, have become increasingly negative (Haselmayer et al., 2019; Maier & Nai, 2022). Given the rising trend of negative campaigning on social media, in contrast to acclaim strategies, we assume that political messages will become more negative over time. In this sense, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3: Acclaim campaigns will be less likely in the 2022 electoral campaign compared to the 2018 one.

H4: Negative campaigns will be more likely in the 2022 electoral campaign than the 2018 one.

3. Method

To understand the relationship between negativity, acclaim, and political issues, we conducted a standardized content analysis of posts on official presidential candidate Twitter pages during the Brazilian national election campaigns of 2018 and 2022. We coded 1,191 tweets from the candidates' profiles that reached more than 3% of the votes during the elections. These tweets were collected using Twitonomy before Twitter limited API access.

The sampling period covers the 28 days before the elections, including the election days. A stratified random sample of 1,191 posts drawn from a total of 3,079 is coded. This sample corresponds to 50% of the posts after matching the number of posts of candidate *Ciro Gomes* to the average number of posts of the other candidates since *Gomes* published a disproportionately high number of messages (1,243 tweets), almost half of all publications. For the comparability of statistical tests, we coded a maximum of 150 posts per candidate and election. For some candidates, this figure corresponds to 100% of the publications, while for the most prolific candidates, the sample size is reduced to 20.6% (see Table 1).

Table 1. Published and coded posts per candidate and election.

Candidate (party)	Election year	Published posts	Coded posts (absolute numbers/%)
Geraldo Alckmin (PSB)	2018	317	150 (47.3%)
Jair Bolsonaro (PL)	2018	202	150 (74.3%)
	2022	141	141 (100%)
Ciro Gomes (PDT)	2018	727	150 (20.6%)
	2022	516	150 (29.1%)
Fernando Haddad (PT)	2018	464	150 (32.3%)
Lula da Silva (PT)	2022	553	150 (27.1%)
Simone Tebet (MDB)	2022	159	150 (94.3%)
Total		3,079	1,191 (38.7%)

Note: Percentage of coded posts in brackets.

To test our hypotheses, the variables negativity and acclaim were defined: Negativity includes posts disseminating unfavorable information about political opponents to damage their image; acclaim is coded in self-promotion posts highlighting candidates' own qualifications, accomplishments, and policy stances. To check which topics associated with these communication strategies, we also coded the political issues present in the post: civil rights, corruption, Covid-19, crime, defense and military, economy, education, election race, environment, foreign relations, gender policy, health, and institutional policy. The variable election race focused on messages on the "horse-race" component of politics, such as in posts focusing on media debates, voting procedures, campaigns, and polls. These variables were coded dichotomously, with 2 if they were present in the post and 1 if they were not present. In this sense, multiple political issues and campaign strategies could have been coded in a single post.

The coding scheme is based on the design used to analyze political communication on social media by Haßler et al. (2021) and is available in an online repository (https://bit.ly/CamforS_OSF). A group of political communication researchers designed this comprehensive coding scheme to enable standardization in studying digital political campaigns worldwide. This coding scheme offers systematic operationalization for the political issues tested in this study, such as institutional policy, election race, foreign relations, defense, civil rights, education, environment, criminality, economy, and health. The coding covered all elements of the Twitter posts, including visual elements such as images and the first minute of videos. To ensure the reliability of the manual coding, a test was conducted among the two coders on a random sample of 100 posts. The Krippendorff's alpha coefficient for all categories ($\alpha > 0.70$) proved to be good (Neuendorf, 2016).

Hypotheses were examined through binary logistic regression means. The initial model explores the associations between negativity and various political issues (H1), along with the year 2022 (H4). The second model examines the associations between acclaim and different political topics (H2), as well as the year 2022 (H3). In our models, we included various political issues, the year of the election, and fixed effects for candidates posting political messages.

4. Findings

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the analyzed variables comparing 2018 and 2022, with the absolute quantitative and their respective percentages. Acclaim campaigns correspond to 18.67% of the 2018 sample,

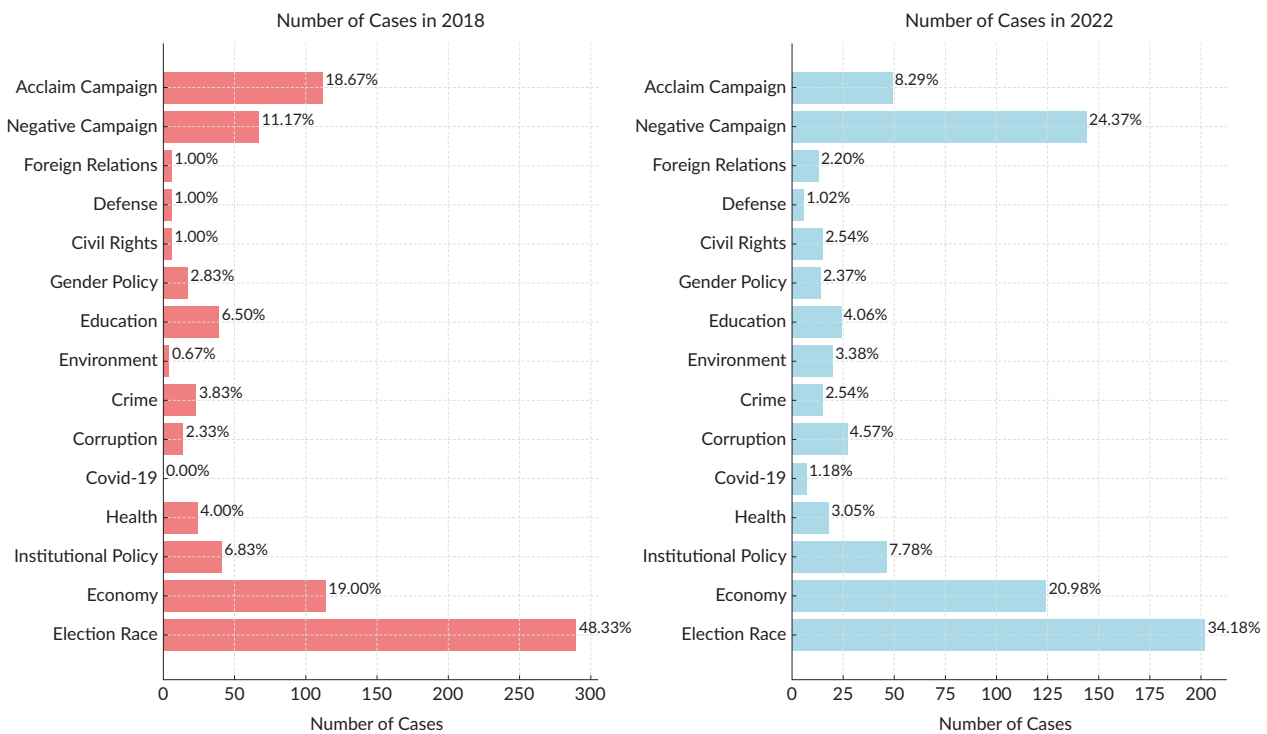


Figure 1. Comparison of the variables' distribution between 2018 and 2022.

compared to 8.29% of the 2022 sample. In contrast, negative campaigns correspond to 11.17% of the posts from 2018, compared to 24.37% from 2022. In this sense, descriptive statistics show significant trends aligned to our H1 and H2, showing that a more positive campaign characterized 2018 and that this tendency reversed in 2022, with campaigns clearly more negative.

Concerning political issues, the theme with the highest distribution was the election race in both years, followed by economic and institutional policy. The plot shows some changes in the prevalence of themes comparing both elections. For instance, in 2018, education corresponded to 6.50% of the posts, whereas in 2022, there was a decrease to 4.06%. Similarly, crime occupied 3.83% of the posts in the first election, compared to 2.54% in the second. In addition, health decreased from 4% of the posts to 3.05%.

Other topics showed an increasing tendency. For instance, civil rights represented 1% of the distribution in 2018, but they increased to 2.54% of the posts in 2022. Environmental issues corresponded to 0.67% of the posts in the first election, with a noteworthy increase to 3.38% in the second election. Corruption corresponded to 2.33% of the distribution in 2018, whereas in 2022, there was an increase to 4.57% of the posts. Defense and gender policy were relatively stable in both years.

4.1. Hypothesis Testing

Binary logistic regression was performed to test this study's H1: Posts about divisive issues (crime, corruption, gender policy, civil rights, and Covid-19) will be associated with negative campaigns. The first model (see Table 2) is statistically significant, showing the likelihood of different political issues and the 2022 election campaign being more negative than in 2018. Results show that corruption was a relevant indicator

of negative campaigns ($b = 2.13, p < 0.001$), in line with H1. In addition to corruption, we found significant divisive political issues associated with negativity were Covid-19 ($b = 1.91, p < 0.05$) and gender policy ($b = 1.35, p < 0.001$). We did not find significant results for other political issues, such as institutional policy, election race, foreign relations, defense, civil rights, education, environment, criminality, economy, and health. The regression model partially supports H1. It highlights those three divisive issues (corruption, gender policy, and Covid-19) associated with negative campaigns.

Model 1 was also used to test H4, positing that negative campaigns would be more likely in the 2022 electoral campaign than in 2018. The regression model yielded significant results in which the 2022 election campaign ($b = 0.98, p < 0.001$) was more negative than the 2018 one. Consequently, H4 was confirmed. The pseudo- R^2 for the first model was 0.11, suggesting that the model can explain approximately 11% of the variability in negative campaigns. We treated political candidates as fixed effects, including all candidates in the model, and compared them to Ciro Gomes, which served as the reference category. The regression model yielded non-significant results for the political candidates.

Table 2. Binary logistic models.

Predictors	Negativity (Model 1)	Acclaim (Model 2)
Year 2022	0.98*** (0.25)	-1.46*** (0.37)
Covid-19	1.91* (0.91)	-13.78 (533.70)
Institutional policy	0.21 (0.29)	0.23 (0.33)
Election pace	-0.09 (0.20)	-0.23 (0.22)
Foreign relations	-0.70 (0.79)	0.83 (0.65)
Defense	0.39 (0.73)	0.33 (0.75)
Civil rights	0.29 (0.54)	-0.26 (0.75)
Gender policy	1.35** (0.43)	1.00** (0.47)
Education	0.01 (0.38)	1.15*** (0.32)
Environment	-1.17 (0.76)	-1.15 (1.05)
Criminality	-0.29 (0.49)	0.53 (0.48)
Corruption	2.13*** (0.37)	0.50 (0.45)
Health	0.31 (0.42)	0.84** (0.38)
Economy	0.31 (0.20)	0.31 (0.22)
Bolsonaro	-0.20 (0.24)	-2.71*** (0.54)
Lula	-0.29 (0.30)	0.73* (0.41)
Alckmin	0.19 (0.34)	-0.29 (0.29)
Haddad	0.07 (0.36)	-0.37 (0.29)
Tebet	0.32 (0.28)	-0.11 (0.45)
Constant	-2.31*** (0.27)	-1.17*** (0.24)
Observations	1,182	1,182
Log likelihood	-492.84	-397.06
Akaike information criterion	1,025.69	834.12
Pseudo R^2	0.11	0.16

Notes: *** Significant at the 1% level, ** significant at the 5% level, * significant at the 10% level.

The second regression model tested H2, stating that posts about substantial political topics (education, health, economy, and institutional policy) will be associated with acclaim campaigns. Results show significant results with positive coefficients for gender policy ($b = 1.00, p < 0.05$), education ($b = 1.15, p < 0.001$), and health ($b = 0.84, p < 0.01$). In contrast, non-significant results were found for economy ($b = 0.31$) and institutional policy ($b = 0.23$). Results partially confirmed H2, highlighting the association between specific substantial political issues and acclaim campaigns. Results also indicate a positive association between such issues and tweets containing acclaim strategy. In the case of acclaim messages, results were also significant for specific candidates, such as Bolsonaro ($b = -2.71, p < 0.001$) and Lula ($b = 0.73, p < 0.01$). The results for the case of Lula indicate that his posts are more likely to be associated with acclaim strategies than those of Ciro Gomes. In contrast, for Bolsonaro, the negative coefficient indicates that his posts are less likely to be associated with acclaim messages compared to Gomes.

Model 2 was also used to test H3, that acclaim campaigns will be less likely in the 2022 electoral campaign than in the 2018 one. In line with this hypothesis, the last binary regression model showed significant results for the 2022 electoral campaign ($b = -1.46, p < 0.001$). In this regard, the negative coefficient suggests that tweets from the 2022 electoral campaign are less likely to be positive. The second model's pseudo- R^2 was 0.16, indicating that the model can explain approximately 16% of the variability in acclaim campaigns. The model is statistically significant and shows that the variables year of the electoral campaign, gender policy, education, health, and Lula are strong predictors of using acclaim strategies in electoral campaigns.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has provided critical insights into the dynamics of negative and acclaim campaigning within the Brazilian elections, focusing on their associations with substantive vs. divisive political issues and the evolution of campaign strategies between the 2018 and 2022 national presidential elections. Our findings resonate with the established theoretical frameworks and reveal contextual patterns and strategic shifts crucial to understanding contemporary electoral processes, particularly in Latin America.

The regression results partially support H1, that a significant association exists between divisive issues (crime, corruption, gender policy, civil rights, and Covid-19) and negative campaigning. Results showed significant associations between corruption-related discourse and negative messages. This finding is consistent with previous literature that highlights the prevalence of corruption as a central theme in negative campaigning in societies recently shaken by scandals related to political corruption, such as Brazil after Operation Car Wash targeting corruption charges (Joathan, 2019; Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2021). We also found results supporting the expansion of negative campaigning related to immediate and symbolic societal concerns such as Covid-19 and gender policies (Kim et al., 2018). Finally, our models showed non-significant associations between negative campaigns and substantive political issues such as economy, institutional policy, education, and health. Such finding is in line with the literature showing that negative campaigns contribute to reducing the quality of the political debate (Klinger et al., 2023; Mubarok, 2022).

The trend towards negativity is in line with the literature in the Global North countries showing associations between negativity and divisive and symbolically charged content, which resonates on a more emotional level and provokes societal apprehensions and sentiments (Kim et al., 2018; Maier & Nai, 2022). However, non-significant associations were found for other divisive issues, such as crime and civil rights. This finding

may suggest that those were not salient divisive themes in the context of Brazilian elections. In this sense, other comparative studies that include more countries could reveal how different divisive issues are salient among different contexts. For example, in Colombia, previous studies have shown that crime is a salient theme because of the criminality issues with Farc organizations (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021).

The study revealed insights into the shifts in the employed political campaign strategies over the years. Results indicating increased negativity in the 2022 campaigns, alongside the predominant focus on divisive issues, confirmed H4. This finding suggests a possible tactical shift in political messaging. The trend toward negativity can be understood as a reflection of the post-Operation-Car-Wash political climate. Politicians could have responded to the feelings of distrust with a strategic move from policy-driven debates towards more sensational, controversy-centric narratives (Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2021). The increase in the theme of corruption in political campaigns aligns with this assumption, and previous findings show that in Latin American countries, corruption is a political issue likely to affect party attachment (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2015). In addition, our results showed a reduction of education themes in 2022, which may suggest the departure from governance-oriented campaigning, potentially influencing the quality of democratic discourse and voter decision-making. Our findings on the expansion of negative campaigns also resonate with the broader literature, showing that political discussions in social media have become increasingly negative (Antypas et al., 2023; Schöne et al., 2021). Thus, our finding supports both contextual and broader explanations.

In contrast to H2, our data analysis partially supported our hypothesis that substantive political issues (education, health, economy, and institutional policy) would be associated with acclaim messages. While we hypothesized that institutional policy issues would be related to acclaim strategies, the analysis defied this assumption. Results showed that issues such as education, health, and gender policy were more influential in acclaim campaigns. Notably, we found surprising that gender policies were both associated with acclaim and negative strategies. A possible explanation could be the sources of such acclaim messages, with politicians from the right wing using gender policy as a topic of negative campaigns. In contrast, politicians from the left wing adopted the opposite strategies. This finding may be connected to gender policy as a divisive issue in Brazil, with competing views from different political parties (Sauandaj, 2023). Yet, the finding calls for a deeper theoretical exploration of the factors associated with thematic choices of both acclaim and negative strategies. Moreover, the observed decline in acclaim campaigns in 2022, as posited in H3, shows a worrying picture of the current political discourse, suggesting a back off from constructive, policy-based campaigning towards an arena dominated by scandal and sensationalism (Carothers & Feldmann, 2021). Yet, it is important to note that such a trend toward negativity may be circumstantial, and follow-up investigations are crucial to examine if the focus on negativity and divisive issues persists in the future.

In our models, we also included candidates to examine if there were specific findings concerning ideology, style, and experience. In our first model examining negativity, non-significant results were found for the candidates. This finding shows that negativity is an overall tendency in the Brazilian landscape and this phenomenon suppresses certain communication styles, party affiliations, and political experiences. However, in our second model examining the acclaim campaign, significant results were found for Lula and Bolsonaro, compared to Ciro, the reference category. In the case of Lula, a positive coefficient suggests that he uses more acclaim messages compared to Ciro. In contrast, Bolsonaro uses fewer acclaim messages than Ciro. Our findings are partially in line with previous studies showing that experienced candidates are less likely to

use negative ads compared to challengers (Ridout & Searles, 2011). Lula was previously president of Brazil, whereas Ciro was a challenger in the previous elections. In this sense, Lula's past experience can explain his preference for acclaim messages. However, even though Bolsonaro was an incumbent in 2022, his negative association with acclaim message suggests that his communication style is less positive, in line with other populist figures (Ernst et al., 2019).

This study presents certain limitations. The use of Twitter data introduces limitations to the generalizability of the findings, given the platform's distinct logic, user demographics, and engagement dynamics. Future research could benefit from a more comprehensive thematic analysis and an expansion into other social media platforms for a deep understanding of online political campaigning, such as Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, comparative studies that include a broader scope of countries and platforms through a longitudinal lens could help to better understand the evolving landscape of negative and acclaim political campaigns. Finally, follow-up investigations are crucial to examine whether the increase in negativity and the political debate on divisive issues persist in the Brazilian landscape, or if the findings in our study are solely associated with the circumstances of corruption scandals in Brazil.

In conclusion, the study highlights a shift in political campaigning from acclaim to negative campaigns, where sensationalism and negativity are increasingly dominating over substantive, policy-oriented discourse. Our findings carry profound implications for both theoretical understanding and practical applications in political campaigning. On a practical level, the increasing negativity in campaigns shows a worrying picture beyond the Global North, with concrete political proposals losing ground for more symbolic-driven content. Moreover, this political communication strategy forecasts an even more polarized scenario, especially on sensitive issues such as gender policies. This trend worries democracies globally, given the increased polarization and distrust over political figures. Theoretically, our study highlights the need for a more nuanced framework capable of accommodating the contextual dynamism of campaign strategies, particularly in countries with high levels of corruption and criminality. In this sense, more research on negativity is lacking in the Global South for more generalized conclusions. The evident shift from substantive debates toward scandal-centric campaigning underscores the need for societal interventions. These should bolster voters' critical political consumption, ensuring the electorate can sift through sensationalism and make informed, policy-driven decisions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Isabella Gonçalves is a research associate and a PhD student at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. She was previously awarded a DAAD scholarship for conducting her PhD studies. She is a member of the research networks DigiWorld and the Digital Media and Society Observatory. Her research interests include digital political communication and journalism research.



Mathias-Felipe de-Lima-Santos (PhD) is a lecturer at Macquarie University, Australia. He is also a research associate in the Digital Media and Society Observatory at the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP), Brazil. Previously, he was a postdoctoral researcher in the Human(e) AI project at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, and a researcher at the University of Navarra, Spain, under the JOLT project, a Marie Skłodowska-Curie European Training Network funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020. Mathias-Felipe is co-editor of the book *Journalism, Data and Technology in Latin America*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2021. His research interests include the changing nature of communications driven by technological innovations, particularly in journalism, media, and online social networks.



Vicente Fenoll (PhD) is an associate professor of audiovisual communication at the Department of Language Theory and Communication Science at the University of Valencia, Spain. He has broad professional experience in broadcast television news and in election campaigns. He is a member of the research groups MediaFlows—Study of Communication Flows in Political Mobilization Processes, CamforS—Campaigning for Strasbourg, and DigiWorld—Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide. His research interests are in political communication, social media, populism, and disinformation. He has been a visiting researcher at various American and European universities.



Yossi David is a senior lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies and the head of the lab for Communication and Social BIAS (Beliefs, Ideologies, Affect, and Stereotypes) Research at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. His primary scholarly interests center on what drives public opinion and social behavior, with a special emphasis on antagonistic and hostile communication behaviors, both in the context of professional media production and digital media.