

“A Very Difficult Choice”: Bolsonaro and Petismo in Brazilian Newspapers

JULIANA GAGLIARDI¹

Fluminense Federal University, Brazil

CAMILLA QUESADA TAVARES

Federal University of Maranhão, Brazil

AFONSO DE ALBUQUERQUE

Fluminense Federal University, Brazil

Regardless of what Bolsonaro does, the shadows of Lula and the Workers’ Party (PT) appear to be ever present in Brazilian legacy media. How does this affect the way they deal with Bolsonaro’s authoritarian tendencies? Drawing on a qualitative content analysis, this article discusses how the three most influential Brazilian newspapers—*O Globo*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, and *O Estado de S. Paulo*—have presented this topic. We hypothesize that, for these newspapers, the prime referential for authoritarianism is not Bolsonaro, but Lula and PT.

Keywords: Bolsonaro, petismo, O Globo, Folha de S. Paulo, O Estado de S. Paulo

In recent years, the shadow of authoritarianism has reached numerous countries around the world (Zakaria, 1997). Even societies reputed as model democracies, such as the United States, have been affected by illiberal trends (Levitsky & Ziblath, 2018; Mounk, 2018). How should we approach the authoritarian challenge? The orthodox answer emphasizes the role of institutions acting from both inside and outside the government in preventing and controlling autocratic leaders through checks and balances logic (Morlino, 2004; O’Donnell, 1998). A vast literature proposes that a free press provides a powerful antidote to authoritarian threats. It contends that, in the absence of external constraints, the press performs a watchdog role, denouncing abuses perpetrated by the powerful on behalf of the citizens (Norris, 2010; Waisbord, 2000). This is the theory, but how effective is this framework in describing real-world political circumstances?

Juliana Gagliardi: jugagliardi@gmail.com

Camilla Tavares: camilla.tavares@ufma.br

Afonso de Albuquerque: afonsoalbuquerque@id.uff.br

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This article analyzes how Brazilian media have dealt with President Jair Bolsonaro. Scholars have referred to his election and government as “an illiberal backlash” (Hunter & Power, 2019, p. 1) and “a hallmark in the liberal recession in Brazil” (Queiroz, Bustamante, & Meyer, 2021, p. 778). Bolsonaro himself has been described as a far-right populist (Phillips & Phillips, 2018) and a brutal and violent populist (*The New York Times*, 2018). His government has faced strong criticism because of its antienvironmental (Deutsch, 2021; Gagliardi, Oliveira, Magalhães, & Falcão, 2021) and antihuman rights (Silva, 2019) policies, its engagement in disseminating disinformation and hate speech (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Recuero et al., 2022), and its illiberal instrumentalization of scientific debates (Oliveira, Evangelista, Alves, & Quinan, 2021).

Otherwise, a considerable body of literature has suggested that, over the last decades, Brazil has experienced a significant improvement in its democracy. Power and Taylor (2011) contend that “the development of accountability institutions in Brazil has been broad, dynamic, and continuous since the transition from authoritarian rule began in earnest in 1982” (p. 4). Scholars have suggested that Brazilian journalism has performed a more active watchdog role (Alves, 2005; Boas, 2013).

When considered together, it would be natural to expect the Brazilian media to be especially active in defense of democracy. In fact, the coverage of Bolsonaro’s government by the legacy media has been very critical. Still, there is a third element to consider in this equation: the Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, hereafter PT) and its leader and former president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. For decades, the legacy media has established a contentious relationship with them, and matters worsened while the PT was ahead of the Brazilian presidency (2003–2016). How has this affected the way the legacy media portrays Bolsonaro compared with his PT predecessors? Specifically, we propose the following research questions:

- RQ1: According to these newspapers, does Bolsonaro present an exceptional danger to Brazilian democracy?*
- RQ2: To what extent is the reference to the PT governments present in the critiques made by these newspapers to Bolsonaro?*
- RQ3: To what degree have these newspapers acted in defense of the stability of the liberal order or, otherwise, contributed to destabilizing it?*

To answer these questions, this article situates the legacy media’s presentation of Bolsonaro in a broader historical context. Accordingly, we have analyzed a sample of the editorials published by *Folha de S. Paulo* (hereafter *FSP*), *O Globo*, and *O Estado de S. Paulo* (hereafter *OESP*). These newspapers are considered the three most influential Brazilian quality papers (Albuquerque, 2012; Marques, Mont’Alverne, & Mitozo, 2021). The corpus selected for analysis comprised editorials published between 2003 and 2021 and was chosen from the search for keywords in the online versions of the selected newspapers. These three traditional, elite-oriented Brazilian newspapers remain among the ones with the largest circulation in the country.

Historical Context

The historical developments in Brazil and its South American neighbors can help us better understand the relationship between Bolsonaro and the legacy media. During the first decade of the 2000s,

leftist presidents came to power in many Latin American countries. The electoral triumph became a source of concern for both the Brazilian legacy media and far-right politicians like Bolsonaro.

The Latin American "Left Turn"

In the early 2000s, leftist presidents came to power in different Latin American countries. Scholars have described this phenomenon as a left turn (Castañeda, 2006; Schamis, 2006) or a pink tide (Ellner, 2020). In concrete terms, this left turn assumed different characteristics in each society. Yet, scholars and political analysts usually reduced this diversity to a dichotomy between a "bad" left—authoritarian, socialist, and populist—and a "good" left—democratic, social-democratic, and institutional (Castañeda, 2006; Seligson, 2007). Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, Evo Morales's Bolivia, and Rafael Correa's Ecuador have been consistently described as examples of "bad left" regimes. On the other hand, Lula has usually been described as a model for a "good left," along with Uruguay's Tabaré Vázquez and Chile's Michelle Bachelet.

In different Latin American countries, the legacy media reacted negatively to the rise of leftist presidents. Conflicts were particularly intense in Venezuela. In 2002, media outlets exerted an active role in the coup that briefly overthrew President Hugo Chávez (Lugo-Ocando, Guedes, & Cañizales, 2011). However, Chávez was able to regain power, and in 2007, his government refused to grant the license of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), which supported the coup. Bitter conflicts also occurred in Ecuador—whose government also ordered the expropriation of opposing media outlets (Waisbord, 2013)—Bolivia, and Argentina (Kitzberger, 2012). Waisbord (2013) presents these conflicts as ultimately expressing a dispute between populism and liberal democracy. This interpretation echoes the orthodox view about the liberal vocation of the press. Otherwise, Kitzberger (2012) describes the antipopulism of Argentina's legacy media as not necessarily implying a commitment to liberal principles. Instead, it provides them with "an ideological rationalization to their opposition to statist-heterodox economic policy" (p. 17). Something similar happened to the Brazilian legacy media. The opposition to heterodox economic policies motivated them to portray the PT-led governments as populist and detrimental to liberal democracy.

The Rise and Fall of the PT (2003–2016)

Since its foundation in 1979, the PT has maintained troubled relations with the legacy media. PT members accused the legacy media of supporting the military dictatorship and obtaining large economic benefits from it. The legacy media portrayed the PT as a radical party and was particularly suspicious of the ties uniting the PT and the workers' unions. During the 1989, 1994, and 1998 presidential elections, they provided Lula, the candidate running for the PT, with strong negative coverage. Lula lost every time. In 2002, he finally won. This time, the legacy press coverage of the election adopted a more neutral tone (Miguel, 2003). This attitude did not endure for long, however. In 2005, the legacy media's treatment of the PT became strongly negative again, after the outbreak of the *Mensalão* scandal—an alleged money-per-vote scheme run by representatives allied to the PT government. Consecutive electoral victories by the PT only made the situation worse. Lula won again in 2006, and Dilma Rousseff won twice, in 2010 and 2014.

Feeling growing frustration with the PT's ability to win consecutive presidential elections, the opposition forces decided to employ nonelectoral means to remove the party from the presidency. The *Lava*

Jato Operation—a judicial operation aiming to tackle corruption in the Brazilian state-owned oil company Petrobras—provided an opportunity for this. Judge Sergio Moro and the prosecutors’ team, led by Deltan Dallagnol, adopted a strong anti-PT bias. They presented the PT as “a criminal organization” and Lula as the mastermind of Brazilian corruption. The legacy media provided massive coverage echoing these views. This scenario proved to be disastrous for the PT. In 2016, Dilma Rousseff was ousted from the presidency after a controversial impeachment process. In 2017, Judge Moro convicted Lula based on corruption charges. Lula was imprisoned the following year and barred from running in the presidential race. Fernando Haddad replaced him as the PT’s candidate. Taking advantage of these circumstances, Bolsonaro was elected president in 2018 and appointed Moro as his minister of justice.

This is not the entire story, however. In 2019, the legal process against Lula suffered a dramatic reversal. Information leaked from the Telegram chat app showed that a group of *Lava Jato* prosecutors conspired with Moro (and the legacy media) to convict Lula. This led the *Supremo Tribunal Federal* (Federal Supreme Court, STF hereafter) to nullify the accusations against Lula. After 580 days in jail, he was set free and announced his decision to run again for the presidency.

Theoretical Approach

For a long time, journalism studies have treated the news as their privileged research subject. Based on the premise that the prime role of journalism is to provide the public with information about the world, they have explored numerous factors influencing this process. Popular research topics include how journalists’ work routines and professional values affect the way they describe reality, the influence exerted by economic and technological factors in the news-making process, and the manner in which news coverage impacts public opinion. In this light, there was little ground for discussing other dimensions of journalistic activity, such as the opinionative role exerted by journalistic outlets through their editorial pieces. Yet, in recent decades, a burgeoning literature has focused on editorials in association with the idea that the press is a political institution in and of itself (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 1999). These studies assume that editorials influence the political debate in the public sphere (Firmstone, 2019) and articulate policy views (Page, 1996).

In societies such as Brazil, where the press assumes an active political role, editorials are especially relevant. Studies have suggested that the Brazilian legacy media claim for themselves the role of arbiter in political disputes (Albuquerque, 2005). In extreme cases, these claims have led these media to support initiatives contrary to the democratic order, such as the 1964 coup and the military regime that followed (Smith, 1997; Stein, 2013) as well as Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2013, which was grounded on a fragile legal basis (Albuquerque, 2019; van Dijk, 2017). Recently, Brazilian scholars have been more attentive to editorials. Some studies have approached editorials from a broad perspective. They discuss the structure, production routines, and political functions of editorials (Pimentel, Marques, & Santos, 2022) and the criteria of editorial worthiness (Marques & Mont’Alverne, 2021). Others adopt a more specific analytical focus. Examples include how the legacy media portrayed Lula in five different presidential campaigns (Nava & Marques, 2019), how they reacted to Rousseff’s impeachment process (Guazina, Prior, & Araújo, 2019; Marques et al., 2021), and how *O Globo* systematically associated the PT with populism and corruption throughout the 2010s (Albuquerque & Gagliardi, 2020).

Methodology

Our analysis considers editorials published in *FSP*, *O Globo*, and *OESP* from 2003 to 2021. The selection of our data set followed three steps. First, we conducted an automated search on the websites of these newspapers based on keywords. We adopted a historical-sensitive approach to define these keywords. The first period of our analysis (2003–2016) refers to the time when the PT was ahead of the Brazilian presidency. We used the keywords *Chavismo* and *Lulopetismo* to choose the editorials referring to this period. The time span between 2015 and 2018 corresponds to the political crisis that ousted Rousseff's government and the presidential election that elected Jair Bolsonaro. The search corresponding to this period added the keywords "impeachment Dilma"; "prisão Lula" [Lula imprisonment]; and "eleições 2018" [2018 elections] to the search. The third period corresponds to the first three years of Bolsonaro's government. In this period, we added "Bolsonaro Lula" to the search. Second, we examined the content of the pieces because many editorials fell outside the scope of this study. Our objective was to understand how Brazilian legacy media treats Bolsonaro compared with his predecessors from the PT, so we considered only pieces clearly presenting this connection ($n = 585$). For this sample, we used a qualitative content analysis (Gibbs, 2009; Krippendorff, 1989).

Results

How did the legacy media's editorials portray Bolsonaro's relationship with the democratic regime? How exceptional was it in comparison to the previous governments led by Presidents Lula and Rousseff? This article employs a historical approach to answer these questions. Accordingly, it organizes the results of the analysis in three parts, which refer to: (1) the period when the PT was ahead of the Brazilian presidency, (2) the intermediary period between Rousseff's impeachment and the rise of Bolsonaro to the presidency, and (3) the first three years of Bolsonaro's presidential term.

From Chavismo to Lulopetismo: The Rhetoric of Authoritarianism in the PT Era

The resource for the "two lefts" framework lasted as a recurring element of the three major Brazilian newspapers for most of the PT government's era. Still, the manner in which they did it changed significantly during this period. The first appearance of this logic in their editorials occurred in 2007, a year after Castañeda (2006) originally proposed it. Initially, these newspapers adopted Castañeda's model as such, as they located the PT government on the "democratic left" pole. Otherwise, they depicted Venezuela's *Chavismo* as presenting the biggest threat to the fragile democracies existing in Latin America (*OESP*, 2007, p. A3). According to *FSP* (2007), Chávez's "authoritarian escalation" eroded "the pillars that underpin democracy" (p. A2). For *O Globo* (2007), "the 21st century socialism consists of intense populist, nationalist, left-wing, and anti-American rhetoric that, in practice, translates into authoritarianism, a cult of personality, state interventionism, and restrictions on free enterprise and individual rights" (p. 6).

The three newspapers recognized the differences about the status of democracy in Brazil, in comparison with Venezuela. However, this did not happen because of the nature of the PT government, but despite it. In their view, the Brazilian political institutions looked solid enough to prevent authoritarianism in the country (*FSP*, 2010; *O Globo*, 2016a). In the following years, these newspapers manifested growing

anxiety about the influence of *Chavismo* in Brazil. This happened for different reasons. First, in both countries, leftist forces managed to stay ahead of the presidency in consecutive elections. Moreover, a growing number of Latin American countries turned left. Finally, these countries fostered a common policy agenda and made efforts to build a sense of regional identity. Considering this, it is not surprising that the legacy media adopted a growingly critical tone with respect to Brazil's foreign policy. In their view, Brazil engaged in "comrades" third-world diplomacy, which was at odds with the country's western-oriented tradition (Gagliardi & Albuquerque, 2021). By doing so, they mobilized geopolitics as a device to create moral panic (Alvear & Lugo-Ocando, 2016). As this happened, the legacy media began to employ terms such as *Chavismo* and *Bolivarian* to describe the Brazilian government. According to *O Globo* (2014), Lula chose *Bolivarianismo* as his ideological platform. *OESP* (2013) stated that Lula's and the PT's dream model was the one "the Bolivarians are trying to copy from Cuba" (para. 7).

By the end of President Rousseff's first term, the relations between the *FSP*, *OESP*, and *O Globo* and the government had evolved into an open conflict. At that time, they coined a new term for qualifying the political forces ahead of the Brazilian government: *Lulopetismo*. This term combines the name of the PT's leader (Lula) with the term used to describe its militants (*petistas*). As a result, the PT is portrayed as a populist party organized around Lula's personality cult. People do not refer to themselves as *Lulopetistas*, as opposed to *Lulista* or *Petista*, though. Similar to *Castro-Chavismo* in Colombia (Guerrero-C & Jaraba-Barrios, 2022), *Lulopetismo* is a term used to present leftist political adversaries in a pejorative manner.

The way the three newspapers employed the term *Lulopetismo* in their editorials varied considerably over time. The term began to be used in 2010 to suggest that, in the event of Rousseff's victory in the presidential elections that year, Lula would remain the puppet master controlling her. In a second phase, *Lulopetismo* became a concrete agent, considered responsible even for misdeeds committed by other parties, not only for the performance of these other agents in ministries, but even for the decision of Congress to maintain the mandate of a deputy (from another party) after the accusation of receiving money illegally (see, for example, *O Globo*, 2011a, p. 6, 2011b, p. 6). By 2016, the legacy media saw *Lulopetismo* as an authoritarian plan by the PT and Lula to stay in power through a huge corruption scheme.

At the time, the legacy media was ostensibly campaigning to depose President Rousseff. From December 2, 2015, when the impeachment proceedings began to August 31, 2016, when Rousseff was impeached, *O Globo* published 10 editorial pieces dedicated to the topic of impeachment. *FSP* published 17, and *OESP* published 70. They offered political, economic, and other justifications in addition to legal ones. An editorial by *FSP* makes this clear:

The impeachment is a judicial-political judgment; it was this last aspect that prevailed. Due to the economic debacle, the profusion of scandals led by the PT, especially the loss of all government capacity, the removal of Dilma Rousseff was a prerequisite for an urgent recovery [of Brazil]. (*FSP*, 2016a, para. 5)

The three newspapers celebrated Rousseff's removal from the presidency. For *OESP* (2016b), "every honest citizen in this country must be pleased by the outcome of President Dilma Rousseff's process" (para. 1). Despite recognizing the weakness of the evidence, the *FSP* defended the process as constitutional,

guaranteeing ample rights of defense and being overseen by an unsuspected STF: "The accusations of budget fraud, however, while pertinent as a reason for impeachment, were never irrefutable and sounded, for the lay majority, as an obscure technicality—and, for a significant minority, as a pretext for a 'parliamentary coup'" (*FSP*, 2016b, para. 2). *O Globo* (2016b), as *FSP*, recognized that "there are no charges of corruption, but crimes reliable to the ideological vision of Lulopetismo" (para. 6). For this newspaper, Dilma Rousseff's impeachment represented the strengthening of fiscal responsibility and the Constitution "to discourage Bolivarian projects such as the Lulopetismo once and for all" (*O Globo*, 2016b, para. 14). This would serve "as a general warning to the nation" (*O Globo*, 2016b, para. 14).

"A Very Difficult Choice": Bolsonaro Versus PT

In the period following Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, *OESP*, *FSP*, and *O Globo* focused on two main topics. First, they encouraged Rousseff's successor, Michel Temer, to promote neoliberal constitutional reforms on labor rights, public spending, and social security. They contended that those reforms were urgent to fix the Brazilian economy after years of PT-led mismanagement. An *OESP* editorial summarizes this position:

Dilma believes that imposing a spending ceiling would be "absurd" in areas such as education. For her, "giving up investments in this area, under no circumstances, is putting Brazil back in the past." It was this type of thinking, according to which there are expenses that must be maintained "under no circumstances" that condemned Brazil to a public deficit of over R\$170 billion. (*OESP*, 2016a, para. 3)

For *FSP*, approving economic reforms such as public spending and a revision of the Social Security rules was a sine qua non requirement to allow Brazil to "emerge from the calamitous recession into which it fell two years ago" (*FSP*, 2016b, para. 8).

Second, they sounded an alarm against a possible Lula comeback to the presidency and contended that he should be put in prison for his alleged crimes. In accordance with the Brazilian Constitution, Lula had the right to remain free while his case was being examined by the appellate and high courts. In May 2018, Lula was, according to the polls, the favorite to win the presidential election that year. In their editorial pieces, *O Globo*, *FSP*, and *OESP* pressured the STF to arrest and forbid him to run in the election bid.

They did it in two different ways. The first focused on the judicial aspects of the process. All three newspapers contended that Lula had received a fair trial and, therefore, he should be imprisoned to pay for his crimes. According to *FSP* (2018b), "Lula's imprisonment follows a republican protocol that transcends the ideological meanings and partisan passions" (para. 3). *FSP* (2018b) tries to convince the readers that the former president's judicial defeat was grounded in "consistent evidence of corruption" (para. 7) and that "Lula's version, of course, cannot be sustained" (para. 4). *O Globo* (2018a) raised a similar point by arguing that "Lula's imprisonment reinforces the Rule of Law" (para. 5). According to the newspaper, "far from embarrassing the country (...) the conviction of a former president demonstrates the strength of its institutions" (*O Globo*, 2018a, para. 14).

A complementary aspect of this discourse was to disqualify the allegations presented by Lula's defense team that the judicial process against its client was biased. *FSP* referred to these claims as a "crazy thesis that he is the victim of a conspiracy plotted by the legal-police institutions and the press" (*FSP*, 2018a, para. 4). For *OESP* (2018a), the protests made by Lula when the STF refused to grant him a *habeas corpus* were even worse: "Once more, the PT and its big boss reaffirm their authoritarian nature" (para. 1).

The second approach considered Lula's arrest from the perspective of its political convenience. According to *O Globo* (2018a), Lula "was preparing to launch his third government candidacy" (para. 2). *OESP* was more explicit and raised concerns about the return of *Lulopetismo*. The newspaper was even worried about Lula's ability to transfer votes to his allied candidates. In its words, "this means that, once again, the electoral campaign will be riddled with the same mentality that resulted in *Lulopetismo*" (*OESP*, 2018b, para. 6).

On August 31, the STF officially forbade Lula to contest the 2018 election. Justice Luis Fux even denied him the right to give interviews to the press. According to Fux: "an exceptional relativization of the freedom of the press is required to warrant a fair informational environment allowing the conscious exercise of voting rights" (*O Globo*, 2018b, para. 2). Fernando Haddad took Lula's place as the PT candidate. Yet, this did not prevent the newspapers from identifying the ghost of Lula in his campaign. According to *FSP*, "instead of assuming its responsibility for the crisis that the country is going through and has forgotten, the PT seems to bet on nostalgia and proselytism" (*FSP*, 2018c, para. 2). According to *OESP*, the PT is "a religious sect, whose credo is based on the infallibility and sanctity of its leader" (*OESP*, 2018c, para. 8).

By September of that year, it was clear that Bolsonaro and Haddad were the favorites to win the presidential election. At that time, Bolsonaro was already questioning the electoral system and electronic voting. An editorial from *FSP* criticized him for encouraging "manipulation paranoia, but only if he did not win the election" (*FSP*, 2018d, para. 4). However, even though Haddad never made comparable claims, the editorial equalizes both candidates. According to it,

Manifestations of submission to the democratic framework have also been lacking for the PT's candidate Fernando Haddad (...). The constant aggression against legitimate decisions by the Justice and Congress, as well as the systematic recourse to corruption in the PT administrations, has not yet been the object of self-criticism by the party or its candidate. (*FSP*, 2018d, para. 8)

OESP even accused the PT of staging a coup if it won the elections. It contended that it was only a matter of time; it showed the idea that the process would already be underway, and that "the schemes devised by the PT and its associates to corrupt Congress were part of the strategy, and only went no further because there was an accident on the way—the Lava Jato Operation" (*OESP*, 2018d, para. 5).

On October 7, Bolsonaro and Haddad qualified to contest the second round. At that point, the three newspapers crystallized the perception of the two candidates as being roughly equivalent. On October 8, *OESP* published an editorial entitled "A Very Difficult Choice," which described the two candidates as presenting equal dangers for the Brazilian democracy: "On the one hand, the rightist Jair

Bolsonaro (PSL), the truculent apologist of the military dictatorship; on the other, the leftist Fernando Haddad (PT), the agent of a prisoner. It will not be easy for the voter to decide between one and the other" (*OESP*, 2018e, para. 2). The editorial piece underscored Bolsonaro's lack of a concrete economic project, but, on the other hand, those presented by Haddad, inherited "from the Lulopetista field," resulted in plunging the country into "a deep economic, political, and moral crisis" (*OESP*, 2018e, para. 6). *OESP* was especially worried about the risk of the PT undoing reforms and privatizations conducted by Michel Temer's government (*OESP*, 2018e, para. 6).

FSP adopted a different approach. In the editorial "Brazil to the right," the vehicle seeks reasons for the results of the first round, showing Bolsonaro's ample advantage over Haddad, despite the "rough preaching, often authoritarian in tone, and an ultra-liberal program embraced at the last minute" (*FSP*, 2018e, para. 7). It blames the PT's unpopularity for Bolsonaro's rise. Another example refers to acts of violence committed during the campaign. During a meeting in Rio Branco, the state capital of Acre, on September 1, Bolsonaro expressed his desire to "shoot down the PT supporters" ("*fuzilar a petralhada*" in Portuguese) and "send them to Venezuela" (Casado & Turollo Jr., 2018, para. 2). Even though Haddad has never made similar statements, in a piece entitled "The Unacceptable," *FSP* (2018f) equated the political violence committed by Bolsonaro's supporters with others attributed to Haddad's supporters.

Despite all the discrepancies between the PT and Bolsonaro, in general, what is perceived is that the main vehicles of the Brazilian press prefer to indirectly endorse Bolsonaro's campaign, even recognizing his flirtation with authoritarianism and the lack of proposals for the government. And this remains the case in the coverage of Jair Bolsonaro's government, as we will see in the next section.

They Are All the Same: The Rise of Bolsopetismo

Jair Bolsonaro was sworn in as president on January 1, 2019. Since then, Brazilian newspapers have closely followed his actions. They constantly balanced his actions with the performance of the former PT governments. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro has faced strong criticism because of his administration's negationist response to it (Oliveira et al., 2021). Even in this case, however, the legacy media described Bolsonaro as being essentially like the former PT governments. For instance, on May 26, 2020, *OESP* published an editorial entitled "Born for Each Other." It argues that:

Jair Bolsonaro and Lula da Silva are like Siamese brothers. They see the world and their role in it from the very same perspective. Everything they do is exclusively related to their power projects, in which the state and the people are no longer the ultimate end of political activity and become mere vehicles of their totalitarian aspirations. (*OESP*, 2020b, para. 3)

On many other occasions, *OESP* argued that Bolsonaro and Lula/*Lulopetismo*/PT were basically the same. Examples include the editorials "When the Intolerable is Tolerated" (*OESP*, 2020a), "Bolsonaro, Lula's Apprentice" (*OESP*, 2021a), and "Bolsonaro Follows the PT's Booklet" (*OESP*, 2021b). Both *FSP* and *O Globo* raised a similar argument, although in a more contained manner than *OESP*. Meanwhile, *FSP* and *O Globo* are more contained in their criticisms and comparisons, at least in editorials. In "Opaque and Degrading" (*FSP*, 2020), *FSP* discusses the lack of transparency of Jair Bolsonaro in respect of the use of the corporate

card, claiming that the excuses were “as inconvenient today as they were in 2008 when a spree in the use of cards generated a scandal in the Lula (PT) government” (*FSP*, 2020, para. 8).

In *O Globo*, the equivalence was also evident on different occasions. One of them happened in 2019 when the Bolsonaro government paid a visit to Israel, which *O Globo* saw as a change in Brazilian foreign policy sponsored by the government’s ideological core. This visit was inspired by a “clash of civilizations” approach (Albuquerque, Oliveira, Santos Junior, Quinan, & Mazur, 2022, para. 3), which sustained that the “Judeo-Christian” civilization was facing an existential crisis, provoked by the rise of rival civilizations. This approach was attuned to the views of Olavo de Carvalho, a far-right conspiracy theorist associated with former U.S. president Donald Trump, whom both Ernesto Araújo, Brazil’s Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, and Bolsonaro considered their political guru. Still, for *O Globo*, “This negative phenomenon had already happened in *Lulopetismo*, to the country’s detriment” (*O Globo*, 2019a, p. 2). The case in question refers to the close relations that Brazil established with its neighbors, including Argentina under Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, Uruguay under José Mujica, and, above all, Venezuela’s Bolivarian regime. *O Globo* also criticized the “privileged treatment granted to Chávez/Maduro, and African dictators, in the name of Third-Worldism” (*O Globo*, 2019a, p. 2) as comparable to Araújo’s “ideological” foreign policy.

In yet another example, to address the censorship imposed by the Bolsonaro government on artistic production, which materialized through the massive suspension of public notices from important funding agencies, the newspaper once again begins its argument by presenting the PT government as a reference. According to *O Globo*, “this experience was already experienced in Lula’s administration when an agency (Ancinav) was designed to supervise the content of audiovisual production. Another movement in the same direction occurred through a ‘council’ that would supervise journalists” and “now, the same authoritarianism reappears with Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right politician, from the ideological pole opposite to the PT, but with the common objective of censorship” (*O Globo*, 2019b, p. 2).

A last topic of comparison was the worries raised by the three newspapers with respect to the elections taking place in 2022. In 2021, *FSP* published several editorials about that, putting Bolsonaro and Lula as the main opponents and trying to build a path for a third candidate, as in “Lula *Versus* Bolsonaro” (*FSP*, 2021a) and “Street Paradox” (*FSP*, 2021b). In “Flexible Democrat,” *FSP* (2021c) dedicated an entire editorial to criticizing Lula and his position about the election of Daniel Ortega, president of Nicaragua. The final part of the editorial mentions Bolsonaro: “In this way, loyal and ideological militancy is pleased, running the risk of arousing the repulsion of other voters. In a cruder way, that’s what Bolsonaro does too” (*FSP*, 2021c, para. 10).

Discussion and Conclusion

As the shadows of authoritarianism spread worldwide, a growing body of literature has emphasized that the free press has an important role in defending democratic institutions. How does the behavior of the press correspond to these normative expectations? This article discusses how this normative framework describes the way the three most prestigious newspapers—*OESP*, *O Globo*, and *FSP*—dealt with Bolsonaro’s government. It suggests that this question could be better considered from a historical perspective. Accordingly, we compare the treatment given by the legacy media to Bolsonaro and his predecessors from the PT.

Scholarly literature and political analysts have repeatedly referred to Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency as presenting a major step back regarding the health of Brazilian democracy. According to most analyses, in the decades following the end of the military regime, Brazil experienced a virtuous trajectory. Political analysts noted that political institutions grew significantly more mature over time. The possibility that Brazil could return to a military regime, then, seemed buried for good. Still, Bolsonaro's government has made this nightmare look alive again. Bolsonaro himself has manifested his nostalgia for the military dictatorship era. During the speech justifying his vote for impeaching Dilma Rousseff, he praised Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the leader of the squad that tortured her in the early 1970s. In fact, he brought many militaries back to the state apparatus. He has threatened to call the military to intervene in the STF when its decisions oppose his interests. He has also cast doubt on the Brazilian electronic voting system and threatened to cancel the 2022 presidential elections if the electoral authorities did not change it. RQ1 interrogates how exceptional Bolsonaro seems to be in the eyes of the legacy news media. Our analysis suggests that, for *OESP*, *O Globo*, and *FSP*, Bolsonaro is not exceptional at all. The editorial pieces of our sample identify the origins of the crisis of Brazilian democracy much earlier, during the PT-led government era.

RQ2 wonders if the legacy media focused on Bolsonaro as the main source of threats to democracy during his presidency. Again, the answer is negative. Certainly, *OESP*, *FSP*, and *O Globo* do not show any sympathy for Bolsonaro. They have fiercely opposed almost every aspect of his government—the neoliberal economic agenda championed by his minister of economy, Paulo Guedes, is a notable exception in this respect.

The president's relationship with the legacy media has clearly been strained. On more than one occasion, Bolsonaro has shown open hostility to journalists. He even threatened to punch a female reporter in the face. Still, since the 2018 election campaign and during his presidential term, the legacy media has balanced any accusation against Bolsonaro with others, directed against Lula and the PT. Therefore, they establish a false symmetry between Bolsonaro's far right and the left. Both are pictured as extremist and equally dangerous to the health of Brazilian democracy.

Recently, we have seen in the media in general the use of the terms *Bolsopetismo* and *Bolsolulismo* or *Bolsolula*, which clearly refer to a supposed confluence between Lula and Bolsonaro. However, a search for these keywords in the collections of the three newspapers considered in this work shows that contrary to *Lulopetismo*—discussed previously in the fifth section of this article—*bolsopetismo* did not become a predominant concept in the editorial discourse of these newspapers. Instead, the term was used by columnists (especially Malu Gaspar, in *O Globo*, and José Neumann, in *OESP*) and in readers' forums, but without editorial adherence. Nonetheless, although it did not appear firmly as a neologism, its meaning, which is the defense of a thesis of equivalence between both characters, was undeniably present in the newspapers, as shown by our results.

RQ3 interrogates the democratic quality of the Brazilian legacy media themselves. Has their behavior contributed to reinforcing or undermining the liberal order? There are different aspects to consider in this respect. To start with, our results suggest that *OESP*, *FSP*, and *O Globo* have considered Lula and the PT, not Bolsonaro, as presenting the more serious challenge to the liberal order. This happens despite the absence of concrete evidence, such as speeches or political measures sponsored by Presidents Lula and Rousseff, aiming to curb the autonomy of the representative and accountability institutions. Instead, the case against Lula and the PT is

essentially speculative: The basis of their speculation comes from different sources. First, there is the argument of proximity: If leftist neighbors (such as Chavista Venezuela, for instance) are authoritarian, then a leftist Brazil runs the risk of becoming one too. The underlying argument is that *Chavismo* and *Bolivarianismo* are contagious. A second element refers to the PT's long permanence ahead of the presidency itself. Never before a political party had won four presidential elections in a row. According to some critics, given that, in Brazil, the president has the constitutional right to indicate the members of the STF, this would bring the risk of making a "Bolivarian Court," which would destabilize Brazilian democracy. Third, the traditional media has frequently associated social spending policies with authoritarianism. This suggests that their prime commitment is with neoliberal ideology, rather than with liberal values and institutions. In short, the worries about Lula and the PT overtook those associated with Bolsonaro. For this reason, during Bolsonaro's government, the legacy media did not act as efficiently as a shield in defense of the liberal order as they could.

Still, there are additional aspects to consider: Did the legacy media undermine the liberal order before Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency? Here our results suggest a positive answer. According to the editorial pieces in our sample, the legacy media has consistently acted as a destabilizing agent in relation to liberal institutions. In defense of their neoliberal agenda, they championed President Rousseff's impeachment even though there was no evidence she committed a crime of responsibility. They also relied on political rather than legal arguments to defend Lula's imprisonment. It was not just about convicting and imprisoning a criminal, but about a broader political scheme known as *Lulopetismo*. They even qualified the arguments raised by Lula's attorneys as a disrespect to the judicial system and argued that this evidenced Lula's authoritarian character. When new evidence emerged in 2019 indicating numerous irregularities in the legal process against Lula, including political bias and collusion between Judge Moro and the prosecutors' team in convicting him, the three newspapers (*OESP* and *O Globo*, in particular) maintained that Lula posed a danger to Brazil and thus should be kept in jail. To summarize, the legacy media acted illiberally on numerous occasions, contributing to the emergence of an institutional crisis. Bolsonaro preyed on these circumstances.

Throughout his entire political career, Bolsonaro's behavior and policies have contradicted the core principles of democracy. After he became president, things became even worse than before. However, contrary to the normative expectations about the democratic role of the press, the Brazilian legacy media did not directly oppose Bolsonaro's authoritarianism. Instead, they trivialized Bolsonaro's behavior by comparing him to his predecessors from the PT. This suggests that the defense of democracy may not be the legacy media's primary value.

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