

## **Postmodern Without Modernization: Ages, Phases, and Stages of Political Communication and Digital Campaigns in Brazil (2010–2020)**

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This article aims to analyze the consequences of digital media on elections and democracy in Brazil from a historical perspective. It will do this by reviewing the ages, phases, and stages of political communication, proposing a contextual description of media and politics in Brazil, and historicizing digital campaigns in the country from 2010 to 2020. It will discuss the Brazilian context concerning the canonical historical approaches and debate the radicalization of Brazilian politics and the equalization of electoral campaigns. Besides that, it will suggest a holistic conception to understand the stages of political communication and digital campaigns in Brazil: the notion of “postmodern without modernization,” following Néstor Canclini’s idea of modernism without modernization for Latin America.

*Keywords: digital campaigns, radicalization, segmentation, equalization, Brazilian politics*

This article historicizes Brazil’s path toward a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), where postmodern and hypermediated political communication work with multiple media spaces, actors, and logic. It does this by trying to understand some consequences of this historical development on Brazilian politics and democracy, contributing to the study of digital campaigns (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Gibson, 2015, 2020; Howard, 2006; Ituassu, Capone, Firmino, Mannheimer, & Murta, 2019; Ituassu, Pecoraro, Capone, Leo, & Mannheimer, 2023; Ituassu, Capone, Parente, & Pecoraro, 2014; Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013; Roemmele & Gibson, 2020; Roemmele & Schneidmesser, 2016; Stromer-Galley, 2006, 2019; Vaccari, 2008). After all, the Brexit and the Trump campaigns in 2016 in the United Kingdom and the United States have given a new advance to these studies, especially to those concerned with consequences to politics and democracy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Chadwick, 2019; Chambers & Kopstein, 2022; Coleman, 2020; Persily, 2017).

At least two disruptive events in Latin America caught researchers’ attention: Jair Bolsonaro’s election as Brazilian president in 2018 and Nayib Bukele’s success in El Salvador in 2019. Both presidents

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ected have developed campaigns heavily based on the Internet, broken decades of dominance of traditional parties, and behaved aggressively against liberal institutions and democracy.

This research tries to understand phenomena like these through historicization. It follows the canonical texts of Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) and Blumler (2016) and other vital contributions to the study of political communication and electoral campaigns (Norris, 2000, 2002; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). It debates the "radicalization" of Brazilian politics and the "equalization" of electoral disputes. Besides that, it suggests a holistic conception to approach the stages of political communication and digital campaigns in Brazil: the notion of "postmodern without modernization," following Néstor Canclini's (1995) concept of "modernism without modernization" (pp. 41–65).

The debate concerning "radicalization" relates to Barbara Pfetsch's (2020) idea of the cooccurrence of changes in communication infrastructure and political culture. This article points to "radicalization" as a historical consequence of digital media development in Brazilian politics, and the events of January 8, 2023, are a high point in this process. Radicals invaded and raged over the Brazilian Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Federal Executive Office that day.

The second debate deals with the notions of "equalization" and "normalization" (Gibson, 2020). Do digital media favor minorities and less capable actors and parties, or are they an element of "normalization"? This article will argue that, in the Brazilian case, "equalization" has been much more the case than "normalization" in the analyzed period (2010–2020), and Jair Bolsonaro is one primary example of it.

In the final discussion, this piece suggests a holistic framework to approach the stages of political communication and digital campaigns in Brazil: the notion of "postmodern without modernization." The core idea refers to a historical process providing universal access to commercial media and culture without universalizing citizens' political, economic, and societal autonomy. The "postmodern without modernization" framework calls attention to the historical continuity of social gaps and inequalities in a new media environment.

In this path, five sections follow this introduction. The first will review the ages of political communication and electoral campaigns. The following sections will develop a contextual description of politics and communication in Brazil and provide a historical analysis of digital campaigns in the country from 2010 to 2020. The fourth will discuss the Brazilian context concerning the canonical historical approaches, and the fifth will present a formal conclusion. Ultimately, the main intention here is to open a path for other historicizations of digital campaigns in Latin America, improving comparative analysis related to politics, democracy, and digital media in the region.

### **Ages, Stages, and Phases of Political Communication**

Political communication has a long tradition of historical perspectives useful for comparative analysis. Swanson and Mancini (1996) developed the hypothesis of "Americanization" as a starting point to compare campaign practices in different countries. After that, "modernization" reinforced the notion that transformations are not only generated by exogenous forces. Norris (2000, 2002) offered a framework based on three ideal types: premodern, modern, and postmodern campaigns, and suggested that changes

are better understood as a modernization process with consequences for the campaigns, media, and the electorate. The postmodern phase consists of a complex media environment, a more volatile electorate, and a climate of permanent campaigning.

In a seminal work, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) described three distinct ages of political communication.

At first, much political communication was subordinate to relatively strong and stable political institutions and beliefs. In the second, faced with a more mobile electorate, the parties increasingly "professionalized" and adapted their communications to the news values and formats of limited-channel television. In the third (still emerging) age of media abundance, political communication may be reshaped by five trends: intensified professionalizing imperatives, increased competitive pressures, anti-elitist populism, a process of "centrifugal diversification," and changes in how people receive politics. (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 209)

Later, Blumler (2016) suggested the fourth era of political communication, intensifying specific processes and structural changes. Blumler (2016) emphasized a growing communication abundance, a stronger mediatization trend, and a further developed "centrifugal diversification," identifying more diverse content, voices, and audience. Blumler (2016) pointed to changes because of the diffusion of Internet facilities and transformations in the old political communication configuration. In the fourth age, digital media empowered individuals and groups to become a communicating force within a decentralization process.

Strönbäck (2008) approached the notion of "mediatization" in a process-oriented perspective characterized by four distinct stages. The transition from the first phase to the second marks increasing journalism independence, professionalization, and commercialization. In the third phase, the media's notion of reality tends to be self-fulfilling, with people acting on "mediated realities" (Strönbäck, 2008, p. 239). The fourth phase marks the "colonization" of politics by the media, with political actors no longer recognizing the distinction between media and political logic.

Studying digital campaigns in the United States, Howard (2006) identified the "hypermedia campaign" as characterized by the work of professional technocrats with expertise in information technology, target media tools to tailor messages to specific audiences, and technical decisions constraining the production and consumption of political content. The hypermedia campaign enabled political actors, consultants, and staff to create minorities rather than follow majorities, "directing public opinion, not just obeying it, and managing the contemporary performance of citizenship" (Howard, 2006, p. 204).

Gibson (2015) observed the United States and the United Kingdom in 2008 and 2010, pointing to a new grassroots-based citizen-initiated campaigning (CIC), which would constitute a new type of party affiliation and campaign membership beyond traditional ways of participation. In the same way, Roemmele and Schneidmesser (2016) indicated four stages of election campaigning. New communication technologies, data, and immediate and direct communication applications change how politics presents itself and citizens

engage in it. Elements of the fourth phase are the hybrid media system, new communications spaces, and campaign data science.

Roemmele and Gibson (2020) also discussed four phases of political campaigning. For them, four shifts point to a new era in political campaigns: changes in the infrastructure and tools of digital communication, the network approach to voter communication, new ways to understand and persuade the electorate, and a more diversified campaign in terms of the actors that "seek to participate and influence the outcome" (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020, p. 597).

Stromer-Galley (2019) articulated the change from mass to network media in a historical work about digital campaigns in the United States from the 1990s to 2016. The author emphasized the notion of "controlled interactivity" in a context where digital media have shifted the relationship between politics and audience, presenting greater possibilities to segment and classify micro publics, "creating a hybrid mass-target communication" (Stromer-Galley, 2019, p. 13).

Gibson (2020) analyzed the electoral contexts in the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Australia, showing the increasing role and centrality of the Internet. The author also suggested a four-phase model, from experimentation to standardization, community-building, and direct voter mobilization, approaching the notions of "equalization" and "normalization."

Of course, these historical characterizations are ideal types that do not represent an evolutionary process, as precedent stages do not always disappear with the arrival of new ones. In addition, they are not universal but appear in distinct shapes in different parts of the world. However, as most authors state, these frameworks serve as starting points for comparative analysis. Following the perspectives approached here, the next section will contextualize recent changes in Brazilian political communication.

### **Changes in Brazilian Political Communication**

This section approaches Brazilian politics, political communication, and media. The intention is to debate recent changes in Brazil's media and politics. It suggests four structural changes: (1) the media system transformation, (2) the universalization of digital access, (3) the liberalization of campaign regulation, and (4) the growing political radicalization.

In this sense, it is crucial to notice the well-established media system centered on TV during Brazil's transition to democracy in the mid-1980s, after 20 years of a military regime (1964–1985). Like most Latin Americans, Brazilians started to reexperience democracy in a highly concentrated modern media system dominated by one enormous commercial group (Globo).

Guerrero (2014) well represented this configuration in his "captured liberal model," referring to Latin America's hyper concentrated commercial media systems (pp. 43–65). The setup was a common consequence of media-government relations during military rules in Latin America, which Fox and Waisbord (2002) characterized as a "double standard" practice. In one way, the authoritarian governments chased

the critical press. On the other, they forged close relations with media elites, offering protection, subsidies, and contracts in exchange for less critical behavior.

The Free Electoral Broadcast Airtime (Horário Gratuito Político Eleitoral, hereafter HGPE) assumed enormous relevance in this media system. Created in the 1960s, the HGPE returned in the 1985 Brazilian municipal elections and the redemocratization process. The basic idea has been the same since then: to guarantee a time on radio and TV for candidates, dividing the time for each based on their parties' representation in the Federal Congress (De Albuquerque, 2004). Not by chance, HGPE has become a crucial element for Brazilian campaigns, having the power to mobilize "the most distant citizen" and marking "the time of politics" in the country (Cervi, 2010, p. 12).

When campaigns started to look to the Internet in the 1990s, they considered it a complement to the HGPE, offering the candidate's website as a place for more information and propaganda (Marques & Sampaio, 2011). At that moment, only a few of the Brazilian population accessed the Internet. In 2005, 17% of the houses in Brazilian urban centers had a computer, and only 13% had access to the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Access grew from 34% of the population in 2008 to 81% in 2020, and social media became popular alongside this process.

Since the beginning, Brazilians were always fans of social media. The old Orkut (2004–2014) joined more than 30 million users nationwide. In 2018, Brazil was third in the number of Facebook users worldwide and sixth on Twitter (Fundação Getúlio Vargas [FGV], 2018). In 2022, Statista showed Brazilians as the fifth-largest population of social media users and the second-largest market out of Asia, only second to the United States (Statista Research Department, 2022).

Meanwhile, regulation changed drastically. In 1998, Law 20.106 limited digital campaigns to information on the candidates' websites. In 2009, Law 12.034 allowed the campaigns to explore the Internet in the 2010 presidential election as never before, including the social media use by candidates. In 2013, Law 12.891 increased campaigns' flexibility to present their candidates online, ruling against negative campaigns, offending messages, or explicit vote pledges. In 2017, new rules permitted campaigns to advertise in digital media.

Concerning the political context, Presidential elections have occurred in Brazil since 1989. In the first contest after democratization, Fernando Collor de Mello won with a right-wing populist platform and a recent-created party (PRN)<sup>3</sup> against Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the left-wing candidate from the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, hereafter PT). *Grupo Globo* and the economic elite strongly supported Collor, fearing the intentions of Lula, but Collor had to resign three years later because of a corruption

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<sup>2</sup> All these data come from the polls made by The Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil—CGI.br).

<sup>3</sup> At the moment this article is being written, Brazil has more than 20 parties in the Federal Congress. In addition, there are parties that appear and disappear, such as President Collor's PRN and Jair Bolsonaro's PSL. Because of the excess of names, this article will work only with initials, trying to characterize the parties' significance when referring to them.

scandal. Vice President Itamar Franco assumed the presidency in 1992 and ruled until 1995. Collor-Itamar's was the last five years term since redemocratization. After that, regulation limited the presidency to four years with one reelection.

From 1994 to 2014, PT and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*, hereafter PSDB) disputed all presidential elections. In the first contest, the sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso won for PSDB with 34 million votes (54.24%). Cardoso's achievement came with the Real Plan's tremendous success, stabilizing the Brazilian economy and ending years of hyperinflation. In 1998, Cardoso won reelection with 35 million votes (53%) after his government successfully approved a law to permit a second term.

In 2002, PT won the Brazilian presidential election for the first time. Lula received 52 million votes (61%) in the second round of that dispute against PSDB's candidate, José Serra. Four years later, Lula won reelection with 58 million votes (60%). In 2010, it was the turn of the first female Brazilian president when Dilma Rousseff (PT) won in the second round with more than 55 million votes (56%). She was reelected in 2014 in a close dispute against PSDB candidate Aécio Neves. Dilma received 54 million votes (51%), and Aécio 51 million (48%). Aécio and the PSDB have formally questioned the results to the Electoral Justice, asking for a recount.

One year before Dilma's reelection, millions took to the Brazilian streets in demonstrations, the biggest ones since the military rule. In 2013, there were protests in more than 500 cities, especially between June and October. In a similar context to the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, social media had a crucial role in the protests. The demonstrations significantly impacted the 2014 election, and Dilma's second term was vigorously attacked. The economic mismanagement and the corruption scandals evolving PT in Operation Car Wash (*Lava Jato*) were mining her government quickly. The Car Wash Operation, led by judge Sergio Moro, aimed to investigate corruption in Petrobras, Brazil's state-owned oil company. Yet, the focus of the investigation soon changed, and it started to function to undermine PT and Lula. As some say, the operation had a "tremendous impact" on Brazilian politics and fostered "a generalized climate of suspicion concerning the PT" (De Albuquerque, 2021, p. 2).

Among a severe economic crisis, corruption scandals, and widespread right-wing protests in São Paulo, Dilma Rousseff was impeached in August 2016. It was a moment of significant instability. After the impeachment, Vice President Michel Temer assumed to spend the rest of the term fighting against corruption accusations. The traditional politician from an old center party (PMDB) appeared in audio doing suspicious negotiations with a business person in the garage of the executive's office. Two years later, in 2018, the far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro and his small party, PSL, replaced the social democrats against the PT in the 2018 presidential dispute. Bolsonaro won in the second round with almost 58 million votes (55%) against Fernando Haddad, who took Lula's place in the campaign. In April 2018, six months before the election, Lula was arrested for corruption and spent 580 days incarcerated. He was set free in November 2019 because of a decision by the Brazilian Supreme Court.

This section aimed to present and debate four particular suggestions from recent changes in Brazilian political communication. These were the transformation of Brazil's modern media system centered

on TV to a hybrid media system, the universalization of digital media access, the liberalization of digital campaign regulation, and the growing radicalization of Brazilian politics. Within this context, the next section will historicize digital campaigns in the country from 2010 to 2020.

### **A Decade of Digital Campaigns: From 2010 to 2020**

Many scholars see the 2010 presidential election as a turning point for digital campaigns in Brazil (Braga & Carlomagno, 2018; Ituassu et al., 2019; Marques & Sampaio, 2011). Before 2010, the legislation permitted only websites, and campaigns had few incentives to invest in interactivity or participation tools. Two events marked the transitional context: the Obama campaign in 2008 in the United States and the changes in the Brazilian electoral law in 2009. Because of the new digital campaigns, some authors identified more information available and an enhanced competition for the electors' attention, pointing to new actors producing and sharing content in blogs and social media (Marques & Sampaio, 2011).

In 2010, a news website organized the first online presidential debate. The event invited the three leading candidates: Dilma Rousseff (PT), José Serra (PSDB), and the environmentalist Marina Silva from the Green Party (PV). Plínio de Arruda Sampaio, a candidate from a minor left-wing party (PSOL), was not invited but decided to promote an alternative debate on Twitter, where he answered the questions and commented on the answers of his adversaries. The action boosted Plínio Sampaio to the top of trending topics in Brazil (Marques & Sampaio, 2011).

José Serra's campaign also developed new experiences. One was a collaborative tool (*Proposta Serra*) for people to elaborate collectively on a government program. On Twitter, the tag #pergunteaoserra (ask Serra) invited the public to pose questions to the candidate. José Serra used his YouTube channel to answer many of these questions. In 2010, scholars also noted the first uses of digital media to disseminate negative campaigns (Braga & Carlomagno, 2018).

In 2012, Facebook replaced Twitter as the leading social media, and researchers produced many studies concerning the Internet (Aggio & Reis, 2013; Braga, 2013; Ituassu et al., 2014; Marques & Mont'Alverne, 2015; Souza & Marques, 2016). In October, 140 million Brazilians voted for mayors and city councils in more than 5,500 municipalities. Candidates' uses of social media were significant, with some studies pointing to a national rate of 89% (Braga & Carlomagno, 2018). Candidates prioritized posts about campaign events and mobilization (Aggio & Reis, 2013; Bachini, Avanzi, Penteado, & Martinho, 2013). It was also common to use social media to spotlight political allegiances.

Two years later, the presidential balloting in 2014 was again a privileged research object of Brazilian scholars (Brugnago & Chaia, 2015; Cervi, Massuchin, & Carvalho, 2016; Massuchin & Tavares, 2015; Murta, Ituassu, Capone, Leo, & Rovere, 2017; Penteado, Goya, & França, 2014; Rossini, Baptista, de Oliveira, & Sampaio, 2016), including the first computational studies (Arnaudo, 2017; Santos, 2016). The strategic use of Facebook and Twitter continued to gain scholarly attention (Massuchin & Tavares, 2015; Rossini et al., 2016; Souza & Marques, 2016), but new platforms and agendas emerged. Some analyzed the presidential candidates Dilma Rousseff (PT) and Aécio Neves (PSDB) on Instagram (Azevedo & Lima, 2015), while others

proposed a methodology to study Internet memes (Chagas, Freire, Rios, & Magalhães, 2017). Penteado and colleagues (2014) examined hashtags and the political debate.

The 2014 election also brought the first worries about polarization. Brugnago and Chaia (2015) found a radicalized right-wing ideology growing on Facebook. Among corruption scandals and severe economic crises, researchers measured Jair Bolsonaro's interaction levels on Facebook as 30 times higher than his colleagues running for Rio de Janeiro's seats in the Brazilian Congress (Murta et al., 2017). In the same way, Santos (2016) found more than 500 fan pages disseminating radical content against the left, practicing tactics of communication guerrilla with flaming, hoaxes, and hate speech to an audience of 10 million followers.

Concerning the first computational studies, a report pointed to a growing polarization in social media linked to the protests in 2013 and fueled by bots (FGV, 2018). The analysis suggested that automated accounts were responsible for more than 10% of the interactions on Twitter at certain moments during the campaign. It also pointed out that polarization and radicalization have not ceased after Dilma Rousseff's (PT) victory, with bots reaching 20% of the interactions in specific clusters debating the president's impeachment soon after the inauguration.

Arnaudo (2017) has called this moment "the electronic campaign that has never ended" (p. 16). It was a turbulent moment for the country, which hosted the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016, among corruption scandals and severe economic crises. There are reports of trolls, cyborgs, and bots in all these political events (Gragnani, 2017). Both the campaigns of Dilma Rousseff (PT) and Aécio Neves (PSDB) used bots in 2014. However, a PSDB's leaked internal memo to the press in 2015 suggested that the scale used by Neves' campaign was unprecedented in Brazil, with almost 10 million reais invested in Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp operations. It also showed that the infrastructure continued to work after the campaign, supporting groups opposing President Dilma Rousseff.

Hybrid strategies with bots and cyborgs also appeared popular in many Brazilian municipal contexts in 2016 (Arnaudo, 2017). In Rio de Janeiro, researchers identified a botnet of 3,500 accounts attacking the left candidate Marcelo Freixo (PSOL) on Twitter. In São Paulo, Fernando Haddad's (PT) and João Dória's (PSDB) campaigns broadly used bots on the Twittersphere (FGV, 2018). The Internet and social media were a crucial part of the 2014 and 2016 campaigns, with almost all executive and legislative candidates using digital media in these two electoral contexts (Braga & Carlomagno, 2018).

In 2018, Brazil had 110 million people accessing the Internet. Brazilians were third among Facebook users worldwide and sixth on Twitter (FGV, 2018). Almost 50% of the population used WhatsApp to share and discuss news. A new law approved in 2017 allowed ads and paid online propaganda. For the first time since 1989, the victorious candidate in the first round had minimum time on TV. Jair Bolsonaro had eight seconds in HGPE and received 46% of the votes. His party got only 0.52% of all public resources used by the campaigns<sup>4</sup>—51% were in the hands of four traditional parties (MDB, PT, PSDB, and PP). At that time,

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<sup>4</sup> In 2017, Law 13.487 created the Electoral Fund, a public capital to finance electoral campaigns. The fund was a political answer to the Supreme Court decision to prohibit the financing by Brazilian enterprises in a context of large corruption scandals evolving the campaigns.

Bolsonaro had a large front in the number of followers on social media, with almost 4 million followers on Twitter and more than 10 million on Facebook (Penteado & Chaves, 2021).

Bolsonaro's presence on Facebook was enormous. Ortellado and Ribeiro (2018) found 115 Facebook pages promoting him, with 41,000 posts, 38 million shares, and 112 million interactions in the first 40 days of the campaign. Other researchers analyzed the candidates' spending on ads (Brito Cruz & Massaro, 2018). They highlighted that Bolsonaro's digital campaign on Facebook developed more on his supporters' pages than on his official site. For Brito Cruz and Massaro (2018), this framework pointed out the significant role of volunteers and militants in favor of the candidate. Bolsonaro also had his weekly live events every Thursday on Facebook, reaching millions in each transmission.

Besides Facebook, WhatsApp also played a relevant role in 2018. The application gained a dimension never seen before in the country because of the spread of messages, including fake news and disinformation, from groups of Bolsonaro's supporters to other nonpolitical groups, such as families, neighbors, or from work (Santos, Freitas, Aldé, Santos, & Cunha, 2019). There were more than 100 WhatsApp public groups of Bolsonaro's supporters. Chagas (2022) studied 124 groups, 12,000 users, and 760,000 messages to indicate a "digital astroturfing" phenomenon on WhatsApp, with the participation of actors from the professional field of politics emulating spontaneous behavior. Piaia and Alves (2020) analyzed 194,710 messages from 21 groups of Bolsonaro supporters. They found that few participants functioned as super-posters, and most of the links shared were YouTube videos and Facebook posts. The research also pointed to a centralized behavior to neutralize the negative campaign against Bolsonaro and support Bolsonaro's candidates for the Brazilian Congress. Chagas, Modesto, and Magalhães (2019) suggested that WhatsApp groups favoring Bolsonaro were crucial in building a polarized and aggressive context, using frames to inspire fear.

Fake news was massively spread in 2018. There were the attacks on the Brazilian electronic ballots, the physical assault of an old lady supporting Bolsonaro (Barragán, 2018), or the phone calls made by Haddad's vice president candidate Manuela D'Ávila to Adélio Bispo de Oliveira (Beraldo, 2018). Adélio Bispo stabbed Jair Bolsonaro in the small city of Juiz de Fora in a public event of Bolsonaro's campaign on September 6. The attack caused severe wounds in Bolsonaro's intestine and intense bleeding, hugely impacting the election.

The alleged support for interbreeding in one of Haddad's books and a story that a primary news vehicle received 600 million reais to attack Bolsonaro were other notorious fake news (Benites, 2018), as well as the rumor that the Facebook group "Women Against Bolsonaro" would have bought over a million followers (Becher, 2018). Another widely shared fake news was the so-called "gay kit" (Barragán, 2018). Bolsonaro's campaign and followers falsely accused PT's government of distributing a pro-gay publication in Brazilian public schools. Bolsonaro used the affair when the prime-time TV news *Jornal Nacional* interviewed him during the campaign.

Disinformation was not only on WhatsApp but also on Facebook and Twitter. In a study of more than a thousand users, Dourado (2020) built a database of 57 fake news stories disseminated on social media. They were considered false by different fact-checking projects, representing more than 3,700 shares

in three months. Weber and colleagues (2021) analyzed Bolsonaro's and Haddad's Facebook fan pages, indicating "a disruption in political aesthetics" (p. 16). Weber and colleagues (2021) suggested that the protests of 2013, the reelection of Dilma Rousseff in 2014 and her impeachment in 2016, the corruption scandals, the problems in the Brazilian economy, and the arrest of former President Lula in 2018 characterized a moment of institutional and communication disruption, which favored the election of Jair Bolsonaro. The research called attention to the values of simplicity in Bolsonaro's campaign, a "cheap campaign against the rich," an elementary dramatization of politics compared to the sophisticated and expensive traditional campaign based on TV and modern marketing (Weber et al., 2021, p. 56).

COVID-19 marked Brazil's 2020 local elections. The health emergency made personal encounters between candidates and citizens almost impossible, and the Brazilian Federal Electoral Justice forbade grand meetings. Because of that, candidates were expected to use digital media in the 2020 election extensively. Local platforms could use digital ads in their campaigns for the first time because of changes in Brazilian electoral law.

In line with the historical development of digital campaigns in Brazil, Verner (2021) found that 96% of candidates for mayor in Brazilian state capitals used Facebook, 92% used Instagram, and 79% had at least one Twitter account. Notably, 14% of the candidates already used TikTok in 2020. The research also shows that 58% had at least one YouTube channel, 42% had a high digital presence using five or six social media, and another 44% used three or four social media.

In 2020, one particular case caught the attention of researchers and journalists: Guilherme Boulos' campaign for mayor in São Paulo. Boulos is a left-wing politician from the minor party PSOL. As a leader of a homeless movement in São Paulo, he has always carried a mark of a radical politician. "Guilherme reached the news as an intruder. He was called a terrorist. Hence, his campaign's main task was to demystify that," said Boulos' communication campaign head (Tagiaroli, 2020, para. 6). With only 20 seconds of TV per day in HGPE and a campaign using humor and memes in digital media, Boulos reached the second round and finished the election with 40% of the votes.

As we have seen, it is easy to characterize Brazilian political communication as postmodern or hypermediated at the end of the analyzed moment. The following section will discuss two consequences of this historical development on Brazilian politics and one suggestion for a holistic framework to inform the research of digital campaigns in Brazil and Latin America.

### **Discussion**

This section aims to discuss the historical development of digital campaigns in Brazil. It will do this by examining three specific points: (1) the radicalization of Brazilian politics and the Internet, (2) the equalization of political actors and parties, and (3) the notion of "postmodern without modernization" as a research framework inspired by Canclini's (1995) idea of "modernism without modernization" (pp. 41-65).

The first point deals with the radicalization of Brazilian politics alongside the development of the country's digital political communication. As a multiparty presidential democracy, Brazil's experience with

polarization is recent, and there are few empirical studies about the matter (Ortellado, Ribeiro, & Zeine, 2022). Brugnago and Chaia (2015) analyzed the 2014 presidential election and found a significant asymmetric polarization, with the strengthening of the left and the right's radicalization. Miguel (2019) also identified a growing political polarization in the protests in 2013, the contented 2014 election, Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, and the success of a far-right candidate for the Brazilian Presidency in 2018. Miguel (2019) again suggested the notion of asymmetric polarization, pointing to a radicalization of the right. The interpretation here is close to the one made by Chambers and Kopstein (2022) when they indicate the radicalization of the Republicans in the United States.

Various studies have identified a growing polarization or radicalization in Brazil since the protests in 2013, some of them suggesting particular roles for social media in this process (Alves dos Santos, 2019; Avritzer, 2018; Brugnago & Chaia, 2015; Machado & Miskolci, 2019; Miguel, 2019; Ruediger, Martins, Luz, & Grassi, 2014). From this article's perspective, one should understand this phenomenon within the process that Barbara Pfetsch (2020) called the "cooccurrence" of communication infrastructure and political culture changes. Radicalization grew strongly in Brazil after 2013, alongside the development of digital political communication since 2010. As new research questions emerge, this article suggests that one should understand the cooccurrence of changes in political culture and infrastructure communication from a historical perspective. In the Brazilian and other Latin American contexts, this may serve as a prosperous path for comparative analysis in studying the consequences of digital media on elections and democracy in the region.

The second point in this section refers to the notions of "equalization" and "normalization" or whether digital campaigns enable a more "equalized" or "normalized" electoral communication and party competition (Gibson, 2020). Analyzing the Brazilian context from 1998 to 2016, Braga and Carlomagno (2018) found a general trend to equalization because of the reduced inequalities in access to social media among all types of candidates and platforms.

Equalization also caught the attention of this research in the analyzed period (2010–2020). One notorious example of digital equalization was Plínio de Arruda Sampaio, a candidate from the small left-wing party PSOL in the 2010 presidential election. Although he could not transform his success on Twitter into votes, Plínio proved that presidential candidates no longer depended on TV and considerable resources to get the public's attention.

In this matter, it is impossible not to think about Jair Bolsonaro and the *bolsonarismo* as significant equalization cases. There are numerous examples of radical conservatives elected in 2018 having an enormous performance on social media, most newcomers to professional politics. Jair Bolsonaro himself left the place of an isolated congressperson who praised the military regime and torture for being elected president in a small party and a cheap campaign centered on social media and WhatsApp groups.

Another example was Guilherme Boulos's campaign for the city of São Paulo in 2020. As seen, Boulos reached the second round and gained 40% of the votes in the wealthiest Brazilian town. He had only 20 seconds of TV per day in HGPE but developed a campaign using humor and memes in digital

media. Even though Boulos was not an outsider, since he had already been a presidential candidate two years before, he came from the small left-wing party PSOL. At least in the analyzed historical period (2010–2020), the idea of an expensive scientific campaign using data science and monitored by new technical staff that could “normalize” the electoral context in favor of the traditional parties is not yet seen in Brazil.

Finally, the last point to discuss here proposes a holistic framework within which digital campaigns work and develop in Brazil and Latin America. The idea of “postmodern without modernization” is based on Canclini’s (1995) notion of “modernism without modernization” (pp. 41–65), which suggests that Latin America had “an exuberant modernism with a deficient modernization” (p. 41).

Canclini (1995) pointed out that modernization was not a universal value in Latin American countries, making it impossible to form symbolic markets where autonomous cultural fields could grow. “Is it possible to impel cultural modernity when socioeconomic modernization is so unequal?” he asked (Canclini, 1995, p. 43). “In what sense do these contradictions obstruct the realization of the emancipating, expansive, renovating, and democratizing projects of modernity?” (Canclini, 1995, p. 46). Canclini (1995) suggested that it is “undeniable that Latin America has modernized as a society and as a culture” (pp. 64–65). For him, the “socialization” or democratization of culture “has been achieved by the culture industry” in the hands of big corporations, and “there continues to be inequality in the appropriation of symbolic goods and access to cultural innovation” (Canclini, 1995, p. 65).

In sum, Canclini’s framework understands modernism in Latin America as a cultural process centered on media conglomerates. It also views the lack of Latin American modernization in the region’s failure to universalize citizenship rights capable of providing the individual’s autonomy, a political prerequisite of the Modern Era. The suggestion to view Brazil and Latin America’s digital campaigns within the “postmodern without modernization” scheme is to point out a cultural process centered on major (digital) media conglomerates where there is universal access to commercial media and culture but not a universal provision of citizens’ rights in the economic, political, and societal fields. In this context, Canclini’s notion highlights the research relevance of following the political prerequisites of the Postmodern Era without forgetting the gaps in Latin American modernization.

Yet, it is essential to notice that the two mentioned points, “radicalization” and “equalization,” relate to each other so that the last facilitates the rise of minority actors and parties, some of them from the extreme of the political spectrum. In this sense, equalization is also an element of radicalization, as is evident in Brazil in the case of Jair Bolsonaro.

At the same time, “equalization” and “radicalization” relate to the “postmodern without modernization” framework alerting to the specific consequences of digital media in contexts where modern (and postmodern) rights are not extensive as access to commercial media and culture. In these contexts, particular versions of populism may arise, and regulation may suffer from disproportional media power. These and other specific consequences can work as research hypotheses for the comparative analysis of digital media impacts on politics and democracy in Brazil and Latin America.

### Conclusion

The path until here consisted of four steps. The first reviewed the ages of political communication and digital campaigns. The second step built a contextual view of media and politics in Brazil. The following discussed a history of digital campaigns in the country from 2010 to 2020, and the fourth debated the Brazilian context concerning canonical approaches and questions. In the end, three points were discussed: (1) the radicalization of Brazilian politics, (2) the equalization of Brazilian elections, and (3) the notion of "postmodern without modernization" to understand the social dynamics around the country's universalization of digital media access.

In the first discussion, this article suggested that one should perceive the radicalization of Brazilian politics as a consequence of the cooccurrence of changes in Brazil's communication infrastructure and political culture. The second debate approached the "equalization" and "normalization" notions, suggesting that the first is much more the case than the last, at least in the analyzed period (2010–2020). Finally, the last discussion proposed a holistic framework within which digital campaigns work and develop in Brazil and Latin America.

This research suggested and debated "ideal types" to understand digital campaigns' consequences on elections and democracy. It did not mean to support technological determinism but tried to approach digital media as a cultural artifact whose uses and understandings are informed by culture. The proposal here was to discuss social and political changes related to transformations in media systems and communication infrastructures.

Hence, this article intended to highlight contexts and historical perspectives as a way to not isolate digital media from politics and societies. In Latin America, it emphasized the thinking about different contexts as "hybrid cultures" within a process of "postmodernization without modernization" (Canclini, 1995). Ultimately, it aimed to open a path for other historicizations to improve Latin American comparative analysis of politics, democracy, and digital media.

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