

Recognising the Iceberg: the sensitivity of the traditional media to the political rise of the far right

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Abstract

This study investigates how national media in Germany and Brazil covered far-right political groups during key elections, addressing the problem of whether the press recognised these groups as distinct from mainstream parties and as potential threats to democracy. Using a qualitative content analysis of digital newspaper headlines published in the year leading up to the elections that brought the Alternative for Germany (AfD) into parliament in Germany and Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency in Brazil, the research examines variations in media neutrality, sentiment, and thematic focus. The findings reveal a contrast in media treatment. German outlets framed the AfD through a critical lens, highlighting its extremism and the problematic background of its main figures. In contrast, Brazilian media largely normalised Bolsonaro's candidacy, treating it as an equivalent political alternative and overlooking his controversial background.

Keywords: Far right; Democracy; Press; Brazil; Germany

1. Introduction

The media currently function as a “window to the outside world” (Akinkoya, Odetoyinbo, and Ogbuehi 2020), offering individuals a way to stay informed about events outside their immediate social circle, especially in societies with large populations. In contexts where direct communication becomes impractical, the press emerges as the main source of news and information. In liberal democratic regimes, the media play a crucial role. Democratic theory emphasises the importance of freedom and independence of the press as essential conditions for the development and maintenance of democratic rule (Dahl 1971, 74). The independence of the press, however, is a relatively recent achievement. In the United States, for example, newspapers only began to disassociate themselves from political parties in the beginning of the 20th century in order to assert their “political independence” (Gentzkow, Glaeser, and Goldin 2006, 189). Despite this, independence often faces challenges from economic,

political, and state actors who seek to influence or control the media (Bajomi-Lázár 2013; Akinkoya, Odetoyinbo, and Ogbuehi 2020).

Given its preponderant role in society, the influence of the media on its readers is a widely researched topic in the fields of Psychology and Political Science. Studies show that the way news is presented can affect people's judgment and shape their opinions through the emotions generated (Kühne 2012; Amsalem and Zoizner 2022). In addition, media coverage can influence voters' political behaviour in referenda and elections (Elenbaas and De Vreese 2008; Van Spanje and De Vreese 2014). It is therefore crucial to analyse both the role of the media in presenting different issues and the impact of this presentation on the public.

In the midst of the so-called “fourth wave” of the far-right's advance, which began in the 2000s and was boosted by the 2009 financial crisis and the so-called 2015 “refugee crisis” (Mudde 2022), and, given the “frenemy” state that characterises the media's relationship with the far right, through which both, in part, feed off each other (Mudde 2024), it is relevant to observe how the media has treated these political groupings, especially identifying their threat to democratic regimes. The present paper inserts itself inside this context. With the aim of analysing how the national media in Germany and Brazil treated far-right groups and candidates as they gained influence—or even rose to power—a qualitative study that investigates headlines published digitally by national newspapers with high circulation in the countries studied is developed. By focussing on the period of one year before the elections that brought the “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) to parliament in Germany and Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency in Brazil, when, for the first time since the end of the World War 2, in Germany, and since the end of the military dictatorship, in Brazil, far-right forces gained relevant strength in the politics in each country. The study aims, thus, to compare the way in which journalistic coverage was given to these parties, which make up a camp of non-mainstream political actors, and to the other parties, that belonged to a rather mainstream dimension. Therefore, it investigates the *objectivity* given by Brazilian and German newspapers to the stories related to the different parties, i.e. the variation in what could be considered “neutral”, and also the subjects that are most associated to the parties.

The purpose of this comparison is to determine whether national media have, firstly, been able to identify these new political groupings as different from the mainstream and, secondly, to identify their danger to the democratic regime. To this end, this chapter is divided into six parts. The first explains what has already been observed in the field of scientific research on the effects of the media on the formation of political opinion and political behaviour. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical approach adopted in the article to define the political biases of the political parties and candidates analysed in both Germany and Brazil. The third section discusses the newspapers chosen to form the sample, clarifying the criteria for their selection and their comparability. The methodology used to carry out the study is then detailed. This is followed by an analysis of the data collected, detailing how the news coverage of political parties in both countries took place during the defined period. Finally, the last part brings a discussion of the study's findings.

2. The power of the press in shaping political opinion

In 1963, Bernard C. Cohen emphasised the role of the press as more than just an information provider, stating that although it does not directly determine *what* people should think, it is extremely effective in shaping *how* they think (Cohen 1963). Cohen was referring to the influence of media on US foreign policy, and this idea inspired Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw to develop the concept of *agenda-setting*. They argued that the media not only reflects but influences the public's priorities, demonstrating that there is a correlation between what the media emphasises and what voters consider important (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 185). Agenda-setting thus represents one of the first forms of political influence by the media.

Another form of influence is the so-called *framing*, a concept presented by Gaye Tuchman. She suggests that the perception of reality depends on how information is presented, and the framing of news can be problematic because it moulds the way the public evaluates events (Tuchman 1978, 1). The media, due to its privileged position, has the power to define the parameters by which the public judges politics, highlighting certain aspects while ignoring others. This effect is called *priming* and originates in the field of Psychology. Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder exemplify this concept by explaining that if the media emphasises, for example, the risk of nuclear annihilation, citizens will evaluate the president based on his ability to reduce this danger (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 63).

Studies in the field of psychology have tested the influence of news coverage on readers, revealing that the emotions generated by articles affect both the interpretation of reported policies and the formation of political opinions (Kühne 2012; Amsalem and Zoizner 2022). Evidence has also been found that readers' perceptions of "public opinion" are shaped by media coverage and can diverge from reality (Mutz and Soss 1997, 442). Furthermore, media coverage has an impact on political behaviour, as evidenced in the 2004 European Union referenda in the Netherlands and the 2009 European elections, where a lack of objectivity influenced turnout (Elenbaas and De Vreese 2008; Van Spanje and De Vreese 2014). Thus, the literature corroborates the relevance of studies on political news coverage and its effects on the population.

3. Sampling newspaper in a coherent manner

When dealing with the press in the scientific field, one can come across the term "quality press". Widely used in the field of communication research, its definition does not seem to be well established. However, the definition adopted here originates from the "unwritten consensus" on what could be qualified as a "quality newspaper", a definition given by Stephan Russ-Mohl. Thus, a newspaper can be classified in these terms if it addresses a country's elites and decision-makers; has national coverage; and provides broad and in-depth news and information coverage (Russ-Mohl 2008, 1). These criteria set a bar to define which newspaper could be considered for the sample and which could not, especially those considered to be "tabloids".

Additionally, the circulation of newspapers was also adopted to sort them and determine which papers would be chosen for the sample. To do this, data from the IVW (*Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V.*) for German newspapers and the IVC (*Instituto Verificador de Comunicação*) for Brazilian

newspapers was used. Both institutions collate information on media circulation in their respective countries. In order to maintain the pragmatism of the study, it was decided to select three newspapers from each country, totalling a group of six newspapers as data sources. As illustrated in Figure 1¹, the six newspapers that met all the criteria adopted were “*DIE WELT*”, “*die Frankfurter Allgemeine*”, and “*die Süddeutsche Zeitung*”, in the case of Germany, and “*Estadão*”, “*a Folha de São Paulo*”, and “*O Globo*”, in the case of Brazil.

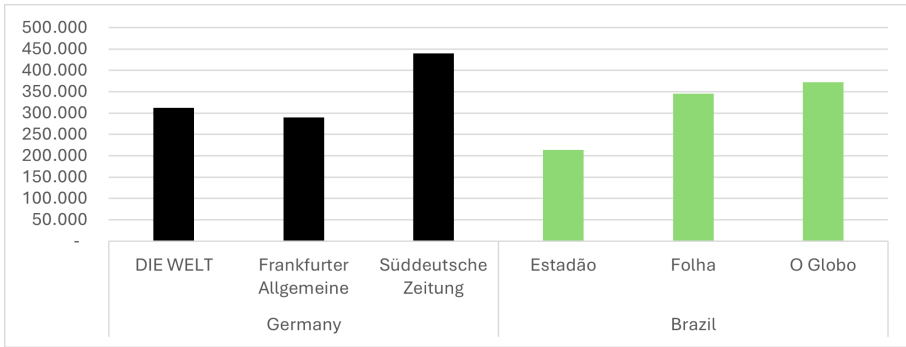


Figure 1. Total circulation (print and digital) of national newspapers in Germany and Brazil in 2022

Source: IVW (2024) and Poder360 (2024). Own illustration.

4. Identifying the actors on the political spectrum

Before defining the methodology, it is essential to identify the political actors analysed in the comparative study. Focussing on the election years of 2017 in Germany and 2018 in Brazil, in which the AfD entered the German parliament and Jair Bolsonaro become president, the study covered the relevant parties in these elections, as well as the leading candidates in Germany and presidential candidates in Brazil. “Relevant parties” were those that maintained significant voting intentions in the period. In Germany, this included parties that exceeded the “blocking clause” of 5 per cent of the vote, and, in Brazil, parties with voting intentions above 5 per cent. Thus, seven German parties² and five Brazilian parties³ were selected. In addition, nine German and five Brazilian candidates were included.

1. Due to the fact that IVW data is only available from 2022 for the first quarter, it was decided to also select the 2022 data for Brazilian newspapers in order to compare them in terms of equality. The data for the German newspapers “*Frankfurter Allgemeine*” and “*Süddeutsche Zeitung*” refers to the Monday to Saturday editions, while for “*DIE WELT*” it refers to the Monday to Friday editions. The German data refers to the “total numbers” of the “category dissemination” (*Verbreitung*), including print, *ePaper*, *extended ePaper* and paid content. The Brazilian data refers to the average daily circulation of the print version together with the total number of digital subscriptions in absolute numbers.

2. The “*Union*” was counted as a single party in most of the analysis, but in the individual analysis it was split between the CDU and the CSU.

3. Since the PSB, which was above 5% in the polls until April 2018, gave up its candidacy, it was not added to the analysis

To categorise the political actors analysed in the study, a pragmatic theoretical framework based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey database was adopted. For the German parties, I used data from 2017 from the European database (Jolly et al. 2022), and, for the Brazilian parties, data from 2020 from the Latin American database (Martínez-Gallardo et al. 2022). This approach made it possible to categorise almost all political actors according to their position on the political spectrum, with the exception of Brazilian party “*Rede Sustentabilidade*”, which was not included in the database. The categorisation was based on the variable “LRGEN”, which measures the general ideology of the parties on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 represents “far left” and 10 “far right”. The parties were classified into four groups: scores between 2.5 and 2.9 as “left”, from 4.0 to 4.9 as “centre-left”, from 5.0 to 5.9 as “centre-right” and between 6.0 and 7.5 as “right”. Scores below 2.5 were associated with the far left and above 7.5 with the far right.

Based on these classifications, four dimensions were established, from an individual to a supra-party one. The supra-party dimension is particularly relevant to the study, as it groups different parties into a “mainstream” and a “non-mainstream”, making it easier to compare news coverage. The political actors analysed in both countries were categorised into four dimensions: individual, “electoral ticket” (meaning, for Germany, the leading candidates, and, for Brazil, the presidential ticket composed of president and vice-president candidates), political spectrum, and belonging to the mainstream. The information on candidates, parties, and other dimensions is displayed on Table 1⁴⁵⁶.

Table 1. Political actors and dimensions analysed

| Country | Actor type | Individual dimension | Electoral ticket dimension | Political spectrum dimension | Mainstream dimension |
|---------|------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Germany | 0 | Die Linke | Linke | Far left | Mainstream |
| | 1 | Sarah Wagenknecht | | | |
| | 1 | Dietmar Bartsch | | | |
| | 0 | Bündnis 90/Die Grünen | Grüne | Left | |
| | 1 | Katrin Göring-Eckardt | | | |
| | 1 | Cem Özdemir | SPD | Centre-right | |
| | 0 | SPD | | | |
| | 1 | Martin Schulz | | | |
| | 0 | CDU | Union | Right | |
| | 1 | Angela Merkel | | | |
| | 0 | CSU | | | |
| | 0 | FDP | FDP | Right | |
| | 1 | Christian Lindner | | | |

4. The short term “*Linke*” will be used to designate the Left party “*die Linke*” throughout the analysis.
 5. The short term “*Grüne*” will be used to designate the party “*Bündnis 90/die Grünen*” throughout the analysis.
 6. The short term “*Rede*” will be used to designate the party “*Rede Sustentabilidade*”. Furthermore, For the purposes of this study, the party was associated with the left-wing due to the background of its founder, Marina Silva, the party’s members, as well as the programme platform presented in the election.

Table 1 continued from previous page

| | | | | | |
|--------|---|------------------------|------|--------------|----------------|
| | 0 | AfD | | | |
| | 1 | Alexander Gauland | AfD | Far right | Non-mainstream |
| | 1 | Alice Weidel | | | |
| | 0 | PT | PT | | |
| | 1 | Lula / Fernando Haddad | | Left | |
| | 0 | PDT | PDT | | Mainstream |
| Brazil | 1 | Ciro Gomes | | | |
| | 0 | Rede Sustentabilidade | Rede | | |
| | 1 | Marina Silva | | | |
| | 0 | PSDB | PSDB | Centre right | |
| | 1 | Geraldo Alckmin | | | |
| | 0 | PSL | PSL | Far right | Non-mainstream |
| | 1 | Jair Bolsonaro | | | |

Note: Types of political actor: 0 = party; 1 = candidate. Polling data used to define the parties and candidates analysed was taken from the Wahlrecht portal (2017) and Wikipedia's 2018 Brazilian election polls page (2018).

Some considerations are important considering the association of different political figures in the “mainstream—non-mainstream” dimensions. In the German case, die Linke, die Grünen, SPD, Union, and FDP were already consolidated political parties in the German political landscape during the analysed time framework. AfD, founded in 2013, was *the* non-mainstream political force to compete in the 2017 federal elections in Germany. Moreover, the emphasis on its differentiation is justified by the background of their main leaders. Alexander Gauland, a central figure in the AfD and a former CDU member, has for years adopted a discourse reminiscent of far-right ideas, using slogans from the neo-Nazi NPD party to criticise Merkel⁷. Another prominent member, Björn Höcke, who has been involved with neo-Nazi marches since 2010⁸, has continued to express neo-Nazi views, criticising the memory of the Holocaust and maintaining a radical stance even as party leader in Thuringia. However, beyond news headlines, the AfD has been subject of scientific analyses in the field of Political Science. Previous research has not only found evidence for its categorisation as belonging to the far-right side of the political spectrum since its foundation (Arzheimer 2015; Decker and Lewandowsky 2017), but also for a strong extremist influence amongst its ranks (Pfahl-Traughber 2019, 37).

For Brazilian parties and politicians, certain caveats must be considered. Although “Rede” was founded in 2015, it is classified here as part of the mainstream political field, given that its founder and most prominent figure, Marina Silva, was already a well-established political actor on the national stage at the time of the party's inception. Conversely, PSL is categorised as belonging to the non-mainstream dimension. Despite being an “old party”, founded in 1998, it remained politically insignificant for most of its history, only gaining relevance when Jair Bolsonaro joined its ranks ahead

7. Newspaper article reporting on it available at Zeit, 2016.

8. Newspaper article reporting on it available at Tagesspiegel, 2017

of the 2018 elections (Iwanowski 2019, 67). Similarly, while Bolsonaro had served as an elected deputy for the state of Rio de Janeiro for three decades, he lacked national political significance (Hunter and Power 2019, 74–75). It was only in the aftermath of the 2014 national protests—co-opted by right-wing political movements—that he began to acquire national visibility (Puzone and Miguel 2019, 286–287). Even before his presidential candidacy, Bolsonaro had been identified as a far-right leader with fascist tendencies (Caldeira Neto 2016, 31), advocating militaristic and anti-democratic views. He had publicly expressed support for civil war in Brazil and defended the use of torture as a political instrument⁹, in addition to inciting political violence during his campaign¹⁰. These factors substantiate the classification of both Bolsonaro and his party within the “non-mainstream” dimension during the 2018 presidential election.

Moreover, these examples are crucial in illustrating the distinction of these parties not only in their political rhetoric but also in their power projects, which stand in contrast to those of traditional parties. This demonstrates that both the AfD and Bolsonaro had already exhibited an anti-democratic bias and were not entirely new or unknown political phenomena, unlike mainstream parties and politicians. The increasing prominence of these forces on the national stage further underscores the importance of analysing them as non-conventional political actors within their respective countries.

5. Methodology

The aim of the study is to qualitatively analyse the headlines published by major national newspapers on their online portals. To this end, digital methods were used, using Python and APIs, both to collect and to analyse data. Once the time frame had been defined (twelve months before the parliamentary elections in Germany and the presidential elections in Brazil) and the sources and actors analysed had been chosen, the data collection began. To ensure that the analysis followed the established period (October 2016 to September 2017 for Germany, and November 2017 to October 2018 for Brazil) and maintained uniformity between different news portals, data was collected using Google’s search engine, which is the largest virtual search engine today with billions of indexed pages (Shepard 2024). Although some limitations of automated tools should be recognised—e.g. not displaying more than 100 results per search—Google’s algorithms prioritise more relevant results, which was considered advantageous for the context studied.

In total, the study involved 26 political actors (including parties and candidates), six newspapers, 24 months of analysis and two countries. The data was collected via Google, and was limited to the newspapers’ websites. A search was carried out for each possible combination of actor, newspaper, month, and country, totalling 936 searches (576 in Germany and 360 in Brazil). The automation was based on SerpHouse’s Serp API, executed using Python code. The searches were configured for the countries’ languages and locations, with relevant results for Berlin (for German actors) and

9. Interview with Bolsonaro on the 23rd of May 1999, at the programme “Canal Aberto”, at the channel “TV Bandeirantes”, in which he makes statements in favour of torture and a Brazilian civil war: Available at Laque, 2017.

10. Example in which Bolsonaro called for the “firing squad” of supporters of the Workers’ Party: Available at Poder360, 2018.

São Paulo (for Brazilian actors). The searches were based on keywords related to each political actor. In the case of “Lula/Fernando Haddad”, for example, the search returned pages that mentioned both names¹¹. This resulted in 8,386 unique pages (57 per cent German and 43 per cent Brazilian). The data was then filtered to focus only on headlines that explicitly mentioned these political actors. In situations where the name of the party was generic—such as “*Rede*” in Brazil (“net/network”) or “*Grüne(n)*” in Germany (green)—manual filtering was necessary. In the end, 1,150 headlines in Germany and 1,934 in Brazil were analysed. Headlines that mentioned more than one actor were analysed separately for each individual actor, but grouped together in collective analyses. For example, a headline that mentioned “Angela Merkel” and “CSU” would be counted twice in the respective individual analyses, but only once in the grouping “Union” or “centre-right”. In this way, the final analysis ensured the uniqueness of each headline per group.

To make it possible to compare media’s treatment of political actors, an analysis of “objectivity” was adopted in news coverage, which is defined here on the basis of a sentimental analysis of the headlines. Google’s *API Natural Language* was used to analyse thousands of texts in both languages, applying machine learning to identify sentiment. The analysis assigns a score between -1.0 and +1.0 for texts, with values between -0.25 and 0.25 considered as “neutral” wording. Values above are classified “positive” and below as “negative” wording. A text is considered objective if it remains in the range considered neutral. The sentimental average was calculated over the twelve months and analysed for each actor, in addition to the amalgamations by electoral ticket, political spectrum, and mainstream dimension. In addition, a code was used to generate word clouds from the headlines, making it possible to identify the most relevant terms in relation to each actor or political group throughout the year of news coverage.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, no hypotheses were proposed to be tested. The focus is on analysing how the media covered different political actors in the pre-election period, especially considering the increased influence of groupings belonging to a non-mainstream dimension and whether there was a differentiation in journalistic treatment according to the parameters defined.

6. Recognising the danger: analysis of pre-election press coverage in Germany and Brazil

6.1 *The German case*

Analysing the data from the 2017 general elections in Germany reveals a significant amount of attention paid by the headlines to the far-right party “*Alternative für Deutschland*” (*AfD*), which surprisingly received media coverage comparable to that of the then still-in-office Union electoral ticket (CDU/CSU), led by Angela Merkel. This period, marked by the *AfD*’s first entry into the Bundestag with 12.6 per cent of the

11. As Lula was the official presidential candidate until September 2018, even after his arrest in April 2018. Haddad had already been seen as possible successor, but was only officially nominated presidential candidate in September 2018. Therefore, their name was combined as one single political actor—PT’s presidential candidate.

vote and 94 seats, also saw a significant increase in media coverage in the six months leading up to the elections. The average number of headlines per newspaper rose from 24 to 44 per month, reflecting the growing attention to the electoral scenario. Media coverage focussed on the AfD was surprisingly high, with a total of 390 headlines over the 12 months, almost the same as the Union, which had 399. This suggests that the AfD, despite being a far-right party and not coming second in the polls—a position held by the SPD—managed to attract as much media attention as the party in office. The SPD, which came second in the polls, received significantly less attention, with an average of just 17 headlines a month, coming third in the number of mentions.

The three newspapers analysed – *DIE WELT*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ)—showed slight variations in the amount of headlines dedicated to the AfD and the Union, with the FAZ standing out as having more emphasis on the AfD than the Union (Figure 2). Meanwhile, the SPD, although relevant in the polls, was consistently less mentioned, occupying only between 15 and 20 per cent of the headlines. Other parties received between 14 and 20 per cent of the mentions, roughly reflecting their relevance in voting intentions at the time. This pattern of coverage indicates that the German media focussed more on the AfD than its numbers in the polls would indicate, highlighting the rise of the far right as a central theme in the 2017 elections.

In addition to the attention given to electoral tickets, the objectivity of the headlines is also crucial to the analysis. Figure 3 shows the average sentiment in the headlines in the 12 months preceding the elections, focusing on the candidates and the mainstream dimension. The data shows that all the averages remain within the classification “neutral”, which indicates that, in general, German newspapers treated all the electoral tickets and camps objectively, without tending towards an excessively positive or negative coverage. However, there are subtle variations in the tone adopted by each newspaper. The FAZ had a slightly positive slant towards the left and the centre. On the other hand, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, was more positive towards parties further to the centre or right, with the exception of the liberal FDP. The *WELT* maintained a more balanced position, with no major variations in its treatment of the parties. These differences between the newspapers resulted, on average, in more positive headlines for left-wing and centre-right parties compared to the others. Of all the parties, the far-right AfD had the least positive headlines. Only the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had headlines about the AfD that were as positive on average as those of the left-wing SPD. This suggests that stories involving the mainstream electoral tickets in general received more favourable coverage compared to parties in the non-mainstream dimension.

Analysing the word clouds (Figure 4) reinforces this trend, with a strong concentration on parties and candidates. In the mainstream dimension, Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose candidacy was leading the polls, appears prominently, as does the SPD and its candidate Martin Schulz. Other parties such as the *Bündnis 90/die Grünen*, FDP, and *die Linke* also figure prominently. Interestingly, the term “AfD” also appears frequently, indicating the attention received by the far right. In addition, names of global leaders such as Trump, Putin, and Erdoğan appear, reflecting their presence in the political debate, often in connection with Merkel. The terms of the non-mainstream dimension seem to be less unanimous. The far-right party acronym

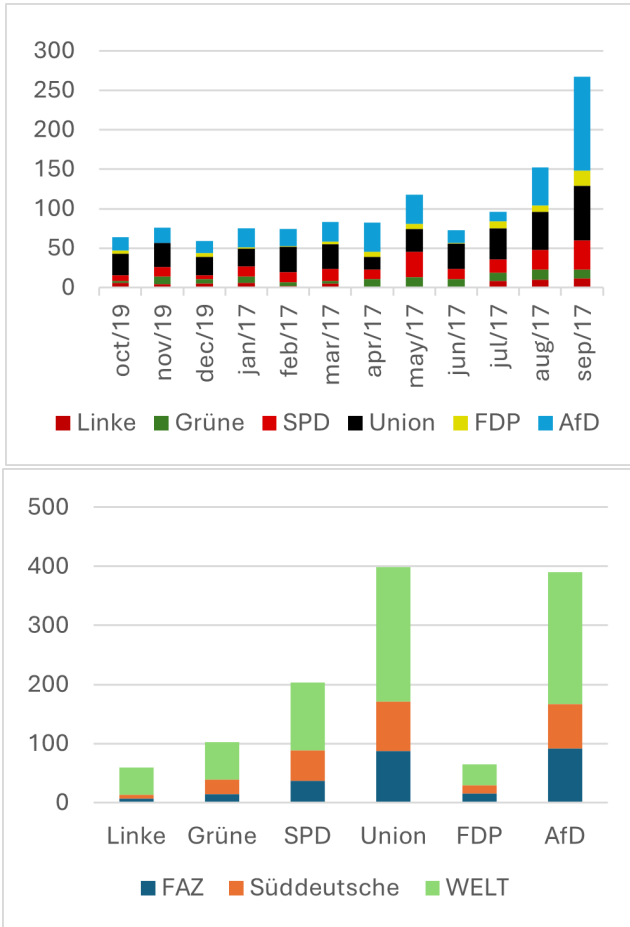


Figure 2. Absolute numbers of headlines explicitly mentioning electoral tickets ahead of the 2017 parliamentary elections in Germany by party, by month and by newspaper.

Source: Own elaboration.

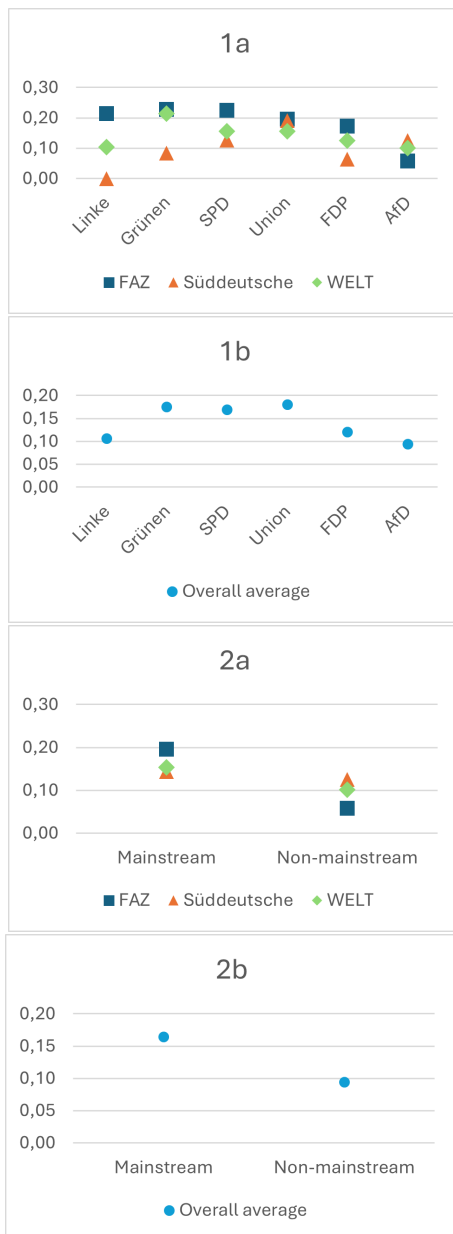


Figure 3. Average sentiment of headlines from twelve months before the 2017 parliamentary elections in Germany by newspaper and overall.

Note: Plot “1a” refers to sentiment by electoral ticket (candidates + parties); “1b” to the overall average between the three newspapers; “2a” to sentiment by mainstream dimension; and “2b” to the overall average between the three newspapers. Own elaboration.

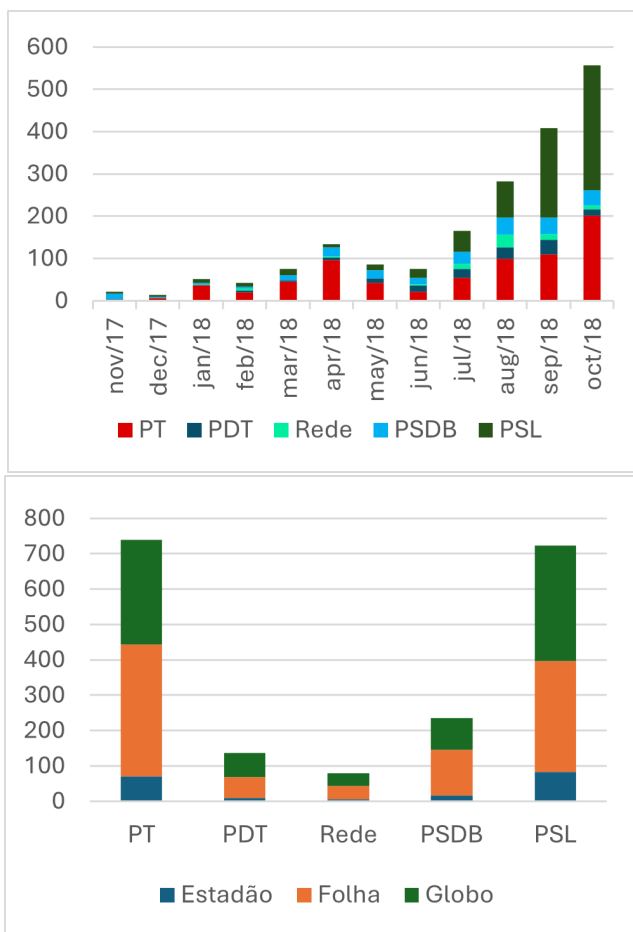


Figure 5. Absolute numbers of headlines explicitly mentioning electoral tickets ahead of the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil by party, by month and by newspaper.

Source: Own elaboration.

With regard to the sentiment analysis (Figure 6), it can be seen that, as in Germany, Brazilian press coverage remained within the limits of neutrality, suggesting, on average, objectivity in the treatment of the headlines. Although the coverage of the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil remained within the limits of neutrality, the average sentiment in the headlines showed a less positive trend. Headlines from *Estadão* about PDT, Rede, and PSDB showed averages closer to 0, or even negative. *Estadão* was more positive when it addressed both PT and PSL electoral tickets, even if only minimally. *Globo*, on the other hand, showed a slightly favourable bias towards the more right-wing candidates, especially the far right, while *Folha* had the highest averages of positivity, with Rede and PDT standing out, followed by PSL. These individual differences resulted in an overall average that progressively favoured parties closer to the right-wing, with the exception of PSDB, which received more critical coverage. This shows that, when consolidating the data, Brazilian newspapers tended to treat figures from the mainstream dimension less favourably than those in the non-mainstream dimension.

In the word clouds in Figure 7, it can be seen that the most quoted terms in the mainstream dimension revolved around Lula, PT, and his successor, Haddad. Geraldo Alckmin, from PSDB's electoral ticket, featured prominently in the media, despite having little relevance in the polls. In the far-right camp, Bolsonaro's name appeared prominently, reflecting the exchange of accusations between PT and PSL, which dominated the electoral debate. The verb "*diz*" (he/she says/states) stands out in the headlines because of statements made by the candidates, reflecting the news coverage focused on declarations and promises. Terms related to other candidates, such as "Marina Silva", "Ciro Gomes", or "PSDB", appear less frequently. The presence of "*prisão*" (jail/prison) refers to Lula's arrest before the election, while "FAKE" is linked to coverage of the dissemination and correction of false information involving candidates. In the non-mainstream dimension, the word cloud also shows Jair Bolsonaro as the central figure, although less expressively than in the mainstream dimension. In addition to him, opponents such as "PT", "Alckmin", "Lula", and "Haddad" appear, showing coverage that involved the stance of other candidates towards his candidacy, as demonstrated by the terms "*contra Bolsonaro*" (against Bolsonaro) and "*pró Bolsonaro*" (pro Bolsonaro). The term "*filho*" (son) refers to the participation of Bolsonaro's sons in his campaign, while "*agressor*" (aggressor) and "*facada*" (stabbing) are associated with the stabbing Bolsonaro suffered in September 2018, with "*ataque*" (attack) reflecting both this incident and the accusations exchanged between the candidates.

7. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to analyse the coverage of the national elections in Germany and Brazil, which resulted in the rise of far-right parties to power in both countries, something unprecedented in decades. To do this, a methodology was developed that was able to generate a broad, empirical overview, allowing comparisons to be made both internally and between the two countries. It is believed that the study achieved its objective, having shown the role played by the media in the rise of forces that could present a threat to the democratic system of each country, regarding their policies and ideologies. The comparative analysis shows that German and Brazilian media differ

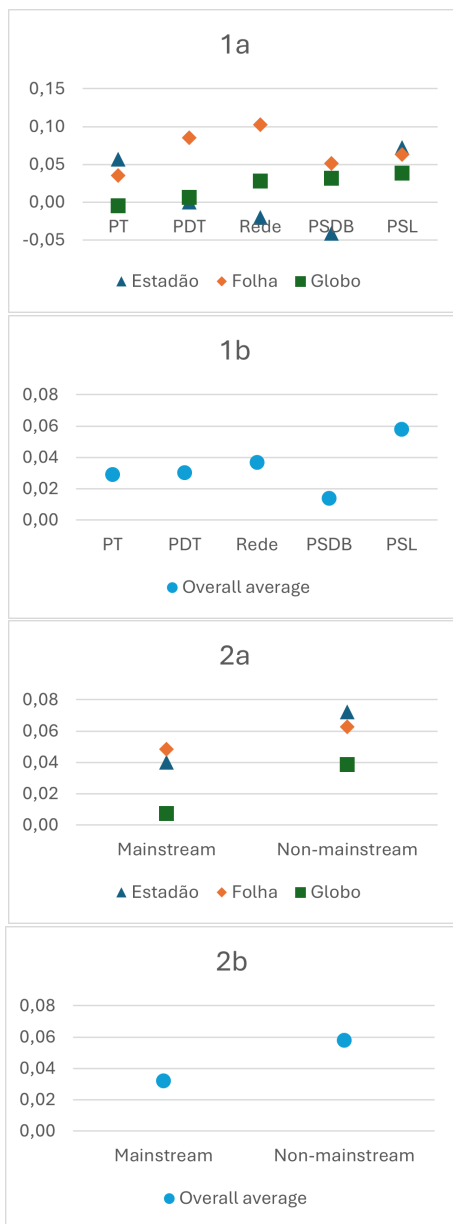


Figure 6. Average sentiment of headlines from twelve months before the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil by newspaper and overall

Note: Graph “1a” refers to sentiment by electoral tickets (candidates + parties); “1b” to the overall average between the three newspapers; “2a” to sentiment by mainstream dimension; and “2b” to the overall average between the three newspapers. Own elaboration.

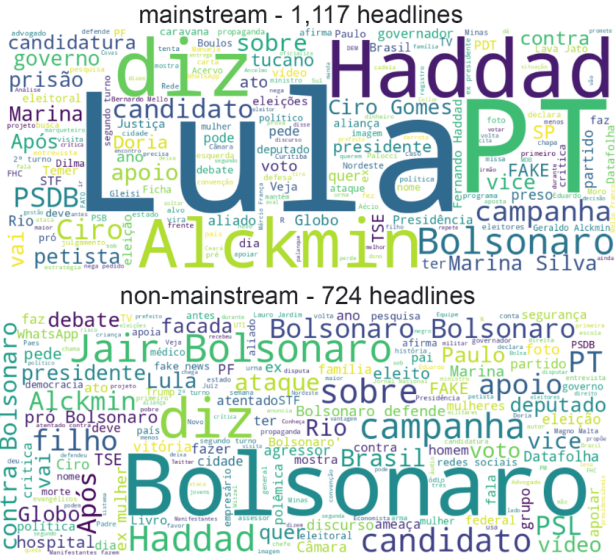


Figure 7. Word clouds with the most frequent terms in Brazilian headlines about the mainstream dimension.

Source: Own elaboration.

in their treatment of the far right. When comparing the coverage of mainstream and non-mainstream electoral tickets, there was a differentiation, albeit to varying degrees. Although the headlines maintained a certain neutrality in terms of sentiment, the content revealed important nuances about how the media treated these political forces.

In the German case, news outlets tended to cover the far right less positively than other political groups. The headlines about mainstream parties focused on domestic and foreign policy issues, while the headlines about the far right emphasised negative aspects, such as their links to Nazism and racism. The attention given to the AfD was significant, going beyond its relevance in the electoral polls, which could be explained by Germany’s historical concern about the rise of the far right. In this sense, it could be inferred that German media was able to approach this political camp objectively, highlighting its particularities without normalising its threatening character to democracy. In Brazil, the behaviour was the opposite.

The far-right electoral ticket, led by Bolsonaro, obtained more positive sentimental averages than the left-wing electoral tickets—although both remained close to the centre, indicating relative neutrality. The coverage focussed on relevant political facts, such as Lula’s arrest and Bolsonaro’s stabbing, but also reported on agreements, speeches, and statements made by political actors. By following the trends of the electoral polls—except in the case of PSDB, which received more attention than the polls indicated—it can be inferred that Brazilian media treated the different political camps equally and, by focussing only on Bolsonaro’s campaign at the time, left out

his problematic background. In this way, one could conclude that Brazilian media normalised the far right, presenting it as a political option equivalent to the others, without recognising the risk it posed to democracy.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise the different contexts of the elections in Germany and Brazil. While the 2017 German elections took place against a backdrop of institutional normality and low polarisation, the 2018 Brazilian elections took place after years of political and economic crises, including declining GDP, rising poverty, distrust in the electoral system, and the impeachment of its first female president. In this highly polarised environment, in which the media also played a polarising role (De Melo and Mundim 2018; De Matos and Formentin 2018; Girelli 2019), it would be expected that media coverage would reflect a more critical view of politics. However, the normalisation or neglect of threats to the democratic regime should not be considered as justifiable. Considering the media as a “fourth estate”, it is expected that the defence of democracy will be a guiding principle of its actions.

Finally, the study recognises its limitations. The use of research tools for data collection and sentiment analysis techniques, although advanced, impose certain restrictions. These include the scope of the sample and the influence of non-transparent algorithms, as well as generalisation that can lead to some deviations. The automation of textual analysis, even using artificial intelligence and machine learning, may still present analytical flaws. Despite these limitations, it is believed that the methods used have delivered a satisfactory contribution to the research, providing reliable results. The analysis makes a significant contribution to the debate on the role of the media in political processes, especially in the contexts of Germany and Brazil.

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