

Contested Representations of Democracy in a Polarized Brazil: A Study of Symbolic Legitimation and Social Media Networks

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This study investigates the meaning-making processes surrounding the concept of democracy on Brazilian formerly Twitter, through an integrated approach combining Social Representations Theory (SRT) and Social Network Analysis (SNA). We analyzed 1,508 tweets and retweets from 219 federal politicians, along with 332,624 retweets from the general public between August and September 2021, a period marked by widespread political mobilization and polarization. The results reveal two antagonistic representational systems of democracy: one rooted in institutional protection and social rights, and the other framed around popular sovereignty and distrust of traditional democratic institutions. Both sides symbolically legitimize their positions through appeals to “democracy,” often deploying the term to justify conflicting and, at times, anti-democratic actions. The study also demonstrates how digital platforms amplify political discourse and group identity through semantic cohesion and algorithmic visibility. By integrating SRT and SNA, we offer a methodological contribution to the psychosocial analysis of political communication, enabling a nuanced understanding of how representations of democracy are produced, circulated, and contested in networked publics.

Keywords: social representations, social network analysis, democracy, political polarization, symbolic legitimation.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy operates today as a contested signifier, marked by symbolic struggles that transcend national borders and intensify within digital environments. In polarized contexts, rival actors seek to name democracy through divergent moral and identity frameworks, transforming it into a device that legitimizes incompatible political agendas. Social Representations Theory (SRT) provides a fruitful lens to understand this struggle over meaning, conceiving public communication as a “battle of ideas” and a space where social knowledge is intersubjectively produced (Howarth, 2006; Marková, 2008; Moscovici, 1988).

In the vocabulary of SRT, representations emerge and circulate through everyday communicative practices, shaping group belonging, us–them boundaries, and normative justifications for collective action. In conditions of political conflict, such representations tend to become polemical, intensifying intergroup differentiation and anchoring normative positions that define what counts as democratic. Emotions and group identities are not noise but mechanisms of meaning production, sustaining adherence, rejection, and silencing within the public debate (Howarth, 2006; Moscovici, 2012).

Contemporary democratic theory likewise emphasizes that political life is not reducible to full consensus. Democracy requires acknowledgement of agonistic confrontation and the transformation of antagonism into legitimate disagreement between adversaries rather than enemies. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from idealized harmony to conflict regulated by institutions and rights, in which plurality gains recognition (Chauí, 2012, 2019; Mouffe, 1999, 2000, 2005, 2015). Psychosocially, this means investigating how groups define democracy for themselves and for others, how they erect identity boundaries, and how they claim moral authority to act in its name.

Digital platforms have become privileged arenas for such representational circulation. Tweets condense arguments, frames, and affects, whereas retweets signal social validation, visibility, and identity alignment. Integrating SRT with Social Network Analysis (SNA) allows the articulation of content and structure: lexicographic techniques capture semantic repertoires, while network metrics map centrality, communities, and diffusion patterns that sustain intragroup cohesion and intergroup segmentation (Silveira & Giacomozzi, in press).

In this study, we examine how political elites and online publics construct and legitimize competing meanings of “democracy” during a peak of political mobilization in Brazil. We ask: what meanings of democracy are mobilized by oppositional groups? How do validation patterns and alignment in networks articulate with those meanings? How do temporal fluctuations inform the representational dynamics of the object democracy? By addressing these questions, we clarify the theoretical value of combining SRT and SNA to understand the production, circulation, and contestation of social representations in digitally networked publics.

This broader theoretical debate becomes tangible in Brazil, where recent political transformations have turned democracy itself into an object of intense symbolic dispute. The country has experienced a resurgence of polarization in the last decade, accompanied by growing distrust in institutions and escalating confrontations between political groups. Public conversation increasingly positions democracy as a moral boundary that separates “us” from “them,” converting disagreements over policy into struggles over legitimacy and national identity. Such dynamics are amplified on social media platforms, where competing versions of what democracy ought to be circulate rapidly, gain visibility through retweeting, and consolidate group identities through online interactions. Within this context, Brazil provides a critical case for observing how actors appeal to democracy to justify opposing political conducts, particularly during moments of heightened mobilization and institutional tension.

Over the past decade, political antagonism in Brazil has intensified, transforming democratic institutions into targets of contestation and symbols of partisan identity. A growing body of research has documented how polarization reshapes social representations of public issues, including migration, health crises, violence and political leadership, deepening intergroup divisions and fueling moralized conflicts in the public sphere (Giacomozzi et al., 2022; Giacomozzi et al., 2023; Giacomozzi et al., 2024; Vitali et al., 2022). Rather than debating policy alternatives, rival groups increasingly accuse each other of threatening democracy itself, reinforcing identity boundaries anchored in mistrust, emotional escalation, and perceptions of existential confrontation.

This antagonism reached a critical peak on 7 September 2021, when large demonstrations called by then-President Jair Bolsonaro mobilized supporters to confront democratic institutions such as the Supreme Federal Court, while counter-protests framed the government as authoritarian and harmful to democratic stability. These clashes unfolded alongside heated exchanges on social media, where actors on both sides claimed exclusive custodianship over democracy and employed the term to legitimize conflicting actions and political identities.

Such dynamics provide a unique opportunity to investigate how democracy becomes a symbolic weapon in intergroup disputes. Examining communication among political elites and online publics during this period enables a deeper understanding of the representational processes through which groups legitimate their own agendas and delegitimize opponents within a context of acute polarization.

In the days surrounding the demonstrations, an intense debate was observed on social media platforms and in traditional media involving the topic of democracy. In these conversations, interpretations about democracy varied according to political alignment: Bolsonaro supporters demanded changes to the electoral system, especially with attacks on electronic voting machines. On the other side, opponents denounced attacks by Bolsonaro supporters on democracy, mainly due to their hostile stance against the STF (Supreme Federal Court). This tension resulted in the events of January 8, 2023, when extremists invaded and vandalized the headquarters of the three branches of government in Brasília, with damages estimated at 784,144 dollars.

In light of this polarized and violent context, in which debates regarding the meaning and significance of democracy were taking place, we decided to investigate the content of messages posted on the formerly Twitter profiles of Brazilian federal-level politicians. Additionally, we conducted a mapping of the retweet network structure containing the expression “democracy” posted on profiles of Brazilian users. The collected data encompassed messages published on the formerly Twitter social media platform from August 23, 2021, to September 27, 2021, with the aim of identifying the meanings ascribed to “democracy” before, during, and after the demonstrations held on September 7, 2021. Even amid the public health crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, these demonstrations brought together thousands of people on the streets of a country fractured by political polarization.

Political Polarization and Violence in Brazil

The current polarized context in Brazil is of particular interest for an analysis of the social psychology of how initially argumentative realities can progressively validate social realities, which, in turn, favor the emergence of discourses that close off the possibility of broader democratic participation. We are interested in understanding social polarization, political extremism, and how these social situations are associated with the closing of possibilities and/or democratic participation, leading to acts of violence. Despite Brazil's long colonial

history (Sá & Castro, 2005) and a recent period of dictatorship, this phenomenon of political polarization and the resulting violence is unprecedented in the country.

Brazil's image as a joyful, peaceful nation contrasts with its violent historical formation through genocide and enslavement of indigenous and African peoples, authoritarian governments, and ongoing “undeclared” war against black and peripheral populations (Vitali et al., 2021). Violence remains repressed in narratives promoting Brazilian cordiality and pacifism. Despite resulting from violence against various groups (Assini-Meytin et al., 2023; Giacomozzi et al., 2020a; Giacomozzi et al., 2020b; Giacomozzi et al., 2021; Giacomozzi et al., 2025; Leandro et al., 2023; Leandro et al., 2024; Lorandi et al., 2025; Pressoto et al., 2022; Vitali et al., 2022), discourses of racial democracy and peaceful, hospitable Brazilians persist (Chauí, 2019; Gomes et al., 2019; Safatle, 2010). Brazilian democracy's deterioration stems from inability to confront this past (Safatle, 2010).

We observe that at the heart of the controversial debate among groups in Brazil lies the conception of what democracy is, with its meanings revealing virtues sought after by groups from different political spectrums. In a polarized scenario, rival groups accuse each other, with their members asserting that their group upholds democratic values that the opposition seeks to destroy. Understanding how democracy was debated by politicians and the public on formerly Twitter during intense political polarization illuminates psychosocial processes underlying political conflicts, revealing constructed meanings and how different Brazilian groups use this term to justify political actions. These debates intersect individual and collective spheres, undergoing reinterpretation through everyday conversations, media, and social group affiliations, constituting an important Social Representations Theory (SRT) study object.

Democracy and Social Conflicts

The concept of democracy refers to the organization of a society, serving as a societal counterpower that determines, directs, controls, and modifies state action and the power of rulers (Chauí, 2019). One fundamental principle of a democratic society is the principle of isonomy (equality of citizens before the law) and isegoria (the right of all to express their opinions). This is based on the premise that everyone is subject to the same laws, of which everyone is an author - directly in a participatory democracy and indirectly in a representative democracy (Chauí, 2019).

Society is not singular but heterogeneous and conflict-ridden, and it is in democracy that these differences are publicly expressed. The central axis of democracy is sustained by the creation of valid rights for all citizens, encompassing the diversity of existences. Thus, the democratic model enables an openness to social transformations, as well as the creation and expansion of existing rights (Chauí, 2019). With modernity, the concept of democracy emerges, which is grounded in the principles of universalism and individualism (Gondim & Chingore, 2021). It is established that democratic models are also based on the logic of the liberal model, arising from political liberalism (the rule of law, separation of powers, and individual rights) and the democratic tradition of popular sovereignty (Mouffe, 2000).

Liberal democracy is understood as a system that organizes human coexistence politically (Mouffe, 2000). It is based on the idea of a society organized into political parties, which is expressed in the process of electing representatives, the rotation of leaders, and technical solutions to economic and social problems, primarily justified by the criterion of efficiency (Chauí, 2012).

Mouffe (2000) critiques the model of liberal democracy in Western cultures, arguing that this perspective is based on political consensus. Recognizing that power is constitutive of social relations, the author asserts the need to abandon the ideal of a democratic model characterized by perfect harmony (Mouffe, 2015). Understanding that the concept of democracy moves away from the principle of universalism and leans towards diversity, plurality, and conflict (Mouffe, 2005).

Currently, the consensual model of democracy projects political debates and conflicts into the moral sphere, maintaining a dichotomous conflict relationship between “us/them” and “good/evil.” However, according to Mouffe (2005), democracy requires a clash of political positions, and if there is too much emphasis on consensus, the avoidance of confrontation can lead to apathy and a disregard for political participation. The result may be the crystallization of collective passions around issues that cannot be managed through the democratic process.

In this way, the primary goal of democracy would be to transform antagonism into agonism. The former is a relationship in which both sides are viewed as enemies, polarizing into “us/them” without any similarity. On the other hand, agonism is a relationship between “us/them” in which the conflicting parties recognize the legitimacy of their opponents, perceiving themselves as adversaries rather than enemies (Mouffe, 2015). Thus, the ethical principle of the democratic model should be the valorization of plurality, ensuring that differences have the opportunity to manifest and be legitimized (Gondim & Chingore, 2021).

From this perspective, for a democratic society, dissent is fundamental, considering the role of subjectivity and emotions in the constitution of the democratic subject (Mouffe, 2000).

Thus, stemming from the contradictions of existence in society and social inequality, the democratic model faces the challenge of reconciling the principles of equality and the legitimacy of conflicts through the attainment of rights (economic, social, political, and cultural). This process of rights creation, as mentioned, can be conflict-ridden, but it is this process that ensures the ideals of freedom, equality, and participation in decision-making. Through it, one can aspire to achieve justice in an unequal society (Chauí, 2019).

Social Representations and Social Network Analysis

According to Moscovici (1988), social representations (SR) consist of everyday thought content of ideas that provide coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas, and the connections we spontaneously make. This SRT offers a dialogical approach to understanding the psychosocial aspects involved in meaning making and communication (Castro & Mouro, 2016; Marková, 2008). The interaction between Ego-Alter-Object would, therefore, be a condition for the emergence and transformation of meaning attribution and representations (Marková, 2008; Moscovici, 1972). It is also important to recognize that the process of communication involves conflicts between the Ego and the Alter over the representation of a socially relevant object (Howarth, 2006), which ends up generating a “battle of ideas” (Castro & Mouro, 2016; Moscovici, 1988).

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a field of study that investigates the structures and patterns of social interactions through the use of graphical representations and metrics based on graph theory (Lemieux & Ouimet, 2012). It is grounded in the idea that relationships between individuals or entities can be mapped and analyzed as networks, with nodes representing actors (such as individuals, organizations, websites) and the connections between them representing social interactions (such as friendships, collaborations, online interactions) (Recuero et al., 2020).

This type of analysis provides a fruitful approach to understanding a variety of social phenomena, from interpersonal relationships in small groups to power structures in organizations and the spread of information in online networks. Through this analysis, it is possible to identify key individuals or groups, discern patterns of influence, measure network centrality and cohesion, identify communities, and comprehend how information flows through social connections (Silva & Stabile, 2016). In this study, node and network metrics were

essential to generate insights, identify actors with greater influence in the network, map the groups formed from interactions between users, and identify content patterns of messages in each group.

In this article, we propose an integration between SRT and SNA, as despite being distinct approaches, they can complement each other due to points of intersection:

1. **Social Structure of Representations:** SNA focuses on the structure of social relationships among individuals or groups (Borgatti, 2018), whereas SRT explores how representations are constructed and shared in a given social context. Both approaches consider the social structure as the unit of analysis, rather than isolated individuals.
2. **Social Influence:** SNA enables the identification of key actors, based on well-established metrics, who play a significant role in disseminating information within a network. On the other hand, SRT explores the symbolic value of socially shared information, describing how representations shared by a group can influence beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.
3. **Social Interactions and Communication Processes:** Both SNA and SRT acknowledge the significance of social interactions and communication processes in the formation and dissemination of information. SNA offers tools to map interaction patterns and communication routes among network actors, while SRT explores how these interactions and communications can co-construct the reality within which they are embedded (Howarth, 2006).
4. **Social Context:** Both SNA and SRT explore phenomena that are organized in the interplay between individuals and the social context, with the latter being crucial to understanding the formation and meaning of relationships and SRs. The utilization of SNA in studies of SRs facilitates the visualization of contexts in which meanings regarding the objects of social representation are situated. The presentation of networks in the form of graphs makes reading less fragmented compared to other visualization structures (Smith, 2020).

Several social media studies have employed Social Representations (SRs) approaches (Alaya, 2016; Arruda et al., 2022; Giacomozzi et al., 2023; Hodecker et al., 2023; Leandro et al., 2019; de Rosa et al., 2021; Rozendo et al., 2022; Rozendo et al., 2023; Rozendo et al., 2024; Vitali et al., 2021; Vitali et al., 2022), particularly examining political discourse. Twitter enables politicians to engage in public debates through mentions and retweets, signaling loyalties and conflicts regarding thematic positions and other politicians (Esteve Del Valle et al., 2022). Politicians use Twitter to position themselves within their political space, utilizing retweets and mentions to navigate their political arena (Cherepnalkoski et al., 2016; Conover et al., 2021). Regarding Social Network Analysis (SNA) in SR studies, Moliner (2023) and

Valentina et al. (2024) highlight its potential, emphasizing SNA applications and contributions that complement traditional Social Representations Theory methods.

METHOD

This qualitative documentary study (Lüdke & André, 1986) examined how Brazilian politicians and Twitter users contributed to democracy-related arguments. We opted to use the name Twitter throughout the article to refer to the platform now known as X, since this was the official name of the social network during the period in which the data were collected. A two-stage analysis was conducted: first, we conducted a textual analysis based exclusively on messages published by Brazilian federal politicians. This dataset comprised 1,508 tweets and retweets posted by 219 members of the Brazilian National Congress that contained the term “democracy”. The goal of this first analytical stage was to examine how political leaders framed the concept of democracy and how their discourse contributed to shaping the topics that fueled public debate. Second, we performed a structural network analysis based on 332,624 retweets shared by 125,604 Brazilian Twitter users. In this broader dataset, retweets were interpreted as acts of symbolic endorsement and social validation, indicating users’ alignment with specific representational fields. The network allowed us to observe how the general population - beyond political elites - engaged with and reproduced meanings associated with democracy. Given Brazil’s strong political polarization, we expected the network to reveal automated references to identity positions and group boundaries typical of contentious social media dynamics.

Data Collection Procedure

Twitter data were collected using the Twitter API Master (TAM) software, developed in TypeScript by programmer Bruno Corazza, whose documentation is available at: <https://github.com/bgcorazza/twitter-api>. The data collection covered the period from August 23 to September 26, 2021, retrieving exclusively messages containing the Portuguese expression “democracia.” All procedures were carried out during the first semester of 2023. At the end of this stage, a total of 988,410 messages - including tweets, retweets, mentions, and replies - were obtained, constituting the initial database for this study.

Data Treatment and Organization

All collected tweets and retweets were compiled into an electronic spreadsheet and processed using Microsoft Excel 365 software, forming the main database consisting of 988,410 messages. The database contained the following variables: user profile name, publication date, message content, identification of whether the message was a tweet or retweet (with user identification for retweets), and whether it contained mentions of other users (with identification of the mentioned user).

The dataset used in the first stage of analysis consisted exclusively of tweets and retweets published by profiles of Brazilian federal parliamentarians. To identify these profiles, we conducted a manual search based on the information available on the official websites of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate. We then cross-referenced this list with the file containing all 998,410 messages collected from Twitter, which allowed us to isolate only those published by the parliamentarians. This procedure resulted in 1,508 messages, organized into columns recording the message ID, the name of the political profile responsible for the post, the textual content, the type of message (tweet or retweet), and the political affiliation.

The second dataset was composed of a subset of the main database, from which user profile data and retweet messages from three time periods were selected: time 1 (T1), time 2 (T2), and time 3 (T3). By focusing on creating networks composed of retweets, we aimed to highlight content replicated by different actors, assuming that a high number of retweets might indicate its validation among social media users. Based on the described criteria, the main spreadsheet, containing 988,410 entries (tweets, retweets, mentions, and replies), was reduced to a spreadsheet composed of 332,624 retweets, with 62,701 retweets from T1 (August 23 to 25), 249,004 retweets from T2 (September 6 to 8), and 20,919 retweets from T3 (September 25 to 27). The time frames that define T1, T2, and T3 were established to enable a longitudinal analysis of communication on Twitter, allowing us to examine how users engaged in conversations involving the term “Democracy” over the selected period. T2 comprises a three-day window—September 7, along with the preceding and following days. This interval was selected based on the hypothesis, supported by the infodemic literature (Eysenbach, 2020, 2022), that the circulation of information and the intensity of communicational activity tend to rise during moments of heightened social and political mobilization. Accordingly, it was

expected that Brazil's Independence Day would trigger an increased volume of debate and discursive disputes on the platform.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through two strategies: lexicographic analysis and structural analysis of networks. With the corpus consisting of posts published by politicians, we performed lexicographic analysis using the IRAMuTeq software (Ratinaud, 2009), version 0.7 alpha 2, through Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC).

DHC allowed the identification of textual patterns by establishing clusters based on the vocabulary patterns of text segments (TSs) within a textual corpus. It also facilitated associating these clusters with variables previously identified by the researchers (Giacomozzi et al., 2023; Giacomozzi et al., 2025; Hodecker et al., 2023; de Rosa et al., 2021; Rozendo et al., 2022; Rozendo et al., 2023; Rozendo et al., 2024; Vitali et al., 2021; Vitali et al., 2022).

Structural analysis of networks was used to examine the network formed by retweeted messages containing the term “democracia” (democracy). To conduct this analysis, it was necessary to create a node and edge matrix based on the collected data, which was subsequently processed using the Gephi software, version 0.10 (Bastian et al., 2009). In the analyzed networks, each node graphically represents a Twitter profile, while each edge represents a retweet interaction between two network users.

As these are directed networks generated from retweets, the indegree value was used to indicate the number of connections a specific user received (Recuero et al., 2020). The modularity metric was employed to identify communities (modules) within the main network (Hansen et al., 2020), defined as “groups of densely interconnected nodes that are weakly connected to the rest of the network” (Recuero et al., 2020, p. 84). Modularity is also useful for coloring nodes, generating different colors for each community. The colors used in the graphs (Figure 2) represent favorable (blue), opposing (red), or neutral (gray) attitudes toward the discourse of former President Jair Bolsonaro. Each graph also displays the position of the 30 profiles with the highest indegree values (Table 1). Indegree is a centrality metric that indicates the number of incoming connections a profile receives, reflecting how frequently its messages are retweeted. This measure is widely used to estimate visibility and influence within communication networks (Hansen et al., 2020).

To visualize the graphs, OpenOrd and then ForceAtlas2 algorithms were used, resulting in a better visual representation of the communities present in the networks, their structures, and interactions.

RESULTS

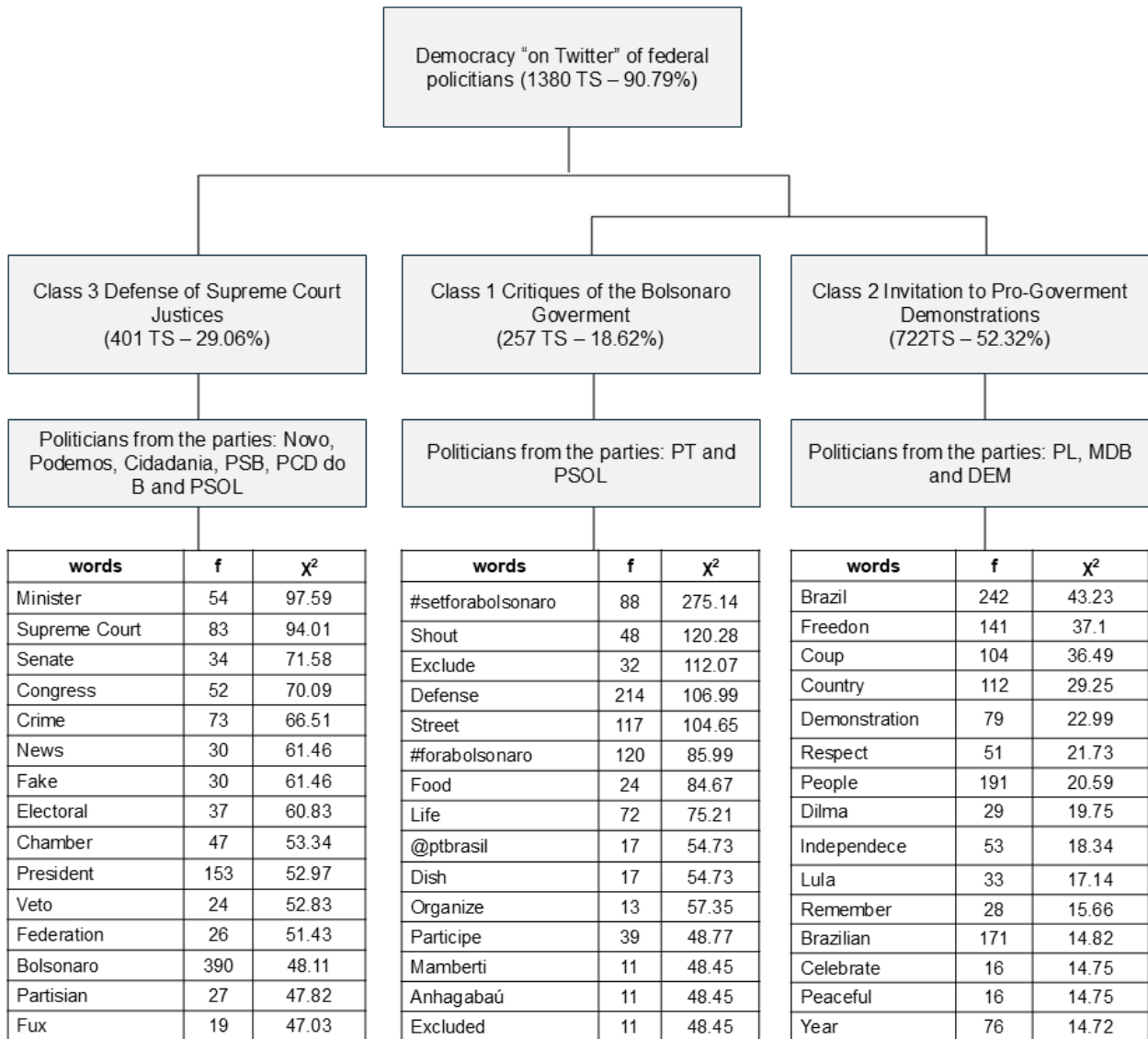
Analysis of Tweets by Federal Politicians containing the term “democracy”

We analyzed 1508 posts (retweets and tweets) published by 219 federal politicians from August 23 to September 26, 2021. Using DHC, the messages were divided into 1520 text segments (TSs), of which 1380 (90.79%) were retained in the analysis, resulting in three classes of TSs (Figure 1).

Firstly, the software separated Class 3 (29.06%) from the others (Class 1 and Class 2, which are related to each other). Class 3 grouped text segments from politicians of various parties in defense of attacks by former President Bolsonaro and his allies against Supreme Federal Court (STF) and Superior Electoral Court (STE) justices. Class 2 (52.32%) grouped text segments inviting the Bolsonaro-supporting base to the September 7th demonstrations, and Class 1 (18.62%) comprised text segments critical of the Bolsonaro’s government, delivered by politicians from left-wing parties: Workers' Party (PT) and Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL).

Figure 1

Dendrogram Generated with the Assistance of IRaMuTeQ, Based on the Content Posted on Brazilian Politicians' Twitter Profiles about "Democracy".



Class 3 - Defense of Supreme Court Justices

Class 3 was associated with TS of tweets published by politicians from various Brazilian parties: Novo Party ($\chi^2=20.78$, $p<0.01$), Podemos Party ($\chi^2=8.72$, $p<0.05$), Citizenship Party ($\chi^2=8.19$, $p<0.05$), Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) ($\chi^2=6.84$, $p<0.05$), Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) ($\chi^2=4.6$, $p<0.05$), and Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) ($\chi^2=4.51$, $p<0.05$). It was a coming together of diverse Brazilian parliament members in support of the defense of democratic institutions. The messages within this class reveal content against the attacks by former President Bolsonaro on the STF and TSE (acronym for Tribunal Superior Eleitoral or

Supreme Electoral Court) and in support of the justices of these institutions. The content of Class 3 can be illustrated by the message posted by a Federal Deputy from the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB):

Bolsonaro needs to stop attacking democracy and seek harmony among the branches of government. The series of attacks on the **STF** (Supreme Federal Court) and the call for the impeachment of **Minister** Alexandre de Moraes is absurd. The **president** only creates division. He even promised to seek the removal of **TSE** (Supreme Electoral Court) President Luís Barroso.

Class 2 - Invitation to Pro-Government Demonstrations

Class 2, labeled “Invitation to Pro-Government Demonstrations,” was associated with the political parties Liberal Party (PL) ($\chi^2=21.03$, $p<0.01$), Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (MDB) ($\chi^2=19.82$, $p<0.01$), and Democrats (DEM) ($\chi^2=5.49$, $p<0.05$), also identified as “centrão” parties. This class consisted of TS related to attitudes that supporters of these parties should adopt during the September 7th event. For instance, Federal Deputy from Liberal Party (PL), posted:

The 7th of September is an expression of love for our Homeland that reaffirms our commitment to democracy and **freedom**. Our **people** are filling the streets of the **country** with civility. After participating in the **pro-Brazil demonstrations** in Brasília, we are now heading to SP.

In Class 2, there are also segments represented by the words Lula, Dilma, and Golpe (Coup), attributed to left-wing politicians, in messages that recall the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff as something harmful to the country's democracy. An illustrative example can be found in a message posted on the Twitter account of the Senator affiliated with the Workers' Party (PT).

Five years ago, we witnessed the **coup** that unjustly interrupted the mandate of the first woman elected president of the country. The effects of the juridical and media farce

have brought us to the scenario of setbacks we are experiencing today. The people continue to bear the cost of this damage to **democracy**.

Despite the presence of some messages from left-wing politicians, in Class 1 there is a predominance of messages favorable to the September 7 demonstrations called for by President Bolsonaro and his base, with invitations to the population to take to the streets to celebrate democracy, in a peaceful manner, with an exaltation of the national flag. However, it's common that within these tweets, messages supporting the demonstrations are accompanied by criticism of the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and direct attacks on opponents of Bolsonarism.

Class 1 - Critiques of the Bolsonaro's Government

Class 1 was associated with politicians from the Workers' Party (PT) ($\chi^2=80.4$, $p<0.01$) and the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) ($\chi^2=6.48$, $p<0.05$). These parties formed the opposition block during President Jair Bolsonaro's government. In this class, there is a predominance of the hashtag “#7setforabolsonaro” (September 7 Out with Bolsonaro). The tweets in this class include critiques of the Bolsonaro's government, its handling of the pandemic, and proposals for social agendas. A message posted by a Federal Deputy from the Workers' Party (PT) serves as an example of the elements within this class:

We participated this morning in Governador Valadares in the 27th edition of the **Cry of the Excluded** (Grito dos Excluídos). In memory of the thousands of COVID-19 victims, in the fight for popular participation, **food**, housing, work, and income. In defense of democracy, we will prevail! #7SforaBolsonaro”.

Structural Analysis of Retweet Networks Containing the Term “Democracy”

In Figure 2, the three graphs representing the retweet networks containing the term “democracy” in their messages are visible. These three graphs are denoted as Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3, respectively. In the Time 1 graph, edges were identified with three different colors. The blue color indicates a concentration of profiles associated with right-wing Bolsonaro-aligned ideas (50.47% of total interactions), while the red color represents a concentration of profiles linked to left-wing political actors, opposing the discourse of the first network (22.47% of total interactions). The gray color represents profiles whose discourses are not related to the

previous groups (27.6%). The profiles identified in each of the graphs (T1, T2, and T3), along with their indegree values and their classification as favorable, opposed, or neutral in relation to the discourse of former President Bolsonaro, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Top Profiles by Indegree at Three Points in the Network Analysis

Time 1 graph				Time 2 graph				Time 3 graph			
ID	Profile	Ati. *	Indegree	ID	Profile	Ati.*	Indegree	ID	Profile	Ati. *	Indegree
1	Senator	F	4789	1	Federal Deputy	F	7671	1	Federal Deputy	F	1460
2	State Deputy and Retired Military	F	2967	2	Senator	F	5602	2	State Deputy	F	1277
3	News profile of Bolsonaro supporters	F	2022	3	Football Team	O	5449	3	Influencer	F	991
4	Digital Influencer	F	1771	4	Senator	F	4967	4	Influencer	N	713
5	State Deputy	F	1634	5	Judge	O	4522	5	Influencer	F	563
6	Lawyer	O	1273	6	Cartoonist	O	4163	6	Deputy and Retired General	F	550
7	Federal Deputy	F	1208	7	Politician and Former State Minister	O	3815	7	Advisor to the Former President	F	545
8	Journalist	F	1066	8	Influencer	O	3783	8	Federal Deputy	F	488
9	State Deputy	F	1009	9	Actress	O	3657	9	Federal Deputy	F	472
10	City Councilor and Military Police		915	10	Former Minister of State	F	3404	10	Journalist	O	392
11	Former President	O	863	11	Unidentified	O	2851	11	Federal Deputy	O	362
12	Federal Deputy	O	841	12	Former Minister of State	F	2765	12	Politician and Former State Minister	O	344
13	Federal Deputy	O	759	13	Lawyer	O	2701	13	Senator	O	316
14	Political News Profile	F	750	14	Jurist and Professor	O	2229	14	News Profile	F	293
15	Digital Influencer	F	715	15	Journalist	F	2047	15	Journalist	O	287
16	Musician	F	710	16	TV Host	F	1915	16	Federal Deputy	F	282
17	Political News Profile	N	654	17	Podcast	F	1903	17	Jurist and Journalist	F	277
18	Federal Deputy	O	623	18	Unidentified	F	1808	18	News Website Profile	O	266
19	Sociologist	N	619	19	Former Minister of State and Senator	O	1783	19	Humor Profile	O	251
20	Senator	O	609	20	Influencer	O	1775	20	Jurist	N	236
21	News Portal	F	599	21	Embassy Profile of Another Country	F	1774	21	News Website Profile	N	236
22	Virologist	F	544	22	Federal Deputy	F	1767	22	State Minister	F	210

23	Print and Digital Newspaper	O	539	23	Lawyer	O	1733	23	Doctor and Former State Minister	O	193
24	Senator	O	535	24	Federal Deputy	O	1680	24	Unidentified	F	189
25	Advertiser / Publicist	F	501	25	Unidentified	O	1646	25	Journalist	O	187
26	Federal Deputy	F	476	26	Senator	O	1555	26	Unidentified	F	176
27	Political News Profile	O	470	27	Federal Deputy	O	1545	27	Policy Institute	O	161
28	Digital Influencer	F	467	28	Journalist	F	1535	28	Former Federal Deputy	O	149
29	Politician and Former State Minister	N	463	29	Print Newspaper Profile	O	1508	29	Printed Newspaper Profile	F	147
30	Digital Influencer	F	459	30	State Governor	O	1480	30	Unidentified	N	140

Total Indegree: Time 1 graph	F	21687	O	6512	N	1736	Tota Indegree: Time 2 graph	F	37158	O	47875	N	0	Tota Indegree: Time 3 graph	F	7920	O	2908	N	1325
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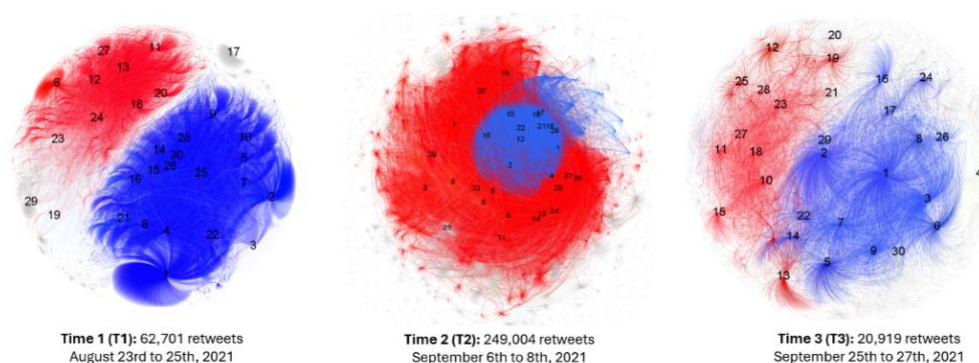
Note. *Ati = Attitude: (F) Profile that agrees with the demonstrations called by then-president Jair Bolsonaro, (O) Profile that disagrees with the demonstrations called by then-president Jair Bolsonaro, (N) Profile with a neutral position.

Table 1 presents the list of the 30 profiles with the highest indegree values in the Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 graphs. However, each profile was classified according to its main activity, its stance toward the administration of then-president Jair Bolsonaro, and its respective indegree value. At the bottom of the table, the total indegree for each category of political stance is also provided, allowing for a comparative assessment of influence based on user alignment.

Based on the total sum of indegree values for the 30 profiles analyzed in the Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 graphs (Table 1), it is observed that users supportive of the Bolsonaro government concentrated a significantly higher indegree, totaling 66,765, compared to 57,295 recorded among profiles opposed to the pro-Bolsonaro demonstrations.

Figure 2

Network Graphs Generated in Gephi Software from Retweets Containing the Term “Democracy”



In Graph Time 1, the user with the highest indegree was the profile of a senator identified in the graph with the profile 1 (indegree = 4789), followed by the profile of a retired military officer and state deputy, 2 (indegree = 2967), a news profile of Bolsonaro supporters, 3 (indegree = 2022), a digital influencer, 4 (indegree = 1771), and the state deputy, 5 (indegree = 1634). All of these profiles are characterized by their association with right-wing groups aligned with the political agenda of Jair Bolsonaro (blue cluster).

A characteristic of Bolsonarism is the association between the military and politics; hence, military profiles with political mandates (Profiles 2 and 10) can be observed in the blue part of the graph. The messages from this group advocated for various aspects: impeachment of Supreme Court justices, support for military participation in the demonstrations, endorsement of the Bolsonaro-aligned demonstrations on September 7, 2021, protests against President Bolsonaro's political opponents, advocating for paper ballots with an audit trail, and more. In a retweeted message that received 4,789 retweets, Profile 1 - belonging to a Senator (see profiles in Table 1) - wrote:

Analyzing the impeachment of Supreme Court justices is not an attack on democracy; it is in the Constitution. If it's considered an attack, then the article granting this prerogative to the Senate should be removed from the Constitution. Besides the president's request, there are 30 other requests in the House, one with 3 million signatures.

This was the most retweeted message during the period analyzed in this research. Its effects were observed on September 7, 2021, when many demonstrators took to the streets with banners and posters directly requesting the dissolution of the Supreme Federal Court.

The red group interactions featured predominantly left-leaning politicians from Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) and Workers' Party (PT), holding antagonistic positions toward Bolsonaro-aligned individuals. Profile 11 (Former President) exhibited the highest indegree value (indegree=863), followed by profiles 12 (indegree=841), 13 (indegree=759), 18 (indegree=623), and 20 (indegree=609). In a message retweeted 80 times, Profile 11 stated: "I do not accept this polarization between two extremes. I have a history of democratic life. And what's at stake is democracy against fascism." Profile 11 consistently employed terms "democracy" and "fascism" in messages, framing Brazilian polarization as a conflict between these realities, positioning Bolsonaro as representing Brazilian fascism.

The gray color represents the grouping composed of profiles that do not necessarily align with the discourses of the previous groups. In these groups, there is prominence given to profiles such as the profile 19 (sociologist) (indegree=619), the profile 17 of a political news profile (indegree=654), and the profile 29, belonging to politician and former Minister of State (indegree=463).

From the Time 2 graph (Figure 2), a 297.1% increase in the number of retweets compared to the Time 1 graph can be observed. In this network, two clusters are evident, represented by the colors blue and red. In the center of the network, in blue, there is a group representing profiles aligned with the Bolsonaro's government (26.91% of total interactions), with high centrality for profile 1 belonging to a federal deputy (indegree=7671) and profile 2 belonging to a senator (indegree=5602). Both were very close to then-president Jair Bolsonaro. Interestingly, Jair Bolsonaro's profile is not displayed in the graph, as the former president did not use the word "democracy" in his posts during the data collection period of this study.

The pro-Bolsonaro's government group (blue color) produced messages that praised the September 7, 2021, demonstrations, with an emphasis on content addressing the fight for democracy, freedom of expression, the peaceful nature of the protests, the use of green and yellow, transparent voting, respect for the constitution, and more. The most quoted profiles in this graph, profiles 1 and 2, highlighted the large number of people who took to the streets in support of Jair Bolsonaro. The image of streets full of people wearing yellow shirts - usually of the Brazilian national soccer team - and Brazilian flags, was widely used to highlight the patriotism of the pro-Bolsonaro demonstrators on social media.

The opposition group to Bolsonaro-supportive demonstrations (red color) comprised 7 clusters representing 48.51% of interactions. Unlike previous analyses, this group exhibited convergence among actors with diverse political-ideological positions, including prominent artists (Profile 9, nationally known actress), digital influencers (Profile 8, influencer; Profile 7, cartoonist), a Supreme Federal Court Justice (Profile 5), right-wing politicians such as Profile 30 (State Governor) and Profile 19 (former State Minister and Senator), and critics of both Lulism and Bolsonarism like Profile 7 (Politician). Messages from these profiles reinforced institutional trust, ensured Rule of Law, criticized pro-military dictatorship or coup messaging present in Bolsonaro-supportive demonstrations, and promoted "#forabolsonaro" (#BolsonaroOut) campaigns. In the Time 3 graph, a significant decrease in the discussion about democracy on Brazilian Twitter is evident, with a decrease of 91.8% in the number of interactions compared to the Time 2 graph. Thus, after experiencing a peak of interactions around the term 'democracy' due to September 7, conversations mentioning the term decreased

significantly. In this process, interactions from pro-Bolsonaro profiles increased again. The group formed by these interactions (blue color) accounted for 39.86% of the total network interactions, while the opposing groups (red color) reached a percentage of 24.11%. Once again, the network represents a polarized dispute between left-leaning profiles, now more linked to Workers' Party (PT) (red color), and politicians and Bolsonaro's supporters (blue color).

The temporal fluctuations observed indicate that representational disputes intensify during moments when institutional tension rises. The “battle of ideas” becomes more visible as opposing camps mobilize meanings of democracy to respond to unfolding political events. The representational conflict is therefore not static, but activated and escalated as groups perceive threats to their preferred democratic order.

The results indicate that the use of the term “democracy” often polarizes the network into two opposing sides. Within each side, interactions among profiles produce semantic interpretations of “democracy” that emerge from meanings collectively constructed within the group and grounded in either adherence or resistance to Bolsonarism. These shared meanings, understood as social representations, circulate through social media networks to organize and give sense to members' actions and to reinforce group cohesion and identity.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that the concept of democracy functions as a polarized symbolic field in Brazil, producing two antagonistic representational systems anchored in distinct political identities. The lexicographic analysis of tweets by federal politicians showed that those aligned with the Bolsonaro administration framed democracy as popular sovereignty threatened by institutional actors, whereas left-leaning representatives emphasized the protection of rights and democratic institutions under attack. These contrasting meanings were not merely semantic; they positioned groups as either defenders or destroyers of democracy, transforming the concept into a boundary marker of moral legitimacy.

Network analyses reinforced this division by showing that retweet patterns segregated users into cohesive clusters with minimal cross-interaction between them, especially during the peak of political mobilization surrounding the events of September 7, 2021. Validation dynamics in the networks, expressed through indegree concentration, demonstrated that a relatively small number of political actors amplified polarized interpretations of democracy,

revealing how public spheres on social media become structurally fragmented and responsive to elite messaging. Temporally, the intensity of engagement with the term “democracy” rose sharply around the demonstrations and declined afterward, indicating that representational conflict surged in response to political events and institutional tension.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the meaning of democracy is not shared consensually within the Brazilian public sphere. Instead, it is strategically mobilized to justify actions, reinforce oppositional identities, and delegitimize political adversaries. Democracy operates as a rhetorical resource in the “battle of ideas” (Moscovici, 1988), where claims of democratic purity serve to naturalize one’s stance while framing the other as a threat. This dynamic illustrates how polemical representations take shape and circulate in highly polarized contexts, integrating symbolic content, identity processes, and relational structures within digital communication ecosystems.

These patterns highlight the relevance of interpreting online communication not merely as information exchange, but as a relational process through which groups co-construct meanings and position each other within antagonistic political fields.

We observed that the arguments put forth by political actors played a central role in this social media discussion, effectively steering the discourse according to their own interests. In doing so, they contribute to the deepening of political polarization regarding democracy (Rodrigues, 2021). While some advocate for democracy as plural and diverse, requiring protection and respect, others, using populist rhetoric, assert that democracy is the will of the majority, the people, and that the people should not bend to the desires of a political elite (including democratic institutions like the judiciary and the Supreme Federal Court) (Fancelli, 2022). The antagonistic frames identified correspond to polemical representations, in Moscovici’s (1988) sense, where competing groups construct and defend conflicting meanings of democracy as part of an ongoing struggle for symbolic legitimacy.

According to Mouffe (2005), such clash of political positions is an integral part of democracy. Without it, there is a danger that democratic confrontation could be replaced by confrontation between other forms of collective identification, as seen in identity politics. Thus, an emphasis on consensus and a refusal of confrontation could lead to apathy and disdain for political participation, resulting in the crystallization of collective passions around issues that cannot be addressed through the democratic process, and an explosion of antagonism that could unravel the very foundations of civility.

However, in the field of social psychology, more specifically through the theoretical lens of SRT, these “battles of ideas” (Moscovici, 1988) specifically concern controversial social

representations – those that guide the identities of groups with well-defined contours (reflexive groups). Competing groups share antagonistic and irreconcilable views of the same objects (Kus et al., 2013). Finally, shared beliefs take on the dimensions of group identification artifacts, becoming more extreme and divisive as rivalry and violence between groups escalate (Martin-Baró, 1982; 1988; 2000). This process involves an escalation of intergroup positions and the tone of communications (Elcheroth et al., 2011), as classifying the other becomes a necessity to guide one's own behavior (Martin-Baró, 1988; 2000).

That way, the DHC results indicated distinct approaches to the Social Representations (SR) of democracy for various groups that engaged on formerly Twitter. In Class 3, we observed the alignment of diverse parliamentarians from different Brazilian political parties, coming together to defend democracy and protect institutions that were under attack by Bolsonaro, such as the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and its justices. In Class 1, there was an understanding that the ex-president's organized protests aimed to defend and celebrate democracy, with the intention of safeguarding Brazil. However, these tweets frequently combined messages of support for the demonstrations with critiques of the STF and calls for its closure, revealing a lack of trust and dissatisfaction with the Brazilian judicial institutions.

This data reflects a relatively recent shift in the positioning of right-wing groups in Brazil, as evidenced by a study conducted in 2017 (Lima et al., 2017). The focus of that study was to investigate SRs of national identity and their influence on trust in institutions, driven by the political events that unfolded in Brazil since the 2014 presidential elections. The research revealed that political orientation along the Left-Right spectrum was intricately linked to trust in institutions. It was observed that the further to the Right on the spectrum, the greater the trust in Family, Police, the Judiciary, and the Armed Forces.

The results of the current research concerning another political group in power reveal a different landscape of SRs, indicating a lesser credibility of the judiciary among the population more aligned with the right. These shifts in perspectives across historical and political periods are explained by Moscovici (1961/2012), who highlights how we socially construct and share SRs to comprehend the reality around us and guide our actions and perceptions.

Class 2, composed of tweets from Brazilian left-wing politicians, presents an understanding of democracy centered around the achievements of minority rights, as evidenced by their advocacy for rights lost during the Bolsonaro's government and its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of tweets grouped in this class reveals criticisms directed at the Bolsonaro's government and a strong defense of social agendas. In this context, Class 2's understanding of democracy is based on the conception that this political regime should not be

limited to the state sphere but should shape social relations and institutions throughout society. From an intergroup perspective, these clusters embody symbolic boundaries where meanings of democracy serve as markers of belonging and moral distinction, reinforcing antagonistic identities. This perspective emphasizes democracy as a space for rights contention, in which popular participation plays a crucial role (Chauí, 2019; Mouffe, 1999).

The increase in interactions in retweet networks and the usage of the term “democracy” observed between 6 -8 September, highlights the utilization of the term “defense of democracy” by both pro-Bolsonaro’s government groups and opponents. The first group expresses support for democracy while advocating for military intervention, a coup d’état, and attacks on institutions, often employing symbols associated with Brazil’s period of dictatorship. According to McFaul (2004), it’s common for society to adopt democracy not only as a system of governance but also as a value. Consequently, this value attributed to the democratic political system can influence judgments related to actions taken by democratic groups, leading to perceptions of greater legitimacy for these actions regardless of their moral nature. In this context, empirical research has indicated that military interventions are perceived as more legitimate when their proponents are viewed as coming from the democratic camp (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2012). These findings suggest how the persuasion of groups identifying as democratic can serve to legitimize actions even contradictory to democracy itself (Rodrigues, 2021).

The findings of this study reveal how the term democracy operates not merely as a political concept but as a symbolic mechanism of moral legitimization. In highly polarized contexts, both supporters and opponents of the Bolsonaro administration mobilized the word democracy to authorize their respective positions, often masking anti-democratic intentions under a democratic veneer. This instrumental use of the term echoes Falomir-Pichastor et al. (2012) argument that actions - even those contradicting democratic principles - can be perceived as legitimate when framed as democratic. Thus, the representation of democracy in these tweets functions as a discursive shield, offering moral justification for positions that would otherwise be subject to greater contestation.

The network analysis revealed that the discourse surrounding the term “democracy,” before, during, and after September 7, 2021, was dominated by political actors, with a prevalence of politicians aligned with former President Jair Bolsonaro. This demonstrates the strength of far-right politicians and parties on internet social networks. Da Empoli (2022) has described this phenomenon within the political landscapes of Italy, the United States, and Brazil. The author argues that without the use of social media platforms and their algorithms,

populist politicians would have had a difficult time coming to power over the last decade. In some ways, these parties managed to exploit a space left void by politicians of other ideological positions.

The lexicographic analysis of tweets published by Brazilian federal politicians, combined with the structural analysis of retweet networks among common Brazilian users in relation to the term “democracy,” highlighted the significant influence of politicians on the content discussed by the general public on this subject. Significantly, social media platforms served as amplifiers of the perspectives and opinions of Brazilian federal politicians, which justifies the extensive use of social media platforms by politicians in the current landscape (Da Empoli, 2022).

The lexicographic and network analyses enabled the identification of two distinct and competing systems of social representations of democracy. One system, predominantly associated with left-leaning political actors, emphasized democracy as institutional stability, protection of minority rights, and expansion of social participation. The other, aligned with the Bolsonarist camp, represented democracy as the will of the people, often in opposition to traditional democratic institutions such as the judiciary. Naming and contrasting these systems helps to clarify the underlying ideological conflicts and provides a framework for understanding how shared meanings are co-constructed within antagonistic identity groups. This binary framing also illustrates the psychosocial mechanisms that drive representational polarizations in contentious political contexts.

These network configurations show not only that polarization is present but that it is maintained through structural mechanisms that limit cross-exposure and reinforce ingroup validation. In SRT terms, this reflects a relational dynamic in which groups co-construct meanings while actively excluding the alternative worldview.

The debates that took place on formerly Twitter were largely shaped by polarized political discourses, as social media platforms often employ metrics aligned with the interests of their users, thereby boosting engagement while also fostering the formation of social bubbles. This aligns with Bauman and Mauro’s (2016) notion that social media networks are “an expanded replica or mirror of those who weave them,” creating a space that predominantly facilitates conversation among like-minded individuals, guided by homophily biases (Smith, 2020).

The temporal analysis shows that representational conflict is event-driven. The surge in engagement around September 7 indicates that the meaning of democracy becomes more contested when institutional tensions escalate. This reveals the dynamic nature of social

representations, which intensify, shift and stabilize as political actors confront each other in moments of heightened uncertainty.

Finally, network analysis proved to be essential in demonstrating the dynamics of interactions occurring over the three data collection periods, indicating a significant homogeneity in the discourse among profiles supporting Bolsonaro and the efforts of profiles aligned with left-leaning discourses to critique these positions.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the debates surrounding democracy in Brazil through formerly Twitter conversations involving both politicians and the general public. Acknowledging the limitations of network analysis, we recognize that it may not encompass the entire spectrum of communications and discussions related to the studied theme. However, by examining what political figures posted on the subject and how the general public responded, we believe we are fostering avenues for analyzing the mediated social context.

The examination of data related to content shared by politicians and the analysis of the retweet network concerning “democracy” unveiled the existence of two contrasting groups—one supportive and the other critical of Bolsonaro's government. Thus, it is apparent that the space that could have been used for more nuanced reflections on the term “democracy” was constrained to a form of binary thinking, either in favor or against Bolsonarism. Such battles of ideas undermine the discourse on and construction of meaning surrounding democracy, intensifying the political polarization of the country, particularly during a period marked by a high number of COVID-19-related deaths. This demonstrates that polarization is not only a semantic disagreement but a relational configuration that limits cross-exposure and sustains antagonistic worldviews.

This study's significant contribution lies in methodologically integrating Social Representations Theory (SRT) and Social Network Analysis (SNA). While traditionally applied separately, their combination enabled multidimensional understanding of meaning-making processes within large-scale digital environments. This innovative approach advances methodological possibilities for psychosocial research, demonstrating the power of combining semantic and relational analyses to capture contemporary political discourse dynamics. Longitudinal data collection proved improvable for future studies analyzing temporal meaning-making dynamics.

Future studies that combine TRS and SRA could be conducted on different platforms, utilizing various data collection and analysis techniques. These studies could further focus on understanding how societies interact in the digital world, as digital communication is a defining feature of contemporary times and warrants continued research.

Ultimately, approaching democracy through the combined lens of SRT and SNA reveals how legitimacy is not only argued but networked, and how political conflict shapes the very conditions through which representations circulate, gain traction and define who belongs in the democratic community.

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