**Bolsonaro and Bukele: Political Leaders as Influencers**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the discursive practices of two Latin American right-wing populist leaders (Jair Bolsonaro and Nayib Bukele) in the context of electoral competition for their countries’ presidency. It is based on both online and offline research conducted between September 2022 and February 2024, during the weeks leading up to and following the presidential elections of Brazil and El Salvador in 2022 and 2024 respectively. The article seeks to understand how right-wing populisms employ political communication to consolidate their popularity by addressing masses of frustrated and disaffected citizens. More specifically, it focuses on their mobilisation of affective elements that promote adherence to their candidacy while fuelling political polarisation and inciting violence. Overall, the analysis shows the central role that these political influencers play in the legitimation of violence against political opponents and other social groups. Though representing very different countries with diverging histories, both candidates have performed a politics of spectacle featuring authoritarian, chauvinistic, and paternalistic traits and practices that have mobilised large portions of the electorate.

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, both Brazil and El Salvador have seen emerged two prominent political actors that have revolutionised the political landscape of their countries. Jair Bolsonaro came to prominence in Brazil during **the mass protests of 2013**, when **he embraced a punitive discourse, calling for harsh measures against crime and corruption, while leveraging public frustration with political institutions**. Despite 27 years as a Deputy in Congress, Bolsonaro eventually won the presidency in **2018**, **campaigning on a platform of law and order, conservative values, and economic liberalisation**. In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele was already politically active since **his tenure as mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán in 2012, ultimately rising to the presidency in 2019 with promises of radical anti-corruption reforms and later gaining recognition as a tough-on-crime leader who has heavily promoted punitive measures against gang violence.**

The last two presidential elections in both of these countries have been highly polarised and affectively charged events. Both countries are governed by a presidential system that strengthens the construction of leadership and personalism. In Brazil, the 2022 election saw former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva narrowly defeat Bolsonaro, the far-right incumbent president whose aggressive rhetoric and divisive campaign tactics mirrored a growing trend of political extremism worldwide. The aftermath of this election was marked by widespread protests from Bolsonaro supporters, who vehemently decried alleged electoral fraud and called for military intervention. These protests culminated in the storming of government institutions in Brasilia, an event eerily reminiscent of the U.S. Capitol riots in 2021. Mobilisation around Bolsonaro thrived on social media, where misinformation, conspiracy theories, and affectively charged content fueled political violence and activated his loyalists, many of whom believed they were defending their country from a communist takeover.

Meanwhile, in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele’s dominance in the 2024 election was virtually uncontested. With over 84% of the electorate supporting him in the polls, Bukele dismissed the need for a traditional electoral campaign, boasting about his overwhelming popularity. Indeed, he has a constant social media presence that allowed him to barely engage in electoral campaigning. Yet his party Nuevas Ideas (“New Ideas”) actively campaigned for the legislative elections, disseminating messages that emphasised Bukele’s success in reducing crime while framing the opposition as a threat to national security. Supporters of Nuevas Ideas circulated images and narratives focused on how a victory of Bukele’s opponents would result in the release of imprisoned gang members, fuelling fears of chaos and violence. Despite the overwhelming support Bukele’s candidacy canvassed, signs of electoral fraud, intimidation, and political suppression permeated the process, with critics fearing speaking out against the president and his party due to cases of jailed or disappeared political opponents. Much like in Brazil, the social media landscape was heavily dominated by the supporters of the president, limiting critical coverage aand strengthening the segmented spaces in which dissent was repressed.

This comparison between Bolsonaro and Bukele, though emerging in radically distinct national contexts, is revealing of a larger phenomenon in Latin America: the rise of strongman, or caesarist, leaders propelled by social media. Both Bolsonaro and Bukele have built their political careers by positioning themselves as the defenders of their nations against internal enemies—whether communists, corrupt politicians, or criminals—and by employing aggressive, punitive and outsider rhetoric. Social media played a critical role in their rise, allowing them to bypass traditional media outlets which they did not control or influence and to speak directly to their supporters through highly curated narratives that presented them as national saviors. In 2022, Bolsonaro’s digital campaign was rife with conspiracy theories, memes, and viral misinformation, while Bukele’s 2024 election disseminated messages centered around his government’s successful fight against crime and the alleged dangers represented by a return to government of the political opposition.

Both leaders have transformed the political landscape not only through their positions as heads of state but also by constructing highly personalistic profiles, particularly during electoral processes. This construction, achieved primarily—but not exclusively—through political communication, has been shaped by their strategic use of platforms like X (former Twitter) and Instagram to craft and amplify their public personas. Bolsonaro and Bukele have both used these platforms to frame their opponents as existential threats, intensifying political divisions and normalising authoritarian practices. Their leadership styles merge forms of traditional power with the dynamics of digital influence, where their direct communication with followers reinforces loyalty and heightens polarisation.

This article examines how these profiles use political communication—both digital and offline—to construct their public personas and consolidate popularity during elections. It explores how their discursive practices mobilise affect, fuel polarisation, and legitimise violence. By examining the discourses that proliferated on X and Instagram during their electoral campaigns, we explore how both leaders crafted their public personas and mobilised their followers. We focus particularly on how these platforms enabled them to project authoritarian and punitive projects, positioning themselves as the ultimate arbiters of national destiny. This study aims to shed light on how the transformation of politicians into influencers has reshaped political discourse, with profound implications for democratic institutions and the future of political communication in the digital age.

It is based on both online and offline research in order to understand how their discourses mobilise elements that promote political polarisation and incite violence while promoting themselves as strong personas. Between September 2022 and February 2024, in the weeks leading up to and following each presidential election, we collected textual and visual data from X and Instagram public accounts employing open-source Netlytic and CrowdTangle software. We also conducted ethnographic fieldwork during the weeks preceding the elections to capture offline discursive practices and the affective milieu of each electoral campaign as a means to contextualise and deepen our understanding of the social media data. Our ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil and El Salvador included attending public rallies and political events across different parties, visiting party headquarters when possible, engaging in informal conversations with party members and loyalists, and observing publicly open political meetings.

The article first briefly traces the trajectory of the historical concept of ‘populism’ and digital populism to then discuss the conceptual tools that have ended up being used by the so-called far-rightight populists. Subsequently, we analyse the main elements that characterise the communication of these leaders: how they portray themselves as responding to a divine mandate and their construction of the enemy. In this vein, we explore traits and trajectories that assimilate and differentiate between the two leaders, paradigmatic representatives of punitivist populism.

**2. Latin American right-wing populisms: from historical roots to digital populism**

**2.1. Historical roots**

In the last decade, studies of personalism, supremacy, and populism and the relation of these traits to the expansion of far-right expressions in Latin America have deepened. These studies have focused on problematising the concept of populism, understanding its regional particularities in their specific historical, social and political contexts (Gidron & Hall, 2017). Studies on personalism and supremacism have sought to understand the weaknesses of public institutions and presidentialist constitutionalism in the face of the emergence of different forms of authoritarianism in Latin America (see Hawkins, 2010; Horowitz, 1999).

Populism has long been a defining feature of Latin American politics, emerging in various historical moments as a response to crises of representation and dissatisfaction with the political establishment. In contemporary political discourse, populism is often conflated with demagoguery or viewed as a lament for the decline of liberal representative democracy, rather than understood as a distinct analytical category. Ernesto Laclau, in La razón populista (2005), redefines populism as a political logic that articulates unsatisfied popular demands around a unifying, often symbolic, leader, offering a way to challenge institutional systems unable to address collective needs. In contrast, Federico Finchelstein (2017) explores the ideological roots of populism in the authoritarian modern tradition, emphasising its potential for both progressive transformation and authoritarian drift.While populism in the region has traditionally been associated with *leftist* leaders such as Juan Domingo Perón or Hugo Chávez, the rise of right-wing populisms in recent years marks a significant shift (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019).

Unlike their predecessors, profiles like Jair Bolsonaro and Nayib Bukele deploy populist strategies to advance conservative, punitive, and exclusionary agendas. These leaders, emerging in the 2010s and 2020s, build on the populist traditions of past movements, but differentiate themselves by their embracement of a reactionary and authoritarian rhetoric against specific social and cultural and legal changes such as advances in women's rights, LGBTQ+ or the fight against racial discrimination. (Landau, 2020). The historical roots of right-wing populism in Latin America can be traced back to complex processes of political and cultural transformation, where the construction of collective identities through **subjectivity** and **symbolism** plays a central role.

**2.2. Digital populism: the president as an influencer figure**

Brazil and El Salvador are countries with a growing number of social media users (Nasir et al., 2018; Da Silveira, 2017; 2019), who have become a relevant target audience for far-right actors to exploit communications technology to advance the expansion of their ideology, as well as various economic interests (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022). Although the use of online platforms for the dissemination of political propaganda, collective mobilisation and discursive construction of the far-right have been studied in Western countries (Gheorghe, 2019; Conway et al., 2019), a gap exists regarding how the far-right operates in this respect in the Global South, especially in Latin America.

These countries present a growing network of political influencers, with a presence on various social networks, who build audiences and sell far-right ideology through intimate and accessible relationships with the audiences who consume their content (Lewis, 2018). Influencers are effective communicators in social media and can be defined as opinion leaders who are active on social networks (Idem). These users have a high number of followers, are admired and heard by the crowd (Romero et al., 2011). In the case of the political influencer, it is often a celebrity, who is very effective at fusing political content with personal branding communication techniques to gain an audience and followers (Leidig & Bayarri, 2022). Regarding the phenomenon of "Instafame", Marwick (2015) argues that it is a "variety of celebrity", which manages a series of communicative characteristics, primarily defined by self-presentation practices suited to social media. In the case of political influencers, they strategically design a profile, target followers and reveal personal information about their habits and non-verbal forms of expression to increase attention and thus enhance their online status (Senft, 2013).

Previous studies indicate that political influencers in Brazil and El Salvador began by focusing their attention on fashion and aesthetic issues and then turned to strategic elements to establish their political brand (Da Silva & Tessarolo, 2016; Ramos Reyes, 2022). Political influencers are mainly characterised by the following elements that determine whether they enjoy celebrity traits: reach, resonance, and relevance (Politi, 2019). They are usually bearers of authority on social networks, as they have become opinion leaders, and stand out for their testimonials, as well as having the legitimacy to validate the content they transmit via Instagram, X, Facebook, TikTok or YouTube (Maly, 2020). The figure of the political influencer is increasingly legitimised and supported through the dynamics of influencer marketing, particularly by the phenomenon of micro-influencers (Marwick, 2015). Micro-influencers are individuals with smaller, yet highly engaged, followings—usually ranging from a few thousand to around 100,000 followers—who often cultivate a more personal, authentic relationship with their audience (Abidin, 2019). Unlike traditional celebrities or large-scale influencers, micro-influencers are seen as more relatable and trustworthy by their followers, who perceive them as peers or individuals they can connect with on a personal level (Ramos Reyes, 2022).

The rise of political influencers, particularly within the framework of micro-influencers, has significantly reshaped how political figures engage with the public (Arriagada, 2021). Micro-influencers are valued for their authenticity and relatability, which are essential in political spheres where building trust and maintaining influence is paramount. Political influencers often adopt strategies similar to micro-influencers, sharing personal narratives, engaging directly with followers, and using targeted content to sway opinions or mobilize support for specific causes (Usher, 2018). By positioning themselves in this way, they can bypass traditional media outlets, fostering a more direct and grassroots-level influence. This alignment with influencer marketing not only enhances their reach but also cements their legitimacy, especially when their political messaging is woven into the same framework used to promote brands and products. Consequently, these figures gain the ability to amplify their voices and reach new audiences, extending their influence beyond the traditional political establishment (Tanwar, Chaudhry & Srivastava, 2022).

The phenomenon of political influencers is especially fascinating when politicians adopt this role, as it marks a relatively novel shift in political engagement in the era of social media. While this practice is modern in its form, its roots can be traced back to earlier populist leaders who effectively cultivated public personas to appeal to the masses (Fullana Landero, 2022). Today, the blending of political messaging with influencer marketing techniques represents a new chapter in how political figures engage with their constituencies and reshape the nature of political communication (Lewis, 2020).

**3. The political communication of right-wing leaders**

**3.1. The social media ecology**

The political forces of the so-called international far-right-wing populism use a simple and polarised discursive strategy (Fernández-Villanueva & Bayarri, 2021). Actors and social forces are divided into good and bad, exaggerating the importance of the opposites and denying any semantic space between the polarised categories. As Burdett (2003) argues, the construction of antagonists based on videos, texts and images was also characteristic of the period of 20th century fascism. Exaggeration and simplification are not seen as inadequate or disturbing strategies of political discourse, but are normalised and extended (Gallardo, 2018). This discursive polarisation has clearly emerged in recent far-right communication (Lewis, 2020).

The functioning of social networks, which encourages disintermediated communication, favours the communication strategies of far-right politicians, highlighting exaggerated communication, disinformation, and polarisation. The characteristics of these movements include: 1) elements of an ideological nature and 2) the use of new technologies and social networks for the construction of simplified, dichotomous political propaganda that spreads rapidly through allegorical forms (Bizberge & Segura, 2020), such as the use of bots for the dissemination of fake news.

The distortion and manipulation of information for political purposes in social media is among the mechanisms most employed by far-right-politicians (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Ardévol-Abreu, 2022). In this context, the denunciation of the purchase of fake news packages and their dissemination on social networks by Bolsonaro during the 2018 presidential campaign stands out (Campos Mello, 2020), which was also confirmed in research on the sharing of misinformation in WhatsApp groups (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Canavilhas & Colussi, 2022). Similarly, Bukele was accused of having facilitated the transmission of fake news and other forms of disinformation during the pandemic (Carballo & Marroquín Parducci, 2022).

The communication strategies of the far-right benefit from the dynamics of social networks through the publication of tweets, memes, and *Lives*, formats that circulate quickly and benefit politicians during electoral campaigns, when the main objective of communication is to attract voters and capture votes (Ross & Rivers, 2017). In this sense, political content published on social networks is characterised by speed and excess (Zafra, 2017). Both the images and videos disseminated promote a rapid expansion of political content, whether informative or of an opinion nature, while at the same time slowing down the in-depth reproduction of reasoned argumentation. These characteristics reinforce the role that political and social polarisation play in this type of format, in which the audience tends to pay more attention to the aesthetical, communicative, and compositional elements of the environment. This is what Freidi, Moro, and Silenci (2022) call a form of "affective polarisation". This affective polarisation has increased in asymmetrical terms in recent years, impacting most strongly on supporters of the far-right. Social networks are thus transformed into the vehicle that facilitates the processes of political radicalisation, not only of the far-right, although mainly affecting the latter (Fuks & Marques, 2022).

**3.2. The Study of Political Communication during Elections**

Elections are periods of effervescence and heightened feelings (Montoya, 2015, 2018). One could think that as extraordinary events, they are not necessarily representative of political life and politics as usual. Yet in highly polarised contexts, they are unique moments to observe and register the passions that run high even if not constantly exhibited in everyday life. We thus decided to focus our research on the last two electoral competitions for the presidency in Brazil and El Salvador, both countries with polarised political landscapes. While the communication of the two most prominent right-wing leaders in these countries is mainly on social media, we decided to combine both digital and ethnographic research as means of obtaining complementary data on the political contexts we were analysing.

Between September 2022 and February 2024, we collected both textual and visual data from public X and Instagram accounts in the weeks leading up to and following each election. For Brazil, this spanned from 1 October 2022 to 2 November 2022, covering both rounds of the presidential election (2 October and 30 October 2022). For El Salvador, data collection occurred from 15 January 2024 to 15 February 2024, encompassing the lead-up to the presidential election held on 4 February 2024. The focus on these two platforms was due to the distinct content they provide—X offering rich written material, while Instagram focuses on visual content—both of which were regularly and strategically managed by the political leaders throughout their campaigns. We imported 137 tweets from Bolsonaro and 83 from Bukele, totaling 210 tweets. Additionally, we collected 122 Instagram posts from Bolsonaro and 13 from Bukele, yielding a total of 135 Instagram posts. X was primarily used for political discourse, while Instagram served as a space for more personal content, providing a complementary view of how these influencers present themselves. The difference in post volume between the platforms was notable, but Instagram's higher follower count meant that its posts often had more impact.

The lower number of posts from Bukele is likely due to his consistent use of social media throughout the year, rather than intensifying his strategy during election periods. This ongoing approach allows him to maintain a steady presence, unlike Bolsonaro, whose content is more concentrated around electoral times. Bukele's continuous engagement contributes to his sustained influence rather than relying solely on an electoral push.

The analysis was conducted using a Critical Visual Methodology (CVM) to interpret both visual and textual elements in the posts, enabling a deeper understanding of the political and social context in which they were produced. This approach allowed us to detect patterns of political polarisation, particularly on how these platforms enabled these leaders to project authoritarian and punitive projects. Manual coding of the posts revealed recurring symbolic elements that contributed to the construction of political identities, enriching our analysis by incorporating both visual and written components of the discourse.

In addition to online data collection, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork during the final weeks of both electoral campaigns to capture the offline discursive practices and affective dynamics characterising these crucial political moments. Elections have been typically examined through quantitative methods and institutional perspectives. In contrast, we argue that ethnographic research provides deep insights into how people cast their votes, beyond assuming purely rational or strategic motivations (Montoya, 2015, 2018). Short-term ethnography, as proposed by Pink and Morgan (2013), is particularly suitable for elections, as it allows researchers to capture the intense social and political activity that becomes more visible in such condensed periods at which stakes are high.

Our ethnographic fieldwork in both Brazil and El Salvador involved attending public rallies and political events of various parties, visiting party headquarters when accessible, holding informal conversations with loyalists and party members, and observing political meetings open to the public. We also paid close attention to the political propaganda disseminated both in the streets and through mainstream media, noting the visibility it had in different parts of the country.

**4. Political service as a divine mandate**

It was a hot day, 18 October 2022. Two weeks before the general elections, Jair Bolsonaro took part in a large political event in the Fluminense city of Sao Gonçalo, east of Rio de Janeiro. The atmosphere was festive, albeit riddled with aggressive symbols and slogans: the mood was tense and polarised, and different people carried banners transforming Lula into a demon. “I'm voting for Bolsonaro because he is a man of God”, exclaimed a woman with a Brazilian flag on her forehead. “For God, for the country, for the family, for freedom, Bolsonaro must win”*,* a disturbed man told me. Suddenly, thousands of phones went up in the air, and Bolsonaro appeared on the stage, as the Brazilian anthem played loudly. Then Bolsonaro lowered his head and raised his arms. The crowd imitated their leader, and together they all recited the Lord's Prayer.

The investment of political mandate with religious connotations has not been limited to Brazil. In another part of the continent, in El Salvador, President Bukele stormed into Congress on 9 January 2020 with the army to demand that deputies approve a credit to continue his government’s fight of gangs. In what was a clear takeover of the legislative body by the executive, Bukele sat in the assembly president's chair, closed his eyes, and began to pray. Years later, in January 2024, before his controversial re-election, Bukele’s affinities with the well extended Pentecostalism was revealed anew as politicians were attending cults as part of their election campaign. It was during a service at the Church of Israel that politicians from Bukele’s party, Nuevas Ideas, who attended a ceremony were blessed by the pastor, who encouraged his congregation to vote for Bukele's party, the party of the men of God, Nuevas Ideas.

Religion and conservative values are central to the political communication strategies of both Jair Bolsonaro and Nayib Bukele. These leaders strategically use religious rhetoric to construct narratives that legitimise their leadership and appeal to deeply ingrained cultural values among their constituencies. Bolsonaro’s reliance on religious messaging is especially prominent, comprising 11.11% of his tweets and 9.59% of his Instagram posts. His discourse often emphasises opposition to abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and “gender ideology,” portraying heteronormativity as an ideal and condemning what he views as societal deviance. “A Christian family is made up of a man, a woman and their children”, a Bolsonaro voter assured me. This framing is visually reinforced in his social media posts, where he often appears blessing supporters, attending religious ceremonies, or interacting with faith leaders. These portrayals amplify his image as a protector of Christian morality, a narrative that consolidates his base of conservative Christians. Bolsonaro’s strategic use of religious imagery elevates him beyond a mere political figure, casting him as a moral leader tasked with guarding Brazil against cultural and moral decline.

In a similar vein, Bukele integrates religious themes into his public persona, dedicating 1.94% of his tweets and 9.52% of his Instagram posts to matters of faith and morality. While his religious rhetoric is less confrontational than Bolsonaro’s, it still reinforces his image as a leader of moral clarity. “Our president has been sent by God to save us”, said a woman at a Nuevas Ideas election event.

Bukele frequently invokes the figure of Archbishop Romero, a revered figure in Salvadoran religious and national identity, to legitimise his authority and to position himself as a divinely inspired leader. By associating himself with Romero, Bukele transcends partisan politics and presents himself as a unifying moral force. His religious discourse intersects with subtle anti-feminist rhetoric, where he occasionally ridicules feminist movements to further appeal to conservative and religious audiences. This rhetoric is evident in his social media content, where his posts often feature images of Romero or other religious symbols that reinforce his spiritual authority and moral mission.

Both Bolsonaro and Bukele use religious imagery not only as a tool for political legitimacy but also as a way to frame their leadership in divine, almost messianic, terms. This construction of divine leadership serves to deepen their connection with their respective bases, framing their political actions as part of a higher, moral mission. “He is a creature of light, he is the chosen one, God sent him to save the nation, to save us from communism...” these are common phrases in both contexts. In this sense, their religious discourse is not just about policy but also about creating an emotional bond with their followers, presenting themselves as profiles who embody the moral compass of the nation.

The divinisation of political leaders, often linked to religious-like devotion, is not a new phenomenon but has gained renewed prominence in the age of social media, where influencers shape their public personas through curated content that resonates emotionally with audiences. This emotional connection can echo the language of faith and devotion, where followers project hope and idealisation onto their leaders. As one middle-aged man anxiously remarked, "Thanks to Bolsonaro, my children will be able to prosper," while an elderly man commented, "Nayib is young, he represents the needs of the new generations." These expressions reflect how political figures can take on a quasi-religious role, fostering personal identification and trust in a way that blends political and emotional devotion.

As Michalowski (2008) and Vidal (2014) highlight, the divine framing of leaders empowers their supporters by channeling collective aspirations and desires. Leaders who adopt this approach are able to craft narratives that go beyond traditional political ideologies, positioning themselves as moral arbiters and agents of a supernatural mission. These narratives foster an environment of intense loyalty, where the leader is seen not just as a political figure but as a messianic force capable of transcending ordinary governance.

This divine narrative often carries authoritarian undertones. According to Álvarez (2019), leaders who claim divine inspiration tend to assert absolute truths that leave little room for dissent. In the case of Bolsonaro and Bukele, their religious messaging not only promotes moral and cultural conservatism but also delegitimises opposition by framing dissenters as threats to national or divine order. This framing of “enemies”, as we will show in the next section, allows these leaders to justify actions that could otherwise be seen as authoritarian, transforming political discourse into an existential battleground where opposing views are not just challenged but actively demonised.

The construction of leaders as divine profiles has historically been a central element in totalitarian regimes. Kershaw and Lewin (2012) document how regimes like Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia utilised the mythologisation of their leaders to centralise power and eliminate opposition. These leaders were portrayed as heroic profiles, divinely appointed to guide their nations to achieve glory . This strategy involved the use of rituals and symbolic acts that reinforced their divinity and legitimacy, while also facilitating the justification of violence against perceived enemies.

This divine narrative, when deployed in the current political landscape, is not just about affirming moral authority but also about crafting a national identity that places the leader at the center of the struggle for national salvation. Both Bolsonaro and Bukele frame their leadership as essential to protecting the nation from existential threats, such as crime, progressive politics, or foreign influence. By portraying their leadership as divinely inspired, they are able to justify measures that might otherwise be seen as authoritarian, positioning themselves as the only ones capable of safeguarding the national interest.

In the context of modern digital media, these divine narratives are further amplified through social media platforms, where visual content—such as selfies with supporters, images of religious ceremonies, and motivational messages—plays a key role in constructing and maintaining the leader's divine persona.

By presenting themselves as profiles who embody both national pride and moral purity, Bolsonaro and Bukele have skillfully combined their political messages with broader cultural and spiritual narratives, positioning themselves not only as political leaders but as figures with a divine mandate. This transformation into quasi-messianic figures enables them to cultivate a deep emotional connection with their followers, where their authority is no longer solely political but imbued with a sense of destiny and divine approval. What is particularly striking, however, is how they blend this messianic role with other representations that may seem contradictory yet ultimately reinforce their power.

For instance, Bukele, while positioning himself as a messianic figure, has recently embraced a more monarchic persona, particularly evident in the ceremony marking the initiation of his second mandate. His attire, the grandeur of the ceremony at the National Palace, and the display of military power all reflect a monarchic image that reinforces his central, almost sovereign role. This dual representation—part messiah, part monarch—appeals to different facets of his followers' desires for both spiritual salvation and strong, centralized leadership. Similarly, Bolsonaro’s rhetoric merges religious imagery with a populist, authoritarian stance, creating a potent mixture of divine mission and political strength. These seemingly contradictory portrayals work effectively because they appeal to the multifaceted identities of their supporters, allowing both leaders to extend their influence across various social and political dimensions.

Ultimately, the divinisation of leaders in the era of influencers highlights the growing intersection of religion, politics, and media. Through strategic use of social media, Bolsonaro and Bukele tap into collective aspirations and cultural values, presenting themselves not only as political profiles but as divine protectors of their nations. Their ability to leverage these narratives demonstrates the potential of digital media to shape the perception of leadership and authority, turning politics into a battleground for spiritual and national salvation.The analysis of Bolsonaro and Bukele as political influencers in the digital age highlights the growing intersection of populism, authoritarianism, and social media. By examining their strategic use of platforms like Instagram and X, it becomes evident how these leaders have transformed traditional political messaging into highly personalised, media-driven campaigns that appeal to emotional and cultural identities. Their invocation of divine mandates and religious imagery, as well as their blending of messianic and monarchical roles, speaks to a broader trend in contemporary populism where leaders transcend mere political figures and become symbols of national and moral salvation.

This transformation, as demonstrated in Bukele's monarchic displays and Bolsonaro's religious rhetoric, reflects a shift in how populist leaders consolidate power: not solely through institutional authority, but through an intimate, almost spiritual connection with their followers. By positioning themselves as divine figures, both leaders blur the lines between political authority and religious devotion, enhancing their legitimacy while consolidating control. The growing use of social media as a tool for political branding and outreach adds another layer to this transformation, as leaders craft public personas that resonate on an emotional level with their audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers.

This redefines the role of populism in the 21st century, shifting it from a political force to a broader cultural and spiritual movement, as highlighted in the works of Laclau (2005) and Finchelstein (2017), and further explored in the growing field of political influencers (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2019). In this new era, populist leaders do not just lead; they embody the aspirations, fears, and identities of their followers, positioning themselves as essential figures in the battle for national and moral salvation. This shift towards influencer-driven politics invites a reevaluation of the impact of digital media on democratic institutions, with significant implications for how political authority is constructed and maintained.

**5. The Dehumanisation of the Other to Legitimise Punitivism**

“A bandit has to be either hanged or in jail!” Bolsonaro shouted at a campaign rally. People cheered, shouting “Myth, Myth, Myth!”[[1]](#footnote-2) I wondered then who these ‘bandits’ were. “Bandits are those who steal”, said an attendee at the event. “Bandits are those who don't want to work”, said a street vendor. “Bandits are all left-wing politicians”, affirmed a woman at the event. “Lula is the main bandit”, exclaimed a young man. “Beggars are bandits, they should disappear, and don't ask me how”, said a young woman. “We don't have any here, but in Spain the bandits are the Arabs, right?”, commented another boy. There seemed to be different definitions of ‘bandits’ circulating among Bolsonaro’s loyalists.

Similarly, the macro-prisons announced by Bukele were accompanied by a strongly punitivist message. “They will pay for their own meals”, Bukele announced on social networks. Who were they? “The Other”, “the enemy”, was for many the gang member, represented in the form of tattooed young men from the working classes. For many, the enemy was also the FMLN, the left-wing revolutionary party who many Nuevas Ideas supporters identify with gangs or the left-wing international that wanted to introduce Agenda 2030. “Radical feminism is our worst enemy”, said a young man at a Nuevas Ideas event. In any case, for both Bolsonaro's and Bukele's supporters there seemed to be a clear distinction between those who are good people, bearers of citizenship rights, and those who could be disposable, and ultimately, exterminated.

Both Bolsonaro and Bukele leverage divisive "Us vs. Them" narratives as a central strategy to polarise their constituencies and justify their punitive governance. This tactic is a powerful tool to dehumanise the Other, positioning political opponents, the media, and marginalised groups as existential threats to national stability. Bolsonaro, in particular, dedicates a significant portion of his social media content to attacking political rivals, especially targeting the Workers' Party (PT). 35.54% of his tweets and 20.55% of his Instagram posts focus on accusing the PT of corruption and portraying them as socialist enemies of Brazil. By continuously branding the PT as a danger to national unity, Bolsonaro reinforces the idea that his administration is fighting against a corrupt and treacherous force. This narrative functions to create a clear division between "good" citizens—those who support Bolsonaro—and "bad" citizens, who are depicted as traitors who act against the national interest.

During the electoral period, Bukele employed a similar tactic, though to a lesser degree. 4.85% of his tweets and 4.76% of his Instagram posts target opposition parties, accusing them of corruption, collusion with criminal organisations, and betrayal of national interests. These attacks are often accompanied by militaristic imagery, positioning Bukele as the decisive leader who is willing to take extreme measures to defend the nation. These actions generate a feeling of order and security, in a hierarchical and paternalistic way, which in a nation with a history of violence like El Salvador is appreciated by many people. *We have lived through a war, we have all lost family members. Now we live in peace,’* said a taxi driver with a pragmatic attitude towards Bukele’s government*.* Bukele’s use of patriotism and sovereignty rhetoric further emphasises the narrative that his actions—particularly his security policies—are acts of national defense, depicting anyone opposed to him as a threat to the security and integrity of El Salvador.

Both leaders use their social media platforms to construct an image of themselves as heroic profiles—guardians of the nation’s future. Bolsonaro dedicates 18.86% of his tweets and 10.96% of his Instagram posts to portraying himself as a man of the people, often using visual cues to demonstrate physical closeness with his supporters. This "heroic" persona is framed within the context of the nation’s moral and political salvation, justifying punitive measures as necessary for national stability and moral restoration. Similarly, Bukele’s image as a national hero, or more recently a monarch, is amplified through his social media content, with 13.59% of his tweets and a striking 38.1% of his Instagram posts reinforcing his persona as a king-like figure, a protector of Salvadoran identity and sovereignty. His framing of himself as a divinely inspired leader further solidifies the sense that his actions—whether they be against political opponents or criminal organisations—are acts of righteous defense against forces threatening the nation’s well-being.This narrative does not contradict the idea of Bukele having a divine mandate because it positions his "heroic" persona within the broader context of divine intervention, presenting him not just as a protector of the nation, but as a leader chosen by a higher power to fulfill this critical role.

These narratives of heroism are inseparable from the exclusionary rhetoric that both Bolsonaro and Bukele employ. They position themselves as the saviors of their nations, framing any opposition—be it from political adversaries, the media, or social movements—as a threat to the fabric of society. Through their social media communication, they cultivate a sense of moral urgency among their followers, presenting their leadership as essential for national survival. “The left is the enemy of the flag, it does not love its anthem, nor its homeland”, affirmed a Bolsonarist supporter during the campaign. This narrative often portrays punitive measures, such as crackdowns on criminal organisations or political opponents, as not only justified but necessary to preserve order and protect the nation's identity.

The strategy of dehumanising the "Other" to legitimise punitive governance is also seen in the far-right’s use of violent and exclusionary imagery. According to many scholars, dehumanisation, animalisation, and robotisation are methods used to strip certain groups of their rights and citizenship. These tactics are not only visible in the images but also evident in the rhetoric espoused by political influencers. Influencers, who serve as key players in amplifying these messages, often share content from anonymous or fringe supporters that promote violent discourse, further legitimising harmful ideologies without directly taking responsibility for them. This type of amplification serves to normalise extreme ideas and allows for the continued vilification of targeted groups, creating an environment where violence against perceived enemies becomes acceptable or even desirable.

To reconnect the section with the initial research question and the literature, it's essential to reflect on how the findings about Bolsonaro and Bukele’s use of social media and dehumanisation rhetoric add to our understanding of populism and political influencers. Both leaders, leveraging social media platforms like X and Instagram, exploit populist tactics to project authoritarian and exclusionary agendas. The study demonstrates how these leaders blend the roles of political figures and influencers, using social media not just for communication but for creating a direct, almost personal bond with their followers, as they also dehumanise opposition groups. This fusion of populism with influencer strategies represents a shift in political engagement, blurring the lines between political messaging and branding (Marwick, 2015; Tanwar et al., 2022).

The use of divisive "Us vs. Them" narratives and the vilification of the opposition is not new to populist leaders, but the digital age enables a more potent and pervasive form of these tactics. As the study shows, Bolsonaro and Bukele harness the power of their social media followings to construct themselves as heroic figures fighting for the nation’s moral survival, justifying punitive measures against the “Other” (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Finchelstein, 2017). This use of dehumanising language and violent imagery on social media enhances their capacity to polarise and mobilise, positioning themselves as protectors of national identity against both internal and external threats, including political opponents, marginalized communities, and even international agendas (Landau, 2020).

Thus, by exploring the roles of these political influencers, we gain a deeper understanding of how modern populism operates in a digital landscape. These leaders employ personal branding, influencer marketing techniques, and exclusionary rhetoric to reshape the political discourse and strengthen their grip on power. The findings suggest that the rise of political influencers, particularly in Latin America, is transforming political communication and deepening political polarization, with significant implications for democratic processes and social cohesion in the region.

In conclusion, both Bolsonaro and Bukele utilise dehumanising rhetoric to create an atmosphere of moral and political urgency. By portraying political opponents, media outlets, and social movements as existential threats, they are able to justify punitive governance as a necessary measure for the protection of national identity and moral order. This strategy of constructing an "enemy" within, supported by their hero-like personas and reinforced by their social media strategies, enables both leaders to foster deep loyalty among their followers while marginalising those who dare to oppose their vision of society.

**6. Conclusion**

**6.1. About data**

To begin the conclusion, it is important to address the issue of the percentages referenced in the analysis, particularly since the figures cited—such as the 11.11% of Bolsonaro's tweets dedicated to religion or the 9.52% of Bukele’s Instagram posts—are not particularly high in absolute terms. At first glance, these numbers might seem low when compared to other types of political or campaign content. However, the significance of these percentages lies precisely in the way these themes, while not overwhelmingly dominant in their communication, are strategically inserted into the discourse and contribute to the construction of their public identities and the mobilization of their bases. In this sense, what is truly meaningful is not the overall volume of religious or moral content, but its ability to create an emotional bond with followers and reinforce the narrative of a divinely inspired or morally superior leadership.

Moreover, it is crucial to highlight how the presence of these themes within a broader digital communication strategy can amplify their impact. On platforms like X and Instagram, where the visibility and reach of posts do not solely depend on frequency but also on resonance and context, content with symbolic weight, even if less frequent, can have significant effects. In a digital environment where the quality of interaction and emotional connection tends to be more determining than the sheer quantity of posts, these symbolic elements are essential in consolidating the leader’s figure as a moral and divinely mandated authority.

In summary, while the percentages of religious and moral content are low in numerical terms, their role within these leaders’ communication strategy is crucial for understanding how their public image is constructed. The relevance of this phenomenon should not be measured solely by the frequency of mentions, but by its power to emotionally mobilize followers and solidify a type of authoritarian and populist leadership that transcends mere politics to become a cultural and spiritual symbol.

### **6.2) Implications for Democracy**

The rise of leaders such as Bolsonaro and Bukele highlights the increasing influence of digital populism and its potential threats to democratic institutions. Through their digital platforms, they utilise symbolic strategies that foster a sense of belonging and unity among disparate social groups, positioning themselves as the authentic voice of the people, while framing the political opposition as illegitimate. These strategies allow them to bypass traditional democratic institutions, consolidating power and eroding democratic checks and balances.

In this process, the leaders’ use of informal language, national symbols, and casual attire fosters a connection with citizens, positioning them as "common men" who share the values and struggles of their supporters. As Goldstein (2019) notes in his work on the "pop far-right," this populist appeal is carefully crafted to create an emotional bond with the electorate, but it also plays a role in undermining democratic structures. Bolsonaro and Bukele attack the media and political opposition, attempting to delegitimise these institutions, which weakens public trust and threatens democratic integrity. This is especially concerning in the context of the media's role in informing and holding power to account.

Additionally, both leaders’ focus on reinforcing binary distinctions—such as the "Good Citizen" versus the "pandillero", “criminal” or "bantit"—echoes the polarising narratives that Laclau and Mouffe (2005) identified as central to populist movements. By promoting a vision of the world in which only their supporters are legitimate and the opposition is portrayed as a threat, they foster an environment of division and distrust. Pérez Zafrilla (2022) warns that this kind of political polarisation can lead to the disintegration of democratic norms, as citizens are encouraged to view their political opponents not as fellow citizens with opposing views, but as enemies to be defeated. This tactic is key to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, as it erodes the idea of political pluralism and the importance of dialogue.

Furthermore, as Cesarino (2020) argues, digital populism creates a space where influencers bypass traditional media outlets, spreading their messages directly to followers and constructing alternative truths. Bolsonaro and Bukele's reliance on social media platforms is indicative of a broader global trend, where digital influencers have become central in shaping political discourse. These digital spaces, as Suuronen et al. (2021) explain, function as "third spaces" where political opinions can be formed outside the scrutiny of established media institutions, often amplifying disinformation and political polarisation. This phenomenon deepens the challenges to democracy, as political narratives become increasingly disconnected from reality, with far-reaching consequences for public trust in democratic processes.

### 6. 3) Understanding the Global Far-Right

The cases of Bolsonaro and Bukele offer valuable insights into the global dynamics of far-right populism and the ways in which leaders in the Global South engage with broader international far-right trends. As we’ve seen, both leaders employ strategies that resonate with those identified in the global rise of far-right movements, especially through the use of digital platforms to construct narratives of resistance against liberalism, foreign intervention, and the so-called "elite." Bolsonaro’s and Bukele’s rethoric reflect different but related strategies in the global populist landscape.

Drawing on Goldstein's (2019) concept of the "pop far-right," both Bolsonaro and Bukele strategically engage in the construction of alternative truths. They decontextualise issues such as crime and national security, framing them in terms of "us versus them" in order to bolster their authority and justify authoritarian policies. For instance, Bolsonaro’s push for the expansion of firearms in Brazil and Bukele’s military modernisation in El Salvador are presented as solutions to national crises, but in doing so, they also serve to reinforce their tough-on-crime images, further polarising the public. Peres-Neto (2022) highlights the ways in which these leaders present themselves as "gurus" whose authority is grounded not in empirical knowledge or institutional validation, but in their personal charisma and direct connection to the masses. This rejection of traditional forms of expertise and governance mirrors the strategies of far-right movements worldwide, further reinforcing the destabilising effects of digital populism on democratic institutions.

Bolsonaro and Bukele also exploit the historical processes of political polarisation in Latin America, drawing from the legacy of earlier populist movements like Peronism and Chavismo. As Laclau and Mouffe (2005) emphasise, populist leaders often construct their political identities through the mobilization of fragmented social sectors, creating antagonistic boundaries that serve to unite supporters and isolate opponents. This dynamic is evident in both Bolsonaro's and Bukele’s rhetoric, where they frame their leadership as a direct challenge to the established order, casting their political opponents as the enemy of the people.

 This strategic construction of political identity is central to their appeal, but it also contributes to the broader global phenomenon of political polarisation, especially in the context of the far-right.These leaders are not simply reacting to global trends; they are actively shaping the contours of political discourse in ways that connect local issues to broader international movements. As Colussi (2020) notes, this dynamic accelerates the spread of disinformation, further deepening the polarisation that defines the global far-right.

Understanding the role of digital populism in the expansion of the far-right provides critical insights into how these movements are able to transcend national boundaries and gain international resonance. Future research should focus on the ways in which these leaders and their far-right counterparts build networks, exchange ideas, and share tactics, particularly through digital platforms. Such research will be essential for understanding the global nature of populism and its impact on political polarisation and democratic erosion worldwide.

~~REFLEXIONES 1~~

~~The profiles of Bolsonaro and Bukele as political influencers embody various elements of "digital populism," drawing on aspects of what Goldstein (2019) describes as the "pop far-right". Both leaders utilise informal language, casual attire, and national symbols to create an image of the "common man," fostering a sense of closeness with their constituents. This connection is crucial, as it encourages citizens to identify with their actions and government proposals.~~

~~At the same time, these elements serve as the foundation for a discursive strategy that emphasises conservative values centered around religion, the homeland, and family. This framework enables Bolsonaro and Bukele to launch attacks against the press and political opposition, undermining the credibility of media institutions in Brazil and El Salvador. Such tactics weaken public trust in journalism, which indirectly affects democratic processes. The demonisation of opposition parties is also a key strategy, aimed at disqualifying their actions and promoting ideological extremism. The context of extremist rhetoric, filled with dramatisation and exaltation (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005), further entrenches the polarising narratives surrounding these leaders.~~

~~In both countries, Bolsonaro and Bukele construct a binary political identification between the "Good Citizen" and the "Bantit" or “criminal” advocating for the latter to be stripped of rights. This approach contributes to a politically polarised environment that poses a significant threat to democracy (Pérez Zafrilla, 2022).~~

~~Returning to the inquiry regarding the narratives that these influencers mobilise, it becomes clear that these narratives interrelate to fuel polarisation and violent conflict. Both leaders present themselves as possessing a divine mandate, using religion to legitimise their authority, albeit in distinct ways. Bolsonaro engages more directly with the populace, actively participating in events to foster a sense of connection. In contrast, Bukele adopts a more distant, almost monarchical demeanor, asserting his authority without physically mingling with the people.~~

~~The narrative of honesty and integrity contrasts sharply with the corruption and chaos they attribute to their political opposition. This dichotomy creates a narrative of "us versus them," further entrenching political polarisation. To bolster their images, both leaders highlight their achievements in social assistance and public works, portraying themselves as champions of the people's welfare. However, their most significant differentiation from opponents lies in their punitive narratives surrounding security and crime. They present themselves as tough-on-crime leaders, often dehumanising criminals and critics of their punitive measures. This hyper-masculine portrayal reinforces their images as strong profiles capable of safeguarding national security.~~

~~Additionally, the role of international dimensions varies between the two cases. Bolsonaro has sought connections with other far-right movements globally, positioning himself within a broader far-right internationalism. Conversely, Bukele has focused on showcasing the success of his government, positioning El Salvador as a case study admired internationally, while also emphasising national sovereignty in response to past foreign interventions.~~

~~It is also worth noting the patriarchal and masculine identities these leaders cultivate, presenting themselves as responsible fathers and hardworking individuals. This paternalistic narrative reinforces hierarchical structures, placing them as heads of both families and nations.~~

~~Finally, a critical area for future research is the timing of the data collection—whether narratives were published before or after elections could significantly influence their content. We plan to explore this dimension to better understand the dynamics at play in the narratives mobilised by these influential leaders. Overall, the convergence of these various elements reveals a complex landscape in which Bolsonaro and Bukele utilise digital populism to shape political discourse and bolster their authoritarian tendencies.~~

~~REFLEXIONES 2~~

~~One of the techniques most used by Bolsonaro and Bukele, in which they acted as political influencers and celebrities, was decontextualisation. Both politicians took advantage of the different online platforms to construct new meanings through concrete objects, such as the construction of a discourse around the reduction of violence in Brazil and El Salvador after the release of licences for the use of firearms (Brazil) or after the acquisition of high-tech military equipment for the armed forces (El Salvador).~~

~~In this scenario of information bubbles and disorder in which the political consolidation of far-right movements can be observed, the production of truths has passed into the hands of these political influencers. These truths, issued through comments and testimonies, substantiate and validate the content they transmit, in a dynamic that potentiates disinformation and political polarisation (Colussi, 2020). Also, the digital spaces maintained by influencers can constitute a new kind of third space where the emergence of political topics can have a greater impact on the political behaviour of influencers' followers (Suuronen et al., 2021).~~

~~In this way, influencers act as gurus, self-proclaiming their authority base and rejecting the validation of their knowledge by the institutions of the field of knowledge and empirical demonstration (Peres-Neto, 2022). This production of truths in social networks related to the communicative strategies of far-right parties has been referred to as "pop far-right" (Goldstein, 2019) or "digital populism" (Cesarino, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2018).~~

~~REFLEXIONES 3~~

~~Bolsonarism and Bukelism represent contemporary expressions of right-wing populism in Latin America, but they are deeply rooted in historical processes of political polarisation, collective identity formation, and the strategic use of symbolism. By drawing on the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe (2005), we can understand how these movements have mobilised fragmented social sectors through the use of chains of equivalence, empty signifiers, and antagonistic frontiers. The historical legacy of populist movements in Latin America—such as Peronism and Chavismo—has shaped the ways in which these leaders have constructed their political identities, united their followers, and created a polarised political environment that serves to consolidate their power. Ultimately, the construction of the "folk" in Bolsonarism and Bukelism reflects the ongoing historical processes of political mobilisation and the symbolic strategies that continue to shape the political landscape of Latin America.~~

**References**

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1. A term used by Bolsonaro's supporters to admire him.
 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)