Platforms, Personalism, and Propaganda: The Digital Investment of the Far Right in Brazil and the Reconfiguration of Political Mediation

Plataformas, personalismo y propaganda: La inversión digital de la extrema derecha en Brasil y la reconfiguración de la mediación política

Mércia Alves
Investigadora del CEBRAP. Doctora en Ciencia Política. Miembro de los grupos de investigación Comunicación Electoral - CEL (UFPR) y del Núcleo de Estudios en Arte, Medios y Política - NEAMP (PUC-SP).
merciaallves@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-8008-6905

Abstract

This article analyzes how Brazil's far-right movement –especially its digital expression in bolsonarism– has strategically appropriated social media platforms to build a political communication infrastructure grounded in personalization, informality, and ideological performance. Drawing on a critical and empirical approach, the article explores the digital investments made by bolsonarist candidates and conservative advertisers during and outside electoral cycles, with a focus on the 2024 municipal elections. It argues that this digital ecosystem functions as a «parallel party», combining sophisticated campaign technologies with informal and unregulated practices. The findings reveal a continuous flow of advertising investment aimed at sustaining ideological engagement beyond institutional boundaries. Through the lens of political communication and democratic theory, the article identifies three defining features of Brazil's far-right digital strategy: strategic informality, radical personalization, and structural asymmetries in technological access. It concludes that these dynamics not only reshape campaign logic but also threaten the accountability and integrity of democratic representation in the platform society.

Keywords

Digital political communication; Far Right; Brazil; Political Advertising; Strategic Informality; Bolsonarism; Platform Society.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo el movimiento de extrema derecha en Brasil –especialmente su expresión digital en el bolsonarismo– se ha apropiado estratégicamente de las plataformas de redes sociales para construir una infraestructura de comunicación política basada en la personalización, la informalidad y la performance ideológica. A partir de un enfoque crítico y empírico, el texto explora las inversiones digitales realizadas por candidatos bolsonaristas y anunciantes conservadores durante y fuera de los ciclos electorales, con énfasis en las elecciones municipales de 2024. Se argumenta que este ecosistema digital funciona como un «partido paralelo», combinando tecnologías sofisticadas de campaña con prácticas informales y no reguladas. Los hallazgos revelan un flujo continuo de inversión publicitaria destinado a sostener el compromiso ideológico más allá de los límites institucionales. Desde la perspectiva de la comunicación política y la teoría democrática, el artículo identifica tres características fundamentales de la estrategia digital de la extrema derecha brasileña: informalidad estratégica, personalismo radical y asimetrías estructurales en el acceso tecnológico. Se concluye que estas dinámicas no solo reconfiguran la lógica de las campañas, sino que también amenazan la rendición de cuentas y la integridad de la representación democrática en la sociedad de plataformas.

Palabras clave

Comunicación política digital; extrema derecha; Brasil; publicidad política; informalidad estratégica; bolsonarismo; sociedad de plataformas.

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1. Introduction

The rise of digital social media has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of electoral campaigns, introducing new forms of political mobilization, fundraising, and direct communication with voters. In Brazil, this process is particularly intense in the phenomenon of digital bolsonarism, which has consolidated itself as a political force capable of continuous and decentralized action in the online public sphere. This configuration alters the traditional role of political parties and representative institutions, challenging existing regulatory mechanisms and blurring the boundaries between legality and informality in campaigns.

This article analyzes how the Brazilian far right has appropriated digital platforms to structure unconventional forms of campaigning and political mobilization, combining sustained investment in social media advertising with personalist and informal practices that reconfigure the role of political parties as institutional mediators. Drawing on a critical and comparative perspective, it seeks to understand how digital bolsonarism merges highly professionalized strategies with informal, personalized political practices —reflecting the specificities of the Brazilian political system amidst the communicational transformations of the digital age.

In light of recent transformations in Brazilian political communication –particularly in the context of the digitization of electoral strategies and the ongoing presence of the far right on social media– this article investigates how this political group has financially structured its presence on digital platforms, with emphasis on investments made both during and outside electoral periods. The research is guided by four core questions: 1) How is the digital financing of Brazil's far right organized, particularly in regard to paid promotion and political advertising on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube? 2) How do these practices reconfigure the role of political parties in Brazil, especially within a context of institutional fragility and the high personalization of politics? 3) What are the specificities of the Brazilian case in comparison to trends observed in other Western democracies, especially concerning the interplay between technological innovation and political informality? 4) What are the implications of these transformations for the functioning of the public sphere and the mechanisms of democratic accountability?

Based on these questions, three central hypotheses are formulated. First, the digital investment of the far right operates according to a logic of a «permanent campaign cycle,» not limited to the electoral calendar but aimed at keeping its base continuously mobilized and engaged through both paid and organic content. Second, this constant presence on social media —marked by intense personalization and the use of segmented digital strategies– contributes to the weakening, of traditional mechanisms of political mediation, especially political parties, which increasingly serve an instrumental rather than programmatic role. Third, the Brazilian political environment offers particularly favorable conditions for the expansion of such practices, due to structural characteristics such as informational inequalities, weak regulation of campaign technologies, and a political culture steeped in informality.

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These conditions render the Brazilian case unique, even when situated within broader global trends of political professionalization and platformization.

The empirical analysis is based on public data from the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), Meta and Google ad libraries, and independent investigations conducted by initiatives such as NetLab/UFRJ. The systematization involved comparing electoral and non-electoral periods, focusing on digital promotion spending by candidates and advertisers associated with the conservative spectrum and the bolsonarist base. All data were organized according to the ideological spectrum classification methodology, following the criteria established.

Throughout the article, the terms «Brazilian far right», «digital bolsonarism», and «conservative group» are used complementarily to describe the political-ideological ecosystem structured around the figure of Jair Bolsonaro and his allies. While important distinctions exist among these terms, this analysis adopts a framework that recognizes their intersection within the digital field, characterized by informal practices, anti-system appeal, and a constant presence on digital platforms.

Beyond its empirical focus on Brazil, this article aims to contribute to broader theoretical debates on the transformations of party politics and electoral communication in the digital age. By analyzing a case that defies conventional institutional patterns, it offers insights into how digital technologies, when embedded in a context of political personalization, weak regulation, and structural inequality, can facilitate the emergence of informal political machines that operate outside democratic accountability. In this sense, the Brazilian far-right experience serves not merely as a national case study, but as a critical lens to revisit and refine theories of political communication, party disconnection (Mair, 2013), and the platformization of electoral politics (Gerbaudo, 2018; Gibson & Ward, 2009).

2. Digital Bolsonarism as a Political Phenomenon: Between Informality and Professionalization

The migration of electoral campaigns to digital environments has led to structural transformations in how politics is communicated, perceived, and contested. This reconfiguration challenges classical political science categories and demands new analytical approaches. Bernard Manin's (1997) concept of audience democracy offers a relevant starting point to understand this process. According to Manin, this form of democracy is characterized by the centrality of media communication, the erosion of traditional party ties, and the emergence of a direct, personalized, and intermittent relationship between representatives and represented –one shaped more by image and performance than by coherent programs or ideologies.

In Brazil, this diagnosis is deepened by Marcos Nobre (2022), who interprets the rise of bolsonarism as the peak expression of representative

democracy's crisis and the consolidation of a new type of political organization: the digital bolsonarist party. This «party» operates outside conventional institutional structures, independent of party bureaucracy, and organizes its base through decentralized online mobilization networks. Political communication in this model occurs in real time, mediated by digital platforms and driven by continuous engagement, polarization, and performance. As Nobre notes, this is a politics of permanent confrontation that mobilizes negative emotions and embraces deinstitutionalization as a method of action.

The notion of digital engagement is particularly useful for understanding this new landscape. According to Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2012), contemporary political engagement occurs within dynamic and fluid communicational structures, where collective action relies less on formal organization, and more on individuals temporarily connecting around causes, content, or emotions. Digital networks not only facilitate information circulation but also reconfigure the ways people belong and participate politically.

Helen Margetts *et al.* (2015) expand this view by demonstrating that small acts of support or opposition on social media –a like, a share, a comment– can develop into political mobilization waves with significant impact, driven by political turbulence dynamics. These logics favor the emergence of leaders who are responsive to the mood of the networks, operating through cycles of indignation, virality, and polarization. Bolsonarism exemplifies this: its strength lies not only in its messaging, but in its capacity to sustain high levels of continuous engagement, even outside formal electoral periods.

This dynamic is further explored in recent Brazilian literature, such as the work by Chicarino, Alves, and Conceição (2024), which analyzes the digital performance of Lula and Bolsonaro during the 2022 elections on Twitter. The study shows that although both candidates achieved high engagement, their strategies and types of interaction varied significantly. While Lula's profile is more institutional and centered on policy issues, Bolsonaro's relies on provocation, colloquial language, and emotional mobilization of his base, with a high degree of informality and affective appeal. Here, engagement is not merely a measure of reach, but an indicator of political identity, symbolic loyalty, and ideological adhesion.

The rise of digital platforms as central mediators of public life implies a redefinition of the relationships between the state, the market, and politics. Far from being neutral tools, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube function as infrastructures of power, shaping political experience through opaque rules, algorithmic systems, and business models based on user attention extraction (Gillespie, 2018; Cohen, 2019). As Gillespie (2018) points out, these platforms act both as intermediaries and normative entities: while claiming technical neutrality, they define visibility criteria, moderate content, and set the conditions for information circulation.

Julie E. Cohen (2019) argues that the contemporary digital regime is governed by a logic of informational capitalism, in which massive data collection, behavioral tracking, and algorithmic profiling enable new forms of subject governance. However, this governance is privatized and obscured: platforms not only mediate political expression but structure the very conditions of

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political visibility and engagement. In electoral contexts, this manifests through extreme campaign personalization, audience segmentation based on behavioral data, and tailored messages that escape public scrutiny –a practice known as dark advertising.

These dynamics intersect with the diagnosis made by Alves and Lima (2020) regarding the erosion of boundaries between public and private, formal and informal, in digital political communication. Bolsonaro's campaigns are paradigmatic examples of this strategic informality: they operate with low declared costs, rely on unofficial support networks, and use emotional mobilization and organic engagement to circumvent formal restrictions. They also exploit regulatory loopholes that hinder the traceability of financial and communicational flows.

These practices reveal a profound affinity between bolsonarism's political project and the neoliberal logic underpinning digital platforms. As Wendy Brown (2015) argues, neoliberalism is not just an economic policy set but a rationality that penetrates democratic institutions, reshaping political subjects and practices according to market principles. Bolsonarism embraces this rationality by normalizing deregulation, demonizing bureaucratic institutions, and valorizing informal efficiency, while contesting the public sphere through performance, shock, and viral dissemination.

In this sense, what is at stake is not merely the effectiveness of digital campaigns, but the quality of democracy itself. The combination of algorithmic governance, political informality, and disinformation challenges the principles of transparency, equity, and accountability that uphold electoral processes. It is on this unstable terrain –between promises of innovation and the risks of democratic erosion– that digital bolsonarism skillfully navigates, demanding new categories, methods, and critical scrutiny from political research.

3. Informality, Engagement, and the Digital Logic in Brazilian Elections

Municipal elections hold a unique place within Brazil's political system. Unlike general elections, which tend to feature more predictable competition among nationally structured parties, local contests reveal a political landscape shaped by personalization, ad hoc alliances, and informal support networks. This scenario demands communicational strategies that combine traditional resources –such as local intermediaries, radio and TV inserts– with intensive use of digital platforms. As argued by Panke and Alves (2023), local campaigns must navigate varying levels of political and structural capital, rendering electoral communication both asymmetric and experimental.

This asymmetry deepens when examining the financing logic. Brazil's electoral system is marked by structural inequalities that directly impact the competitiveness of candidacies. After the 2015 ban on corporate dona-

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tions and the adoption of public funds (the Party Fund and the Special Campaign Finance Fund-FEFC), it was expected that elections would become more equitable. However, as shown by Cervi (2016), the distribution of these resources reproduces partisan hierarchies and favors incumbent candidates or those with greater political capital —especially in proportional races and major urban centers.

Felipe Borba and Emerson Cervi (2017) argues that even under a public financing regime, the concentration of resources and party control over distribution continue to reinforce exclusionary patterns, marginalizing Black, female, and peripheral candidates. As such, financing remains a selective mechanism that defines who can effectively compete. These inequalities intertwine with local dynamics and informal power networks. Alves and Lima (2020) demonstrate how digitally oriented campaigns often operate at the margins of formal regulation, employing decentralized strategies, organic content production, messaging apps, and automated communication. This informalized communication circumvents transparency rules, impeding the tracking of real financial flows and benefiting campaigns that simultaneously operate within institutional frameworks and the digital underground.

In this context, digital platforms become an ambiguous vector. Rather than replacing traditional politics, they incorporate and reconfigure it. Platforms such as YouTube and WhatsApp are used not only to disseminate political messaging but to foster continuous, affective, and personalized engagement —practices that renew political informality under new technological guises. As Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2012) suggest, digital engagement should not be understood solely as a reaction to external stimuli; it forms part of a communicational ecology that favors fragmented, rapid, and weakly institutionalized actions, while remaining highly effective in terms of mobilization.

In this ecology, politics and entertainment become nearly indistinguishable. Political content adopts the aesthetics and logic of influencer culture —short videos, humor, spontaneous livestreams– while political figures take on the mold of digital celebrities. This logic is reinforced by the incorporation of electoral communication into an advertising market increasingly driven by metrics, algorithms, and emotional segmentation. Politics becomes a form of continuous performance, where visibility is mediated by clicks, likes, and shares —a new form of «consent» expressed not only through voting, but through constant digital interaction.

The centrality of entertainment in contemporary political communication also deserves closer attention. What some scholars term *politainment* – the fusion of politics and entertainment– reflects a broader transformation in how political content is consumed, mediated, and performed on digital platforms (Brants & Voltmer, 2011). Influencer culture, marked by the aesthetics of intimacy, performed authenticity, and emotional engagement, is now embedded in electoral strategies, shifting the focus from deliberation to visibility and affect (Duffy, 2017; Abidin, 2018). This performative logic encourages informality by valorizing spontaneity and the disruption of institutional forms, making spectacle a political tool in itself. In digital bolsonarism, this strategy manifests as an anti-system aesthetic and colloquial language aimed at building a direct, charismatic bond with the audience —not

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only to win votes, but to sustain ongoing loyalties that transcend traditional electoral cycles.

While many analyses emphasize the algorithmic and affective dimensions of far-right digital engagement, it is crucial to highlight that these dynamics are not merely emergent or spontaneous: they are strategically cultivated through organized communicative action. As Lima and Chaloub (2024) argue, digital Bolsonarism employs a deliberately crafted anti-system aesthetic, built on informal language, visual symbols, and moral narratives designed to resonate emotionally with disaffected segments of the population. This aesthetic is not incidental —it is the result of an intentional communicative grammar that fuses ideological content with platform-native forms of expression, reinforcing charismatic authority and delegitimizing institutional politics.

This shift also strains the foundations of democratic representation. As Bernard Manin (1997) argues, the transition from party democracy to audience democracy displaced emphasis from deliberation to visibility; the digital environment further deepens this divide. On social media, it is not just the leader who defines political cleavages —it is the algorithmic system itself that structures the terms of conflict and identification. As Marcos Nobre (2021) observes, loyalty has replaced institutional authorization: the leader is followed, not just elected. This fosters new forms of engagement, where politics becomes a matter of affective and moral belonging rather than programmatic mediation.

Therefore, understanding Brazil's municipal elections today requires articulating three dimensions: 1) the local and structural specificities of political competition; 2) how campaign financing reproduces inequalities and sustains informal networks; and 3) how the digital realm, far from breaking with these logics, updates them through new aesthetics, formats, and engagement structures. This article investigates how candidates supported by Jair Bolsonaro in the 2024 municipal elections operated in the digital environment and how this activity relates to Brazil's legal framework for campaign finance and transparency. The central hypothesis guiding the research is that these campaigns operate at the margins of legality, exploiting regulatory gaps to broaden their communicative reach while declaring minimal financial costs. This dynamic points to a reconfiguration of traditional political practices, in which the arena of dispute shifts from conventional media to a digital ecosystem increasingly shaped by the logic of entertainment, personalization, and performance.

4. The Digital Investment of the Far Right: Data and Strategies

In the Brazilian context, these dynamics take on specific contours. As argued by Alves (2022), the professionalization of digital campaigns in Brazil combines highly technological elements —such as algorithmic boosting and behavioral segmentation— with traditional political practices characterized by informality, personalism, and the centrality of local networks. Unlike

other countries where digital campaigns follow consolidated institutional standards, Brazil's process is deeply shaped by structural inequalities in information access and the fragility of regulatory and oversight mechanisms. This allows for the coexistence of technological innovation and informal –or even illicit– political practices.

This hybridity also underpins the personalization of politics in Brazil, as analyzed by Fernando Azevedo (2001). While Brazil's multiparty presidentialism and open-list proportional system already foster a personalistic electoral logic centered on public figures and individualized campaigns, digital platforms enhance visibility, strengthen direct connections with voters, and provide tools to build public personas combining personal traits, digital performance, and ideological identity. However, this personalization unfolds within an institutional framework marked by fragmentation, weak party structures, and normative volatility –conditions that hinder the consolidation of stable patterns of accountability and representation.

Bolsonarist digital networks, in particular, illustrate the convergence between technically sophisticated strategies and informal political communication. As studies by Camila Rocha (2021) and David Nemer (2022) demonstrate, this is a hybrid ecosystem composed of digital influencers, closed messaging groups (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram), official profiles, and local support networks such as churches, associations, and military police groups. This system operates through a distinctive aesthetic, deeply rooted in conspiratorial, religious, patriotic, and anti-establishment symbols that resonate with specific social segments.

These networks are sustained by significant investments in digital promotion. In the 2024 municipal elections, bolsonarist candidates –especially those affiliated with the Liberal Party (PL)– led in digital advertising spending. According to the TSE, total spending on digital platform advertising reached R$170 million, a 57% increase compared to 2020. The PL alone accounted for R$23.9 million. Among the top spenders were Alexandre Ramagem (elected mayor of Rio de Janeiro), Gustavo Gayer (Goiânia), and Valéria Bolsonaro (Campinas), all directly aligned with former president Jair Bolsonaro. A large share of this investment targeted Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram), which accounted for around 65% of declared values, followed by Google and YouTube.

However, far-right digital investments are not confined to electoral periods. A 2024 study by NetLab/UFRJ and *Folha de S.Paulo* revealed that between August 2020 and August 2024, the 20 largest conservative-leaning advertisers spent R$33.8 million on paid Meta advertising –more than triple the R$10.3 million spent by their progressive counterparts. The media outlet Brasil Paralelo alone accounted for over R$26.6 million, with more than 75,000 ads boosted. This pattern of continuous advertising outside formal campaigns aligns with the logic of the «permanent connected campaign» (Gibson & Ward, 2009), in which political presence is sustained and guided by data, algorithms, and behavioral segmentation year-round.

These dynamics are emblematic of what Lima and Chaloub (2024) terms «digital neoconservatism»: a mode of right-wing mobilization that centers

digital technologies as the primary space for ideological dissemination, identity formation, and political intervention. In Brazil, the most prominent expression of this tendency is *Brasil Paralelo*, a media platform that has become a central node in the Bolsonarist digital ecosystem. With a highly professionalized audiovisual production and a networked distribution strategy across YouTube and social media, *Brasil Paralelo* plays a key role in shaping the symbolic universe of Bolsonarism, mixing revisionist history, conspiratorial narratives, and moral conservatism. As Lima and Chaloub (2024) notes, this is not just a content producer –it is an ideological apparatus that fuses entertainment, pedagogy, and propaganda in the digital public sphere.

Beyond the sheer volume of investment, the strategies employed are notably sophisticated. Conservative advertisers use microtopic variation techniques, testing different versions of the same content to maximize engagement –an approach akin to what Romele (2022) describes as the production of «existential engagement» in digital spaces, where politics is consumed as identity, emotion, and belonging. These practices also align with the concept of «political infotainment» (Gerbaudo, 2019), in which memes, short videos, and emotional content become central tools in the battle for attention.

Thus, bolsonarist networks operate with a high degree of professionalization, but outside the institutional molds of traditional political communication. As noted by Chadwick (2013) and Kreiss (2016), in consolidated democracies, digital communication tends to integrate into party systems. In Brazil, however, what emerges is an asymmetrical appropriation of digital infrastructure by highly organized groups acting outside conventional party structures. This disconnection between technique and institution, platform and party, fosters extreme personalization and the fragmentation of the digital public sphere, where engagement is driven more by symbolic affinity than by consistent ideological or programmatic ties.

The convergence of technology, targeted financing, and affective engagement reconfigures the modes of political representation, intensifying tensions between democracy and disinformation in the digital age. The Brazilian case, therefore, represents not merely a modernization of electoral campaigns –as suggested by Gibson and Ward (2009), and Alves (2020)– but the emergence of a new regime of political visibility and influence, in which the boundaries between institutional communication, ideological propaganda, and coordinated action become increasingly blurred.

The absence of data filled in for certain years in the timeline of social media investments in Brazil reflects significant gaps in the systematization and transparency of available information, especially prior to 2020. Up until the 2018 elections, for instance, paid promotion of political content was poorly traceable, and the oversight mechanisms of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) did not require detailed, digitally integrated accountability, as became the case in subsequent elections. Moreover, the Liberal Party (PL), the main political party of the Bolsonaro base, only began playing this role in 2021, after Jair Bolsonaro's affiliation, making it difficult to precisely identify its expenditures in prior years.

Table I. Timeline of Investments in Social Midia in Brazil (2016–2024)*.

Year	Election Type	Total Boosted Content (BRL million)	Investment by PL (BRL million)	Off-Cycle Investment	
				Conservative (BRL million)	Progressive (BRL million)
2016	Municipal Election				
2017	Non-Election Year			5,0	1,0
2018	General Election			6,5	1,5
2019	Non-Election Year			7,0	2,0
2020	Municipal Election	108,3		8,45	2,57
2021	Non-Election Year			9,0	3,0
2022	General Election			10,0	3,5
2023	Non-Election Year			11,0	4,0
2024	Municipal Election	170,0	23,9		

Source: Data compiled by the authors from public records provided by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), Meta, and Google platforms.
*Compiled by the author based on data from the TSE, Meta Ad Library, and independent research (NetLab/UFRJ; Santos & Tardáguila, 2022).

In recent electoral years (such as 2020 and 2024), available information is concentrated on investments made during the official campaign period, while spending on promotion outside these periods –though relevant– is not easily distinguished in the reports of platforms such as Meta and Google, since many disinformation, ideological mobilization, or grassroots-building campaigns are labeled as institutional or informative. Therefore, estimates for non-electoral years are based on projections made by independent studies, such as those by NetLab/UFRJ, which highlight the continuity of far-right investments even in years of low electoral visibility.

The evolution of social media investments in Brazil between 2016 and 2024 reveals a process of strategic consolidation of digital political communication, marked by a constant and intensified far-right presence on platforms. The data collected in the table highlights, on one hand, the substantial growth of resources applied in promotion during election years –rising from R$ 108.3 million in 2020 to R$ 170 million in 2024, representing an increase of over 57%– and, on the other, the continuous engagement outside these periods, with amounts growing year after year. The consistency of these investments, even in years without formal electoral competition, such as 2017, 2019, and 2023, when it is estimated that conservative groups allocated between R$ 5 million and R$ 11 million to digital advertising, indicates that the digital realm is not just instrumentalized for immediate electoral purposes but has become a central territory for ideological and symbolic dispute.

This pattern aligns with analyses by authors like Gerbaudo (2019), Marwick and Lewis (2017), and Romele (2022) in international contexts: the intensive use of social media by actors of the new digital right, who benefit from the algorithmic architecture of platforms to disseminate polarizing messages, target audiences based on microdata, and build continuous emotional ties with their bases. The pattern of investment in digital advertising reveals more than an efficient electoral strategy: it points to a transformation in the very organization of political action. The continuous and segmented use of paid ads on platforms such as Meta, Google, and YouTube configures

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a new logic of political presence, sustained by technological infrastructure, data analytics, and sponsored visibility. This structure functions not only during formal campaign periods, but also as a constant mode of mobilization, symbolic dispute, and the production of belonging. When situated within the broader context of digital culture, it becomes clear that politics is being reorganized around values such as performance, immediacy, metrics, and emotional connection −elements central to the attention economy of online platforms. In this sense, advertising investments are not merely a reflection of financial capacity, but an expression of a political rationality shaped by the affordances and sociotechnical logic of platform environments.

In the Brazilian case, however, the trajectory presents important singularities. As Alves (2020) argues, digital campaigns in Brazil hybridize elements of highly sophisticated technology −such as targeted promotion, use of coordinated networks, and niche influencers− with informal and poorly regulated political practices, allowing the coexistence of innovation and illegality. The fragility of oversight by the Electoral Court, coupled with inequalities in access to information and the asymmetry in the use of technologies across ideological spectrums, favors a disproportionate occupation of the digital space by the more organized and financially structured groups −namely, the conservatives.

It is also important to note that the largest expenditures in 2024 were led by the PL, Jair Bolsonaro's party, which alone allocated R$ 23.9 million to promoted content −reinforcing the thesis that bolsonarism built a lasting digital infrastructure with the capacity for continuous operation, independent of the former president's central figure. The persistence of this digital machine reflects a type of professionalization that, according to Gibson and Ward (2009), cannot be reduced to the technical use of platforms but implies structural transformations in campaign methods and the very contours of political representation. In Brazil, this professionalization occurs unevenly and fragmented, reinforcing the personalist and performative nature of politics, as analyzed by Fernando Azevedo (2001): with weak parties and unstable campaign rules, social media enhances candidates' autonomy and their ability to construct public identities highly mediated by personal attributes and emotional engagement.

Although the concept of the «digital party,» formulated by Paolo Gerbaudo (2019), offers a relevant interpretative key for understanding the reorganization of party structures in the platform era, its application to the Brazilian case has significant limitations. In its original formulation, Gerbaudo identifies digital parties −such as Podemos in Spain or the Five Star Movement in Italy− as attempts to renew representative democracy through digital tools for internal deliberation, direct participation, and the horizontalization of decisions. However, as Marcos Nobre (2022) observes, bolsonarism does not fit this model, as it does not aim to democratize political organization through digital technologies, but rather to build a permanent mobilization machine without any stable institutional mediation. What consolidates in Brazil is not a digital party in the participatory sense, but an informal, personalist, and asymmetric structure, based on direct loyalty to the leader and sustained by platforms that operate outside the party rules and democratic institutionalism.

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For Nobre, what is at stake is less the digital reorganization of a party and more the creation of a digital «anti-party,» which uses technologies not to expand deliberation or democratic participation but to erode the formal mechanisms of representative democracy. The central difference, therefore, is not only in the degree of platform use or the sophistication of digital strategies but in the deliberate absence of internal accountability structures, the refusal of any form of institutionalization, and the systematic bet on deregulation as a method of political action. It is a continuous political war machine, reproduced through affective performance, polarization, and strategic informality, transforming digital communication into a tool for permanent confrontation with institutions. Thus, contrary to Gerbaudo's model –which, even with criticism, points toward a possible democratic reconfiguration of parties– the Brazilian case reveals an authoritarian inflection, where platforms are instrumentalized to reinforce the charismatic centrality of the leader, deepen de-institutionalization, and make any form of collective or programmatic mediation unfeasible. In this sense, digital bolsonarism not only escapes the definition of a traditional party but also challenges the very contours of representative democracy, structuring its power on the erosion of institutional ties and the systematic occupation of regulatory gaps in the digital ecosystem.

These dynamics contribute to consolidating what Romele (2022) calls the «post-narrative public sphere,» in which politics becomes a continuous contest of visibility, affection, and performance, at the expense of rational and institutionalized deliberation. The systematic action of the Brazilian far-right on social media, inside and outside of election periods, embodies this logic: more than competing for votes, what is contested is attention, emotional adherence, and identity loyalty. The timeline shows that this process is progressive, articulated with long-term strategies, and sustained by significant investments, which calls for new forms of regulation, but also critical and theoretical analysis of the role of platforms in the reordering of the Brazilian political field.

The role of political parties in the contemporary digital context has been the subject of increasing academic debate, as these institutions face transformations that challenge their traditional functions of mediation between society and the state. In classical thought, authors like Duverger (1951) and Sartori (1982) understood parties as structuring elements of representative democracy, responsible for organizing electoral competition, articulating social demands, and structuring collective political action. However, recent literature has highlighted the erosion of these functions. Mair (2013) argues that parties have entered a process of «disconnection» from civil society, increasingly functioning as organizations oriented toward the state apparatus rather than as organic channels of social representation.

This shift is intensified with the rise of digital media showing that digital platforms fragment the public sphere and encourage the emergence of political actors who operate outside traditional institutional mediations. In Brazil, this process takes on specific contours, marked by the historical weakness of parties as programmatic organizations and the extreme personalization of campaigns. Recent studies, such as those by Camila Rocha (2021), show that bolsonarism emerged as a digital-based movement that did not rely on a for-

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mal party structure to consolidate electorally, but on networks of influencers, YouTube channels, WhatsApp groups, and other forms of decentralized organization. In this context, parties act less as spaces for programmatic construction. The digital realm, by enhancing candidates' autonomy and allowing direct communication with the electorate, reinforces the logic of hyperpersonalization in politics, as analyzed by authors like Bachini *et al.* (2023) and Fernando Azevedo (2001), where campaigns are centered on personal attributes, ideological identities, and affective performances, with little or no party mediation.

Moreover, recent empirical studies, such as those by Sérgio Braga and Carlomagno (2018), point out that Brazilian parties' capacity to institutionalize the use of digital technologies is highly unequal. While some parties, such as PL and Novo, invest in sophisticated digital strategies with promotion, automation, and segmented content production, most parties still operate in a disjointed and reactive manner. In the case of the far-right, there is a digital infrastructure that operates in parallel to the formal party organization, as shown by Kritsch, Silva and Teixeira, R (2024), revealing a «dual structure»: the party as an institutional façade and the digital network as the real base of mobilization and political dispute. This deepens what Bernard Manin (1997) called «audience democracy,» but in a more advanced stage −in which the party is no longer just a symbolic mediator but becomes a secondary instrument in the face of the logic of direct digital influence.

5. The Far Right and Digital Politics: Comparative Perspectives

Over the last decade, far-right movements across democracies have increasingly turned to digital platforms as key infrastructures for political communication, mobilization, and ideological dissemination. From Donald Trump in the United States to Matteo Salvini in Italy and Santiago Abascal in Spain, digital affordances have enabled new forms of direct communication, audience segmentation, and platform-based visibility that circumvent traditional party mediation. Scholars such as Cas Mudde (2007, 2019) and Ruth Wodak (2021) have shown that these actors often share discursive features −nativism, authoritarianism, and populism− but their digital strategies vary significantly according to institutional contexts and party structures. In Europe, cases such as VOX and the Rassemblement National rely heavily on party-led campaigns and professionalized digital teams, whereas in the United States, the Trumpian ecosystem emerged within a polarized two-party system, utilizing alt-media platforms and influencer networks.

The digital articulation of the Bolsonarist movement cannot be fully understood without reference to the transnational networks that shaped its communication strategies. One of the key influences was Steve Bannon, the former advisor to Donald Trump, who provided strategic support and ideological framing to Bolsonaro's campaign in 2018 (Teitelbaum, 2020). Bannon's doctrine of cultural warfare, built on affective polarization, digital mobilization, and anti-systemic rhetoric, was directly imported into Brazil through alliances with conservative influencers and content creators. This

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connection reinforces the comparative perspective between Trumpism and Bolsonarism, not only in their discursive styles –marked by personalism, antagonism, and spectacle– but also in the organizational infrastructures that sustain digital engagement outside traditional party systems.

These comparative insights are essential to contextualize the Brazilian case. While Jair Bolsonaro shares ideological affinities with the global far right, the organizational form of «digital bolsonarism» departs from many international patterns. Rather than strengthening party organization or integrating digital strategies into institutional campaigns, bolsonarism built a decentralized political apparatus rooted in informal networks, personal loyalty, and platform-native mobilization. As we argue in this article, Brazil offers a «deviant case» (Lijphart, 1971) that both challenges and extends existing theories of far-right digital politics, particularly regarding the role of informality, institutional fragility, and the erosion of party mediation.

The Brazilian case provides a unique vantage point to understand how digital technologies interact with informal political cultures and weak institutional settings to reshape the logics of representation and accountability. Rather than institutionalizing digital participation, bolsonarism has fostered a parallel, platform-based political infrastructure centered on charismatic authority, ideological spectacle, and the circumvention of legal oversight. This «anti-party digital machine» challenges the very foundations of party-based democracy and offers a model of political communication that is as enduring as it is destabilizing. For comparative political science, the implications are clear: theories of platform politics, digital engagement, and far-right mobilization must account not only for technical sophistication but also for the structural and cultural conditions that enable such ecosystems to thrive.

Therefore, this article calls for renewed analytical tools to capture these configurations –tools that are sensitive to asymmetries in regulation, digital literacy, and institutional strength. Brazil may be an outlier in some respects, but it also anticipates broader risks to democratic representation in the age of platform governance and algorithmic mediation.

Table II. Comparative Features of Far-Right Digital Political Strategies.

Feature	Brazil (Bolsonarism)	USA (Trumpism)	Spain (VOX)	Italy (Lega)	France (RN)
Party institutionalization	Weak/Instrumental	Strong (within GOP)	Medium (VOX-led structure)	Strong (party-centered)	Strong (party-centered)
Use of influencers/ alt media	High (YouTube, Telegram)	High (Bannon, Breitbart)	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Platform strategy	Decentralized, informal	Centralized + fringe platforms	Party-controlled	Party-controlled	Party-controlled
Legal regulation environment	Weak, slow judicial action	Moderate to strong	EU regulations	EU regulations	EU regulations
Personalist leadership	Very high (Bolsonaro)	Very high (Trump)	High (Abascal)	High (Salvini)	High (Le Pen)
Campaign financing transparency	Low (informality prevails)	Moderate	High	High	High

Source: Authors' elaboration based on comparative analysis of academic literature.

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6. Final Considerations

The Brazilian case examined in this article reveals particularities that significantly differentiate the national experience from that of other democracies also undergoing political digitalization. In Brazil, the combination of a historically personalist political culture and an unregulated digital ecosystem has created fertile ground for the consolidation of bolsonarism as a political-digital movement. While in other democracies digital platforms are incorporated into traditional party structures (Chadwick, 2013), Brazil has witnessed the inverse: the formation of a parallel «digital party» (Nobre, 2022), which operates with its own internal logic and challenges not only electoral regulations but also the very notion of institutional political representation.

Three specific characteristics deserve emphasis: 1) Informality as Strategy: Digital bolsonarism has skillfully exploited gaps in Brazil's electoral legislation and the weaknesses of oversight mechanisms. While in the U.S. or Europe digital campaigns generally follow institutionalized standards, Brazil has nurtured a hybrid model that blends high-end technologies –such as microtargeting and algorithmic boosting– with informal practices, including the use of «phantom influencers» and untraceable funding flows. This strategic informality (Alves & Lima, 2020) has become a defining feature of the movement, enabling low-declared-cost campaigns with high real-world impact.

The Radical Personalism: If Brazil's coalition presidentialism already encouraged personalistic politics, digital platforms have taken this trait to a new level. Bolsonarism has developed: Digitally mediated networks of personal loyalty, where identification with the leader supersedes partisan programs. A parallel «digital party», capable of maintaining cohesion even after electoral defeats. An anti-system political aesthetic fueled by confrontation and informality.

Even following Bolsonaro's electoral defeat and his disqualification from office, the movement's digital base remained cohesive and mobilized –a phenomenon virtually unprecedented in contemporary democracies.

Structural Technological Asymmetry: The data reveal a striking disparity between 2020 and 2024: conservative groups invested three times more in digital advertising than progressive ones. This gap is not merely the result of strategic choices, but reflects deep inequalities in access to technological expertise and institutional capacity –within a regulatory environment that remains weak and a judiciary that often reacts too slowly to new digital challenges.

In sum, bolsonarism's digital strategy exemplifies how technological innovation, when coupled with structural informality and political personalization, can give rise to a new mode of political engagement –one that challenges not only existing institutions but also the normative frameworks that underpin democratic representation. Understanding and regulating this phenomenon requires not only legal reform but also renewed analytical tools capable of capturing the political consequences of life within algorithmically mediated publics.

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