

Polarized democracies: unveiling distinct perspectives on the concept of Democracy in Brazilian social media political conversations

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Abstract

This study investigates how different concepts of democracy emerge from social media conversations and how these definitions may be influenced by polarization, opinion leaders, and discursive strategies adopted. Our goal is to unveil the dynamics of polarization and discursive strategies in legitimizing these contrasting viewpoints. For this, it presents research on Twitter (now X) conversations about democracy, based on a case study of the event called "Letter for Democracy" in Brazil. Analyzing a corpus of 545,940 tweets, we use social network analysis and connected concept analysis to investigate the polarization around the concept of democracy and its associated discourses. Our findings show distinct understandings of democracy, results of a highly polarized structure and different discursive strategies such as political polarization, populist rhetoric, and the use of disinformation. These findings contribute to the literature as they underscore the importance of understanding threats to democracy amidst a digital polarized environment.

Keywords: democracy; polarization; Twitter; Brazil.

Democracias polarizadas: desvendando perspectivas distintas sobre o conceito de Democracia nas conversas políticas nas redes sociais brasileiras

Resumo

Este estudo investiga como diferentes conceitos de democracia emergem das conversas nas redes sociais e como essas definições podem ser influenciadas pela polarização, pelos líderes de opinião e pelas estratégias discursivas adotadas. Nosso objetivo é desvendar a dinâmica da polarização e as estratégias discursivas na legitimação desses pontos de vista contrastantes. Para isso, apresenta pesquisa sobre conversações no Twitter (agora X) sobre democracia, a partir de um estudo de caso do evento denominado "Carta pela Democracia" no Brasil. Analisando um corpus de 545.940 tweets, utiliza-se a análise de redes sociais e análise de conceitos conectados para investigar a polarização em torno do conceito de democracia e seus discursos associados. Os resultados mostram compreensões distintas da democracia, decorrentes de uma estrutura altamente polarizada e diferentes estratégias discursivas, como a polarização política, a retórica populista e o uso da desinformação. Estas descobertas contribuem para a literatura, pois sublinham a importância de compreender as ameaças à democracia num ambiente digital polarizado.

Palavras-chave: democracia; polarização; Twitter; Brasil.

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1. Introduction

In the political context, language and discourse serve as potent instruments used for shaping social perceptions and distributing power (Foucault, 1971; Fairclough, 2015). As posited by Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 55), "language is capable not only of constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of 'bringing back' these symbols and representing them as objectively real elements in everyday life". Through language and discourse, power relations and structures emerge, legitimizing ideologies and influencing societal dynamics—a central key to comprehending political struggles. Thus, a polarized environment and the discursive strategies used by opinion leaders can distort and legitimize the meaning of precious concepts to the modern world, such as democracy.

The idea of democracy has been discussed by several authors, and there is little agreement to it (Landman, 2007). Democracy, as defined by the Cambridge online dictionary, is "the belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves". However, authors often argue there are several meanings to the idea. Beckman (2021), for example, argues that there are four essential meanings to the concept: a set of political institutions; an ideal of collective self-rule; a normative principle of either legitimacy or justice; or an egalitarian attitude. In common, democracy refers to collective participation in decisions by the people that will be affected by it and thus, democratic systems are constituted over variations on these ideals. Typically, democracy is also associated with its processes or procedures, such as free and fair elections and the institutions that are connected to this process (Dahl, 1972). Our main goal in this paper, however, is not to debate the theoretical concept of democracy, but to debate how social media political polarization helps create and legitimize different views (and sometimes, opposite ones) on what constitutes democracy. Doing research on the perception of democracy, Dalton et al. (2007) explain that even people from these democracies are capable of defining its key points in words, and that understanding the idea is fundamental for its support.

However, recently, studies about social media platforms' effects on how people perceive democracy have grown. While there may be good effects, there can also be bad ones, such as destructive polarization (Esau et al., 2024). These platforms' algorithms, for example, seem to often increase affective polarization and exacerbate emotions, creating spaces where anti-democratic discourses may emerge and contaminate the public sphere (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018), particularly, by far right activists (Soares et al., 2021). In this context, our research focuses on a particular case study in Brazil. We aim to, through this research, be able to discuss the discursive strategies that emerge from the appropriation of these platforms by political groups in polarized events, creating even the conditions to anti-democratic discourses to be legitimated as "democracy".

We will further describe our study and methods based on a case study: the "letter for democracy". The letter was a document which emerged as a social and institutional response to the escalating threats against democratic principles, notably by former Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, and his political supporters. During the backdrop of the 2022 election campaign, the letter gained prominence as a symbolic instrument to safeguard democratic values and institutions.

This research undertakes a three-steps investigation. Firstly, we explore the structure of the debate, aiming to understand its organization and dynamics. Secondly, we identify the various types of actors who play influential roles in shaping the debate. And thirdly, we conduct a detailed analysis of the discursive strategies employed within these conversations, focusing on how participants articulate and frame their perspectives on democracy.

2. Theoretical background

To start the discussion, we need to explore the context, which is how social media platforms enable polarization. Thus, in this section, we delve into the theoretical underpinnings of affective and ideological polarization, highlighting their main characteristics and potential threats to democratic values and norms. We also explore scholarly contributions on polarization and social media platforms. Subsequently, we examine how polarization intersects with discursive strategies employed by political actors to shape public opinion and reinforce ideological divides on core concepts, such as democracy. We highlight the use of "us versus them" strategy, populist rhetoric and use of disinformation as the main discursive strategies.

To begin this discussion, we revisit the contributions on polarization. Esteban and Ray (1994) elaborate on the theorization of polarization and posit that every society can be thought of as an amalgamation of groups. Individuals from the same group tend to be very similar, whereas those from different groups tend to possess very different attributes. According to the authors, the polarization of a distribution of individuals must exhibit certain features: there must be a high degree of homogeneity within each group, a high degree of heterogeneity across groups, and a small number of significantly sized groups. This implies that groups of insignificant sizes carry little weight.

Political polarization can be categorized into two types (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021): affective polarization which is related to the sentiment and overall feeling of affinity towards political associates and antipathy towards opponents, and ideological polarization, which pertains to the divergence of political opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of adversaries. Therefore, polarization can be understood as a two-level structure formed by two different groups comprising similar individuals (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2020). As argued by Esteban and Ray (1994), there is expected to exist some level of inter-group heterogeneity as well as some level of intra-group homogeneity.

Arbatli and Rosenberg (2020) argue that ideological political polarization could erode democracy because the government can use the intimidation of opposition to foster animosity, making anti-democratic and anti-republican measures against the opposing side acceptable to its supporters. For example, a general feeling of animosity and antagonism could lead people to accept attacks on democratic institutions, interventions in elections, and offenses against the press — phenomena that have been observed recently in Brazil.

Finally, Somer et al. (2021) suggest that episodes of polarization can be instigated by political actors who choose polarization to achieve their objectives. In these cases, political actors may instigate and further stimulate polarization to obtain political objectives, such as increasing political capital, winning elections, and retaining power. This was evident, for example, in the discourses of Trump and Bolsonaro about the Covid-19 outbreak, as demonstrated by Kakisina et al. (2022).

Studies on polarization on social media have indicated that these platforms tend to reproduce online social characteristics, including ideological and affective political polarization. Polarization in Twitter's public arena mirrors that found in society, where individuals tend to follow, reply to, and retweet people who share similar views while ignoring or criticizing those with differing views, thereby creating distinct groups based on different topics (Conover et al., 2011; Gruzd and Roy, 2014). Therefore, Twitter provides a conducive environment for polarization, whether by user choice or by algorithms that prioritize content aligning with users' views rather than challenging them (Pariser, 2012).

Scholarly has shown that political networks of tweets tend to differ based on whether they are retweet-based or mention/reply-based (Conover et al., 2011). Consequently, people tend to retweet individuals they consider similar or close to them, thereby endorsing and reinforcing intra-cluster homogeneity. However, they may also engage in conversations with people holding different political views.

Thus, polarization is likely to be more explicit in retweet networks than in reply networks (Conover et al., 2011). For this reason, we chose to analyze the retweet-based network, as explained in the Materials and Methods section.

People tend to cluster around political views on Twitter, as they are more likely to tweet to another political supporter of the same party than to supporters of other parties (Gruzd and Roy, 2014). Open cross-party interactions, especially among leftist party supporters, have also been observed (Gruzd and Roy, 2014). Therefore, while Twitter facilitates communicative spaces, it also exacerbates political polarization, particularly on contentious topics (Borah and Singh, 2022).

In Brazil, Soares et al. (2019) analyzed the role played by the media in the polarized context of the 2018 elections. They found that the "anti-Bolsonaro" group had a more heterogeneous media diet, whereas the "pro-Bolsonaro" group consumed more news from partisan media outlets. Therefore, they argued, based on Benkler et al. (2018), that there is an asymmetric polarization regarding media consumption between the two groups. This means that while one group read and spread news from different media outlets, which means a more eclectic and diverse range of facts and opinions, the group aligned to the far-right tends to consume only news coming from partisan outlets they know tend to publish news aligned with their views and expectations. This asymmetric polarization regarding media consumption contributes to intra-cluster homogeneity and inter-cluster heterogeneity, thereby enhancing polarization.

Furthermore, in the Brazilian political context, former president Jair Bolsonaro learned to use social media to engage and influence public opinion, particularly his supporters (Cesarino, 2020). Chagas et al. (2022) analyzed how the far-right movement supports the government on social media, engaging in specific hashtags during critical periods to create a counter-narrative or draw attention away from the government.

Although many of the recent works consider the existence of "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2001) and "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2012) we tend to agree with Bruns (2021) that more important than these concepts is to discuss the polarization affecting social reality and the public's perceptions. Therefore, we focus this analysis not specifically on the existence or absence of chambers/bubbles but on the dynamics of the polarization itself and how it can be observed through language and discourse and how different actors and discursive strategies may influence these conversations.

Despite the structural aspect of polarization, it often emerges as a consequence of discursive manipulation, wherein political actors strategically employ rhetoric to exacerbate ideological divisions and cultivate support among their constituencies (van Dijk, 2006; Kakisina et al., 2022). This means, polarization exists, but it can also be enhanced by political actors through language and discourse.

One of the most used discursive strategies to foster polarization is the "us versus them" antagonism, marked by positive self-representation versus negative other-representation (Masroor et al., 2019). This involves using moral values to create a sense of proximity while denigrating the opposition, thereby reinforcing affective polarization. This strategy can be used to create and reinforce the positive side of a politician or group and to establish a common enemy that the group should fight, once more increasing affective polarization.

Van Dijk (2006) highlights other manipulative discursive strategies that could reinforce polarization, such as macro speech acts implying "our good" versus "their bad" actions, giving many details about "us" while being precise/vague about "them", and selecting positive words for "us" and negative words for "them". Kakisina et al. (2022) showed some of these discursive strategies used by Trump and Bolsonaro in their discourses on Covid-19. According to the authors, fostering ideological polarization, discretizing others, emotionalizing the argument, and emphasizing power, moral superiority, and credibility of the speaker are some of the strategies used by the two politicians in their discourses. These strategies can lead to radicalization and encourage people to question central societal ideas such as democracy.

The discursive strategy of creating an enemy different from "us" is also related to the populist communication style. Populist rhetoric amplifies polarization by framing political discourse in us-versus-them terms and mobilizing support through emotive appeals, contributing to the erosion of democratic norms and influencing public discourse on social media platforms. Emphasizing the sovereignty of the people; advocating for the people; attacking the elite; ostracizing the others; and invoking the heartland are five elements of populism described by Engesser et al. (2017). Populist leaders also tend to strengthen executive powers and demand reverence and submission (Tumber and Waisbord, 2021). However, the rhetoric of right-wing and left-wing populism differs significantly. While right-wing populism is based on racism, xenophobia, and misogyny, left-wing populism tends to use anti-imperialist, social justice, and participatory rhetoric (Waisbord, 2018).

Waisbord (2018) highlights that populism embraces the notion that truth does not exist as a common good, which leads to the consideration of disinformation as a discursive strategy. Disinformation, a tool that can also enhance polarization, is especially used by right-wing populists (Hameleers, 2022). As argued by Hunter (2023, p. 4), "disinformation disseminated by elites can weaken democratic norms and threaten the overall health of democracies because citizens may have less confidence in elections and democratic institutions due to disinformation campaigns". This discursive strategy is already a well documented characteristic of bolsonarist groups (Cesarino, 2020; Azevedo Jr, 2021; Felinto, 2023; Ozawa et al., 2023).

We must also highlight the importance of the role of different actors in the polarization process. Hagen et al. (2022) explain how influential actors can have a key impact on oppositional discourses about vaccines on Twitter. Kushwaha et al. (2022) focus on what they call "polarization actors" to try to explain how different influencers may impact discourse on Twitter. Falkenberg et al. (2022), discussing ideological polarization on Twitter about climate change, show how minority ideological influencers against the theme often receive a disproportionate audience in a polarized environment. These works underline the importance of discussing how different actors appear in polarized discussions and how they can create perceptions and even influence this polarization to unhealthy effects on public discussion, such as radicalization (Benkler et al., 2018).

In summary, this theoretical background demonstrates that social media platforms such as Twitter are a conducive environment to study controversies that may emerge from conversations based on structure, discourse, and the participation of actors. Thanks to users' appropriations, social media can simulate an online public sphere (Habermas, 2022). The discursive strategies adopted by actors, such as "us versus them" antagonism, populist rhetoric, and disinformation, can further enhance existing polarization. Ultimately, this radicalization can have real-life consequences.

Against this backdrop, we aim to investigate how the concept of democracy has been used in conversations on social media during recent events in Brazil. In this paper we selected the specific case of the "letter of democracy", an event that is presented in the next topic.

3. The "Letter for Democracy": a case study

The concept of democracy is fundamental in contemporary politics, encapsulating ideals of equality, the rule of law, freedom and periodic and fair elections. Essentially, democracy involves a system where power is held by the people, either directly or through elected representatives, and features mechanisms for accountability, participation, and safeguarding individual rights. Exploring different interpretations of democracy is vital for evaluating the strength and endurance of democratic institutions, especially amid political polarization and competing narratives.

The "Letter to Brazilians in defence of the Democratic Rule of Law"¹ was part of a non-partisan and multi-ideological movement formed by people who were worried about the health and stability of Brazilian democracy. Edited and published by the Faculty of Law of the University of São Paulo (USP) on August 11, 2022, the letter was shared online and signed by more than one million people from all parts of the country². The document was seen as a commitment to democracy and democratic elections, and it was signed by celebrities, politicians, and other contenders for presidential office from different parties and political orientations, except for Bolsonaro³.

Although the letter does not contain any direct reference to the former President, its text emphasizes the importance of the Constitution and the division of power between the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary. The text also criticizes attacks unaccompanied by evidence questioning the fairness of the electoral process and democratic rule of law.

On August 11, 2022, a public symbolic act of reading the letter was organized at the USP's Law Department building⁴. Although this movement around the letter was not organized by leftist parties and had different interest groups and organizations, the overall sentiment was an anti-Bolsonaro feeling, as he was the main voice against the stability of democracy. Bolsonaro criticized the movement calling it a "little letter" and saying that he did not need to sign it because Brazil already had a letter called "Constitution", which he had never offended or played against⁵.

All these contradictory events and declarations around the concept of democracy were elements that stimulate the design of a research project aimed at understanding the adoption and construction of the concept of democracy in social media conversations. This case study presents a compelling lens through which to examine the adoption and construction of democratic ideals within the Brazilian social and political landscape. By analyzing the discourse surrounding democracy we can glean valuable insights into the contested nature of democracy in Brazil's polarized public sphere. Moreover, the significance of this case study extends beyond its immediate context, shedding light on broader dynamics of democratic governance and the role of digital communication in shaping political discourse.

4. Materials and Methods

To develop our research, we propose a three-step investigation based on Twitter conversations about the Letter for Democracy. We chose Twitter for three reasons. First, its public nature creates an accessible space for debate (Habermas, 2022). Second, social media platforms have become crucial for direct interactions between politicians and society (Habermas, 2022; Waisbord, 2018). Third, Twitter has emerged as a vital tool for political communication in Brazil, particularly after the 2018 elections (Viscardi, 2020; Recuero, 2020; Dourado, 2023).

We collected 545,940 tweets via the Search API using Social Feed Manager (George Washington University Libraries, 2016), focusing on publications containing the word "democracy" in Portuguese over three days: August 10th, 11th, and 12th, 2022. Tweets were collected and stored in real time. Since the public reading of the letter occurred on the 11th, we gathered data from one day before and one day after to gain a comprehensive understanding of network dynamics and discourse. For analysis, we treated retweets and quotes as edges and accounts as nodes, creating datasets of tweets shared each day.

1. <https://direito.usp.br/noticia/c26b69cbbd74-letter-to-brazilians-in-defence-of-the-democratic-rule-of-law>

2. <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/carta-pela-democracia-atinge-um-milhao-de-assinaturas/>

3. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2022/08/letter-for-democracy-in-brazil-gets-trendy-with-athletes-and-artists.shtml>

4. <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/geral/noticia/2022-08/sp-act-democracy-brings-together-intellectuals-businessmen-and-politicians>

5. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2022/07/bolsonaro-says-he-doesnt-need-a-letter-to-defend-democracy.shtml>

In the first step, we utilized Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) and the ForceAtlas2 algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014) to generate networks based on the modularity algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008). Modularity is a metric used to assess the quality of the division of a network into communities or groups (clusters). In social networks, clusters can represent groups of users with common interests. To focus on polarization, we deliberately removed small clusters and isolated actors, retaining only the two largest clusters in each network, as depicted in Figures 1, 4, and 7. We evaluated cluster openness using two metrics: the External-Internal index (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988) and the clustering coefficient mean. The E-I index compares the number of connections between groups with connections within groups. It ranges from -1, when all connections are internal, to 1, where all connections are external. The clustering coefficient measures how connected each node is in relation to its neighbors (Watts and Strogatz, 1998). Thus, the clustering coefficient mean of all nodes in a cluster indicates how closed this cluster is, that means, how close it is to form a clique, where all possible connections are made (Bastos, 2022).

As a second step we calculated the indegree measure in Gephi. This metric measures the number of connections received in a directed network (Degenne and Forse, 1999; Wasserman and Faust, 1994) and can be used to estimate the influence inside the group (Bastos, 2022). In this study, indegree represents the number of retweets and quotes received by a Twitter profile. Using Google Sheets, we ranked the top 100 nodes with the highest indegrees in each cluster and classified them into 11 categories based on profile description, picture, and recent tweets, as shown in Table 1. We deliberately chose 100 nodes with a higher indegree, as we consider a representative sample of actors who play the role of influencers inside the clusters.

Table 1. Categories for most influential actors

Code	Categories	Description	Color
POL	Politician	Who holds/held or run for an elected public mandate.	
POP	Political Party	Parties and local committees.	
POS	Political Supporter	Ordinary people who use Twitter to provide political support.	
MMO	Mainstream Media Outlet	Hegemonic media and big websites.	
	Alternative / Partisan Media		
APM	Outlet	Small and partisan press accounts.	
JOR	Journalist	Works in a MMO or APM.	
CEL	Celebrity	Famous people, such as singers and YouTubers.	
ACT	Activists	Groups or persons with diverse agendas, including politics.	
JUD	Judiciary	Judges and justices from courts.	
SUS	Suspended	Suspended or changed handler. Account not found.	
OTH	Others	Accounts that did not fit the previous categories.	

Source: Own elaboration.

We then replotted the networks, adjusting the colors of the nodes based on Table 1, and scaled the node sizes according to their indegree for enhanced visualization. Consequently, nodes with higher indegrees appeared larger. Figures 2, 5, and 8 depict the networks featuring the 100 most influential actors within each cluster and day.

Lastly, in the third step, we employed connected concept analysis (Lindgren, 2016) to delve deeper into how various concepts were linked with democracy by the two groups. Initially, we filtered tweets from each cluster and day, extracting the co-occurrence network of concepts to further analyze prevalent discourses within each cluster. Concepts were grouped based on shared meanings, and we focused on the 10% most frequent ones, accounting for over 80% of individual frequency within each network. Subsequently, we utilized Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) with the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm to generate word networks showcased in Figures 3, 6, and 9. Larger concepts within these networks represent those with higher frequency and more connections to other concepts, thus indicating their prevalence in discourse. Each group of concepts forms a discourse emerging from daily tweets (Lindgren, 2016), with these connections displaying the most circulated ideas within each group, as elaborated in the following section.

5. Analysis

In this section, we present the results organized by day: 10th (the day before), 11th (the day of the public reading), and 12th (the day after). Upon reviewing a selection of tweets and identifying the most influential actors, we color-coded the graphs to emphasize the polarization observed in the networks. The red/left side denotes conversations supporting the letter, while the blue/right side represents conversations criticizing the letter. We have consistently adhered to this color scheme throughout the text to facilitate comprehension.

5.1. August 10th - The day before the public reading

Figure 1 displays the graph of conversations on August 10th. The red cluster comprises 9,938 actors, connected by 16,603 internal edges and 379 external edges, while the blue cluster consists of 12,829 actors, linked by 22,144 internal edges and 197 external edges. The red cluster exhibits an E-I index of -0.96, and the blue cluster -0.98, indicating a slightly higher openness to interaction in the former. The clustering coefficient mean in the red group is 0.025, compared to 0.007 in the blue group. This suggests that actors in the red cluster tend to engage more with their neighbors, fostering greater intra-cluster interaction through retweets and quotes. Thus, while the anti-letter group boasts larger numbers, the red group appears to demonstrate a greater propensity for inter-group engagement and intra-cluster cohesion.

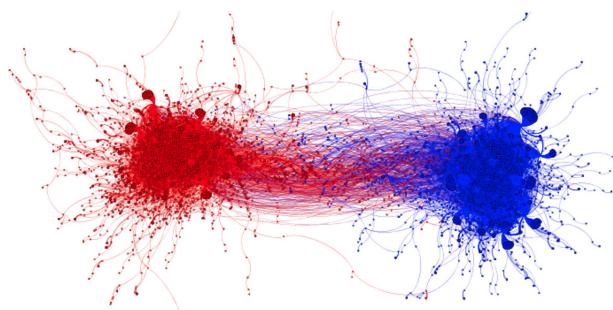


Figure 1. Graph representing August 10th. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

Figure 2 displays the most influential actors, categorized by type (see Table 1). The cluster supporting the letter exhibits greater heterogeneity compared to the cluster opposing it. On the left-hand side, we observe a diverse array of actors including politicians (dark green), political parties (light green), political supporters (magenta), mainstream media outlets (dark blue), alternative and partisan media outlets (light blue), journalists (cyan), activists (light gray), and celebrities (light purple). Conversely, the right-hand side is predominantly comprised of political supporters (magenta) and politicians (dark green), suggesting a narrower spectrum of diversity in opinions but also a higher degree of intra-cluster homogeneity, thus reinforcing polarization.

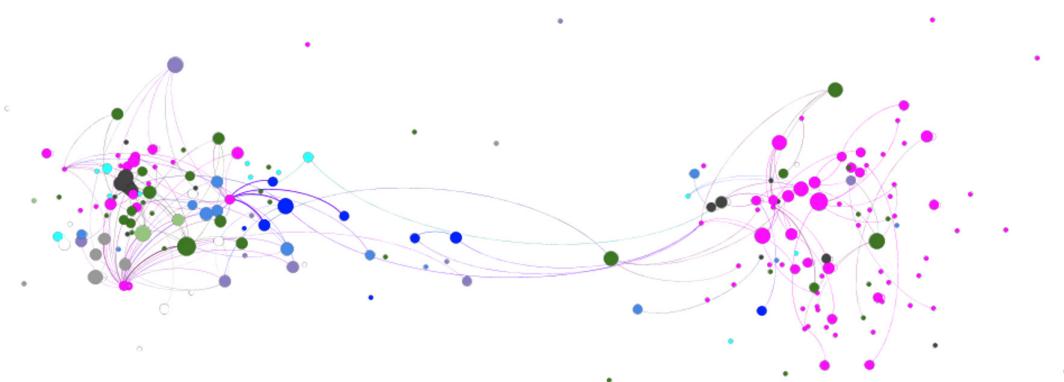


Figure 2. The 100 most influential actors on the 10th in each side. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

In this graph, it's noteworthy to emphasize the role of the press (represented by the three shades of blue). This group of actors is situated closest to the other side, possibly serving as bridges between the two poles and receiving retweets and quotes from users on the opposite end.

Upon analyzing the conversations within each cluster, we observed a distinct group supporting the letter in one cluster (the red cluster) and another group criticizing it in the opposing cluster (the blue cluster), as previously explained. Within the red cluster, terms such as "defense" and "democracy" are prominently linked to "fight," "left," and "coup". Here, actors discuss the defense of democracy and the rule of law, advocating for street protests to uphold free elections. Additionally, concerns about a potential coup and military dictatorship arise, fueled by assertions from some of President Bolsonaro's supporters.

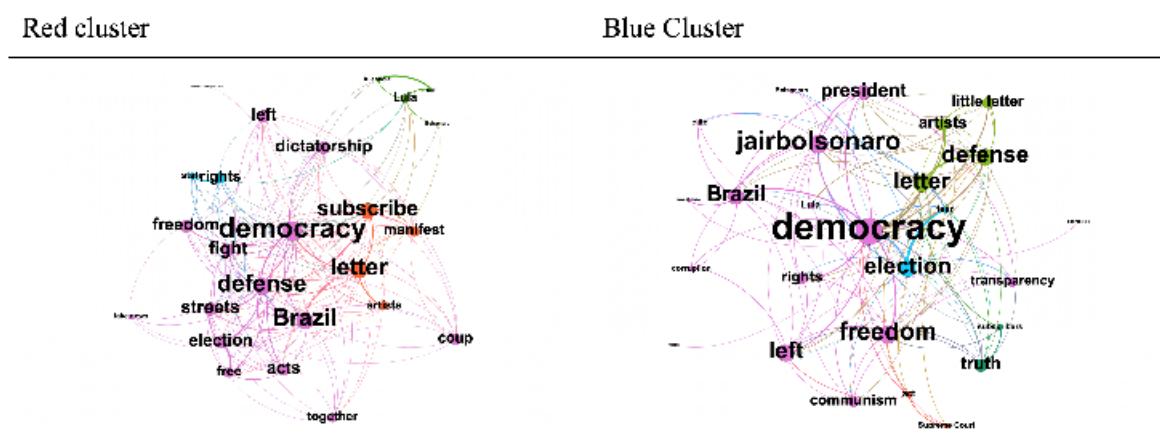


Figure 3. Main topics on August 10th. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

Tweets with higher retweet counts primarily originate from celebrities and politicians, urging individuals to sign the letter and attend the public reading scheduled for the following day. Consequently, within this cluster, discussions often revolve around the letter's role in safeguarding democracy. As expressed by one politician: "On the 11th, Brazil commits to democracy".

In the blue cluster, there is also evident concern about democracy, albeit with different invoked concepts. Conversations largely revolve around far-right ideals of freedom, particularly emphasizing freedom of speech as paramount, alongside the insistence on knowing "the truth". Participants express apprehension regarding communism and socialism, evoking fears of potential leftist dictatorships akin to what they perceive in Venezuela. Additionally, notable mentions include terms like "subscribers" and "little letter", employed by Bolsonaro and his supporters to downplay the significance of the movement. For instance, one political supporter sarcastically remarked: "This morning alone, the eve of the public event, the letter for Democracy, the one they audit, gained 35,000 signatures". This statement is not congratulatory but rather serves as a critique, cynically questioning the feasibility of gathering this number of signatures.

The most retweeted tweet originates from Bolsonaro himself, in which he declares:

"LETTER OF MANIFEST IN FAVOR OF DEMOCRACY

'I hereby declare that I am in favor of democracy.'
'signed Jair Bolsonaro'.

This publication serves as a tactic to bolster his network of supporters and engage in his strategic maneuvers. The data indicates that the approach within this cluster is to diminish the significance of the letter and reinforce the "us versus them" antagonism inherent in ideological polarization.

5.2. August 11th - The day of the public reading

On August 11th, the day of the public reading of the letter, we captured the network plotted in Figure 4. In this graph, the red cluster comprises 33,906 actors, connected by 97,141 internal edges and 2,424 external edges, while the blue cluster consists of 28,229 actors, linked by 82,631 internal edges and 3,379 external edges. The E-I index for the red group is -0.95, indicating a slightly higher interaction with the opposite side compared to the blue group's E-I index of -0.92. The clustering coefficient mean in the red cluster is 0.051, suggesting a higher tendency for actors to interact with their neighbors

compared to the blue cluster's coefficient mean of 0.024. Thus, unlike the previous day, it appears that the pro-letter group has more actors and they are more engaged in interactions within their cluster. However, on this day, the anti-letter group seems to be more open to interacting with their opponents.

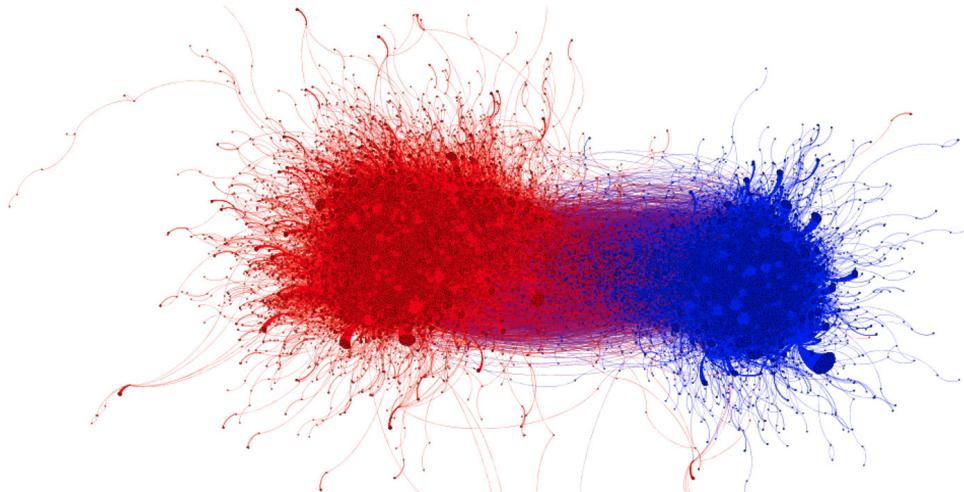


Figure 4. Graph representing August 11th. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

Figure 5 illustrates that on the day of the reading, the 100 most influential actors in each cluster were significantly more engaged with each other compared to the previous day, as evidenced by the increased number of edges connecting the nodes. Once more, the left-hand side, representing support for the letter, appears to be more heterogeneous than the right side, which opposes the letter.

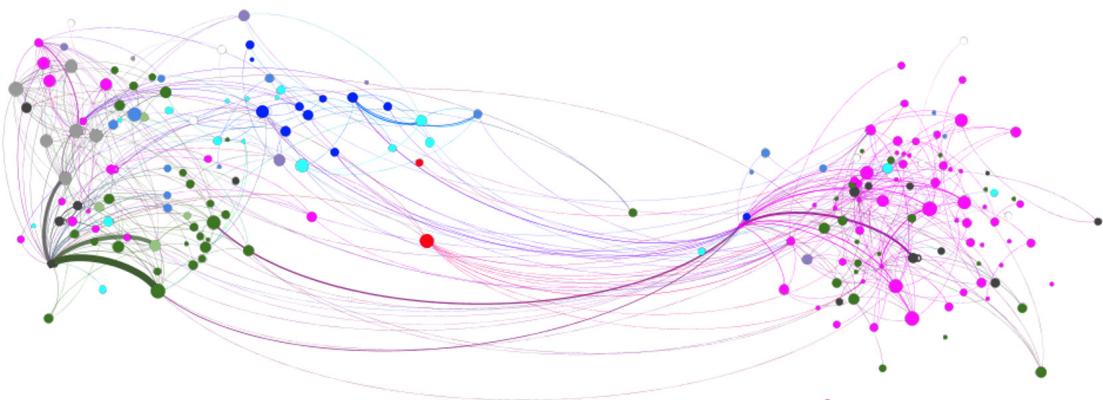


Figure 5. The 100 most influential actors on the 11th in each side. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

On the left-hand side, three small clusters are observable: one comprised of politicians (dark green) and political supporters (magenta); another consisting of activists (gray) and political supporters (magenta); and a third one constituted by mainstream, alternative, and partisan media outlets along with journalists (dark blue, light blue, and cyan). Notably, this last group, closest to the right side, likely acts as a bridge between the two sides. Additionally, it's noteworthy that political parties (light green) are

exclusively present in the left-hand cluster. Conversely, the right-hand cluster appears more closed and is primarily composed of political supporters (magenta) and politicians (dark green). While some press actors are present, they wield less influence and hold lower importance within this cluster.

The prominent red actor positioned near the center of the graph represents the profile of Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who would imminently assume the presidency of the Electoral Superior Court. In his tweet, he emphasized the significance of the events unfolding on the historic date of August 11th, stating that the USP Law Faculty was the scene of important acts in defense of the rule of law and institutions, reinforcing pride in the solidity and strength of democracy and the electoral system, essential foundations for the development of Brazil.

In terms of the concepts utilized, the left-hand cluster maintained a consistent thematic focus on the letter, the event, and the defense of the constitution. However, notable additions included topics related to the defense of and respect for the electoral system and the electronic voting system. These additions are significant in light of recent criticisms directed at electoral justice and the electronic voting system by Bolsonaro. By emphasizing these concepts, the left cluster conveyed its stance against any allegations undermining the integrity of the electoral process, reaffirming its commitment to upholding democratic norms and institutions.

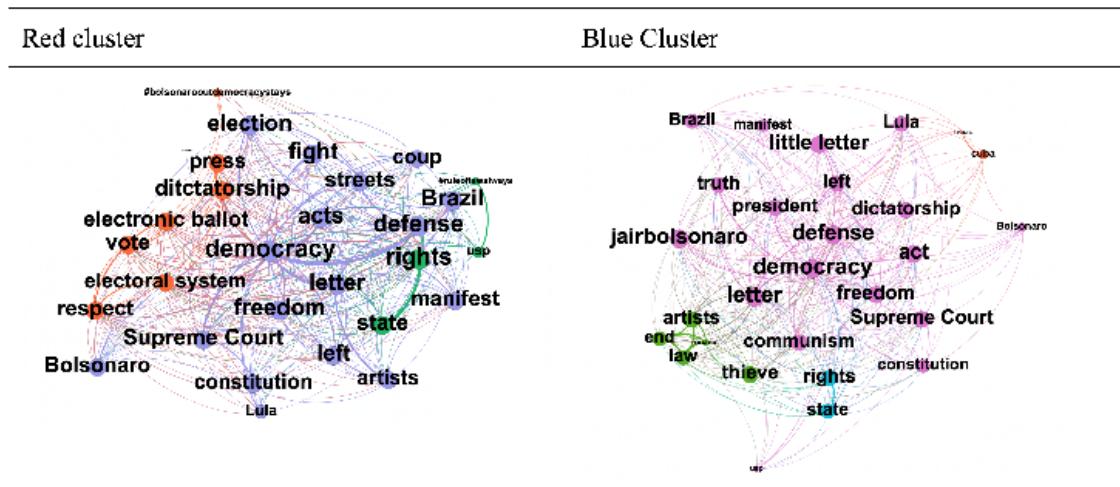


Figure 6. Main topics on August 11th. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

The right cluster largely maintained its discursive strategies from the previous day, including diminishing the significance of the movement as a "little letter," advocating for truth and freedom, and evoking fears of communism and dictatorships like those in Venezuela and Cuba. For instance, a tweet by a political supporter exemplifies this stance: "Whoever is IN FAVOR of democracy is necessarily AGAINST the dictatorships of Cuba and Venezuela. It's one or the other. The two together set up a serious case of cognitive deficit... or bluntness."

On this day, the involvement of celebrities and artists was particularly noteworthy. Many of them actively participated in the movement, leveraging their platforms to encourage people to sign the letter. Actors, singers, and even popular YouTubers were part of the discourse. Conversely, on the right side, efforts to diminish the significance of the letter included unfounded allegations suggesting that artists were motivated by a desire to reinstate a law enabling them to easily access government funds and finance their projects; they were even labeled as "thieves." However, such claims were debunked as disinformation, as discussed within the conversations.

5.3. August 12th - The day after the public reading

On August 12th, the day following the public reading of the letter, we gathered and visualized the network depicted in Figure 7. In this network, the red cluster comprises 26,808 nodes, with 56,705 internal edges and 2,734 external edges. Conversely, the blue cluster consists of 34,207 nodes, with 109,716 internal edges and 3,890 external edges. Notably, the red cluster exhibits a slightly higher openness to outside connections compared to the blue group, with an E-I index of -0.91 for the former and -0.93 for the latter. Regarding the clustering coefficient mean, the red cluster registers 0.020, while the blue cluster records 0.041, indicating that actors in the anti-letter group tend to be more strongly connected than those in the pro-letter group. The graph also illustrates how the pro-letter group became more dispersed, resulting in a loss of momentum in the discourse.

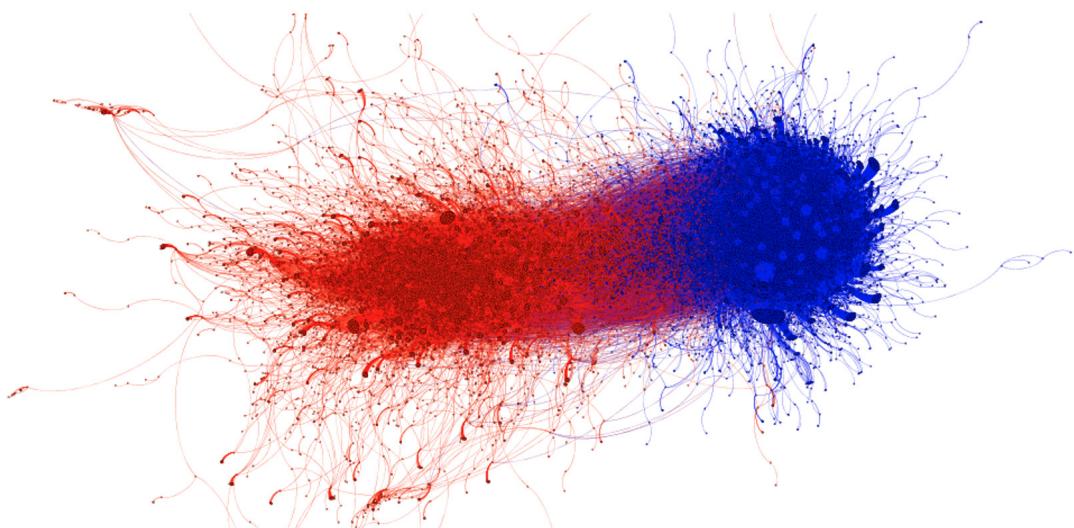


Figure 7. Graph representing August 12th. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

Figure 8, illustrating the 100 most influential actors on each side, further corroborates the aforementioned trend. The graph suggests that the left-hand side continued to encompass a variety of actors but experienced a decrease in engagement among them. Conversely, the right cluster maintained its composition of actors and level of engagement, displaying stronger intra-cluster connections. Notably, mainstream media outlets retained their significance by bridging the two clusters. Overall, actors appeared to have diminished influence in the network, as evidenced by their reduced average indegree and size. However, it is noteworthy that the prominent green actor on the right-hand side represents Bolsonaro's account, underscoring his significance within the cluster.

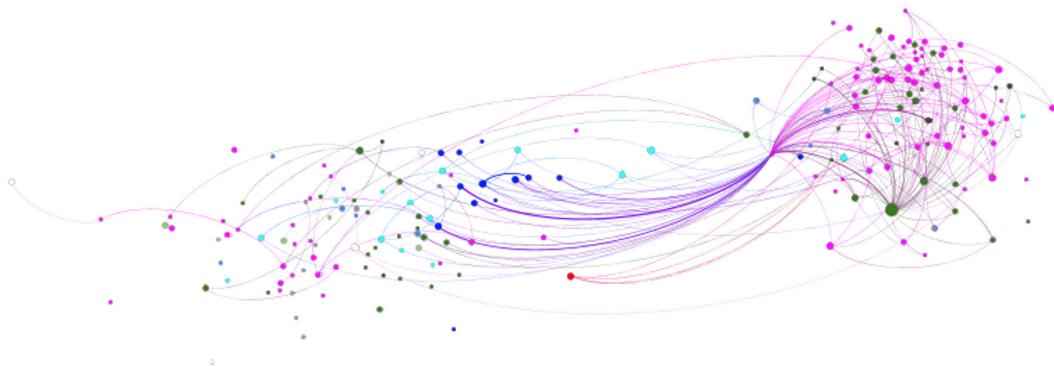


Figure 8. The 100 most influential actors on the 12th in each side. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

On August 12th, discussions within the left-hand cluster maintained consistency with previous days, as depicted in Figure 9. However, the right cluster exhibited a broader range of discursive strategies. Criticisms were directed towards artists and labor unions, accompanied by accusations against former President Lula, portraying him as an ex-convicted criminal and an ally of dictators from authoritarian regimes linking "Maduro", "Venezuela", and "Cuba". Moreover, there were criticisms regarding the scale of the event, labeled as a "flop", and disparagement towards the flags displayed. Notably, invitations were extended for people to attend the military parade traditionally held on September 7th, Brazil's Independence Day, to showcase support for President Bolsonaro and his administration. This underscores the prevalent discourse within Bolsonarism, which views the army as the safeguard of democracy. Furthermore, the strategic discursive maneuvers linking the press and leftists are noteworthy, reflecting a well-established tactic employed by far-right populists to discredit the press (Waisbord, 2018).

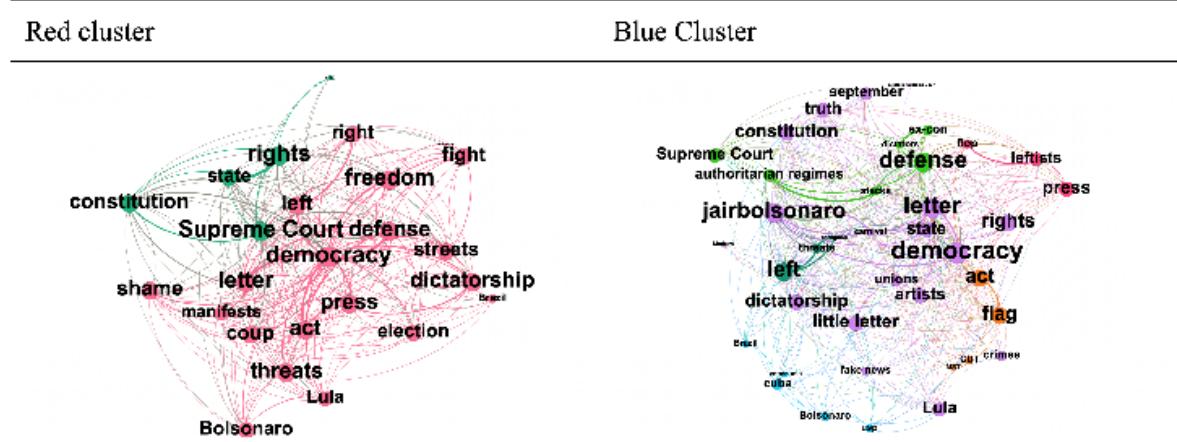


Figure 9. Main topics on August 12th. Source: Authors with data from Twitter/X.

6. Findings and Discussion

Our study's first step delves into the structural underpinnings of the democracy debate to understand how social media platforms may be appropriated to legitimize opposite views on democracy and democratic institutions.

Our data analysis reveals a highly polarized environment, with active engagement from both pro- and anti-letter factions. Metrics indicate that the pro-letter contingent initially smaller, surged forward

during the public reading, but dwindled afterward. Conversely, the anti-letter faction, associated with the far-right and former President Bolsonaro, displayed robust engagement initially, waned during the reading, then rebounded. This trend mirrors findings by Chagas et al. (2022), underscoring the efficacy of far-right activists in online discourse manipulation. Furthermore, data suggests that the pro-letter group aligns more with the left and center, and exhibits greater openness to external connections, consistent with Gruzd and Roy's (2014) findings.

Our second step involved examining the types of influential actors within each cluster. Notably, the pro-letter cluster exhibited greater heterogeneity among its influential actors, encompassing politicians, political supporters, celebrities, activists, and media outlets. In contrast, the anti-letter cluster was predominantly influenced by political supporters and politicians, with Bolsonaro himself playing a significant role. This disparity suggests asymmetric polarization within this group, as noted by Benkler et al. (2018) and Soares et al. (2019).

Building upon these insights, it can be posited that individuals in the left-hand cluster are more likely to encounter diverse viewpoints and are consequently influenced by a wider spectrum of opinions. As previously discussed, this group demonstrates a greater propensity for engaging with outside connections. Conversely, individuals in the right-hand cluster tend to be influenced predominantly by a homogenous group of political supporters. This tendency may lead to a dearth of diverse opinions within the cluster, thereby fostering homophilic intracluster behavior. Moreover, the disproportionate attention received by a minority of influencers, as observed by Falkenberg et al. (2022), could exacerbate ideological polarization and radicalization among individuals in this cluster. This suggests that far-right activists may appropriate the affordances of social media to engage their audience and use strategies to legitimize, for example, the support for a coup-de-état.

We also underscore the positioning of media outlets within the networks. The majority of mainstream media accounts are situated in the red cluster, indicating that the blue cluster has a more limited array of trustworthy information sources. This observation suggests a form of asymmetry regarding news media, akin to findings by Soares et al. (2019) and Benkler et al. (2018). It's important to note a significant distinction: the most influential actors in the blue clusters are not partisan outlets, but political supporters, who do not even need to pretend to respect journalist routines.

In the subsequent phase of our investigation, we delved into how the structure and actors influenced the conceptualizations of democracy, employing various discursive strategies. Our analysis revealed the potential influence of polarization on these conversations. Within the red cluster, prevailing concepts revolved around urging individuals to sign the letter and defending democracy in anticipation of a potential military coup. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on safeguarding the electoral process, supporting the electronic ballot box, upholding the separation of powers, and respecting institutions and the rule of law. Conversely, discussions within the blue cluster centered on democracy in relation to individual freedom, accompanied by critiques of the letter, the judiciary, left-wing parties and politicians, artists, and the press. Key themes included downplaying the significance of the letter and disparaging the opposition through derogatory terms such as "little", "thieves", "flop", and "ex-convicted". Consequently, we posit that the right-hand cluster employed discursive strategies rooted in affective polarization to exacerbate ideological divisions (van Dijk, 2006; Kakisina et al., 2022; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021).

In this context, the "us versus them" dynamic (Masroor et al., 2019) observed in our study varies depending on the ideological pole under scrutiny. On the left-hand side, the notion of 'us' encompasses a diverse array of actors, including politicians, celebrities, and media outlets, whereas 'them' is singularly represented by Bolsonaro. Conversely, within the right-hand cluster, 'us' pertains to individuals supporting Bolsonaro, while 'them' encompasses a broader spectrum: former President Lula da Silva, the Supreme Court and its justices, 'communists', 'thieves' in reference to artists, and the 'leftist' press—essentially, anyone endorsing the letter.

Regarding the populist rhetoric, we did not find explicit discourses emphasizing the sovereignty of the people or advocating for their interests. However, we did observe the use of terms such as 'elite' and 'bourgeoisie' to refer to those supporting the letter, along with accusations of a 'corrupted left'. Additionally, there were instances of ostracizing others by associating them with countries like Venezuela and Cuba, as well as labeling the press as potential threats. Furthermore, there was an invocation of the heartland in discourse inviting participation in the Independence Day parade, a symbol strongly linked to the military and Bolsonaro's political identity. Bolsonaro's tweet, as previously discussed, exemplifies another aspect of populist discourse. As noted by Tumber and Waisbord (2021), populist leaders often seek to consolidate executive powers and demand unwavering loyalty. We posit that Bolsonaro deliberately fueled polarization between the two groups, heightening animosity and bolstering support among his followers. His prominence as the most influential actor in the network on the third day underscores his role as the leader. Thus, our analysis reveals fragmented forms of populism within this corpus (Engesser et al., 2017).

Furthermore, we identified a notable discursive strategy employed by the anti-letter group: the dissemination of disinformation. Within the corpus, there was a narrative accusing artists of supporting the letter in order to secure government funding for their cultural productions. This narrative falsely suggests that artists receive direct financial support from the government. In reality, artists typically register their projects and apply for authorization from the government, allowing them to seek private funding from companies. These companies may then receive tax benefits for their sponsorship (Cesarino, 2020). The misconception propagated in this discourse highlights the intentional spread of misinformation to discredit the motives behind supporting the letter.

To conclude this discursive analysis, it's crucial to underscore the utilization of 'threats' by both factions. Within the pro-letter group, the perceived threat to democracy revolves around the specter of a potential military coup and the resurgence of military dictatorship. Conversely, the anti-letter cluster perceives threats emanating from leftist parties, communism, and the possibility of a dictatorship akin to those in Venezuela and Cuba. This discursive tactic mirrors findings from the analysis conducted by Prado et al. (2023). However, the crux of the issue arises from the propagation of a 'fear of communism' narrative, wherein the anti-letter group contends that military intervention would serve as a safeguard to preserve democracy in Brazil. A similar discourse was present during the 1964 military coup that led Brazil into 18 years of dictatorship.

In summary, the data indicate divergent interpretations of democracy shaped by ideological perspectives, which are perpetuated by opinion leaders and the discursive strategies employed within each cluster. Within the analyzed corpus, polarization fuels a discursive contestation over the 'true' meaning of democracy, with various influencers chosen to bolster and shape these perceptions. As observed, each cluster advocates for and legitimizes its actors' distinct conception of democracy. In the pro-letter camp, democracy is closely linked to safeguarding the electoral process, upholding the rule of law, and preserving democratic institutions. Conversely, the anti-letter faction frames democracy within the context of populist rhetoric, emphasizing the defense of individual freedom and the battle against the left and communism. This group exhibits elements of both ideological and affective polarization, fostering conditions wherein anti-democratic discourse is misconstrued as democratic. Consequently, this appropriation of social media platforms serves to accentuate existing societal polarization and could potentially lead to detrimental consequences, including physical harm, as witnessed in Brazil, and discussed in the subsequent section.

7. Final remarks

In this study, we conducted an analysis of Twitter conversations centered around the keyword "democracy", aiming to uncover how the concept of democracy is constructed and discussed on social media platforms. Our investigation revealed a deeply polarized discourse, with distinct influencers and discursive strategies operating within each pole of the debate.

We found that conversations surrounding democracy exhibited stark ideological divisions, with one cluster defending the letter and democratic principles, while the opposing cluster launched attacks against both. It is noteworthy that those critical of the pro-democracy movement paradoxically advocated for military intervention, erroneously believing it would safeguard their moral values and protect Brazil from perceived communist threats.

This dichotomy in conceptualizing democracy became evident as we examined the discourses within each cluster. While the pro-letter group associated democracy with free elections and the rule of law, the anti-letter faction aligned democracy with freedom, the military and the fear of communism. The latter group, in particular, viewed the military as synonymous with democracy, suggesting a belief that a coup d'état could restore what they perceive as genuine democracy—an alarming notion given Brazil's historical context. Thus, while analyzing the use of democracy, we observed that a polarized environment can also depict anti-democratic descriptions of the concept.

Moreover, our analysis revealed the deployment of various discursive strategies by the anti-letter group to solidify their ideological stance and exacerbate polarization. These strategies included the "us versus them" antagonism, populist rhetoric, and the dissemination of disinformation rooted in affective polarization. Actors within this cluster employed derogatory language not only to criticize individuals and the pro-democracy letter but also to undermine the very concept of democracy itself.

The polarization observed in Brazilian society presents a significant challenge to the health of democracy. As noted by Habermas (2022), a growing segment of the population no longer has faith in democratic institutions, with some even advocating for the return of military dictatorship. This erosion of trust in democratic norms and institutions poses a grave threat to the democratic fabric of society.

The attempted coup by Bolsonaro's supporters on January 8th, 2023, serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of unchecked polarization and political extremism. Although it is challenging to directly attribute such attacks to social media discourse, our analysis uncovered striking parallels between the narratives propagated online and the rhetoric espoused by those involved in the attempted coup. This underscores the potential influence of social media in shaping political realities and fueling extremist ideologies.

In our analysis, we underscore the troubling emergence of discursive strategies within the far-right cluster aimed at undermining democratic institutions, discrediting elections, and aligning democracy with authoritarianism, all under the guise of defending democracy itself. We show that these tactics were evident well before the occurrence of physical attacks. The insular nature of the far-right cluster likely contributed to the reinforcement of shared beliefs, fostering a sense of mistrust in democratic processes such as elections and the judiciary. As previously argued, this form of political polarization poses a significant threat to the foundations of democracy (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2020).

We acknowledge several limitations inherent in our study. Firstly, our analysis was constrained by the relatively short timeframe considered and the specific focus on Twitter conversations surrounding a contentious topic. While Twitter provides a valuable platform for studying contemporary discourse, it offers only a partial view of public opinion and may not fully capture the complexities of societal dynamics. Moreover, our study relied on intentionally collected data, which may introduce bias and limit the generalizability of our findings. Additionally, correlating online discourse with real-world events poses inherent challenges, as the relationship between online conversations and offline behavior is mul-

tifaceted and nuanced. Furthermore, while our analysis sheds light on discursive strategies surrounding the concept of democracy, it does not delve into the broader socio-political context that shapes these conversations.

Despite these limitations, our study highlights the critical role of language and discourse in shaping public perceptions and constructing social and political realities. By examining the discursive dynamics surrounding the concept of democracy, we shed light on how language can be wielded to distort reality and legitimize ideologies, even to the extent of accepting a military dictatorship as a form of democracy. By recognizing the power of language in shaping societal dynamics, we can better understand the complexities of political struggles and work towards safeguarding democratic principles in the face of such discursive manipulations.

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