# COVID AND POPULISM IN THE NEWS:

## how Brazilian media outlets approach the issue of populism during the pandemic

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**ABSTRACT** – The recent rise of right-wing populism has given new momentum to the discussion about the meaning of populism around the world and the covid-19 pandemic added yet another layer to the issue. Considering the growing circulation of the term "populism" in public discourse, as well as the volatility of its meaning, this paper seeks to identify the different constructions of meaning around this phenomenon by Brazilian media during the covid-19 pandemic. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, in which we used the perspective of media framings, we examine 170 articles from 17 Brazilian media outlets published between March 1st and October 1st, 2020. The results allow us to conclude that there are circumstantial meanings of populism that were incorporated during the pandemic, especially related to an antiscientific approach.
**Key words:** Populism. Journalism. Covid-19. Framing analysis. Political communication.

**COVID E POPULISMO NO NOTICIÁRIO:**
**como os meios de comunicação brasileiros abordam**
**a questão do populismo durante a pandemia**

**RESUMO –** A recente ascensão do populismo de direita tem dado um novo impulso à discussão sobre o significado do populismo em todo o mundo e a pandemia da covid-19 acrescentou uma camada complementar à questão. Considerando a crescente circulação do termo "populismo" no discurso público, bem como a volatilidade de seu significado, este artigo busca identificar as diferentes construções de sentido em torno deste fenômeno nos meios de comunicação brasileiros durante a pandemia da covid-19. Por meio de análises quantitativas e qualitativas, nas quais mobilizamos a perspectiva dos enquadramentos midiáticos, examinamos 170 artigos de 17 veículos de comunicação brasileiros publicados entre 1º de março e 1º de outubro de 2020. Os resultados permitem concluir que há sentidos circunstanciais do populismo que são incorporados durante a pandemia, especialmente relacionados a uma abordagem anticientífica.
**Palavras-chave:** Populismo. Jornalismo. Covid-19. Enquadramento. Comunicação política.

**COVID Y POPULISMO EN EL NOTICIERO:**
**cómo los medios brasileños abordaron al populismo**
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**RESUMEN –** El reciente aumento del populismo de derecha ha dado un nuevo impulso a la discusión sobre el significado del populismo en todo el mundo y la pandemia de covid-19 agregó una capa más al problema. Considerando la creciente circulación del término "populismo" en el discurso público, así como la volatilidad de su significado, este trabajo busca identificar las diferentes construcciones de significado en torno al fenómeno por los medios brasileños durante la pandemia de covid-19. A través de un análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo, en el que utilizamos la perspectiva de los encuadres mediáticos, examinamos 170 artículos de 17 medios brasileños publicados entre el 1 de marzo y el 1 de octubre de 2020. Los resultados brindan elementos que nos permiten concluir que durante la pandemia se incorporaron significados circunstanciales del populismo, especialmente relacionados con un enfoque anticientífico.
**Palabras clave:** Populismo. Periodismo. Covid-19. Encuadramiento. Comunicación política.

## 1 Introduction

The recent rise of right-wing populism has given new momentum to the discussion about the meaning of populism around the world. If for a long time the idea was centered on left-wing leaders mainly from Latin America, now the phenomenon has reached Europe and the United States with a different political shape. In a landscape where leaders from major countries are being seen as populists, the discussion about the meaning of the term is at the center of the debate about contemporary democracies.

The covid-19 pandemic added yet another layer to the issue. The discussion about what are populist leaders or populist measures in the context of this global crisis in its multiple dimensions and what they can offer in terms of results has appeared in many countries, such as Brazil, the United States, and the United Kingdom. By inquiring or suggesting that some behaviors, speeches, and political actions in the coronavirus conjuncture are populist, the media proposes a certain comprehension of what populism is and of which political actors can be assigned to this category.

We consider that populism is a polymorphic phenomenon, whose meanings are inseparable from the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are produced. Nevertheless, the growing popularity of this word in public discourse combined with the pandemic outbreak in 2020 have expanded the comprehension of the phenomenon worldwide. This paper aims to consider the interrelationship between crisis and populism (Laclau, 1977) to answer the following question: how is populism characterized and with what is it associated, in the media coverage of the covid-19 pandemic in Brazil? Our hypothesis is that, due to the floating nature of this phenomenon, the negationist behavior of Bolsonaro's government induced the association of populism with an antiscience stance specific to far-right leaders in the Brazilian media discourse.

Thus, the first part of this study provides a picture of the social, political, and communicational context during the outbreak of the pandemic, with Brazil as a backdrop. Then, we present the relations between populism and media and point out the importance of these relations as a structural condition to the problematization of the former. Finally, through quantitative and qualitative analysis, in which we used the perspective of media framings, we examine 170 articles from 17 Brazilian media outlets published between March 1st and October 1st, 2020. The results of the analysis provide elements that allow us better to apprehend how populism is read in the media, as well as its specific circumstances due to the health situation.

## 2 Populism, the pandemic, and communicational issues: a portrait of 2020

Despite its sanitary nature, the covid-19 pandemic has significantly renewed or reconfigured central issues of contemporary

democratic political systems. Topics such as the collapse of neoliberalism or the rise of populism around the world have moved to the center of the political debate.

Although populism, its characteristics, and its forms have been regarded with attention by many scholars during the last few decades, there is no consensual definition of what it means, even if a view of the phenomenon as synonymous with demagogy or democracy pathology is commonplace in the contemporary public discourses (Laquièze, 2012). Analyzing the uses of the term in recent decades, Taguieff (2007) points its ambiguous nature, authoritarian and antidemocratic and hyper-democratic at the same time, based on the rejection of the national political class, fear, and mainly the maximum sovereignty of people, for whom the leader is a messiah. In Brazilian media, previous studies have shown that it is mostly used to negatively qualify opponents (Ronderos & Barros, 2020).

Canovan (1999) defines populism as "an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values" (p. 3). According to the author, democracy has two opposite faces, one "redemptive" (salvation through politics, popular power) and other "pragmatic" (institutions), and the tensions between them make populist mobilizations a perennial possibility. Similarly, Laclau (2005) sees populism as an inherent component of the democratic system, because the latter is always constrained to manage popular demands and their institutional and social integration. So, any government could be populist insofar as populism is not a movement or style, but a political logic, not necessarily positive or negative, nor specific to the right or the left political spectrum. It is based on the temporary articulation of popular-democratic dissatisfactions around a common symbol.

In this paper, we approach populism as a political logic, as suggested by the Essex School. It entails a notion of "us" against "them" that may be appropriated by diverse ideologies (Ronderos & Barros, 2020).

In a seminal work on the subject, Laclau (1977) highlights the relationship between crisis and populism as a very important point to understand the populism phenomenon. This idea has been taken up by scholars to analyze, on one hand, the appropriations of the crisis in the populist narrative or, on the other hand, the populist and anti-populist discourses in the public sphere (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020). Following this point of view,

> Not only 'crises' are considered particularly opportune environments for the rise of populist actors, as they usually designate moments that exaggerate socio-political divisions, creating new rifts and potentially increasing the distance between 'people' and 'elites', government and the governed. (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020, p. 4).

These elements are very useful in our study because they allow us to see clearly how populism and crisis articulate and influence each other in an urgent health context.

In a recent international comparative study conducted during the pandemic, Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2020) demonstrate, for example, the specificities, limitations, and the heterogeneity of the populist phenomenon and its political forms in different countries, including Brazil. Their work also points out how the effects of the pandemic on populist leaders are controversial. Some analysts believed that the health crisis could be an opportunity to weaken populist leaders by exposing their errors and the risks of their actions[1]. As such, leaders are often contemptuous of institutional actors, the institutional support and knowledge demanded by the situation could bring about the political death of these leaders – figuratively but also literally, given the skeptical stance some of them have taken towards covid-19. The context should rather favor the emergence of experts, whose opinions are based on scientifically and institutionally certified information. However, that thesis was not supported by reality. Instead, we saw conspiracy theories and the recommendation of medicines proven to be ineffective – such as hydroxychloroquine – strongly overlap scientific knowledge, "Chinese virus" rumors, and the notion of the coronavirus crisis as a message from God. These discourses have gained enormous dimensions in Brazil.

In this vein, Machado et al. (2020) analyze YouTube videos in Portuguese focusing on the pandemic. The authors studied how the contents circulating on this platform – which is the most accessed video network in Brazil – relate, discuss, or even contest information from official institutions, such as the Ministry of Health, state health secretaries, and even international organisms such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO), which early on warned us of an "infodemic" problem during the pandemic. In their findings, Machado et al. (2020, pp. 17–38) identified four major video networks around covid-19 on YouTube: a conspiracy network, a religious network, a business medical discourse network, and, finally, an information network. The latter became more expressive

at the beginning of March 2020, when the pandemic turned into a worldwide health problem. According to the researchers, the growing presence of mainstream media on YouTube is very significant because it points to the emergence of an important stronghold of qualified information amid a complex ecosystem of disinformation.

The role of journalism in the health crisis in Brazil was analyzed by Rêgo et al. (2020). The authors point out that journalism became a major actor not only because of its informative function but also by giving sanitary and behavioral prescriptions in face of the lack of knowledge about the virus. Oliveira's work (2020a) also describes mainstream media as a source of more reliable information while showing that digital social networks have proven to be a fertile ground for the proliferation of fake news[2]. Thus, the coronavirus pandemic imposed a double mission upon media actors: on the one hand, they need to inform the public about the evolution of the pandemic and the actions taken by public authorities; on the other, they struggle with the accelerated spread of incorrect or manipulative content in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). That challenge is certainly not new, but it gains new social meaning when thousands of lives are at stake, and even more so when we consider locations, distant from the urban centers, which do not have access to the necessary information (Javorski & Bargas, 2020).

The spread of misinformation and the role of traditional media during the pandemic may not, however, be analyzed without considering how this issue was treated in the political arena. In the USA, the media repeatedly aired footage of Trump claiming that the coronavirus would disappear "like a miracle", even after he himself was contaminated. In Russia, Putin continued to shake hands with health personnel in hospitals, underestimating the severity of the disease. In the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson encouraged people to keep on with their normal lives but changed his mind after being infected himself. In Brazil, Bolsonaro also downplayed the danger of the covid-19 crisis by calling it a "mild flu".

Luiz (2020) demonstrates that President Bolsonaro uses political polarization to frame the debate about the pandemic in terms of beliefs and ideology. Based on interviews, pronouncements, and social media posts by Bolsonaro from March to May 2020, the author shows how dividing society into two opposing camps remains central to his strategy, which resorts to simplification, the reproduction of conspiratorial claims, and spreading misleading information. Luiz

concludes by saying that "Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro appeals to populism and disinformation as his central political strategy" (Luiz, 2020, p. 68): on the one hand, he questions the legitimacy of the Supreme Federal Court (STF), the Brazilian Parliament, and even the WHO; on the other, he challenges other political actors and attacks journalists and the media for "spreading hysteria and dread" among Brazilians[3].

In that sense, the tensions between Bolsonaro's government, its health ministers, and state governors over what measures should be taken against the disease have contributed to a turn in Brazilian media coverage. Mainstream media have become increasingly critical of the President (see Oliveira, 2020b), who, in retaliation, has limited his communication with journalists and has stopped sharing official data about the evolution of covid-19 in Brazil. Given the federal government's political and informative inefficiency in face of the health crisis, journalists from five national electronic media outlets – O Globo, Extra, Estadão, Folha de S.Paulo, and UOL – have created a media consortium dedicated to counting the number of cases and producing a daily report to share information on covid-19 with the population[4]. In addition, this intensification of tensions between the media and government actors has put in evidence their political weaknesses and denounced the risks of a populist approach to the health crisis, a matter that has started to be more often discussed in the media.

## 3 Populism and the media

The rise in discussions about populism and populist leaders was accompanied by a rise in occurrences of the term in media articles. Furthermore, several scholars (Therrien, 2019; Herkman, 2016, 2017; Bale et al., 2011; Mitozo et al., 2020; Ronderos & Barros, 2020) have pointed out that, along with academic discussion, the media plays a major role in the construction of shared meaning of populism. In Brazil, for example, Ronderos and Barros (2020) have analyzed the occurrences of the term in the Brazilian newspaper Estado de S. Paulo. Their findings demonstrate that it has been several decades since the word became popular in national newspapers. It is interesting to see that the first political movement to appropriate the term in the media, in 1946, is the right-wing movement led by Plinio Salgado, known as *Integralistas* (Integralists)[5]. They referred to themselves as populists, that is, those who were side by side with the people.

However, that positive appropriation of the term did not last. In 1949, a year before the presidential election of 1950, the newspaper published a series of articles warning about a "populist danger identified in the possible – and virtually undefeatable – alliance between the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) with Getúlio Vargas and the Social Progressive Party (PSP) with Adhemar de Barros" (Ronderos & Barros, 2020, p. 34)[6]. From then on, populism and populists are frequently pointed to as being opposed to democratic behavior. Although there is no consensus on the pertinence of its use, this label keeps being applied, both by the opposition and by the media, to discredit political figures during the New Republic, such as former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and the Worker's Party (Pires & Castro, 2014)[7].

If the term is not new in the vocabulary of the news media, the recent increase of interest around the concept, especially after the election of Donald Trump, in the United States, and of Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil, did bring about new and diverse interpretations of it. As Barros (2020) highlights, "although there is growing agreement within the Brazilian public sphere that Bolsonaro is a populist leader, there is very little consensus on why this is the case" (p. 18).

Some authors argue that populist discourse is particularly well-adapted to the logic of the media, which tends to give space to "everything that represents a certain rupture of the normality of everyday life" (Araújo & Prior, 2020, p. 5). As a result, disproportionate media attention is given to these actors (Hameleers et al., 2019). In this sense, the media has a role in promoting populist leaders and movements (Araújo & Prior, 2020). One of the ways of doing that would be to normalize populist behavior and discourse, placing populism on the same spectrum as other political stances. Araújo and Prior (2020) state that, in the case of Brazil, the comparison made between Bolsonaro and Workers' Party candidate Fernando Haddad suggests that if any threat to democracy did exist, it could equally come from either one of the two. There was no significant difference in the media coverage that associated democratic threats with both the far-right-wing candidate and the center-left one, resulting in a normalization of extreme discourses.

In the Brazilian public sphere, after Bolsonaro's election in 2018, "populism" and "populist" have definitively turned into common labels used negatively to qualify political actors and their actions, behavior, and rhetoric. The coronavirus pandemic outbreak, in turn,

complicated the scenario by combining sanitary, political, economic, and social issues into the same crisis. These many variables have been systematically covered and discussed in the news. However, media outlets find themselves forced into a very particular situation: they have to keep people well informed and, at the same time, protect them from misinformation and the infodemic, which are sometimes weaponized by the politicians themselves in a binary discursive logic opposing "us", the people, and "them", the enemies. We can infer, in a certain way, that the negligent behavior of Bolsonaro's government during the pandemic has placed the media in an attack position. This has contributed not only to the closer association of populism with cynism towards scientific expertise but also to the emergence of a discussion around right-wing populism, until recently relatively marginal in the Brazilian media.

From the constructivist perspective, journalistic work consists of a series of complex fabrication processes which propose a view of reality by discursively shaping it (Delforce, 1996; Lippmann, 2010). Thus, daily media coverage proposes certain framings that shape our environment and our comprehension of various issues, phenomena, and events – such as the pandemic. If we accept populism as a social phenomenon (Taguieff, 2007) and the media as political actors (Therrien, 2019), examining the use of populism in the media provides an opportunity to look closer at what kind of definitions or representations of it are circulating in the social space.

As stated previously, in this text we work with the notion of populism as a political logic that may be appropriated by different ideologies. Considering the theoretical perspectives presented, we will address this issue in the health crisis context to identify which trends are more recurrent in the Brazilian public sphere. In this sense, media plays a major role in framing this notion of populism through its association with certain actors, topics, and actions. It is this framing process that we will explore in the next section.


## 4 Framings of populism in Brazilian media

In order to understand the meanings of populism present in Brazilian online media during the pandemic, our study mobilizes the concept of "framing" to identify which interpretations are at work in the analyzed corpus. Before getting to the issue itself, we propose to clarify the concept and how it is applied in the scope of this work.

The approach of media framing has its origins in Goffmanian framing analysis (2012), where social experience frames are understood to be key factors in the analysis of social phenomena and the behavior of actors interacting in everyday life. Frames operate as interpretative schemes anchored by an organizing idea, which can influence human consciousness and give meaning to events.

In media studies, this idea has been employed in different forms. Mendonça and Simões (2012) list three main approaches to operationalize it: analysis of the interactive situation, content analysis, and frame effects. In this paper, we adopt the second approach, aiming to "analyze statements and speeches of varied nature, capturing the way reality is framed by them" (Mendonça & Simões, 2012, p. 193). One of the seminal texts of this approach is Entman's (1993), where he posits that:

> [...] framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing analysis, as the author explains, supposes that the frames have a common effect on a wide portion of the audience, although they cannot achieve it uniformly. Macé (2005) mentions three limitations of the process of production of information: the format (editorial line, kind of support, public or target audience), the program (proximity to the political agenda of the moment), and, directly attached to both of these, the framing (ways in which the subject is covered, from one interpretative angle instead of another). Frames are a result of the articulation of these three elements and propose a possible way to describe and explain reality. In journalism, framing enables one to re-present the event through thematizations, attributions of roles, and a metaphorical *mise en scène* of the subjects covered. This allows us to consider the media sphere in democratic regimes as an "arena", that is, a place of tensions and conflicts within which the interpretation of reality represents a major political issue (Macé, 2003).

As we mentioned in the first part of this paper, media plays an important role in giving visibility to and putting populism at the center of public attention. It is thus important to develop our knowledge about the meanings of populism shaped by media because "they are at the same time a mirror of knowledge and academic debates on the subject, of

how different actors who access the media space to express themselves understand it, and of the meaning that the media themselves, through journalists, give to this notion" (Therrien, 2019, p. 62).

In that sense, Herkman's study (2016) explores the meanings given to populism in the Nordic press, during the first parliamentary elections of the 2010s in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. The author identifies five prevailing frames, namely: 1) the nationalist frame, more popular in the Finnish press; 2) the nativist frame, most emphasized by Swedish newspapers; 3) the empty rhetoric frame, which was favored as a primary frame in all the Nordic countries that were studied; 4) the political movement frame, mostly used in Sweden and Finland; and 5) the voice of the people frame, the only media frame clearly favorable to populism and the least common in all articles. In a similar study during the 2018 electoral campaign in Québec, Therrien (2019) identifies three other frames: antieconomic consensus, democratic threat, and simplification. As Herkman, he finds the political movement frame and the nativist frame as well.

While Bale et al. (2011) conclude that the term was used more or less explicitly in a pejorative way in the British press, Herkman points out that the meanings given to populism depend on and are only fully understandable in a political and cultural context. So, "the public meanings of populism are interesting not only because they reveal differences in national political and journalistic cultures, but also because they may have real political effects" (Herkman, 2016, p. 159).

With the global health crisis as a backdrop, this study will base itself on media coverage to understand the meaning(s) of populism that circulates in the Brazilian public sphere in a context marked by political polarization and distrust in the social institutions, including journalism. Inspired by previous works (Bale et al., 2011; Herkman, 2016; Therrien, 2019) and using both quantitative (occurrences of the terms "populist" and "populism") and qualitative (framing analysis) methods, we aim to answer the following question: how is populism characterized and with what is it associated, in the media coverage of the covid-19 pandemic in Brazil? The sample is composed of 170 news articles published in national online news media from March 1st, 2020 to October 1st, 2020, and containing the words "populism" and "covid". The material was collected through the Media Cloud platform[8]. Concerning this point, it is important to note that the choice of using a preexisting media collection has an impact on this study.

On one hand, it enabled us to work with a standard database that provided the same information for all the articles collected despite their media origin. A manual collection of these data would have been virtually impossible in terms of time and also due to different restrictions of the media outlets' online databases (free or paid access, limitations of the search engine, problems extracting results, among others). So, the choice of a preexisting database over that of a manual collection of the texts was due to the practicality and rigor in the constitution of the corpus. On the other hand, during our work with the tool, we also noticed some inconsistencies. Notably, some of the media outlets did not return any results, although through the manual search in the websites we did find articles that mentioned "populism" and "covid". Even though our database is not exhaustive, it allows us to consistently analyze the collected articles.

## 5 Results and discussion

Before addressing the predominant frames related to populism in the texts we have studied, we would like to give an overview of our procedures and findings.

To gather the news articles, we used a preexisting database composed of 17 national media outlets. We work with national news media (including online versions of printed newspapers, online magazines, and websites), in order to get a general sense of the populist phenomenon mostly related to the national reality rather than to regional ones. Although varied, they mostly lie along an editorial line that can be identified as belonging to the right or center-right of the political spectrum and take their public to belong mainly to the A-B classes[9].

The texts were coded according to the date, online media, title, and type of text. Then, we divided our corpus into three categories or styles of journalistic text: informative, opinion, and interviews.

The informative category is dominant in the sample (97). In this category, we find texts written according to journalistic writing techniques that aim to present the facts objectively. So, the terms "populism" and "populist" are used by the journalists especially in two situations: either when they paraphrase the words of others, or when they quote their interviewees.

The opinion category (44) gathers all texts of our sample that were published in the "opinion" section of the Brazilian media outlets we studied. These texts are either signed by journalists who work for these companies or by invited columnists such as scholars, artists, and public celebrities. They are the ones who mention, analyze, and criticize populism or behaviors viewed as populist. Five media outlets lead the publication of texts of this category: Folha de S.Paulo (61,8%), followed by Exame (50%), A Gazeta do Povo, and Veja (37,5%), and O Globo (34,8%).

It is interesting to notice that while informative texts are dominant in our sample, the newspaper Folha de S.Paulo features mostly opinion texts. None of the other newspapers give as much space to analyses and opinions about the pandemic outside of their editorials. This, in a way, has favored a diversity of approaches to populism and populist concerns by the newspaper due to the different origins and perspectives used by columnists to address the topic.

Finally, interviews (24) are texts structured in a question-answer format. This type of material comes mainly from media such as Último Segundo (50%), followed by BBC Brazil and Valor Econômico (33,3%), and the news portal Terra (31,3%). In the case of interviews, the meaning of populism depends most of all on how the interviewee treats the subject in his or her answers, although, in some cases, it also comes out in the journalists' questions.

We also classified each text according to its dominant frame. Even though some interpretations can overlap in the same text, certain aspects are more salient than others, which justify their classification within a given frame. As in Herkman (2016) and Therrien's (2019) method, we analyzed the excerpts (paragraphs or sentences) one by one, to see more closely the main idea behind the usage of the terms "populism" and "populist" to identify the type of approach associated with populism and its declinations.

As we can see in figure 1, seven frames indicate how Brazilian online media shape the meanings of populism during the covid-19 pandemic: antiscience (31,2%), economic policies (20%), democratic threat (19,4%), political movement (7,6%), empty rhetoric (6,5%), anti-globalization (6,5%), demagogic opportunism (4,1%).

**Figure 1** - Frequency of frames in the corpus
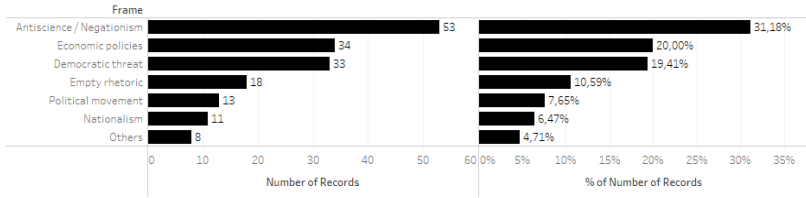


In general, our results are in line with Taguieff's (2007) argument: populism is a disqualifying label, an operator of illegitimation. As identified in the Nordic case (Herkman, 2017), this pejorative perception is supported by Brazilian news media, which are also generally hostile to positive populist significations, despite their critical treatment of politics. Our analysis shows that the idea of populism is, in most cases, associated with something negative and not to be qualified as valid politics. However, the context of the pandemic puts other variables at stake, which jointly affect the meanings associated with it in the media sphere.

In that same vein, the texts identified with the antiscience frame are characterized by the predominance of an association between populism and skepticism regarding the danger of the virus and the recommendations of health authorities. This frame highlights an idiosyncratic approach to the pandemic taken by figures considered to be populists, such as Bolsonaro or Trump. The terms "populism" or "populist" here express a critical reading of negationist behavior towards the evolution of the daily number of cases and deaths by covid-19. Several combinations reflect the association between populism and antiscience stances, such as politics vs. science, quackery vs. science, death vs. life, to name a few of the most frequent ones in the sample.

These interpretations are mostly linked to national and international public personalities, such as artists, politicians, or analysts, who denounce the failure of populist leaders to properly combat the pandemic. It is also important to say that antiscientific postures are essentially associated with the right and the far-right. Politicians from those political spectrums are protagonists of those discourses and adopt them as an essential part of their narrative during the pandemic. Leaders belonging to the center or the left of the political spectrum are never mentioned in the texts in which this frame is predominant. However, the Brazilian President's staunch

negationism is presented as exceptional compared with the less reticent stances taken by other populist leaders such as Duterte, Modi, and even Trump. The relationship between populism and antiscience beliefs seems to have reached an even higher level in Brazil.

In the case of the economic policies frame, "populism" and "populist" are used to describe a type of economic policy adopted by certain governments in face of the health crisis. Two distinct poles were identified: populism is taken to mean either privileging economic liberalism over public health, under the pretext that "Brazil cannot stop", or else implementing financial aid policies for the population, especially for its poorest portion. In that sense, the labels "populism" and "populist" are often applied according to the respect or negligence of the health recommendations and the economic measures implemented by the State to support the population during the pandemic. The understanding of populism as an economic strategy is also built by attempts to compare the economic policies adopted in face of the crisis with those implemented by the Workers' Party governments. But if the populist fame of Vargas or Lula's governments is largely due to social policies implemented, there is a variation in the understanding of populism in the media discourse, which criticizes the welfare state and the supposed consensus around the neoliberal economic order at the same time. Beyond confusion around the phenomenon, it can be read as an adaptation of its forms and representations in the Brazilian context.

The democratic threat frame is the third most popular in the sample. It consists mainly in an interpretation of populism through the prism of its "dangerous potential" (Therrien, 2019) for the functioning of the representative democratic model, for individual freedoms, and for a pluralistic society. The understanding of populism as a democratic threat is found in the idea that the coronavirus is being instrumentalized by authoritarian rulers. Its proponents point out the risks faced by democracies around the world, including in Latin America and in Brazil in particular, whose authoritarian past would favor the return of conservative governments. Studies, reports, and interviews with national and international authorities and experts, such as the German political scientist Yascha Mounk, are mobilized to support the argument of a democratic retraction enabled by the social, political, and economic fragility generated by the pandemic. In line with a dominant frame in the literature (Canovan, 1999), populism is presented as the opposite of the essential values of democracy, such

as equality, freedom, and fraternity, instead endorsing exclusion, repression, and hatred.

The fourth-place frame is the one we have named empty rhetoric. Here, populism is related to "statements that do not result in actual political acts, trust or responsibility" (Herkman, 2016, p. 152). This frame also includes demagogic discourse in a broad sense, as opposed to specialized knowledge (Barros, 2020). It includes texts that usually take up, reproduce, or criticize the declarations or actions of rulers or politicians considered simplistic or frivolous, who are criticized for their inaction and for minimizing the human cost of the virus' advance. Once again, populism and populist rhetoric or style are identified as characteristic features of right-wing politics. In other cases, populism is related to the fallacies of certain political actors in face of the problem, including President Bolsonaro. The recommendation of methods and drugs without scientific proof or the absence of reliable official data from the Brazilian government are some of the facts that shape this understanding of populism.

Considerably less represented than the previous frames, the fifth most prevalent frame, the political movement frame concerns texts that identify populism as a specific ideological current. It proposes a more "neutral" approach to populism, according to Herkman (2016), given that it employs the terms "populism" and "populist" descriptively, to differentiate them from other movements or political parties. Thus, this frame is attached to political personalities and policies, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, those that have in common a style and rhetoric anchored in the supremacy of "the people". The texts identified as employing this frame tend to address populism in its specificity in relation to other ideological-political currents. In this way, the terms "populism" and "populist" function as distinctive labels. The idea of a "populist advance", as gaining space in the political ground, is also present. We highlight here the importance of the term "movement" (Therrien, 2019) because populism is often presented as a wave, a rising trend.

The nationalism frame is close to what Herkman (2016) identified as the "nativism frame" in his study about populism in the Nordic press. This frame is found in the texts that associate populism and populist attitudes with nationalist or even racist and xenophobic attitudes and policies. Therefore, the meanings of populism in the texts employing this frame are essentially negative, often focusing

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on the hostility toward or even exclusion of others promoted by populist leaders or politics.

The seventh frame – Others – unites texts that do not fit into the previous trends, but also do not share enough characteristics to form a separate group. One of the topics that are included in this category, surprisingly less frequent than expected, points to the role of digital media and disinformation in populism. Other references refer, for example, to President Bolsonaro's strategies in seeking to regain political support through alliances with "*Centrão*" (a center-right block of) parties. These are, therefore, scattered readings that do not share a common understanding of the phenomenon.

Concerning the central frames in this study – antiscience, economic policies, and democratic threat –, we have noticed an oscillation over the analyzed period. In figure 2 we can see that the antiscience frame is highly used at the beginning of the analyzed period, achieving its peak in April and May. It is no coincidence that these months correspond to the moment when covid-19 emerged as a public health problem on an international level. The period also coincides with that analyzed by Luiz (2020) in his study about the logic of disinformation in President Bolsonaro's speeches during the pandemic. The author demonstrated how fake news and rumors, some even shared by the Brazilian president, became especially visible during this period. Thus, the high number of articles addressing populism from an antiscientific perspective would be explained by the mediatization of scornful or even misleading statements by actors such as Bolsonaro and Trump in the first months of the epidemic. This scenario increases the pressure on governments and political actors, whose declarations and actions downplaying the increasing risks of contagion were under the spotlight of the national and foreign press. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro's frivolity in the face of the evolving pandemic and the absence of cooperation between federal, regional, and local administrations favor the appearance of another topic related to the issue of populism: the economy. After that date, usage of this frame decreases.

In the opposite sense, the economic policies and democratic threat frames gain relevance in the second half of the period. Both are the most mentioned in the last two months analyzed. Those findings appear to indicate that, after some initial worry about attacks on scientific knowledge and facts, as the pandemic lingers and the actions of government become even more important, political and economic aspects take the center of the stage.

**Figure 2** - Frequency of frames per month

| Primary frame | 3/2020 | 4/2020 | 5/2020 | 6/2020 | 7/2020 | 8/2020 | 9/2020 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anti-scientism / Negationi... | 3 | 17 | 17 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 2 |
| Democratic threat | 2 | 9 | 1 | 7 | 3 | 5 | 6 |
| Economic policies | 1 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 12 | 6 |
| Empty rhetoric | 1 | 7 | | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Nationalism | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Others | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | |
| Political movement | | 2 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |

The adoption of more severe restrictive measures and the effects generated by the post-covid-19 economic crisis raise questions about the risks of a return to authoritarianism in some countries under the pretext of fighting against the pandemic. In the case of the economic frame, we can see a peak in August 2020. The period corresponds to the moment when the prognosis of the impact of the pandemic on the world economy began to be outlined more clearly. Restrictive measures in several countries call for analysis and indicate the burden of such an event upon the international financial system. In Brazil, this discussion is accompanied by the polarization surrounding the opening of commerce and non-essential services in several states, including São Paulo, its largest economic center. Added to this are the quarrels between Bolsonaro and João Doria, governor of the state of São Paulo, whose attacks are highly mediatized and contribute to further political polarization in Brazilian society.

As suggested by previous studies, the noun "populism" is a polysemic term (Ronderos & Barros, 2020; Araújo & Prior, 2020). In our corpus, this word is a characteristic of specific political positions ("right populism", "left populism"); political processes ("legislative populism", "electoral populism"); economic decision-making ("nationalist populism", "economic populism", "fiscal populism", "spendthrift populism", "price populism"); communication strategies ("digital populism", "technopopulism"), among others. Although most of these associations are considered among the frames proposed in this paper, the association between populism and communication strategies was not recurrent in our corpus. The discussion about how populist actors would differ from others in their use of online communication – especially social media – has been a major topic in academic literature (Moffitt, 2018; Azevedo, 2019). Gerbaudo (2014) even proposes a differentiation of major categories of populist action in the age of social media, originating what he calls Populism 2.0. Despite that, due to the low frequency of this topic in our corpus, it was included in the category Others.

We have also identified all the political actors that were mentioned by the media as related to populism. Not surprisingly, the most mentioned political actor is President Jair Bolsonaro (104 times) followed by former President Donald Trump (48 times). In the third and fourth positions appear the Hungarian President Viktor Órban (6 times) and the Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (5 times). The Mexican president is the only one not identified as a far-right leader. On the contrary, López Obrador was elected as a leftist politician, but at the beginning of the pandemic denied its severity and resisted taking restrictive measures. That behavior brought him closer to far right-wing leaders. The first non-head of state that appears is Doria (3 times), in the fifth position. He was the main political actor to antagonize President Jair Bolsonaro on national media regarding covid-19 measures. In all, 29 different political actors were cited.

While the greater number of references to Jair Bolsonaro was expected, since we are analyzing Brazilian media outlets, the other actors bring interesting elements to our discussion. The role of American president Donald Trump as an example is undeniable, as he is mentioned almost half as often as Bolsonaro. But he is not the only one. The international perspective appears as a major trend in the framing of the populist issue. Twenty of the 29 political actors identified were foreigners. Present and past Latin American leaders appear as important figures in this narrative. If Getúlio Vargas, Perón, and Bolivar are remembered as historical figures that could be said to be populists, Daniel Ortega, Alberto Fernández and Álvaro Uribe are present leaders falling in that same category. This points to a discussion about the specific history of Latin American populism, differing from that of other parts of the world (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

**Figure 3 -** Word cloud of political actors by frequency of citation

## 6 Conclusions

In this study, we have explored how the issue of populism is framed in Brazilian mainstream media during the covid-19 pandemic. Our findings show some interesting trends.

First, far from the speculation that the pandemic would mean the death of populism due to the rise of expert knowledge, what we see is an adaptation of its meaning. In that sense, if we compare the frames identified in this work with other research results in non-pandemic contexts, significant differences can be seen. Our hypothesis that the negationist behavior of Bolsonaro's government induced the association of populism with an antiscience discourse was confirmed. The rapprochement of these two concepts is clearly a characteristic of the pandemic crisis period, as is viewing populism as the opposition between saving the economy and saving lives. Those are specific contextual frames that are very significant in our corpus.

It is important to say that our findings coincide partly with the work of Barros (2020), who also analyzed the coverage of populism in Brazil during the pandemic. He points to four main uses of the term: "populism as antiscientism, populism as demagogic opportunism, populism as authoritarianism, and populism as irresponsible economic policies" (Barros, 2020, p. 18). Although he does not quantify the presence of each of these approaches, we can see that contextual meanings are already considered to be important.

Nonetheless, that does not mean that more traditional and longstanding framings of populism are not important. On the contrary, our seven months of analysis have allowed us to verify that issues related to the nature of populism, in terms of political form and expression as well as in aesthetic terms, remain essential to understanding this phenomenon. In this way, the frames democratic threat, nationalism, political movement, and empty rhetoric demonstrate that the construction of the meaning of populism in the media also involves its association with variables of a political, cultural, and discursive nature. The presence of such frames dialogues with the results of the works of Therrien (2019) in the context of Québec and Herkman (2016) in the Nordic countries.

However, it is clear that, although they have some stability, the primacy of these categories varies according to the political and journalistic cultures prevalent in a given context. This helps to understand why, for example, the nationalism frame is more expressive in Nordic countries, whereas in Québec the relationship between nationalism and

populism is less obvious to journalists due to the importance of the local independence movement. In the same vein, these differences explain why the terms "populism" or "populist" sometimes designate actors and parties on the left, sometimes on the right. An interesting element to highlight here concerns the discussion, in the Brazilian media sphere, about a "right-wing populism" as opposed to the "populism" historically associated with the predominant left-wing leaders in Latin American, including Brazil. It shows how the articulations between populism and pandemic crisis in the media discourse help to open new perspectives on the forms and understanding of the populist phenomenon in this country.

These shifts in the meanings of populism are consistent with the concept of populism as a political logic, and, thus, deeply related to the social and political circumstances of a certain territory. That does not entail completely new appropriations of the concept, but rather an intense and continuous negotiation process within political forces in a given situation. This represents a challenge to the literature on populism that, on one hand, has to avoid simplistic and episodic interpretations of the phenomenon, that deny its historical roots, and, on the other hand, needs to deeply comprehend the contextual appropriations of the concept. In this second approach, the role of media is especially relevant due to its temporal dynamic, tracking closely daily events. This process plays an important role as it serves as an arena in which different interpretations of populism can be confronted and new meanings can be built.

In terms of which actors are associated with populism, we can see that the context has but a small impact. As in a non-pandemic context, national politicians (mainly heads of state) are at the center of the debate. Political leaders who emerged specifically in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, such as the governor of São Paulo, the ministry of health, or the ministry of economy, appear but are marginal. On the other hand, historical and regional leaders seem to play an important role in framing what is populism. Furthermore, the international dimension of the issue is also central, with foreign leaders representing most of the political actors mentioned.

It is important to point out that this study has limitations. The first one is a methodological limitation stemming from the use of the Media Cloud platform. Although the collection of media we chose includes 83 national outlets, some of them did not return any data, even though articles with the keywords ("populismo" + "covid") were published in the analyzed period. That is probably due to a problem in the search engine of the platform, the workings of which are closed to access. That problem

was especially important regarding the Estadão newspaper, one of the biggest in the country, which was not present in our corpus.

Nevertheless, the findings of this paper may be useful to further research on the collective construction of the meanings of populism and the role that media plays in it.

## NOTES

1  See "Will Coronavirus Kill Populism?", by Walter Russell Mead. Retrieved from www.wsj.com/articles/will-coronavirus-kill-populism-11585004780

2  See http://www.observatoriodaimprensa.com.br/coronavirus-covid-19/a-cobertura-da-pandemia-do-novo-coronavirus-trouxe-maior-credibilidade-ao-jornalismo/

3  The tensions between this latest and the President can be seen, for example, here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl_DYb-XaAE

4  See https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/06/08/veiculos-de-comunicacao-formam-parceria-para-dar-transparencia-a-dados-de-covid-19.ghtml

5  "Integralism", as known as "Brazilian fascism", was a far-right political party and movement led by Plinio Salgado that emerged in Brazil in the 1930s. It was influenced by fascist ideas and practices that developed in Europe after the end of World War I.

6  Getulio Vargas is an emblematic figure of Brazilian populism. He played a very important role in the Brazilian industrialization and considerably extended social legislation, changing people's lives in the country. Vargas' popularity and paternalistic style of ruling earned him the nickname "Father of the Poor".

7  Lula is one of the most popular left-wing political leaders in Brazilian and Latin American political history. He is part of the governments that marked the left turn in the region in the 2000s. Former worker from ABC Paulista (a very important industrial district in the Sao Paulo state), his closeness to the people and his engagement with the most disadvantaged portion of Brazilians quickly made him popular and a symbol of the left-wing populism.

8  Media Cloud is an open-source platform that gathers data from

different media collections. Our data was collected by searching for media articles that contained both the word "populismo" and "covid". We chose the collection Brazil National (https://sources.mediacloud. org/#/collections/34412257), that reunites major Brazilian online media, as the universe of media where the search was done.

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