

Populism on the Global Stage: Jair Bolsonaro's Foreign Policy as a Mechanism of Electoral Appeal

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Abstract

This paper examines how foreign policy can serve as a tool for domestic political consolidation in polarized societies, using Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) as a case study. It investigates how public opinion shifted during weeks marked by key foreign policy actions in 2022 and whether Bolsonaro leveraged diplomacy for electoral gain. Drawing on weekly survey data from the Instituto de Pesquisa de Reputação e Imagem—30,000 responses from June to December 2022—the study employs sentiment analysis and text analysis to assess public reactions, focusing on four major foreign policy events. The findings suggest that these events coincided with shifts in approval ratings and public discourse, possibly contributing to the consolidation of a conservative base and influencing broader patterns of public opinion. This underscores the instrumental role of diplomacy in the context of democratic backsliding.

Keywords: Foreign policy; democratic backsliding; public opinion; polarization; Brazil.

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1 Introduction

Democratic backsliding has become a pressing global issue, with leaders eroding liberal democracies through subtle strategies that often elude detection and resistance. Many adopt polarizing and nationalist tactics—such as executive aggrandizement and electoral manipulation—to consolidate power by targeting specific segments of a divided public. While these strategies impact various areas of governance, recent scholarship highlights a concerning trend: the use of foreign policy to galvanize domestic support amid the erosion of democracy.

This paper explores how foreign policy can reinforce domestic political standing within a polarized society, contributing to discussions on authoritarian tactics in foreign relations. Using Brazil under President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) as a case study, we examine how political leaders leverage diplomacy to secure domestic support during periods of democratic fragility. Focusing on public reactions to Bolsonaro's foreign policy in the second semester of 2022—a period marked by intense political tensions and election campaigning—this work addresses two central questions: (1) *How did Brazilian public opinion*

vary during weeks marked by Bolsonaro’s key foreign policy actions in 2022? and (2) *Was foreign policy instrumentalized by Bolsonaro as an electoral tool in a polarized environment?*

Building on theories emphasizing the role of public opinion in shaping foreign policy, we analyzed weekly survey data from the Instituto de Pesquisa de Reputação e Imagem (IPRI) to explore the relationship between Bolsonaro’s diplomatic actions and public sentiment during a politically turbulent period. Collected between June and December 2022, these data provide a nuanced perspective on public opinion leading up to the first and second rounds of the presidential elections (October 2 and October 30).

Through sentiment analysis and text analysis, the study investigates shifts in government approval and foreign policy-specific news recall. These methods uncover patterns in how key foreign policy events—Bolsonaro’s June meeting with U.S. President Biden, his controversial address to foreign ambassadors in July, his appearance at Queen Elizabeth II’s funeral, and his United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) speech in September—were received domestically and potentially leveraged as electoral tools during a period of heightened polarization.

The research formulates three hypotheses for analysis (H1 through H3). H1 anticipates that Bolsonaro’s polarizing foreign policy actions in late 2022 will correlate with shifts in public approval, with observable peaks or declines following key diplomatic events. H2 posits that Bolsonaro’s rhetoric at diplomatic events will employ specific appeals to conservative and nationalist values, aiming to align with the ideological preferences of his electoral base. Finally, H3 predicts that public recall of foreign policy topics in the news will show variation in prominence immediately after significant diplomatic events.

Collectively, these hypotheses aim to assess public engagement with Bolsonaro’s foreign policy actions in the second semester of 2022 and to explore whether these actions served as tools for influencing—or were influenced by—public opinion across society.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, reviewing key research on democratic backsliding, populism, and the intersection of foreign policy and public opinion. Section 3 provides the case context, exploring Brazil’s foreign policy traditions, Bolsonaro’s populist departures from these norms, and his strategic use of diplomacy between 2019 and 2022, with particular attention to the rhetorical patterns in his UNGA speeches. Section 4 describes the data and methods, including the survey design, key variables, and analytical tools used to evaluate public opinion responses to Bolsonaro’s foreign policy actions. Section 5 presents the results and discussion, exploring the study’s hypotheses through sentiment analysis and text analysis, with a focus on public approval of the government and rhetorical patterns. Finally, Section 6 concludes by synthesizing the findings, discussing their broader implications for democratic resilience, and suggesting avenues for future research. This study advances our understanding of the interplay between foreign policy and democratic backsliding, demonstrating how populist leaders may strategically weaponize international narratives to reinforce authoritarian tendencies domestically.

2 Theory: Democratic Backsliding, Foreign Policy, and Public Opinion

2.1 Democratic Backsliding: Trends, Tensions, and Theoretical Insights

Concerns over democratic backsliding have intensified worldwide as leaders increasingly undermine norms and institutions through subtle, often legally sanctioned tactics. Instead of abrupt coups, this erosion typically unfolds gradually within legal frameworks, allowing leaders to preserve a democratic façade while concentrating power (Haggard & Kaufman 2021). In these contexts, polarizing and nationalist rhetoric is often employed to bolster executive authority while discreetly manipulating electoral and judicial systems, fracturing the social unity essential for democratic governance (Bermeo 2016; Ginsburg & Huq 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2019). As institutions are dismantled incrementally, civil society faces growing challenges in mounting resistance (Diamond 2015). This gradual erosion allows executives to consolidate authority through legal reforms, centralizing power without overtly dismantling democratic institutions (Gamboa 2022).

Studies on democratic backsliding frequently underscore enduring challenges to democratic resilience, including executive aggrandizement, the erosion of electoral integrity, and weakened accountability mechanisms. A pivotal factor in this process is the role of political elites, who strategically respond to incentives, often by maintaining the appearance of democracy through elections while systematically eroding

foundational pillars, such as freedom of speech and minority rights (Bartels et al., 2023; Ding & Slater, 2021). Przeworski (2023) critiques the predominant focus on coercion and manipulation in explaining autocratic resilience, emphasizing that autocrats frequently secure support by delivering tangible benefits, such as economic stability or symbolic achievements, that resonate with citizens. Adding to this perspective, Druckman (2024) emphasizes that democratic backsliding is influenced not only by elite actions but also by the intricate dynamics between societal actors, including the media and interest groups, which significantly impact democratic outcomes and stability.

International dynamics further exacerbate the erosion of democracy. Riedl et al. (2024) argue that while international networks and resources can promote democratic resilience by sharing opposition strategies, mobilizing advocates, and highlighting human rights violations, they may also enable backsliding—for instance, by providing financial support to autocratic regimes or integrating them into stable economic blocs. Similarly, although regional organizations may resist power consolidation and serve as alternative judicial platforms for citizens, they can also undermine domestic accountability processes by prioritizing stability over democratic integrity (Riedl et al. 2024).

Diminished global support for democracy also empowers leaders to manipulate elections, restrict civil liberties, and suppress opposition with impunity (Hyde 2020; Samuels 2023). Cavari, Magen, and Yoel (2024) likewise contend that backsliding in influential democracies, such as the United States, erodes global public trust in democratic norms, fueling the appeal of authoritarian alternatives elsewhere. Meanwhile, anti-democratic powers such as Russia exacerbate this trend by promoting autocratic models globally and providing financial, technological, and diplomatic support to embattled regimes, enabling them to suppress dissent and shape public sentiment (Diamond, Plattner, & Walker 2016).

The “us versus them” mentality fueled by domestic polarization compounds democratic backsliding, a process further aggravated by fragile democratic institutions. Emerging research emphasizes the difficulty of maintaining checks and balances, particularly when executives exploit structural weaknesses to sideline legislatures and judiciaries, consolidating power while avoiding democratic constraints (Huq & Ginsburg 2023). Executive aggrandizement also regularly involves silencing media and civil society, limiting public accountability, weakening oversight, and leaving institutions less capable of dealing with both internal and external authoritarian pressures (Diamond 2015; Varieties of Democracy 2024).

Knutsen et al. (2024) state that defining and measuring democratic backsliding is inherently challenging due to the contested nature of democracy itself, urging scholars to move beyond simplistic measures and adopt more nuanced frameworks that account for diverse political contexts. Building on this, Little and Meng (2024a, 2024b) advocate for incorporating objective metrics, such as electoral turnover and executive constraints, which tend to depict more stable global trends. This is particularly relevant as they highlight that leaders increasingly employ subtle strategies to undermine democracy, often evading detection by traditional measurement frameworks.

Contemporary scholarship thus underscores the need for research that integrates domestic, institutional, and international perspectives. Wunsch and Blanchard (2023) add that identifying distinct patterns of backsliding can aid in devising tailored interventions, while Druckman (2024) emphasizes the value of holistic frameworks that incorporate psychological, societal, and institutional dynamics to better understand and counter current threats.

Leaders such as Bolsonaro have followed this trend by increasingly extending their anti-democratic strategies to the international stage and leveraging foreign policy as a tool to consolidate power at home. Topic 2.2. will explore the interplay of public opinion, media, and foreign policy, revisiting key literature to establish the theoretical foundation for understanding how these dynamics unfold in polarized contexts, including Brazil.

2.2 Foreign Policy as a Domestic Tool: The Interplay of Public Opinion, Media, and Diplomatic Actions

Research on public opinion and foreign policy has evolved significantly, moving from an early focus on the supposed volatility of mass attitudes to more nuanced perspectives on how citizens influence—or are influenced by—a state’s international decisions. Early theories, such as the Almond-Lippmann consensus, argued that public opinion on foreign affairs was too unstable and uninformed to consistently guide policy (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955). However, later studies challenged this view, showing that public attitudes on foreign policy can be stable, value-driven, and influential under certain conditions, providing a rational basis for preferences (Holsti 1992; Rathbun et al. 2016). In Brazil, Almeida, Fernandes, & Guimarães (2021) demonstrate that public opinion on diplomatic action is shaped by deep-seated beliefs about the nation’s peaceful and proactive global role, revealing stability rather than unpredictability in

public attitudes toward international affairs.

The role of media in shaping foreign policy opinions has also become a major area of focus. Baum & Potter (2008) argue that the media actively shapes public perceptions, exerting significant influence over diplomatic outcomes by amplifying specific issues, especially in democracies, where public support is crucial for policy legitimacy. More recently, Baum & Potter (2019) also emphasize how social media has fragmented information environments, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing views and limit exposure to diverse perspectives. This shift potentially weakens democratic constraints on foreign policy by isolating citizens within media silos, leading to abrupt shifts in public opinion on diplomatic issues.

Research also examines the tension between elite and mass public opinion in shaping foreign policy. The impact of public opinion on diplomatic outcomes becomes particularly apparent in electoral contexts. Aldrich et al. (2006) highlight that when voters hold coherent attitudes about foreign policy, can readily access these attitudes when casting their votes, and are presented with distinct party platforms, foreign policy becomes a meaningful criterion in shaping electoral choices. Gelpi and Reifler (2007) add that public opinion can constrain leaders' diplomatic actions, particularly during electoral cycles, as it reflects both retrospective judgments and future expectations—insights that are especially relevant to understanding Bolsonaro's use of foreign policy during the 2022 election cycle.

In addition, Powlick and Katz's (1998) concept of "latent [public] opinion" provides a compelling framework for understanding how the Brazilian President may have leveraged ingrained public values to justify controversial policies and polarize domestic sentiment through foreign policy. This concept refers to deeply held beliefs that remain dormant until activated by specific events or strategic messaging. In line with this perspective, our research suggests that Jair Bolsonaro strategically employed nationalist themes in his foreign policy to rally his base and suppress dissent, exemplifying how leaders in polarized contexts can exploit public predispositions to consolidate political support.

Overall, this body of literature provides a robust foundation for examining how public opinion, media, and foreign policy interact amidst polarization and democratic backsliding. The next section explores Brazil's case under Bolsonaro, offering a distinct perspective to analyze the dynamics outlined in the theoretical framework.

3 Case Context: Brazil Under Bolsonaro (2019-2022)

As democratic backsliding gains global attention, Brazil under President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) presents a pivotal case study. His administration systematically eroded democratic norms by weakening institutional checks and balances and infusing governance with populist, nationalist, and conservative values. This gradual degradation exemplifies how authoritarian tactics adapt to democratic frameworks, allowing democratic structures to persist in form while losing substance (Samuels & Zucco 2018; Varieties of Democracy 2021-2024).

A defining feature of Bolsonaro's presidency was his unprecedented appointment of military officials to civilian government roles, undermining the separation between civilian and military spheres established after Brazil's dictatorship. This move not only reinstated military influence in governance but also aligned with broader patterns of executive aggrandizement (Bermeo 2016). As Meyer (2021) notes, this shift represented a significant departure from Brazil's post-1988 democratic advances, signaling a rollback of civilian control over the military—a cornerstone of democratic stability.

Bolsonaro also relied heavily on populist, divisive rhetoric, positioning himself as an outsider combating a corrupt establishment. By framing opponents as threats to "traditional values" and national security, he mobilized evangelical Christians, conservative voters, and agribusiness interests—groups that felt marginalized by progressive agendas and supported his stance against "political correctness" (Farias, Casarões, & Magalhães 2022; Luna & Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Montero 2024). This approach combined nationalism with authoritarianism, transforming social and economic divides into potent political tools.

Bolsonaro's denialist stance on the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved downplaying the virus, rejecting scientific guidelines, and endorsing unproven treatments, further polarized society. For many, disregarding health measures became a marker of loyalty to the President. This approach not only exacerbated social divisions but also eroded trust in democratic institutions by targeting officials who opposed his stance, such as the Supreme Court and state governors (Smith 2020; Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, & Da Mata 2023).

His tenure displayed executive aggrandizement through efforts to centralize power within the executive branch while sidelining other powers. His contentious relationship with the judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court, sought to undermine judicial independence—a strategy Meyer (2021) identifies as part

of a broader pattern of “constitutional erosion” aimed at consolidating power and stifling opposition. Similarly, frequent accusations of media bias and “fake news” were deployed to discredit journalism and weaken its role as a democratic check on government authority (Meyer, 2021; Melo & Pereira, 2024).

The polarization of Brazilian society was also starkly evident during the 2022 presidential elections. Bolsonaro’s support came predominantly from wealthier socio-economic groups, including those earning more than ten times the minimum wage, and from key sectors represented by the “Beef, Bible, and Bullets” coalition: the evangelical church, agribusiness, and the military and police (Tanscheit & Barbosa 2023). In contrast, lower-income voters, especially those earning up to two minimum wages, overwhelmingly backed former President Lula da Silva, whose previous administrations were associated with significant socio-economic improvements for a large portion of the population (Tanscheit & Barbosa 2023). Issues such as gun ownership, conservative family values, and religious identity fueled polarization, introducing new identity-based divisions into Brazilian politics and threatening the social cohesion essential to democratic stability (Layton et al. 2021; Tanscheit & Barbosa 2023).

In summary, Bolsonaro’s administration can be understood as a product of Brazil’s “multidimensional crisis”, as described by Hunter and Power (2019), characterized by rising corruption, public insecurity, and declining trust in democratic institutions. His presidency highlights the complex, multifaceted nature of democratic backsliding, where militarization, polarization, and executive aggrandizement intersect to weaken democratic governance. What role, then, does Brazilian foreign policy play in this complex political landscape?

3.1 Brazilian Foreign Policy as a Public Policy: Bolsonaro’s Departure From Tradition

Since the adoption of the 1988 Constitution, Brazilian foreign policy has increasingly been viewed as a form of public policy, aligning the country’s international relations with the democratic values enshrined in the constitutional framework (Lopes & Valente, 2016). Article 4 of the Constitution establishes core principles, including the promotion of human rights, peace, non-intervention, and regional cooperation in Latin America. These ensure policy continuity across administrations (Lima 2000; Cheibub 1985) while aligning foreign policy with democratic commitments, national interests, and global challenges (Ratton Sanchez et al. 2006). As Milani and Pinheiro (2013) argue, this framework integrates foreign policy with domestic priorities, fostering mechanisms for participation and accountability.

Rooted in longstanding diplomatic traditions, Brazil’s 1988 Constitution emphasizes “soft power,” favoring negotiation over military force, non-intervention, sovereignty, regional cooperation, and non-discrimination. However, Bolsonaro’s administration (2019–2022) disrupted many of these principles, disregarding constitutional guidelines and raising critical questions about the use of foreign policy to rally public support for his populist agenda, rather than advance Brazil’s international interests.

A key feature of this reorientation was the promotion of conspiracy narratives, particularly the notion of “globalism,” which framed international institutions as threats to Brazilian sovereignty (De Sá Guimarães et al., 2023a). This approach seems to have served to polarize public opinion, reinforce Bolsonaro’s political base, and secure electoral advantages, often at the cost of diplomatic standing. Therefore, as Cadier (2024) describes in the concept of “battleground foreign policy,” Bolsonaro weaponized diplomacy to confront domestic opponents, blending external and internal adversarial politics.

The appointment of Ernesto Araújo as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2019 was pivotal in this shift. Influenced by far-right thinker Olavo de Carvalho, Araújo advanced an anti-globalist narrative that framed multilateral institutions as threats, incorporated evangelical themes into diplomacy, and championed conservative stances on issues including abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, often disregarding Brazil’s constitutional and international obligations toward human rights (De Sá Guimarães et al., 2023b).

Using “stereotyped images,” (Wehner 2022) Araújo portrayed international organizations as “globalist elites” opposed to the Brazilian people, constructing an “us versus them” rhetoric on the global stage. The administration’s alignment with leaders including Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán appealed to nationalist and conservative segments of the population, polarizing society through both domestic and international channels.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted Bolsonaro’s populist approach to diplomacy, marked by a rejection of international norms and skepticism toward global health initiatives. Rather than cooperating with the World Health Organization or adhering to scientific guidelines, he framed health measures as threats to national sovereignty and leveraged social media to amplify fears of globalism, portraying external entities as dangers to Brazil’s identity (Fracalossi de Moraes 2023; Trajber Waisbich 2023).

In 2021, Carlos França succeeded Araújo as Minister of Foreign Affairs, raising expectations for a

more pragmatic diplomatic approach. However, foreign policy remained tightly aligned with Bolsonaro's broader political goals, including efforts to politicize diplomacy for domestic popularity. A striking example occurred in July 2022, when Bolsonaro convened foreign ambassadors to question the integrity of Brazil's voting system—an unprecedented use of diplomacy to disseminate domestic misinformation. This aligns with Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann's (2021) characterization of populist regimes, where foreign policy becomes personalized and centralized, sidelining traditional bureaucracies in favor of direct control by the leader and their close allies.

Environmental policy was another area where this administration diverged from tradition. Previous governments had positioned Brazil as a global leader in environmental protection, particularly of the Amazon rainforest. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro weakened these protections, reduced funding for regulatory agencies, and even threatened withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, distancing Brazil from former allies including Norway and Germany. This stance was also framed as a defense of sovereignty, portraying international concerns as intrusions on Brazil's right to development (De Sá Guimarães et al. 2023a).

To delve further into Bolsonaro's diplomatic rhetoric and investigate H2, this study examined his opening speeches at the UNGA from 2019 to 2022. Text analysis was conducted to process, clean, and organize the data, with word cloud visualizations created to enhance understanding of the speeches' thematic structure and linguistic trends. The analysis also used bigrams to identify frequently occurring phrases, highlighting key themes and rhetorical patterns.

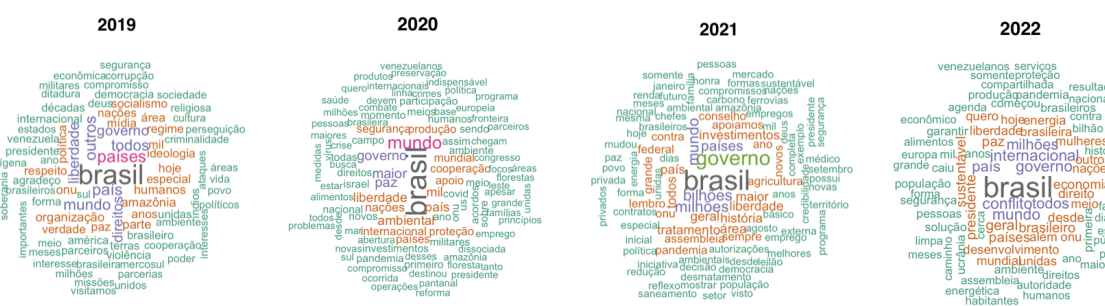


Figure 1: Word clouds of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's opening speeches at the United Nations General Assemblies (2019-2022). Source: own making.

The findings from Figure 1 reveal a consistent rhetorical pattern, with *Brasil* as the most frequent word each year, accompanied by neutral terms including *mundo* (world), *governo* (government), and *país* (country). Another notable word is *liberdade* (freedom); while it might also initially appear neutral, our deeper examination of its employment reveals that Bolsonaro capitalized on the concept of freedom to support his populist rhetoric, reframing it to resonate with a conservative, domestic agenda.

In 2019, for instance, he references freedom to celebrate past military dictatorships in Latin America, framing them as necessary to combat socialist threats. In 2020, he uses this concept to criticize pandemic lockdown measures, highlighting an internal power struggle rather than genuine international engagement, a pattern that is evident across all four speeches.

Alongside recurring terms, Bolsonaro's rhetoric reflects his evolving priorities for international and domestic audiences over the years. For instance, in 2019, terms including *socialismo* (socialism), *Venezuela*, and *ditadura* (dictatorship) highlight his opposition to leftist regimes in Latin America, positioning his government as a bulwark against socialism and aligning Brazil with right-wing allies.

In 2021, the prominence of terms such as *bilhões* (billions), *milhões* (millions), and *tratamento* (treatment) reflects his dual narrative of positioning Brazil as an emerging economic power while defending controversial pandemic policies. The President emphasized billions in investments and economic recovery efforts to portray financial resilience, while simultaneously promoting what he referred to as “early treatment” for COVID-19, including the off-label use of medications. This approach defied international scientific consensus and sought to counter criticism of his government’s pandemic response by showcasing Brazil’s economic performance and reframing his health policies as a defense of individual freedoms.

By 2022, his speech took on a distinctly electoral tone. Declining inflation was presented as a hallmark of his administration's success, accompanied by criticisms of corruption and mismanagement tied to previous leftist administrations. His rhetoric also emphasized socially conservative themes to cast himself as the only leader capable of maintaining Brazil's stability and traditional values. Hence, the

observed rhetorical strategies lend support to H2, highlighting the President’s consistent use of populist appeals in diplomacy to engage with his electoral base.

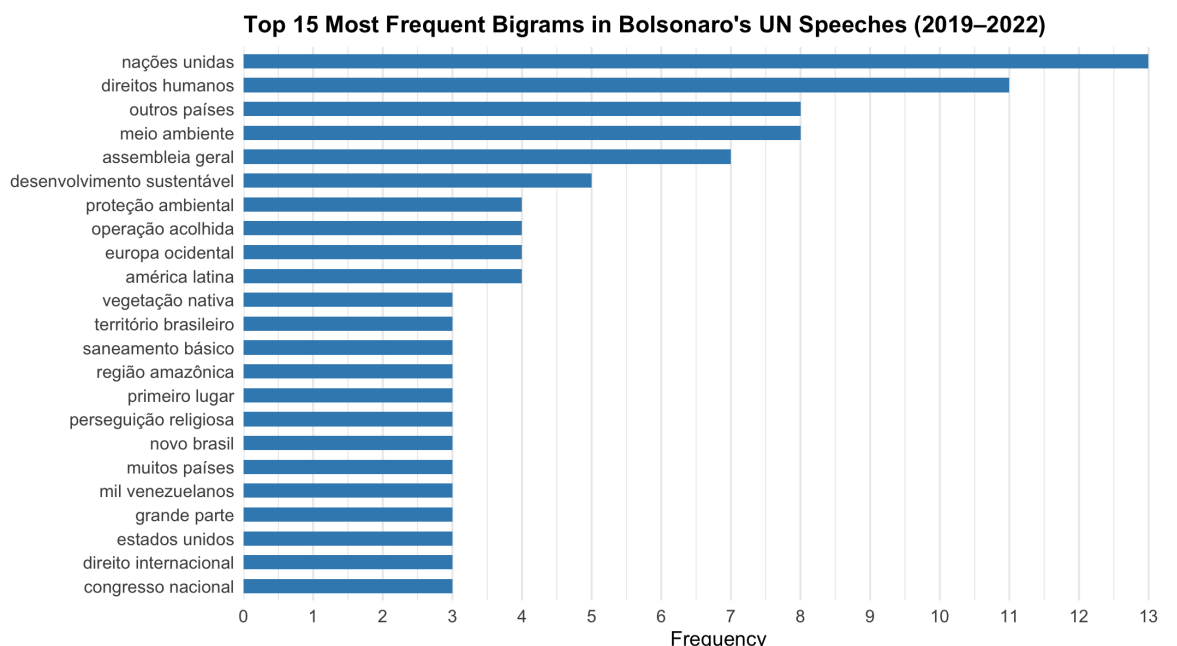


Figure 2: Fifteen most frequent bigrams in former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s opening speeches at United Nations (UN) General Assemblies. Source: own making.

The pattern from the word clouds extends to frequently used bigrams in his speeches (Figure 2). Expressions such as *Nações Unidas* (United Nations), *direitos humanos* (human rights), *outros países* (other countries), *meio ambiente* (environment), *nosso governo* (our government), and *desenvolvimento sustentável* (sustainable development) might appear neutral out of context. However, our analysis found that these were also often used in a distorted manner, reinforcing Bolsonaro’s populist narrative.

For instance, in 2019 he invoked human rights to inaccurately describe the *Mais Médicos* (More Doctors) Program—a partnership between Brazil and Cuba to provide healthcare in underserved areas—as “a form of true slave labor,” allegedly “endorsed by human rights entities in Brazil and the UN.” In his 2022 speech, he framed values such as the right to life from conception and opposition to gender ideology as central to human rights, leveraging them as campaign tools for re-election.

This pattern was also evident in his approach to environmental policy, a frequent target of criticism. As an example, in his 2020 speech he claimed that foreign actors criticized Brazil’s environmental policies to undermine the country’s position as a leading food producer, deflecting legitimate concerns while strengthening a nationalist image.

These findings also align with H2. By framing topics including freedom, human rights, and environmental policy through a domestic populist lens, Bolsonaro’s speeches emphasized themes that echoed the values and grievances of his conservative supporters, rather than addressing Brazil’s broader international concerns. To explore these dynamics further, the next section details the data and methods employed to empirically examine the study’s hypotheses.

4 Data and Methods

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to address its two core research questions: (1) How did Brazilian public opinion vary during weeks marked by Bolsonaro’s key foreign policy actions in 2022? and (2) Was foreign policy instrumentalized by Bolsonaro as an electoral tool in a polarized environment? The methodology integrates sentiment analysis and text analysis, providing a comprehensive framework to examine public reactions to key foreign policy events during the second semester of 2022.

Sentiment analysis tracks shifts in government approval and rejection, while text analysis examines public discourse and Bolsonaro’s rhetoric in key speeches, highlighting how nationalist and populist messaging shaped foreign policy. Weekly survey data provide temporal granularity, capturing both

immediate and cumulative effects of major diplomatic events. This approach connects foreign policy with Brazil’s process of democratic backsliding, suggesting that international engagements were strategically leveraged to advance domestic political objectives.

4.1 Data Description

The analysis draws on weekly survey data collected between June and December 2022 by the Instituto de Pesquisa de Reputação e Imagem (IPRI), a research organization that has provided services to the Brazilian Federal Government. The dataset was accessed through the Brazilian Presidency’s Open Data portal. It consists of 30,000 responses collected via telephone from representative samples of adults during a critical political engagement period, including the two rounds of the 2022 presidential elections (October 2 and October 30).

The surveys included questions encompassing demographics, government evaluation, media consumption, weekly themes, and additional profile information. Most questions were multiple-choice for consistency, while open-ended questions on memorable news provided qualitative insights to complement the structured data. Surveys were conducted as 10-minute telephone interviews, adhering to Brazil’s General Data Protection Law (LGPD) to ensure confidentiality and quality control.

4.2 Research Design

This research encompasses a detailed analysis of the IPRI data, integrating sentiment analysis and text analysis to explore the relationship between public opinion and key foreign policy events during the second half of 2022. The selected events highlight how Bolsonaro’s administration leveraged high-profile international platforms to convey messages with both domestic and international significance, frequently blending diplomatic engagements with populist campaign rhetoric to reinforce his political narrative.

Key Foreign Policy Events

For our analysis, we identified four key foreign policy events from the second half of 2022 that exemplify Bolsonaro’s diplomatic strategy. The events are:

Event #1: *Meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden (June 09, 2022)*

In June 2022, Bolsonaro had his first meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden following his strong alignment with former President Donald Trump and his critical stance on the 2020 American elections. The Brazilian President addressed the country’s sovereignty over the Amazon, subtly responding to international criticism of deforestation under his administration. He also used the international platform to voice concerns about Brazil’s upcoming elections, stressing the importance of ensuring “clean, reliable, and auditable” outcomes. This stance underscored his persistent skepticism regarding electoral integrity, a narrative that gained prominence as polls increasingly indicated his opponent, Lula, as the frontrunner.

Event #2: *Meeting with foreign ambassadors (July 18, 2022)*

In July, Bolsonaro convened foreign ambassadors at his official residence to question the reliability of Brazil’s electoral system, casting doubt even on the 2018 elections that brought him to power. During this unprecedented diplomatic event, he made unsubstantiated claims of electoral hacking and accused Supreme Court justices of bias toward Lula. The meeting, broadcast on state-owned *TV Brasil*, drew criticism for undermining electoral confidence using government resources. According to the Superior Electoral Court, it represented a misuse of state resources for political gain, leading to Bolsonaro’s ineligibility ruling in 2023.

Event #3: *Visit to London for Queen Elizabeth II’s Funeral (September 18, 2022)*

On September 18, Bolsonaro’s official visit to London for Queen Elizabeth II’s funeral quickly turned into a campaign moment. Speaking from the Brazilian ambassador’s residence balcony, the President addressed supporters, asserting that victory in the upcoming elections was certain, despite polls indicating otherwise. His remarks referenced his conservative positions, highlighting the campaign slogan “our

flag will always be green and yellow,” which was widely criticized as highly inappropriate for the occasion.

Event #4: UN General Assembly Speech (September 20, 2022)

In his final UNGA speech, Bolsonaro adopted an electoral tone instead of addressing pressing global issues. The President leveraged this international platform to accuse political opponents of corruption and governance failures, as well as to highlight his government’s achievements. The Superior Electoral Court soon prohibited the use of this event’s footage in campaign materials, citing misuse of an international platform for electoral promotion.

Key Variables

The events chosen demonstrate how authoritarian-leaning leaders may strategically use international platforms to further domestic political objectives. To assess their impact on public opinion and explore their potential electoral motivations during the second half of 2022, this study utilizes sentiment analysis and text analysis, focusing on the following variables:

1. **Government approval and satisfaction:** assessed through questions evaluating overall government performance (P08 – “How do you evaluate the performance of the Federal Government?”) and approval/rejection (P09 – “Do you approve or disapprove of the Federal Government’s performance?”), offering both categorical and binary measures of public support.
2. **Public recall of foreign policy in the news about Brazil and the federal government:** tracked through open-ended questions on recent news about Brazil recall (P01 – “Regarding news from recent days about Brazil, what is the topic or news story that you remember the most? And in second place?”) and government actions (P02 – “What is the news or topic of the last few days about the Federal Government that you remember the most?”), enabling an assessment of the prominence of foreign policy within public consciousness.

Analytical Techniques

This work employed sentiment analysis to examine fluctuations in public opinion across various dimensions. By quantifying shifts before and after major foreign policy events, this approach uncovered correlations between these and changes in government evaluation (H1).

Text analysis complemented this by examining open-ended survey responses to identify recurring themes in public recall of foreign policy topics (H3). It was also applied to Bolsonaro’s speeches at the UNGA and the ambassadorial meeting, revealing a rhetorical focus on nationalist and populist themes over Brazil’s traditional foreign policy principles and connecting his diplomatic messaging to a broader electoral strategy (H2).

A systematic approach to data manipulation and analysis ensured efficient processing of responses. Response frequencies were calculated and visualized over time to track trends in public opinion surrounding Bolsonaro’s foreign policy events in late 2022. Word clouds captured public recall of news items (P01, P02) before and after these events. To uncover key themes and rhetorical patterns, bigram analysis was applied to Bolsonaro’s UN speeches (2019–2022) and his ambassadorial meeting speech, identifying frequently used two-word phrases. Text cleaning and stemming techniques ensured the accuracy and relevance of the textual analysis.

The methods employed are well-suited to the study’s objectives. Sentiment analysis captures fluctuations in government evaluation, enabling the identification of correlations between key foreign policy events and shifts in public opinion. Text analysis adds depth by identifying recurring themes in survey responses and official speeches, linking diplomatic rhetoric to nationalist and populist strategies. Visual tools, such as word clouds and bigram analysis, make the findings more accessible, ensuring the methodology effectively supports the exploration of the role of foreign policy in domestic political consolidation.

Methodological Limitations

Methodological limitations may have influenced the findings of this study. First, the analysis of Event #1 (Bolsonaro’s meeting with Biden) was constrained by the surveys conducted during Weeks 2 through 5, which were region-specific. This restricted the ability to capture a comprehensive national response to the event and affected both the analysis and the selection of other foreign policy actions during this period.

Second, as the surveys were commissioned by the Federal Government, the framing or focus of certain questions may have been influenced, potentially affecting data neutrality. In addition, the reliance on telephone-based data collection may have introduced an income bias, excluding individuals without access to telephones, typically from lower-income backgrounds. This exclusion is particularly relevant given that lower-income demographics strongly supported Lula in the 2022 elections, potentially impacting the representativeness of public opinion reflected in this study. These limitations underscore the need for caution when interpreting the results, as they may influence the generalizability of the findings.

Despite these challenges, the dataset remains a valuable resource for understanding how foreign policy was perceived during a politically charged moment. The surveys offer rare insight into the public’s recall of diplomatic actions, helping us reflect on how foreign affairs are politicized in the domestic sphere in a context of democratic erosion and electoral polarization.

5 Results and Discussion

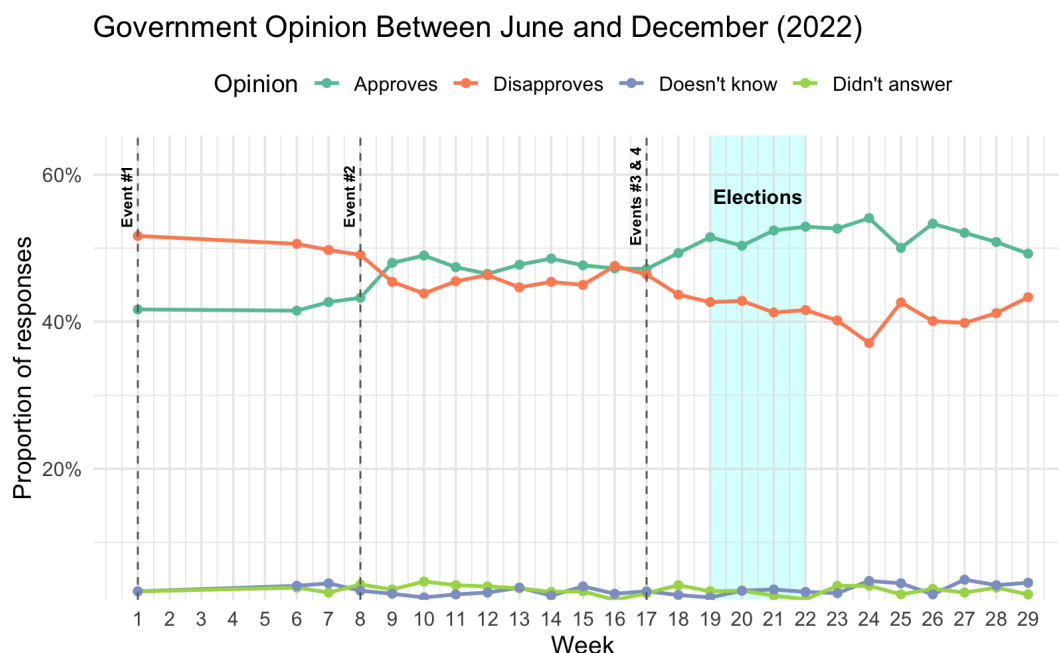


Figure 3: Trends in government opinion between June and December 2022, based on data from the IPRI surveys. Weeks 2 to 5 show no variation because the corresponding data were regional, not national, and thus were not used in the main analyses. These weeks were retained in the figure to preserve the continuity of the survey timeline. Source: own making.

Figure 3 illustrates fluctuations in public approval and rejection of Bolsonaro’s government from June to December 2022 (P09 – “Do you approve or disapprove of the Federal Government’s performance?”), with the four key events marked on the timeline. If H1 were true, we would expect the figure to indicate observable peaks or declines in approval and rejection rates closely aligned with the timing of the events—and this was indeed the case.

In the weeks following Event #1 (Bolsonaro’s meeting with Biden), there is a slight but noticeable increase in approval ratings and a decrease in rejection, suggesting a brief positive reception from Weeks 1 through 8. However, rejection remains consistently higher than approval, reflecting sustained polarization in public opinion.

Event #2, Bolsonaro’s controversial meeting with foreign ambassadors, is followed by an immediate and sharp shift: rejection drops significantly, and approval rises substantially. This is the first time in

this period that approval surpasses rejection, indicating that Bolsonaro’s rising criticism of the electoral process—including during Event #2—may have resonated with a significant segment of the public.

In the period surrounding Events #3 and #4—Bolsonaro’s visit to London for Queen Elizabeth’s funeral and his UNGA speech—the graph shows an increase in approval and a decrease in rejection. This may suggest that his actions on the international stage, blending diplomacy with campaign messaging, resonated with a portion of the public in the lead-up to the election. However, it is difficult to establish a clear causal link between the events and the observed shifts in approval, especially given the proximity to the election and the broader context of intense political activity during that period.

Overall, these trends are consistent with H1, as shifts in public sentiment seem to coincide with Bolsonaro’s polarizing foreign policy actions. Each event is followed by temporary changes in approval and rejection, suggesting that diplomatic actions may have contributed to shaping how voters perceived the President’s leadership in an election-charged climate.

Government Opinion Between June and December (2022), pt. 2

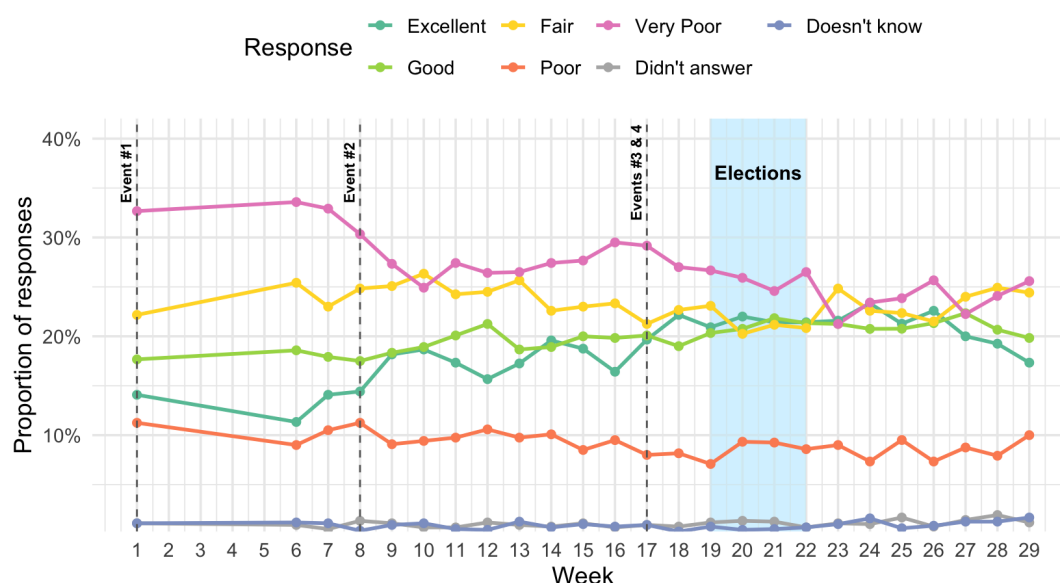


Figure 4: Trends in government opinion between June and December 2022, according to data collected from the IPRI surveys (part 2). Weeks 2 to 5 show no variation because the corresponding data were regional, not national, and thus were not used in the main analyses. These weeks were retained in the figure to preserve the continuity of the survey timeline. Source: own making.

Figure 4 illustrates fluctuations in public opinion toward Bolsonaro’s administration from June to December 2022, based on responses to question P08 (“How do you evaluate the performance of the Federal Government?”), categorized as Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, and Very Poor. Once again, if H1 were correct, this figure would likely display noticeable shifts across performance categories—and it does.

Event #1 is followed by nuanced shifts in public opinion, though the response is mixed. In Week 6, there is a slight increase in both “Very Poor” and “Good” ratings, followed by more intense decreases in Weeks 7 and 8, reflecting varied reactions. Notably, “Poor” and “Excellent” ratings decline from Weeks 1 through 6, with growth mainly in the “Fair” category. Nonetheless, because data from the immediate post-event period is limited to regional samples, firm conclusions about its impact must remain cautious.

Event #2 aligns with more pronounced shifts. Following it, there is a sharp decline in “Very Poor” ratings and a marked increase in “Excellent” ratings, along with smaller increases in “Fair” and “Good” ratings and a decrease in “Poor” ratings. This pattern may indicate a rallying effect among Bolsonaro’s supporters, with the rise in “Excellent” ratings suggesting that his stance on electoral integrity during this moment—with Event #2 standing out as a key illustration—reinforced support for him. Meanwhile, the decline in “Very Poor” and “Poor” ratings hints at softened opposition or more favorable views of his performance.

Immediately after Events #3 and #4, “Excellent” ratings increased, accompanied by a smaller rise in “Fair” ratings. At the same time, there was a slight decrease in “Good” ratings, a modest increase in “Poor” ratings, and a more substantial drop in “Very Poor” ratings. This combination suggests that

Bolsonaro’s international actions might have had a positive influence on the public, softening internal criticism. Nevertheless, while these changes in opinion coincide with the events, their interpretation remains tentative, as other factors related to the election period may have also influenced public sentiment.

In summary, the trends depicted in Figure 4 align with the expectations outlined in H1, showing changes in public opinion following diplomatic events. To examine H3 (public recall of foreign policy topics in the news will show variation in prominence immediately after significant diplomatic events), we chose to represent responses to P01 (“What is the news or topic of the last few days about the Federal Government that you remember the most?”) and P02 (“Thinking about the news from recent days about Brazil, what is the topic or news story that you remember the most? And in second place?”) using word clouds.

Responses to both questions were combined, as we observed that the notions of “Federal Government” and “Brazil” were often intertwined in public perception. This approach facilitates a broad exploration of events in the weeks surrounding the selected foreign policy actions, allowing us to investigate whether diplomatic actions were prominent in public memory.

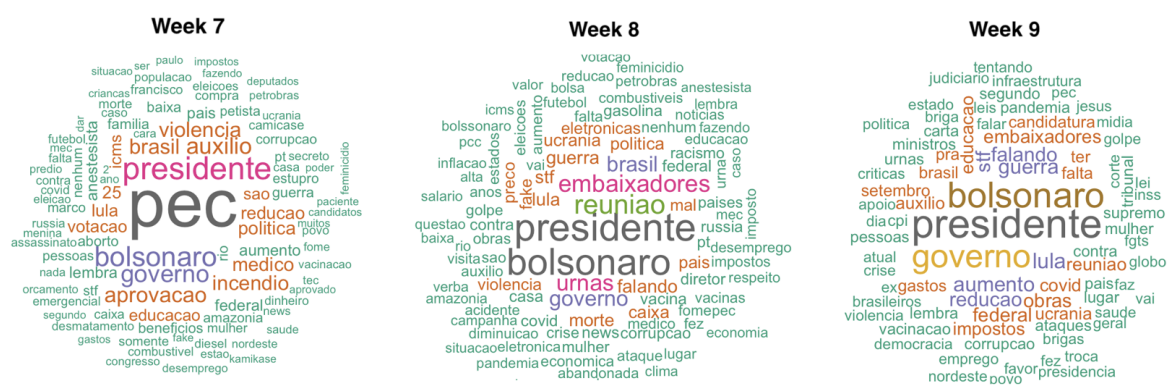


Figure 5: Word clouds of P01 (recall of news about Brazil) and P02 (recall of news about the Federal Government) one week before, during, and one week after Event #2. Data collected from the IPRI surveys. Source: own making.

Word clouds for Weeks 7, 8, and 9 reflect clear shifts in the public’s recall of prominent topics concerning diplomatic events (Figure 5). The survey responses used to generate them were collected on July 13–14 (Week 7), July 20–21 (Week 8), and July 27–28 (Week 9), with the event itself taking place on July 18, 2022—in between the first and second waves.

Week 7, immediately preceding Event #2 (Bolsonaro’s meeting with ambassadors), is dominated by terms related to an internal, populist measure implemented by the government, notably PEC (Proposed Amendment to the Constitution), the most prominent word. Other frequently mentioned terms include *aprovação* (approval), *auxílio* (aid), *redução* (reduction), *aumento* (increase), *ICMS* (a tax on goods transactions), *benefícios* (benefits), *diesel*, *emergencial* (urgent), and *combustível* (fuel). These refer primarily to the recently approved “*PEC dos Auxílios*” (Aid PEC) in the National Congress. This amendment allowed the government to declare a state of emergency, ostensibly due to rising fuel prices, which enabled the provision of financial aid to various low-income groups just three months before the election—a controversial move widely criticized as a tactic to boost Bolsonaro’s popularity. Other terms such as *Bolsonaro*, *Presidente* (President), *Política* (Politics), and *Governo* (Government) also appear in multiple contexts, but most often in connection with the *PEC*.

In Week 8, the week of Event #2, attention is clearly focused on this controversial act. Our analysis revealed that the most prominent words—*Presidente* (President) and *Bolsonaro*—refer almost exclusively to this gathering, and related terms such as *embaixadores* (ambassadors), *reunião* (meeting), and *urnas* (ballot boxes) are also highlighted. Words including *Lula* and *STF* (Supreme Court), both targets of Bolsonaro’s criticism during the meeting, also appear frequently. Broader terms such as *governo* (government), *Brasil*, *política* (politics), and *país* (country) also appear in various contexts, though mainly related to this move.

Topics from the previous week are still mentioned but with significantly less emphasis, indicating that the focus shifted primarily to the meeting with ambassadors and demonstrating how the week’s controversial diplomatic event overshadowed recent domestic news.

In Week 9, the week following Event #2, it still draws attention from the public. Key words such as *Presidente* (President), *Bolsonaro*, *Governo* (government), *Lula*, and *STF* (Supreme Court) are prominent, often mentioned in association with the meeting. Specific terms directly related to it, such as *reunião* (meeting) and *embaixadores* (ambassadors) continue to stand out, indicating that the controversy surrounding the gathering is still top-of-mind for many respondents.

The persistence of these terms in the word cloud suggests that Bolsonaro’s meeting with ambassadors had a lasting effect, fueling ongoing discussions and concerns related to democracy, the judiciary, and the electoral process. This enduring prominence highlights the significant public interest and controversy generated by the President’s foreign policy during this period, therefore sustaining H3 and demonstrating how some of Bolsonaro’s controversial diplomatic acts were able to displace purely domestic topics in public memory.



Figure 6: Word clouds of P01 (recall of news about Brazil) and P02 (recall of news about the Federal Government) one week before, during, and one week after Events #3 and #4. Data collected from the IPRI surveys. Source: own making.

Word clouds for Weeks 16, 17, and 18 also reflect important shifts in the public’s recall of prominent foreign policy topics (Figure 6). The survey responses used to generate them were collected on September 14–16 (Week 16), September 20–22 (Week 17), and September 27–28 (Week 18), with the events themselves taking place on September 18 and September 20, 2022—in between the first and second waves.

In Week 16, following Queen Elizabeth’s death (Event #3), public attention is primarily focused on this event, as highlighted by the words *morte* (death), *rainha* (queen), and *Elizabeth*. These data, collected from September 14 to 16, capture the public’s interest in the Queen’s passing before Bolsonaro attended her funeral and used the occasion for political messaging.

The words *Bolsonaro*, *Presidente* (President), and *governo* (government) also appear frequently, but not in connection with foreign policy. Instead, these are largely related to a domestic scandal, reflected in the word *imóveis* (real estate), following the revelation that the Bolsonaro family used cash to purchase about half of their real estate assets, which raised suspicions of corruption. Therefore, no significant Brazilian foreign policy actions are highlighted in public recall for this week.

Nonetheless, in Week 17, the week of Events #3 and 4, all of the most prominent words are directly related to foreign policy. Terms including *morte* (death), *Inglaterra* (England), *funeral*, and *rainha* (queen) now mostly refer to public commentary on Bolsonaro’s behavior at the funeral, rather than the event itself. Other prominent words—*Bolsonaro*, *presidente* (president), *ONU* (UN), *viagem* (trip), *discurso* (speech), *governo* (government), and *visita* (visit)—show that public attention this week centered on the two diplomatic events. This marks a clear change from the previous week, therefore highlighting a shift toward the President’s controversial behavior at international events, supporting H3.

In Week 18, immediately following Events #3 and 4, we see a highly politically charged atmosphere, as this is the final week before the presidential election. The wide presence of words such as *Presidente* (President), *Bolsonaro*, *Lula*, and *Governo* (government), linked to the race, reflects the intense political focus of this period. Interestingly, mentions of Bolsonaro’s UN speech have disappeared from the word cloud. However, his attendance at Queen Elizabeth’s funeral—and his controversial address to supporters—remained fresh in mentions. This is evidenced by the prominence of words such as *rainha* (queen),

morte (death), *visita* (visit), *viagem* (trip), and *Elizabeth* and by qualitative analysis of the responses to P01 and P02, suggesting that the President's behavior at the funeral left a lasting impression.

Nevertheless, this international event is not the sole or even the primary focus of the week. Domestic political issues, represented by words such as *corrupção* (corruption), *TSE* (Brazil's Electoral Superior Court), and *STF* (Supreme Court), are also prominent. Other events, such as the ongoing World Cup, capture attention with words including *copa* (cup), *mundo* (world), and *futebol* (soccer). This diverse mix of topics highlights the multifaceted public discourse in this week, with domestic issues, international controversies, and sports all contributing to the public's focus.

Our findings hence illustrate significant changes in public recall of notable topics, pointing to support for H3 as the prominence of foreign policy in public recall seemed to vary in response to significant diplomatic actions, rising or fading in importance over time.

Finally, to further investigate H2 (*Bolsonaro's rhetoric at diplomatic events will employ specific appeals to conservative and nationalist values, aiming to align with the ideological preferences of his electoral base*), this study generated a word cloud (Figure 7) and bigram analysis (Figure 8) based on the transcript of Bolsonaro's meeting with ambassadors, which stood out for its unusually hostile rhetoric toward Brazilian democratic institutions, diverging sharply from conventional diplomatic norms. Our analysis aligned with this impression, as did the Superior Electoral Court's 2023 ruling, which convicted Bolsonaro and disqualified him from future elections for abusing political power and misusing media resources during the event.

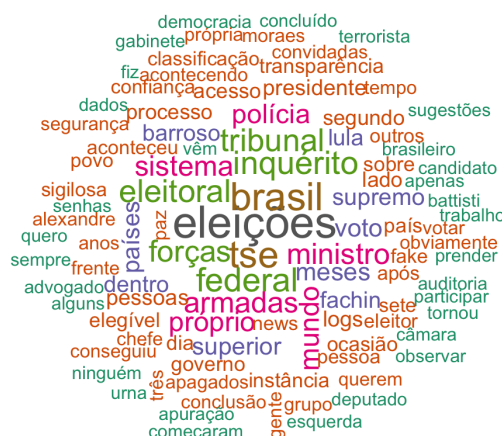


Figure 7: Word cloud analysis of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s speech to foreign ambassadors on July 18, 2022. Source: own making.

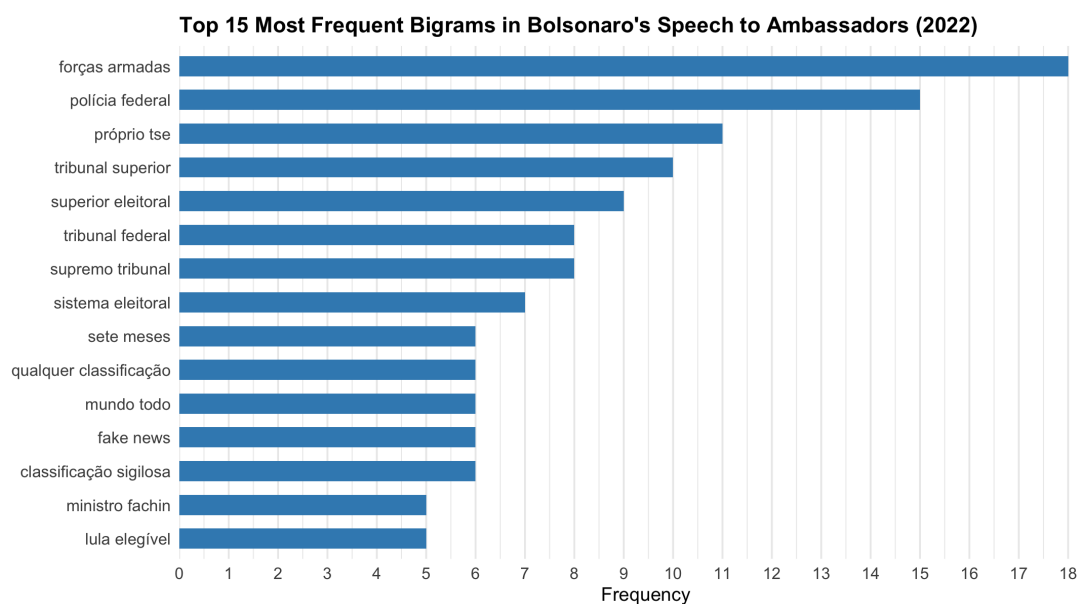


Figure 8: Fifteen most frequent bigrams in former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s speech to foreign ambassadors on July 18, 2022. Source: own making.

The analysis of both the word cloud (Figure 7) and the bigram (Figure 8) reveals a notable absence of references to Brazil’s international relations, despite the event’s diplomatic nature. Instead, prominent terms—such as *eleições* (elections), *inquérito* (inquiry), *polícia federal* (federal police), *forças armadas* (armed forces), and *tribunal* (court)—focus on domestic issues, particularly unfounded claims about the security of Brazil’s electoral process and attacks on judicial institutions such as the Supreme Court (*Supremo*, *Supremo Tribunal*, *Tribunal Federal*) and the Superior Electoral Court (*TSE*, *Tribunal Superior*, *Superior Eleitoral*, *próprio TSE*) and their justices (*Barroso* and *Fachin*, targeted by Bolsonaro). This emphasis on institutional conflicts over diplomatic topics confirms Bolsonaro’s aggressive and atypical foreign policy rhetoric, aimed at undermining trust in Brazil’s democracy.

The Superior Electoral Court’s 2023 ruling of this event found that it deviated significantly from diplomatic norms, serving instead as a platform for Bolsonaro’s political messaging. By leveraging state resources, including broadcasting the event on public television, the former President turned the diplomatic gathering into a tool for his re-election campaign. This unprecedented use of presidential diplomacy to advance an internal political agenda violated Brazilian electoral law and resulted in his ineligibility until 2030.

6 Conclusion

This study examines Jair Bolsonaro’s strategic use of foreign policy to consolidate domestic political support during the second semester of 2022. By analyzing public opinion around key foreign policy events, it provides evidence that the former Brazilian president leveraged international platforms to advance a nationalist and populist agenda.

The analysis identifies correlations between Bolsonaro’s diplomatic actions and shifts in public sentiment, such as increased approval ratings and reduced rejection during pivotal moments. The findings suggest that the president’s rhetoric, marked by attacks on institutions, resonated strongly with a significant portion of voters and may have softened opposition during a critical electoral period. Additionally, the study shows that foreign policy topics gained prominence in public discourse following high-profile international events and remained salient in the weeks thereafter, indicating sustained public engagement with these issues.

While the paper offers valuable insights into the Brazilian case, its scope is primarily descriptive, centered on identifying patterns rather than testing causal mechanisms. Future research should pursue formal hypothesis testing and comparative analysis to evaluate the broader applicability of these findings. For example, investigating the roles of social media and economic variables could further clarify how populist leaders adapt foreign policy to consolidate domestic support, offering deeper insight into the mechanisms of democratic backsliding and informing strategies for democratic resilience.

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