

## **Media Parallelism Beyond the Political World: How Newspapers Push Economic Agendas Through Editorial Journalism**

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Over the last decade, political communication research has scrutinized the characteristics of media systems beyond the developed world. To understand new façades in media/political connections, this article examines how the notion of parallelism unfolds in the *O Estado de S. Paulo* (OESP) editorials—one of the most influential Brazilian newspapers. We investigate (a) the arguments raised, (b) the policies suggested, and (c) the news companies' evaluation of the political performance of the Lula, Temer, and Bolsonaro administrations regarding pension reform approval. A content analysis of 341 editorials revealed that the OESP adopts a parallelism that strays from the literature's traditional definition. For the newspaper at stake, the contrasting ideologies underpinning the three governments matter less than their willingness—and political strength—to approve liberal economic reforms. The article reinforces its claim for de-Westernizing media research by empirically demonstrating singular dimensions of media parallelism that have not been fully explored to date.

*Keywords: editorials, media systems, news organizations, pension reform, political parallelism*

Although previous studies explored the association between the field of politics and the media (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975/1995; Seymour-Ure, 1974), the idea of political parallelism became more striking from the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004). According to these authors, political parallelism refers to the degree to which media companies support different political ideals or organizations—going beyond the traditional focus on political parties.

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Over the last few years, an extensive array of investigations has applied the concept of political parallelism to understand the media/politics connections in several contexts (van Dalen, 2021; van Kempen, 2007). However, most studies continue underlining Western European and American cases, thus curbing the concept's explanatory power (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013; McCargo, 2012).

Therefore, this article investigates how this phenomenon manifests in editorials published by mainstream media companies in a democracy beyond the Western world. More specifically, our work examines the positions and interests disclosed in editorials of the Brazilian newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* (OESP) when the Lula da Silva (2003–2010), Michel Temer (2016–2018), and Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) presidential administrations introduced pension reform bills.

Through a longitudinal, comparative content analysis of 341 editorials published over three different governments (each belonging to a specific ideological lineage), we emphasize the relevance of such opinion pieces for sustaining journalistic companies as players interested in influencing decision-making processes (Cook, 2006; Pimentel, Marques, & Santos, 2022; Sparrow, 2006).

Although Brazil's social security system is among the most significant expenses of the nation's public budget, it ensures the survival of millions of low-income citizens. Since the 1988 Constitution, the country's pension system has undergone several changes to control public spending. The reforms proposed by the Lula (Worker's Party), Temer (Brazilian Democratic Movement), and Bolsonaro (Liberal Party, as of today) administrations have become a matter of intense debate due to the scale of the proposed changes. Thus, comparing the three political and economic settings allows us to identify continuities and transformations in the OESP's editorial stances.

Besides contributing to the literature on media systems and political parallelism, our work reinforces the need to "de-Westernize" (Marques & Miola, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021) research in political communication. By pointing out the existence of *economic parallelism* in a scenario in which different forms of parallelism coexist with instrumentalization, our study calls for a revision in certain long-established theoretical categories. In addition, this work reinforces the role of journalistic organizations as actors with their own agendas and policy preferences (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013; Mont'Alverne & Marques, 2022), spending their best efforts to pressure political authorities rather than merely reflecting preexisting political cleavages. We argue that the Global South phenomenon deserves more attention if we aim to integrate our international community of scholars effectively.

### **Political Parallelism in the Global South**

Despite its prestige, the idea of political parallelism has been heavily criticized (Norris, 2009). For example, the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) disregarded the media/politics connections in Global South societies. Even though the authors addressed this issue years later (Hallin & Mancini, 2012), some phenomena still beg for further explanation, especially in environments where political parallelism and instrumentalization coexist (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013; Pimentel & Marques, 2021).

Accordingly, Albuquerque (2012) argued that political parallelism must consider the existing sociopolitical cleavages and the willingness of the media to influence the debate in each context. McCargo (2012) suggests that parallelism emerges not from formal organizational ties but from personal connections. Another criticism claims that Hallin and Mancini (2004) assign a subordinate role to the media. That is, they allegedly underestimate media actors' willingness to sponsor their own agendas and interests—even though the press has intervened in Latin American politics (Pérez-Liñán, 2007).

While scholarship has considered that political parallelism implies the existence of different points of view voiced by organized groups and echoed by media organizations (Mancini, 2012), the notion of instrumentalization "acts within a sort of discursive vacuum where the only thing that counts is the possibility of exercising pressure and constructing consensus" (Mancini, 2012, p. 272). Consequently, just like political parallelism, the idea of instrumentalization (or media capture) is insufficient to explain contexts where the media seeks to impose themselves and transform the distribution of power to carry out their private interests (Chakravarty & Roy, 2013; Cook, 2006).

Furthermore, the notion of parallelism suggests a structure of the public sphere marked by significant external pluralism—what we see as another limitation of the traditional concept. Such plurality has strong roots in Western Europe (Albuquerque, 2012; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, even though environments beyond the West rely on low external plurality, this does not mean that we must automatically resort to instrumentalization as the single explanatory key (Mancini, 2012).

Against this backdrop, our article sustains the idea that journalistic organizations can sponsor their own ambitions without necessarily being subordinated to or instrumentalized by groups external to the media field, even in settings characterized by scarce plurality. The improved concept of parallelism must consider elements such as the pragmatism characterizing media managers, recognizing their willingness to pursue private interests, and acknowledging the protagonist role of journalistic organizations under certain circumstances (McCargo, 2012; Pimentel & Marques, 2021).

### **Pension Reforms in Brazil**

According to the National Treasury, Brazil is Latin America's largest spender on social security (Carneiro, 2018; circa 12% of the GDP). While some experts claim that the system is in deficit (Tafner & Nery, 2019), others argue that the social security system has a surplus (Gentil, 2019)—results vary according to the methodology. Likewise, there is no consensus on what to prioritize when debating social security (Silva, 2012): Should the goal be to secure social protection or improve the government's budget balance? The fact remains that social security in Brazil consumed approximately US\$140 billion in 2021, benefiting more than 30 million individuals (Villas-Bôas, 2020).

As in other countries (Conceição-Heldt, 2008), attempts to change the social benefits system in Brazil have incited heated social debate, requiring extensive political effort for bills to be approved (to change the Constitution, one needs the support of 3/5 of parliamentarians in Congress and Senate, in two voting rounds). Presidents Collor (1990–1992), Cardoso (1995–2002), and Rousseff (2011–2016) successfully passed specific changes to the retirement plans of public and private workers (Tafner & Nery,

2019). Nonetheless, the Lula, Temer, and Bolsonaro administrations sent sweeping bills to Congress to overhaul the pension system.

Since the Brazilian party system is exceptionally fragmented (Calvo, Guarnieri, & Limongi, 2015), convincing representatives and changing public opinion require strong support from the journalistic field—thus conferring singular importance to the opinions of media outlets when state reforms are under discussion.

### **Media Parallelism in Brazil and the Relevance of Liberal Economic Agendas**

Mainstream journalism in Brazil has historically endorsed liberal economic agendas (Albuquerque, 2021; Saad-Filho, 2020). The argument that neoliberalism would be a desirable—and inevitable—trend compelled much of the media to support Collor in the 1989 elections (Lattman-Weltman, Carneiro, & Ramos, 1994).

In the 1994 and 1998 presidential races, quality papers such as *O Globo* backed Fernando Henrique Cardoso (*Brazilian Social Democracy Party*) because his economic agenda was grounded in fiscal responsibility, inflation control, and the privatization of public companies. Following earlier defeats in 1989, 1994, and 1998, Lula da Silva won the 2002 election. Azevedo (2017) argues that although the country's leading news organizations continued to spurn center-left governments, their reluctance was reduced following Lula's commitment to preserving his predecessor's liberal macroeconomic policies.

While Brazil experienced considerable economic growth and fiscal control under Lula's administration (Mollo & Saad-Filho, 2006), the Rousseff government was marked by rising inflation, prompting the media to characterize the then-president as an unreliable manager. When examining the role of mainstream newspapers, different authors emphasized the use of economic arguments by mainstream media outlets to back Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 (Marques, Mont'Alverne, & Mitozo, 2021; Pimentel & Marques, 2021). It was as if journalistic organizations were willing to make concessions regarding the rules of the democratic game to preserve their economic agenda.

After Rousseff's ousting, then-Vice President Michel Temer took over the government with the support of leading journalistic organizations, including OESP. Temer implemented fiscal austerity policies and further expanded liberal economic reforms (Søndergaard, 2020). However, a series of corruption scandals hindered the president's political strength. Nonetheless, the editorials of Brazilian quality papers showed enthusiasm for Temer's "realist" behavior and commitment to austerity, often praising the president for controlling inflation, lowering interest rates, and approving a spending ceiling (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2016, para. 1).

Likewise, Bolsonaro's economic agenda, president-elect in 2018, was positively received by a considerable part of the Brazilian press—despite the president's troubled relationship with media organizations (Albuquerque, 2021; Fontes & Marques, 2022; Marques, 2023).

Against this background, Pimentel and Marques (2021) argued that Brazilian newspapers might adopt a parallelism characterized by two singularities. First, mainstream media support for political agents primarily focused on economic rather than political issues. Second, the authors suggest that parallelism in Brazil occurs under specific circumstances, as news companies team up with political groups that "buy" their

agendas and have the political conditions to implement them. While these authors' claims may seem intriguing, further empirical analysis is required.

That being said, this article chose the OESP as a case study because this newspaper has a wide circulation in Brazil (Yahya, 2022); it is the oldest quality paper in the country, founded in 1875; the OESP is read mainly by the Brazilian political and economic elites (Tokarski, 2019); the newspaper has historically criticized left-wing political leaders—which makes our investigation relevant for verifying whether such criticisms persist even if historical adversaries of the OESP implement liberal economic policies when in power. To illustrate, during the 1990s, the newspaper maintained a critical stance toward Lula da Silva and his political group, endorsing center-right coalitions in several presidential elections (Nava & Marques, 2020).

As for the administrations under analysis, Lula, Temer, and Bolsonaro introduced the three most significant bills, proposing changes in Brazil's pension system since the 1988 Constitution. Congress approved Lula's and Bolsonaro's bills in 2003 and 2019, respectively. Temer's bill discussion was suspended in February 2018 because of corruption scandals and a lack of political conditions to proceed with the negotiations (although Brazilian society vividly debated his project). Understanding how the OESP editorials covered these discussions allows us to navigate administrations aligned with diverse political-ideological perspectives, encompassing the center-left (Lula), the center-right (Temer), and the far-right (Bolsonaro). Such governments also comprise distinct economic contexts and pressures from social actors. In addition, comparing the editorial stances concerning approved and nonapproved bills is a unique opportunity to identify the role of journalism in galvanizing public debate.

Finally, the literature on political parallelism has often neglected editorial pieces. Editorials allow media outlets to express their positions away from the constraints of the principles that mark news production routines (Eilders, 2002; Perreault, Kananovich, & Hackett, 2022). In other words, one of the central roles of editorials is to reveal the alignments that newspapers share with other actors, parties, or ideologies (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011). Editorial pieces seek to influence the political process by signaling to officials and public opinion the "correct" paths for society. Furthermore, comparing editorial coverage from different periods offers the opportunity to understand to what extent "editorial jurisprudence"—the idea that a newspaper's opinion tends to be stable over time (Marques & Mont'Alverne, 2021)—makes sense.

Considering the literature review, our investigation poses three research questions and one hypothesis:

*RQ1: What arguments and opinions did the OESP editorials emphasize when addressing the pension reform bills introduced by the Lula, Temer, and Bolsonaro administrations?*

*RQ2: Which policy elements did the OESP advocate as guidelines for each of the three pension reforms?*

*RQ3: How did the OESP editorials evaluate the performance of each government in articulating the approval of the pension reforms?*

*H1: The OESP establishes a different kind of parallelism from the literature's traditional definition, given that the newspaper does not necessarily align with a particular government by way of political or party issues but by sharing a liberal economic reform agenda.*

### Methods

We compiled the OESP editorials from the newspaper's digital archive (O Estado de S. Paulo, n.d.). The first methodological step involved gathering all the editorials published between (a) the first day of the month when each reform bill was introduced in the Brazilian Congress and (b) the last day of the month when each project was approved (or officially suspended).

Thus, we considered the OESP's editorial coverage regarding the Lula administration from April to December 2003; regarding Temer, the editorials under analysis were published between December 2016 and February 2018. As for Bolsonaro, we investigated pieces published between February and November 2019. Our analysis comprises a 33-month period. During the Rousseff government (2011–2016), no substantial bill to reform the pension systems was presented, probably because the then-president knew that her political prospects and strength to convince Congress may be insufficient. This is why 2011–2016 is not considered in our research.

The timeframe also includes three critical moments in recent Brazilian history. Lula's reform was presented the same year he took office as president for the first time. After two terms of PT's then-main adversary in power—the Brazilian Social Democracy Party ruled between 1995 and 2002—a left-wing administration governed the country after the military dictatorship. Temer's reform was posed immediately after Rousseff's impeachment. Several leading newspapers supported his economic agenda—which may explain the media's complacency with the government then. Bolsonaro harshly criticized Lula, Dilma, and Temer. He took control in 2019, during the wave of right-wing populism that emerged worldwide (Fontes & Marques, 2022; Marques, 2023).

The data collection corresponding to the three periods totaled 3,099 texts, and they underwent additional filtering processes. First, we isolated all editorial pieces mentioning at least one of the five search terms related to social security: *Previd\**; *Aposent\** [*Retire\**]; *INSS* [*National Institute of Social Security*]; *Pensão* [*Pension*]; and *Seguridade* [*Social Security*—which resulted in 804 editorials. We then focused on the leading editorial piece in each newspaper edition (the OESP publishes three daily editorials, but only one is prominent in terms of layout and text size). This process resulted in 375 editorial pieces. Finally, for greater analytical precision, we excluded from the corpus all pieces that mentioned some of the search terms but did not directly address pension reform. As a result, 341 editorials remained for analysis (Lula = 57, Temer = 161, and Bolsonaro = 123).

The methodological strategy involved a quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017) based on a codebook divided into three dimensions (Table 1)—each dimension associated with a respective research question. The 23 binary variables in our codebook stem from the literature focusing on Brazil's social security dilemmas (Gentil, 2019; Tafner & Nery, 2019). We also considered other studies that designed codebooks to investigate newspapers' editorial stances regarding political and economic issues (Hynds, 1990). To refine

the codebook, we selected 100 editorials (chosen at random, distributed proportionally among all administrations under analysis) from the main corpus for previous reading, which allowed us to complement the range of variables under analysis.

**Table 1. Codebook.**

<b>Dimension 1: Opinions/arguments of the newspaper/editorial about the reform (0 = Absent   1 = Present)</b>
- The reform is indispensable to ensure the control/balance of public expenditures and/or to control social security deficits
- The reform is essential for the modernization, development, recovery, and/or growth of the economy
- The reform helps to fight inflation
- The pension reform will ensure a fairer and more egalitarian system, correcting injustices in the pension system
- The reform will trim privileges in the public sector
- The reform will improve the fiscal situation of the states and/or municipalities
- The reform will encourage investments in strategic sectors (social programs, infrastructure, education, etc.)
- The reform lends greater credibility to the government with the market
<b>Dimension 2: Policy elements that, according to the newspaper/editorial, can/should serve as guidelines for the reform (0 = Absent   1 = Present)</b>
- Set a minimum age for retirement
- Set restrictions on retirement according to years of work
- Set restrictions on special pensions (teachers, rural workers, etc.)
- Equate the retirement ages for both men and women
- Equate the pension systems of different categories of workers (public sector, private sector, military personnel)
- Encourage the creation of supplementary or capitalization schemes
- Change the rules of the Continuous Cash Benefit Program (BPC)
- Raise the tax burden to preserve the social security pension system
- Encourage formalization of the labor market
- Extinguish the Unbinding of Federal Revenue
- Collect social security debts from the business sector
<b>Dimension 3: Newspaper/editorial assessment of the government's role (0 = Absent   1 = Present)</b>
- The government demonstrates fiscal responsibility by advocating/introducing the reform
- The government does not make efforts to pursue and/or hinders the necessary political articulation for the reform
- The government is competent in the defense and articulation to pass the reform
- The government shows weakness by yielding to the interests of groups against the reform

Two trained researchers applied the codebook to the texts. We also performed reliability tests before the final classification (Krippendorff, 2004). To this end, 50 randomly selected editorials (circa 15% of the total corpus) were coded. Krippendorff's alpha tests reached results between 0.625 and 1 (Neuendorf, 2017). Upon coding the texts, we evaluated the data using descriptive statistics, Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), Adjusted Standardized Residuals (SR), and Cramér's  $V$  tests (Field, 2005). Such analytical tools make identifying significant differences in the newspapers' coverage possible. The papers' Appendix<sup>2</sup> includes additional methodological explanations for interpreting the tests listed here.

## Results

For each dimension, we compared the presence and absence of codebook variables in the editorials. Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide information about each variable's frequency and the results for Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), Adjusted Standardized Residuals (SR), and Cramér's  $V$  tests. Due to space limits, the Appendix<sup>3</sup> details the temporal distribution of the editorials mentioning at least one of the keywords.

### ***Dimension 1: Opinions/Arguments About the Reform***

Table 2 shows that the prevailing argument in the OESP editorials claims that *pension reform is indispensable to ensure the control/balance of public expenditures and/or to control social security deficits* (Lula = 15; Temer = 90; and Bolsonaro = 38). We found significant differences in the editorial coverage of the three administrations ( $\chi^2 = 24.764$  |  $p = 0.000$ ). The argument about the importance of the reform is more recurrent in Temer's reform bill (SR = 4.9). Regarding the reforms proposed by Lula and Bolsonaro, there were 2.6 and 3.1 fewer cases, respectively, than expected concerning the presence of this variable. The OESP criticized the suggested modifications in the bill when Congress was analyzing Temer's proposal, claiming that previous administrations had promoted reckless fiscal policies in social security. The editorials also called those who opposed the reform "irresponsible populists" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2017a, para. 3). From the newspaper's perspective, promoting changes in social security rules was the only way to organize the country's finances.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jnd2Kalt7sztZSvE6Knn9mJziy2SuSkH/edit>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jnd2Kalt7sztZSvE6Knn9mJziy2SuSkH/edit>.



**Table 2. Opinions/Arguments of the Newspaper/Editorial About the Reform.**

	The reform is indispensable to ensure the control/balance of public expenditures and/or to control social security deficits				The reform is essential for the modernization, development, recovery, and/or growth of the economy				The reform helps to fight inflation				The pension reform will ensure a fairer and more egalitarian system, correcting injustices in the pension system			
	Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?			
	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	
	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR
Lula	42 (73.7)	2.6	15 (26.3)	-2.6	54 (94.7)	2.7	3 (5.3)	-2.7	57 (100)	1,2	0 (0)	-1.2	50 (87.7)	-1.8	7 (12.3)	1.8
Temer	71 (44.1)	-4.9	90 (55.9)	4.9	132 (82)	-0.1	29 (18)	0.1	155 (96.3)	-2,1	6 (3.7)	2.1	150 (93.2)	-0.1	11 (6.8)	0.1
Bolsonaro	85 (69.1)	3.1	38 (30.9)	-3.1	94 (76.4)	-2.1	29 (23.6)	2.1	122 (99.2)	1,2	1 (0.8)	-1.2	118 (95.9)	1.5	5 (4.1)	-1.5
Freq (%)	198 (58.1)	-	143 (41.9)	-	280 (82.1)	-	61 (17.9)	-	334 (97.9)	-	7 (2.1)	-	(318) 93.3	-	23 (6,7)	-
$\chi^2$ (p-value)	24.764 (0.000)				8.897 (0.012)				4.379 (0.112)				4.183 (0.123)			
Cramér's V	0.269				0.162				0.113				0.111			
	The reform will trim privileges in the public sector				The reform will improve the fiscal situation of the states and/or municipalities				The reform will encourage investments in strategic sectors (social programs, infrastructure, education, etc.)				The reform lends greater credibility to the government with the market			
	Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?			
	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	
	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR	N (%)	SR
Lula	46 (80.7)	-3.6	11 (19.3)	3.6	51 (89.5)	-1.0	6 (10.5)	1.0	54 (94.7)	0.7	3 (5.3)	-0.7	51 (89.5)	0	6 (10.5)	0
Temer	151 (93.8)	0.9	10 (6.2)	-0.9	156 (96.9)	2.8	5 (3.1)	-2.8	144 (89.4)	-1.9	17 (10.6)	1.9	152 (94.4)	2.8	9 (5.6)	-2.8
Bolsonaro	118 (95.9)	1.9	5 (4.1)	-1.9	109 (88.6)	-2.2	14 (11.4)	2.2	117 (95.1)	1.4	6 (4.9)	-1.4	102 (82.9)	-2.9	21 (17.1)	2.9
Freq (%)	315 (92.4)	-	26 (7.6)	-	316 (92.7)	-	25 (7.3)	-	315 (92.4)	-	26 (7.6)	-	305 (89.4)	-	36 (10.6)	-
$\chi^2$ (p-value)	13.698 (0.001)				8.059 (0.018)				3.737 (0.154)				9.737 (0.008)			
Cramér's V	0.200				0.154				0.105				0.169			

The second most recurrent argument in this dimension underlined that *pension reform is essential for the economy's modernization, development, recovery, and/or growth* (Lula = 3; Temer = 29; and Bolsonaro = 29). The frequency of this reasoning also revealed significant differences in the data distribution ( $\chi^2 = 8.897 \mid p = 0.012$ ). The residuals indicate a high concentration of this variable in the context of Bolsonaro's reform (SR = 2.1), while in Lula's scenario, we found 2.7 fewer cases than expected of the presence of this variable. As for Temer's bill, the residuals did not reach the critical threshold ( $\pm 1.96$ ). To illustrate this point, the OESP contended that the pension reform would restore economic growth, increasing income and job creation. That is, the reform encourages "a set of urgent measures that can bring the country back on track toward economic growth and the generation of employment and income" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2019a, para. 8).

There was practically no presence of the variable associating the pension reforms with *inflation control* (Lula = 0; Temer = 6; and Bolsonaro = 1), with no statistically significant differences ( $\chi^2 = 3.251 \mid p = 0.180$ ). Furthermore, the argument that *the pension reform would ensure a more egalitarian system, correcting social security injustices*, was rarely mentioned (Lula = 7; Temer = 11; Bolsonaro = 5). We found no statistically significant differences for this variable among the reforms analyzed ( $\chi^2 = 4.186 \mid p = 0.123$ ).

As for the argument that *the pension reform trims privileges in the public service sector* (Lula = 11; Temer = 10; and Bolsonaro = 5), we found significant differences in the distribution ( $\chi^2 = 13.698 \mid p = 0.001$ ). The most frequent references to this claim were found in editorial pieces published during Lula's reform (SR = 3.6)—mainly due to the Workers' Party unionist agenda, which the OESP has historically fought against. Put differently, the editorials are more assertive in Lula's case, asking for "the extinction of some privileges, such as retirement with a full pension for public servants" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2003, para. 3). The statistical values concerning the Temer and Bolsonaro administrations did not reach the critical threshold.

We also found a low recurrence of the variable regarding the assertion that *the pension reform will improve the fiscal situation of the states and/or municipalities* (Lula = 6; Temer = 5; and Bolsonaro = 14). Nonetheless, the data distribution reveals significant differences ( $\chi^2 = 8.059 \mid p = 0.018$ ) when we compare the three governments. This argument was predominant in coverage related to the Bolsonaro period (SR = 2.2), although it did not receive as much attention when Temer's proposal was on the agenda (SR = -2.8). In Lula's case, the residuals did not reach the critical threshold.

In turn, the claim that *the pension reform will encourage investments in strategic sectors (social programs, infrastructure, education, etc.)* appeared on 26 occasions (Lula = 3; Temer = 17; and Bolsonaro = 6). This variable had no significant distinctions ( $\chi^2 = 3.737 \mid p = 0.154$ ).

The last argument in dimension 1—*the reform lends greater credibility to the government before the market*—was mentioned 36 times (Lula = 6; Temer = 9; and Bolsonaro = 21). There were significant differences in the data distribution ( $\chi^2 = 9.737 \mid p = 0.008$ ), with a more meaningful presence of this opinion in Bolsonaro's reform (SR = 2.9) and less recurrence in Temer's reform (SR = -2.8). Once again, the residuals related to the reform bill during Lula's administration did not reach the critical threshold.

### ***Dimension 2: Policy Elements That Should Guide the Reform***

Table 3 presents the results for the second dimension: Which policy elements does the OESP advocate as guidelines for pension reforms? The first variable defends the need to *set a minimum age for retirement* (Lula = 8; Temer = 14; and Bolsonaro = 14). Our data indicate no statistically significant differences among the three administrations ( $\chi^2 = 1.410$  |  $p = 0.494$ ).

Similarly, the argument that *the pension reform should set restrictions on retirement according to years of work* appeared only 14 times (Lula = 4; Temer = 3; and Bolsonaro = 7). We also found no significant differences in the editorial coverage relative to each administration ( $\chi^2 = 4.069$  |  $p = 0.131$ ).

Regarding the opinion that *the reform should set restrictions on special pensions (teachers, rural workers, etc.)* (Lula = 7; Temer = 3; and Bolsonaro = 6), we found statistically significant differences among the three editorial coverages ( $\chi^2 = 10.230$  |  $p = 0.006$ ). The standardized residuals show that this variable stands out in the bill proposed by Lula (SR = 3.0) and registers 2.3 fewer cases than expected during the analysis of Temer's bill by Congress. As for the editorials addressing Bolsonaro's bill, the residuals did not reach the critical threshold. One explanation for the heated debates over restrictions on special pensions during the Lula administration refers to the center-left leader's agenda favoring more state expenditures, while the OESP prioritized fiscal austerity.

**Table 3. Policy Elements That Can/Should Serve as Guidelines for the Reform.**

	Set a minimum age for retirement				Set restrictions on retirement according to years of work				Set restrictions on special pensions (teachers, rural workers, etc.)				Equate the retirement ages for both men and women			
	Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?			
	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	
	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR
Lula	49 (86)	-0.9	8 (14)	0.9	53 (93)	-1.2	4 (7)	1.2	50 (87.7)	-3.0	7 (12.3)	3.0	57 (100)	0.6	0 (0)	-0.6
Temer	147 (91.3)	1.1	14 (8.7)	-1.1	158 (98.1)	2.0	3 (1.9)	-2.0	158 (98.1)	2.3	3 (1.9)	-2.3	160 (99.4)	-0.1	1 (0.6)	0.1
Bolsonaro	109 (88.6)	-0.4	14 (11.4)	0.4	116 (94.3)	-1.1	7 (5.7)	1.1	117 (95.1)	-0.1	6 (4.9)	0.1	122 (99.2)	-0.4	1 (0.8)	0.4
Freq (%)	305 (89.4)	-	36 (10.6)	-	327 (95.9)	-	14 (4.1)	-	325 (95.3)	-	16 (4.7)	-	339 (99.4)	-	2 (0.6)	-
$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	1.410 (0.494)				4.069 (0.131)				10.230 (0.006)				0.448 (1.000)			
Cramér's <i>V</i>	0.064				0.109				0.173				0.036			
	Equate the pension systems of different categories of workers (public sector, private sector, military personnel)				Encourage the creation of supplementary or capitalization schemes				Change the rules of the Continuous Cash Benefit Program (BPC)							
	Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?							
	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes					
	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR				
Lula	46 (80.7)	-4.0	11 (19.3)	4.0	54 (94.7)	-1.9	3 (5.3)	1.9	57 (100)	1.1	0 (0)	-1.1				
Temer	152 (94.4)	1.0	9 (5.6)	-1.0	160 (99.4)	1.8	1 (0.6)	-1.8	160 (99.4)	1.5	1 (0.6)	-1.5				
Bolsonaro	119 (96.7)	2.1	4 (3.3)	-2.1	120 (97.6)	-0.4	3 (2.4)	0.4	118 (95.9)	-2.4	5 (4.1)	2.4				
Freq (%)	317 (93)	-	24 (7)	-	334 (97.9)	-	7 (2.1)	-	335 (98.2)	-	6 (1.8)	-				
$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	16.306 (0.000)				4.654 (0.098)				6.010 (0.05)							
Cramér's <i>V</i>	0.219				0.117				0.133							

The claim for *equating the retirement ages for both men and women* appeared in just one editorial during the Temer administration, as well as in a single editorial regarding Bolsonaro's reform bill. There was no mention of this variable in Lula's case. We found no significant differences in the editorial coverage of the reform bills concerning this variable ( $\chi^2 = 0.657$  |  $p = 1.000$ ).

When considering the idea of *equating the pension systems of different categories of workers (public, private, and military sectors; Lula = 11; Temer = 9; and Bolsonaro = 4)*, we found significant differences in the OESP's editorial coverage across all three administrations ( $\chi^2 = 16.306$  |  $p = 0.000$ ). This variable was largely present in the scenario of Lula's reform (SR = 4.0). Nevertheless, for the Bolsonaro administration, there were 2.1 fewer cases than expected for this suggestion. The residuals for editorials addressing Temer's proposal did not reach the critical threshold.

Regarding the reasoning that the bill would *encourage the creation of supplementary or capitalization systems*, this variable was rarely mentioned in the debates during all three reforms (Lula = 3; Temer = 1; and Bolsonaro = 3). No statistically significant differences were identified in the data distribution ( $\chi^2 = 4.534$  |  $p = 0.085$ ), and no standardized residual exceeded the critical threshold.

We found sporadic occurrences claiming that *the reform should change the rules of the Continuous Cash Benefit Program* (a cash transfer program to assist individuals with extreme social vulnerability; Lula = 0; Temer = 1; and Bolsonaro = 5). Furthermore, there were no statistically significant differences among the reforms for this specific policy ( $\chi^2 = 4.526$  |  $p = 0.065$ ). During Temer's administration, the single mention was related to "easing the rules for granting rural retirement pension and benefits for the elderly and low-income disabled persons" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2017b, para. 4). As for Bolsonaro, the mentions focused on "resistance in Congress regarding cuts in the Continuous Cash Benefit Program" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2019b, para. 3). In none of the cases did the newspaper effectively take a stand (for or against) on the topic, limiting itself to alluding to the debate in Congress.

There was no mention of the other four variables in dimension 2 (*Raise the tax burden to preserve the social security pension system; Encourage formalization of the labor market; Extinguish the Unbinding of Federal Revenue; Collect social security debts from the business sector*). To facilitate data visualization, we did not include these variables in Table 3.

### ***Dimension 3: Newspaper/Editorial Assessment of the Government's Role***

Dimension 3 focuses on how the OESP editorials assess each presidential administration's performance in articulating the pension reforms' approval (Table 4). The first variable refers to the idea that *the government demonstrates fiscal responsibility by advocating/introducing the reform*. The argument was rarely employed by the OESP editorials (Lula = 2; Temer = 5, and Bolsonaro = 0). We found no significant differences in the data distribution ( $\chi^2 = 4.641$  |  $p = 0.072$ ). The few opinion pieces raising this issue at the time of the Lula administration emphasized the newspaper's positive surprise after realizing that the then-president would maintain the fiscal policy of the previous government. As for the bill proposed by the Temer administration, the OESP claimed that constitutional changes in the pension system would be a "clear sign

of the federal government's responsibility and its unwavering commitment to the fiscal health of the State" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2017c, para. 2). No editorial complimented the Bolsonaro government in this case.

The variable referring to the argument that *the government does not make efforts to pursue and/or hinders the necessary political articulation for the reform* was much more recurrent in the corpus (Lula = 2; Temer = 6; and Bolsonaro= 62), motivated by the OESP's criticism regarding the Bolsonaro administration. In over half of the editorials published during the discussion on Bolsonaro's bill (50.4%), the OESP expressed concern about the president's behavior, resulting in statistically significant differences among the three administrations ( $\chi^2 = 105.286$  |  $p = 0.000$ ). The standardized residuals indicate that, while this variable appeared 3.5 times less than expected in Lula's scenario and 7.3 times less than expected during Temer's reform bill, it was present 10.3 times more than expected in the case of the far-right leader. By criticizing Bolsonaro's political articulation, the OESP suggested that the reform advanced in Congress not because of the president but despite him.

**Table 4. Newspaper/Editorial Assessment of the Government's Role.**

	The government demonstrates fiscal responsibility by advocating/introducing the reform				The government does not make efforts to pursue and/or hinders the necessary political articulation for the reform				The government is competent in the defense and articulation to pass the reform				The government shows weakness by yielding to the interests of groups against the reform			
	Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?				Is the variable mentioned?			
	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	
	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR	<i>N</i> (%)	SR
Lula	55 (96.5)	-0.8	2 (3.5)	0.8	55 (96.5)	3.5	2 (3.5)	-3.5	37 (64.9)	-3.8	20 (35.1)	3.8	55 (96.5)	-1.8	2 (3.5)	1.8
Temer	156 (96.9)	-1.3	5 (3.1)	1.3	155 (96.3)	7.3	6 (3.7)	-7.3	124 (77)	-2.5	37 (23)	2.5	161 (100)	1.9	0 (0)	-1.9
Bolsonaro	123 (100)	2.0	0 (0)	-2.0	61 (49.6)	-10.3	62 (50.4)	10.3	120 (97.6)	5.5	3 (2.4)	-5.5	121 (98.4)	-0.6	2 (1.6)	0.6
Freq (%)	334 (97.9)	-	7 (2.1)	-	271 (79.5)	-	70 (20.5)	-	281 (82.4)	-	60 (17.6)	-	337 (98.8)	-	4 (1.2)	-
$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	4.066 (0.131)				105.286 (0.000)				34.737 (0.000)				4,811 (0,090)			
Cramér's <i>V</i>	0.109				0.556				0.319				0,119			

One of the OESP's recurring criticisms refers to the interference of Bolsonaro's sons (also elected politicians) in the debates relating to pension reform. The newspaper declared that the "best we can do is hope he [the president] stops getting in the way" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2019c, para. 9). The newspaper also accused Bolsonaro of being a "radical" and a "criminal faction leader" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2019d, para. 1). One editorial text argued that if Bolsonaro wished to see the reform bill move forward, he should "abandon the vote-seeking blathering, which only serves to feed useless discussions" (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2019e, para. 6).

The variable that *the government is competent in the defense and articulation to pass the reform* was recurrent, considering the number of editorials published during all three reform proposals (Lula = 20; Temer = 37; and Bolsonaro = 3). Once again, we found significant differences among the administrations ( $\chi^2 = 3.737 \mid p = 0.000$ ). However, unlike the previous variable, a positive assessment of the government's commitment to the approval of the reform was more frequent in the editorials published during the Lula administration (SR = 3.8), followed by the coverage of Temer's bill (SR = 2.5). As for Bolsonaro, the residuals indicate that the variable was present 5.5 times less than expected, thus reinforcing the argument that Bolsonaro's actions obstructed the negotiations. The OESP editorials regarded Lula as a "pragmatic" leader and a "skilled negotiator." The newspaper also described Temer as a political expert—at least until the then-president suspended the analysis of his bill due to a lack of conditions for approving it.

The last variable in this dimension sustained the idea that *the government shows weakness by yielding to the interests of groups against the reform* (Lula = 2; Temer = 0; and Bolsonaro = 2). We found no significant differences among the three administrations ( $\chi^2 = 4.801 \mid p = 0.053$ ), and none of the residuals exceeded the critical threshold.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This article aimed to explore an array of newspaper editorials published during the pension reforms proposed by the Lula, Temer, and Bolsonaro governments to understand media parallelism in settings beyond the Western world. Our findings indicate that the OESP pressured political representatives by loudly defending the approval of fiscal austerity policies—even if this meant temporary alliances with long-lasting enemies. Hence, in this case, parallelism prevailed as long as the government adopted the economic agenda championed by the news organization. Furthermore, over the years, OESP editorials have consistently supported liberal reforms and the economic-technocratic agenda, reinforcing the newspaper's jurisprudence as a relevant "criterion of editorial-worthiness."

To answer each research question, our empirical design comprised three analytical dimensions. The first one (the newspaper's opinions/arguments about the pension reform) allowed us to identify the variety of claims sustained by the OESP when taking a stance on the bills. Regarding the reform proposed by the Lula administration, the news company emphatically supported the benefit cuts for public servants introduced by the then-president (Nakahodo & Savoia, 2008). In Temer's case, the government budget balance was the most mentioned argument because of the poor economic situation in Brazil when the project was under analysis (Carleial, 2015). Curiously, the newspaper's coverage of the pension reform during the Bolsonaro administration did not single out public expenditure management as one of its central arguments. One explanation lies in the partly restored economic stability achieved during Temer's administration. That is, the OESP assessed that the



previous government laid most of the necessary foundations (in terms of inflation control and lower interest rates) for Bolsonaro to devote his efforts to approving a reform focused on economic growth.

Thus, our findings reveal that the vigorous defense of liberal reforms in the pension system was a constant stance in the OESP editorials. Indeed, although Lula implemented substantial reform, the newspaper continued to advocate for more changes to the pension system throughout the Temer and Bolsonaro administrations. On the one hand, this result underlines the relevance of "jurisprudence" as an editorial value (Marques & Mont'Alverne, 2021). On the other hand, the newspaper's friendly stance toward the bill proposed by Lula (a historic adversary) indicates that the organization may be willing to assuage (at least temporarily) strong political disagreements when its own economic agenda is successfully addressed.

Regarding the second dimension (policy elements that should serve as guidelines for the reform), the lack of interest of the OESP in advocating heterodox proposals to deal with social security problems is striking. The newspaper ignored policies advocated by some economists (Gentil, 2019), such as raising the tax burden. Furthermore, the editorials discarded the suggestion of collecting social security debts from the business sector. It is worth highlighting that some Brazilian media organizations were among the government's biggest debtors, a fact that the OESP turned a blind eye to. To illustrate, at the beginning of 2020, the companies owning the major broadcast television networks in Brazil had R\$223 million (approximately US\$45 million) in social security debts (Mali & Ferro, 2020). Put differently, the OESP adopts a conservative, technocratic stance aligned with a liberal ideology but avoids displeasing historical allies, such as the business class and industrialists.

The third dimension focused on how the newspaper evaluated the government's performance when the three presidents proposed and articulated the approval of their respective pension reforms. We found meaningful differences in the OESP's approach to the efforts made by Lula, Temer, and Bolsonaro. While Lula and Temer were pictured as leaders who worked efficiently to approve their reforms (even though Temer's bill never made it to the voting stage in Congress), Bolsonaro was accused of obstructing the negotiations of his bill. That is, OESP's editorials adopted a pragmatic stance that considered not only the willingness of the presidents to advocate liberal reforms but also their strength to approve them. More interestingly, the *a priori* alignment with Bolsonaro's economic agenda coexists with various criticisms of this leader's actions.

More than a stable alignment through political-ideological convergence, the OESP editorials reveal a connection between media and politics that has not yet been fully understood by the Global North-inspired concepts of parallelism and instrumentalization (Mancini, 2012). Put differently, our hypothesis is confirmed since the OESP's editorials establish a different kind of parallelism from the literature's common definition, given that the newspaper does not necessarily support a particular government as a result of political-party convergences but by sharing a liberal economic reform agenda. While the traditional notion of parallelism implies (a) relatively steady party systems, (b) deep-rooted political parties, (c) the existence of strong sociopolitical cleavages, and (d) the presence of stable political, ideological, and cultural trends (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the OESP's editorial coverage challenges this notion.

In addition, we draw attention to the OESP's supportive stance toward an economic agenda promoted by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In Brazil,

this economic agenda, for example, is embraced by the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (FIESP), an institution with which the OESP has close ties and shares its liberal agenda. For the newspaper, enforcing a liberal economic approach is an inescapable phenomenon. This finding is in tandem with the traditional intervening role the Brazilian mainstream media put in place.

Lastly, the OESP editorials reinforce the idea that this newspaper has operated as an actor with an autonomous agenda (Cook, 2006; Sparrow, 2006), pressuring political authorities to analyze the pension reform bills in Congress. The newspaper was even sympathetic to the arguments and performance of left-wing parties during the analysis of Lula's reform bill. At the same time, although the OESP has been a fierce supporter of Bolsonaro's Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes (Albuquerque, 2021), the newspaper's diagnosis at the time was that the government was incapable of leading productive political negotiations.

Truth be told, Mancini (2012) added that for parallelism to exist, the articulations between media and politics "should not be temporary or volatile" (p. 70). In the absence of such conditions, the author continues, instrumentalization thus becomes the alternative (Mancini, 2012). However, the newspaper examined here defies both conceptions. Accordingly, the OESP editorials operated as tools for expressing the company's and its allies' political and economic interests. Therefore, the newspaper did not necessarily mirror the political system in the pension reform processes, but instead functioned as an autonomous agent. In fact, the OESP adopted a "chameleonic" behavior by endorsing different ventures through polyvalent partisanship (McCargo, 2012). In the newspaper's view, the political ideology that underpins the government matters less than its willingness (and strength) to approve liberal economic reforms. Once the liberal and technocratic economic policies are satisfied, the OESP is inclined to support even antagonistic political groups.

The findings presented here add much nuance to the media systems debate and reinforce the relevance of expanding the conceptual framework on media/politics connections beyond strictly political alignments (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The OESP case underlines the importance of markedly understanding *economic parallelism* defined by the support for leaders and parties willing to implement a liberal macroeconomic agenda. Another possibility is the existence of *single-occasion parallelism* marked by the circumstantial support of leaders strong enough to pass the agendas that most serve the private interests of the journalistic organization in a given moment (Pimentel & Marques, 2021).

As with any research, our article has limitations. A comparative study on how national and regional media organizations have addressed issues such as pension reforms could reveal more precise particularities in our national media system.

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