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Framing Controversies: Television and the 2002 Presidential Election in Brazil

MAURO P. PORTO

This article investigates the role of television in the first round of the 2002 Brazilian presidential election. Content analysis and survey data are used to show that TV news and political advertising led to important framing effects. On the one hand, exposure to the most watched newscast, TV Globo's Jornal Nacional, led voters to support the interpretive frame that was promoted by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration and by financial markets. This frame emphasized the need to keep inflation under control and to protect the stability of the economy. On the other hand, exposure to political advertising led voters to reject this frame, since opposition candidates used their programs to emphasize Brazil's social problems, especially poverty, hunger, and social inequality, as the most important issues.

Keywords framing, political communication, television journalism, Brazil

In this article, I analyze the role of television in the first round of the 2002 presidential election in Brazil. The theoretical framework of the research stresses the role of television as a key arena in which candidates, government officials, and market forces, as well as other social and political actors, struggle over the interpretation of political themes and events. I argue that television played an important role by framing the main controversies of the 2002 campaign in particular ways. As I show below, the main controversies of this election centered on the difficulties that the Brazilian economy was facing, which in turn were related to the lack of confidence in the country on the part of foreign investors and financial markets. Candidates of the opposition, on the other hand, framed Brazil's dramatic social problems as the main campaign issues. This article argues that television news and political advertising played important, albeit contrasting, roles during this important election. I base my argument on content analysis and survey data from ESEB, the Brazilian Electoral Study, a national post-election survey that took place after the second round of the presidential election.¹

As a developing democracy, Brazil offers a good opportunity to investigate media effects. Brazilian voters are characterized by weak partisan attachments, while television in general, and TV Globo in particular, occupy unusually strong positions as a source of news and entertainment for the mass public (Porto, 2003; Lawson & McCann, 2005, p. 28;

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Baker, Ames, & Rennó, 2006). The ESEB survey itself provides further evidence of the centrality of television in Brazilian society. Among the variables that respondents mentioned as the most important for them in choosing a presidential candidate to vote for, television stands out. Debates on TV, political advertising on TV, and TV news are among the most important sources that voters used to choose a candidate.² Besides television, it is important to stress the importance of interpersonal communication (conversations with family members and friends), which is a variable that has been highlighted since the first empirical studies on the role of the media in elections (see Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1952; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1986). Some authors have argued that political discussion within the immediate social contexts of voters was a key variable in the 2002 presidential election in Brazil. Based on panel data, Baker et al. (2006) argue that “hot talk” among voters had massive effects in the campaign, explaining the levels of vote switching that took place during the electoral period.

It is also important to stress the high levels of public confidence and legitimacy of television in general, and TV Globo in particular. When asked to evaluate the performance of nine institutions, voters placed the Catholic Church in first place and TV Globo in second. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents evaluated the network as “excellent” or “good.” Big companies and military institutions occupied an intermediate position, while political institutions (federal government, judiciary, Congress, and political parties) received the worst evaluations.³

Considering this context, this article focuses on an analysis of two genres of television programming: news and political advertising. First, the article investigates the role of the most popular newscast in Brazil, TV Globo’s *Jornal Nacional*. The audience ratings for *Jornal Nacional* are very high: 42% of the households with television sets watch the newscast every day, with an audience share (percentage of households with TV sets on) of 67%.⁴ Among the respondents in the ESEB survey, exposure levels were also very high. When asked about the frequency with which they watched *Jornal Nacional*, 29% of those interviewed affirmed they watched it every day, and 45% at least once a week; only 26% said that they rarely or never watched the newscast.

Besides analyzing the role of Brazil’s most important newscast in the 2002 presidential election, this article also investigates the role of political advertising. This analysis is important, since candidates and political parties enjoy free and extensive access to prime time television during the 45 days preceding the first round of elections.⁵ The main form of access of candidates to television during elections is “Free Electoral Political Advertising Time” (*Horário Gratuito de Propaganda Eleitoral* [HGPE]), which I will call “political advertising.”⁶ Since 1962, candidates and political parties have had free access to radio and television during electoral campaigns. In the case of the 2002 election, 50 minutes of political advertising were allocated to presidential candidates daily, with 25 minutes at lunchtime and 25 minutes at prime time. According to present regulations, the total time for free political advertising is divided in the following way: One third is distributed in equal shares between all registered candidates, and two thirds are divided according to the number of seats that each party or coalition has in the lower house of Congress (*Câmara dos Deputados*). It is also important to stress that broadcasting of these programs by all television stations during the two periods is mandatory.

The article is organized in the following way. First, I present the theoretical framework of the research, the *interpretive controversies* model. Then I present a brief overview of the general context of the 2002 presidential election. The third section discusses the main features of the campaign coverage presented by Brazil’s most popular newscast, TV Globo’s *Jornal Nacional*. Next, I investigate candidates’ strategies in their political

advertising programs broadcast before the first round of the presidential election. The fifth section presents the main hypothesis and the methodological procedures adopted, while the sixth tests the main hypothesis about framing effects with survey data. Finally, the conclusions summarize the findings and discuss their implications for Brazilian democracy.

The Interpretive Controversies Model

The study of media effects on electoral processes has been one of the main areas of research in political communication since the field's origins. While early studies on media effects tended to identify limited persuasive and behavioral influences, new approaches that emerged in the 1960s started to investigate more subtle and powerful cognitive effects on citizens' preferences (Noelle-Neumann, 1973; Chaffee, 1977; Katz, 1980; Iyengar & Lenart, 1989; McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1992). Some scholars refuted the previous "limited effects" paradigm by developing agenda-setting and priming theories (McCombs & Shaw, 1971; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2004). Others have proposed a complete break with the old model by developing better measurements of key variables, especially media exposure (Bartels, 1993; Zaller, 1996).

Among the new theoretical perspectives in political communication that have emerged more recently, the concept of framing has become one of the most popular, opening new perspectives for understanding the role of the media in political processes (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001; Callaghan & Schnell, 2005). Although frame analysis has become a major tradition in the field, few studies have linked media frames to controversies that take place during elections. Frame analysis about elections usually focuses on how the campaign itself was presented by the media, especially in terms of the "issue," "strategy," "horse race," and "episodic" frames (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Rhee, 1997). Few studies have investigated how the media frame specific political events and issues during elections (but see Woo, 1996).

Based on the concept of framing, this article develops a framework for analysis of the role of television in elections that focuses on interpretation of the main campaign issues. But before advancing the model, some conceptual clarification is necessary. This is important because, although the concept of frame has great potential to improve our understanding of political communication processes, it has been plagued by "conceptual indeterminacy," with a lack of conceptual clarity and consistency in its various uses (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 39; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997, pp. 222–223; Entman, 2004, p. 5).

To overcome this lack of clarity, I draw on the interpretive controversies model (see Porto, 2001) to define a specific level of framing. According to this model, interpretive controversies are political disputes that are effectively immune to resolution through accessible facts and are carried out instead primarily through interpretive frames. This definition is based on Schon and Rein's (1994) sophisticated analysis of policy controversies. According to these authors, even when parties to a controversy focus on the same facts, they tend to interpret them differently. People have a remarkable ability, when embroiled in a controversy, to dismiss the evidence adduced by antagonists. This does not mean that facts and information are irrelevant, but policy disagreements are not resolved simply by recourse to evidence and argumentation.

I define "interpretive frames" as frames promoted by a sponsor that offer a specific interpretation of a political event or issue.⁷ The interpretation that is promoted by this type of frame usually involves one or more of the following: (a) problem definition, (b) attributions of responsibility and causes, (c) assessments about the significance of political

events or issues, (d) arguments about consequences, and (e) treatment recommendations. Interpretive frames are made up of arguments such as “government inefficiency has led to the crisis of the health care system” (responsibility attribution); “the health care reform approved by Congress reflects the interests of business, not of citizens” (assessment of significance); or “the health care reform approved by Congress will increase the deficit and lead to inflation and therefore harm citizens” (argument about consequences).

The concept of interpretive frame is a particular subset of the more general notion of media frames. I believe that a specific focus on the interpretation of concrete themes and events has the potential to overcome the indeterminacy and lack of clarity that have characterized framing research. As I hope to show below, the concept of interpretive frame can shed new light on media effects on controversies that take place during electoral campaigns.

But how does the interpretive controversies model define the influence of interpretive frames presented by television on how audiences make sense of political issues and events? The main hypothesis of the model is the following:

When television messages about a particular theme or event are characterized by a diversity of interpretive frames, viewers have access to a broader set of cues and will develop more varied interpretations about this issue or event. Conversely, when television messages are dominated by one interpretive frame, more members of the audience will interpret the events or issues in terms of the interpretation promoted by this frame.

The model is not based on “hypodermic needle” assumptions about the passivity of the audience, nor does it ignore that there are limits to the ability of the media to shape the outcomes of interpretive controversies. As I show elsewhere (Porto, 2001), citizens frequently resist the interpretive frameworks promoted by television, and the strength of framing effects depends on a variety of factors.⁸

By focusing on the relationship between frames in media texts and the interpretive frameworks applied by citizens to make sense of political reality, the interpretive controversies model adds to a growing literature on the dynamic struggles to control news frames. Several theoretical perspectives and concepts have been developed to stress the ability of the state and elite groups to determine how the news media frame political events and issues, including “hegemony” (Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1994, chap. 4), “indexing” (Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 1996), and the “cascade model” (Entman, 2004). Without ignoring the fact that the media promote unique frames of their own (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001) and that social movements have the ability to influence framing disputes (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Wolfsfeld, 1997; Marchi, 2005), the results reported in this article tend to confirm the power of governments and elite groups to shape public debate. But contrary to most studies, which tend to be based on developed nations, especially the U.S., this article stresses framing contests in an emerging country with a foreign-capital-dependent economy. As a result, it incorporates other actors that tend to be absent from framing research, including globalized financial markets and Wall Street banks.

The interpretive controversies model also allows us to go beyond the notion of bias and direct media effects on vote choice. The mass media in Latin America are well known for their traditional patterns of biased news coverage of elections and for explicit partisan political interventions during electoral campaigns (Fox, 1988; Skidmore, 1993; Hughes & Lawson, 2004; Boas, 2005; Lawson & McCann, 2005). Nevertheless, recent processes of democratization and liberalization have brought important constraints to the media institutions

of the region. As Mexico and Brazil illustrate, powerful television networks, such as Televisa and TV Globo, have tended to provide more balanced coverage of candidates in recent presidential elections, overcoming a history of more explicit biases (Hallin, 2000; Lawson, 2002; Porto, 2003).⁹

Despite these changes, studies about media and elections in Latin America continue to emphasize the effects of partisan news coverage on voting behavior. In contrast, this article focuses on framing effects and shows that the media can have a significant impact on elections even when news coverage is “balanced.” I argue that the focus on bias and objectivity might obscure important media effects on campaigns, especially in terms of framing of the main election controversies.

Media framing can be seen just as a more subtle form of bias, but the differences between the two paradigms should not be underestimated. As Hackett (1984) stressed more than two decades ago, the concepts of bias and objectivity have been increasingly called into question in news media research. He reviews several studies showing that the absence of partisan bias does not mean that the media are ideologically inert. Hackett recommends that students of news go further than identifying of bias and imbalance and focus instead on the “structured orientation” of journalists, including framing processes that extend beyond conscious processes of distortion or manipulation. As he puts it, media frames might be a result of the “unconscious absorption of assumptions about the social world in which the news must be embedded in order to be intelligible to its intended audience” (Hackett, 1984, p. 248).

The interpretive controversies model goes beyond the identification of traditional forms of bias and focuses instead on more subtle framing processes. Later, I apply this framework to the 2002 presidential election in Brazil. But before advancing the analysis, the next section introduces the political background of the 2002 campaign.

Context of the 2002 Election

The 2002 election was marked by a significant erosion of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s popularity level (Carreirão, 2004). Based on a center-right coalition between his social democratic party (PSDB) and the conservative PFL, Cardoso implemented important political and economic reforms during his two terms in the presidency (1995–2002), including the privatization of major state-owned companies and a new economic plan that managed to reduce the previously high and uncontrolled inflation rates. Nevertheless, due to difficulties in the economy, including high unemployment and low growth rates, voters tended to reject Cardoso’s policies and expressed a clear desire for change.

Early in the 2002 campaign, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, known simply as Lula, emerged as the front runner in the polls. Lula is the leader of the Workers Party (PT), the leftist political party founded in 1980 after a new trade union movement led by Lula shook the foundations of the military dictatorship through massive strikes in the main industrial centers of the country. Lula had been a candidate in the three previous presidential elections (1989, 1994, and 1998), always finishing the race in second place.

President Cardoso’s party (PSDB) decided to launch his minister of health, José Serra, as presidential candidate. Serra based his campaign on his administrative and technical experience but faced difficulties due to Cardoso’s low popularity and voters’ demand for change. He attempted to overcome these difficulties by distancing his candidacy from the president and by emphasizing the need for “change.” Such a rhetorical strategy did not work. Serra presented a discourse “out of place,” since he was seen by voters as the candidate of continuity, not of change (Almeida, 2004). The centrist

PMDB joined Serra's coalition, although several of its leaders decided to support Lula instead.

Besides Lula and José Serra, there were two other main candidates in 2002, both from the leftist opposition. The Popular Socialist Party (PPS) presented the candidacy of Ciro Gomes, a one-time governor and minister of state. The Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) chose Anthony Garotinho, governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro. In the analysis that follows, I concentrate on these four main candidates: Lula, Serra, Ciro, and Garotinho.¹⁰

Jornal Nacional: Framing Economic Instability

In this section, I summarize the results of a previous study about the coverage of the 2002 presidential election by the newscast *Jornal Nacional*. This analysis is important because, although TV Globo's tradition of partisanship and bias is well known (Lima, 1988, 1993; Straubhaar, 1989; Amaral & Guimarães, 1994; Miguel, 2000), insufficient attention has been given to recent changes in its News Division that have established a new journalistic model (see Porto, 2002).

In the 2002 election, *Jornal Nacional* offered unusually balanced news coverage of the main candidates, overcoming a past of more explicit partisanship. A content analysis of *Jornal Nacional's* coverage of the first round of the 2002 presidential election identified impressive levels of impartiality in airtime distribution among the candidates and in the tone of its coverage (Porto, Vasconcelos, & Bastos, 2004).¹¹ In the period of analysis, *Jornal Nacional* presented almost the same number of soundbites from each of the four main candidates. There were also no significant differences in the average length of soundbites or in the total number of seconds taken by each candidate. As far as the tone of the coverage is concerned, none of the candidates were harmed by more negative coverage with the exception of Ciro Gomes, who was subjected to more critical reporting.

Although *Jornal Nacional's* coverage of presidential candidates was characterized by an absence of open bias, I argue that the newscast played an important role in the 2002 presidential election through the way it framed the main controversies of the campaign. The content analysis developed by Porto et al. (2004) identified the most frequent themes in *Jornal Nacional's* coverage of the first round of the election. The data show that more than half of the news stories were about the electoral process. In these reports, the newscast emphasized candidates' daily agendas and campaign activities, adopting in this case a more descriptive tone. The second most frequent theme in the news coverage was the country's economy (27% of the reports). Thus, economy was the main substantive topic of the interpretive controversies presented by Brazil's most popular newscast. News stories about other themes, such as social issues (poverty, social inequality, health, education, etc.) and crime/public security, received much less attention, with less than 5% of the reports dedicated to each.

This emphasis on the economy was related to the difficulties that Brazil was experiencing during the electoral period. The country was facing high levels of distrust by foreign investors, especially Wall Street banks, which led to a rapid increase in Brazil's risk premium and a significant devaluation of the national currency. As Martinez and Santiso (2003, p. 370) put it:

Between April and July 2002, when investors started to worry that one of the leftist candidates might actually win, anxiety was transmitted to financial variables. By July spreads levels jumped above 2000 bps . . . , and the currency had sunk to more than 3.50 reais per dollar (from a level of 2.30 reais at the beginning of the year).

According to the authors, “Lula’s strength in the polls was perceived as a growing risk by investors and analysts, because it presented a serious threat of discontinuity in economic policy” (p. 371). Spanakos and Rennó (in press) also stress how economic instability during the campaign period was related to voters’ tendency to favor candidates whose policy proposals were perceived by investors as ambiguous and/or misguided.

In this context, interpretations of the causes and consequences of the economic crisis became a key controversy during the campaign. In this debate, *Jornal Nacional* helped to frame the economy in a restricted way, supporting the interpretation that was promoted by Cardoso’s administration and by financial markets while marginalizing the perspectives of oppositional candidates. Content analysis data show that the great majority (75%) of news stories on the economy adopted a restricted form, with a single interpretive frame (Porto et al., 2004). Thus, these reports tended to promote a single interpretation of the economic reality. Analysis of the soundbites that appeared in this restricted coverage of the economy demonstrates a clear predominance of official sources (28.2%), the candidate of the government and his campaign staff (12.7%), businessmen (10.3%), and experts (9.4%), all of whom tended to support the same frame. On the other hand, opposition candidates received much less time in the controversies over the economy (28.7% of the soundbites for Lula, Ciro, Garotinho, and the members of their campaign staffs).

But which interpretive frames were promoted by Cardoso’s administration and by opposition candidates? The government and its candidate, José Serra, interpreted the difficulties in the economy in terms of the nervousness of financial markets and foreign investors as a result of “electoral uncertainties.” In other words, the main cause for the devaluation of the national currency and for unfavorable indexes of trust (the “Brazil Risk”), according to this interpretation, was the strong standing of the opposition in the polls, which represented a threat to the economic model established by President Cardoso. On the other hand, opposition candidates always linked the nervousness of financial markets to uncertainties about the country’s capacity to honor its commitments, since Cardoso’s “disastrous” economic policy had caused huge growth in the federal budget deficit (see Porto et al., 2004, pp. 78–79). Therefore, while the interpretive frame promoted by the government, its candidate, and financial markets interpreted the economic crisis as resulting from the polls (which indicated that the opposition could win), opposition candidates argued that the crisis was a result of the government’s own policies and failures. *Jornal Nacional* played an important role by emphasizing the first interpretive frame and marginalizing the second.

Taking into consideration these findings, I hypothesize that higher levels of exposure to the newscast *Jornal Nacional* will make voters frame economic instability as the main national problem. The assumption is that exposure to *Jornal Nacional* will affect voters’ preferences by increasing their support for the interpretive frame on the economy that was promoted by the government, its candidate José Serra, and financial markets. As previous studies have shown, this frame was systematically supported by *Jornal Nacional*’s news coverage.

Political Advertising: Framing Social Issues

Besides analyzing the role of Brazil’s most important newscast in the 2002 presidential election, this article also investigates the role of political advertising (HGPE). As mentioned, the total airtime for political advertising is divided proportionally according to the number of seats that each party or coalition has in the lower house of Congress. As a result of these criteria, during the first round of the 2002 presidential election each 25-minute

block of political advertising broadcast in prime time was divided in the following way: José Serra, 42%; Lula, 21%; Ciro Gomes, 17%; Anthony Garotinho, 9%; José Maria, 5.5%; and Rui Pimenta, 5.5%.

To develop a specific hypothesis about framing effects in the 2002 election, I rely on previous studies about candidates' programs on television. In particular, I summarize the results of a content analysis of all political advertising programs broadcast in prime time by the four main candidates: Lula, Serra, Ciro, and Garotinho (Porto et al., 2004).¹² Based on the classification of "appeals" proposed by Joslyn (1990), the content analysis identifies eight possible types of appeals that candidates can present in their programs:

1. *Future Policies*: presents the candidate's programs and policy proposals.
2. *Past Policies*: refers to what the candidate or his/her party has done while in office at the municipal, state, or federal level.
3. *Personal Attributes*: stresses the features and qualities of the candidate as a person (knowledge, experience, honesty, competence, etc.) and also includes segments on the candidate's biography.
4. *Partisan*: links the candidate to personalities (including leaders of his/her party), groups, or institutions. Includes segments in which the candidate praises or identifies him/herself with other politicians, social groups (women, youth, workers, etc.), social movements, institutions, and so forth.
5. *Ideological*: uses explicit ideological terminology (left-right, socialism, liberalism, nationalism, etc.) to identify the candidate or coalition.
6. *Symbolic*: relies upon the articulation of myths and cultural ideals, such as stability, union, optimism, justice, solidarity, and so forth.
7. *Situational Analysis*: presents an evaluation of the current situation of the country in a variety of aspects (economy, health, education, etc.).
8. *Negative Campaign*: includes attacks on other candidates, individuals, or institutions.

Besides this classification of appeals, the theoretical framework of the research also identifies the following content segments of political advertisements:

1. *Metacampaign*: segments aimed at promoting the candidate's campaign, including poll results, announcements of campaign activities and rallies, and segments presenting and reinforcing the candidate's name and number.
2. *Songs*: segments in which the programs present the candidate's jingles and songs.

Based on this typology of appeals and content segments, all programs of the four main candidates broadcast before the first round of the presidential election (August 20–October 3) were analyzed. Next, the findings of this content analysis are summarized.

Lula's Appeals

In Lula's case, the data show that the PT candidate emphasized *situational analysis*, with 28% of the total program time. Thus, Lula's main priority was to present an evaluation of the country's situation. He was the candidate who devoted the most time to this appeal. In second place for Lula is *future policies*, with 18% of his program time. Thus, besides evaluating the national situation, Lula also emphasized his proposals to solve the nation's problems. It is also important to stress the "light tone" of Lula's campaign. On the one hand, he was the candidate dedicating the most time to songs and jingles (11%). On the other hand, he put the least emphasis on *negative campaign* (2%).

The content analysis also identified the most frequent themes in Lula's main appeal (*situational analysis*). Lula emphasized the national economy, which was the main topic of 51% of the segments in this category. In second place, with 46% of the segments, came social problems (poverty, social inequality, health, education, etc.).

Finally, the analysis identified the main themes of Lula's *future policies*, the second most frequent appeal in his program. Social problems were the main theme in this category, accounting for 53% of the segments in this appeal. Lula gave special attention to health, education, and poverty. His plan to end hunger in Brazil, known as *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger), was one of his key electoral platforms. Besides social issues, PT's airtime also stressed the economy, which accounted for 38% of the segments in this appeal.

Serra's Appeals

The main priority of the PSDB candidate, José Serra, was presentation of his plan for government. Serra was the candidate who dedicated more time to the *future policies* appeal (36% of total program airtime). In second place comes his *past policies* appeal (16%). Thus, Serra emphasized his past achievements, especially as minister of health in Cardoso's second term (1999–2002). In contrast to Lula, the government's candidate did not dedicate much of his program's time to analyzing the country's situation. The *situational analysis* appeal accounted for only 5% of his total airtime.

The content analysis also identified the main themes of Serra's appeals. In the case of *future policies*, Serra put a strong emphasis on the economy, which comprised almost two thirds (65%) of the segments of this appeal. Serra focused on "employment and wages," which accounted for 52% of the *future policies* segments. In contrast to Lula, Serra did not dedicate much time to "economic policy" in general, which took only 3% of the segments of the *future policies* appeal.

Ciro's Appeals

The main appeal of the PPS candidate, Ciro Gomes, was *negative advertising*, with 29% of his total airtime. Ciro dedicated the most time to criticizing other candidates, personalities, and institutions, including the federal government. Most of this counter-attacked the negative ads of José Serra, which presented Ciro as unstable and aggressive, framing him as unprepared for the presidency. These ads of Serra played an important role in eroding Ciro's standing in the polls and in blocking his participation in the second round. The PPS candidate's voter support fell from 26% on August 20, when the programs began, to 9% on October 5, just after they ended (Figueiredo & Coutinho, 2003, p. 106). Panel data show that the cascade away from Ciro was triggered by media, especially negative reportage by his competitors (Baker et al., 2006).

The second most important appeal of Ciro's program was *future policies*, with 14% of his total airtime. When Ciro presented his government policy proposals, he emphasized social problems and the economy (36% and 33% of the segments, respectively). On the other hand, Ciro was the candidate who dedicated the highest proportion of time to the issue of crime/public security when presenting his proposals (22% of the segments of the *future policies* appeal).

Garotinho's Appeals

The main emphasis of Anthony Garotinho's (PSB) program was on *past policies* (24%). Thus, the candidate's main strategy was presenting his achievements as governor of the

state of Rio de Janeiro. He was the candidate who devoted the most time to this type of appeal. *Future policies* took second place, with 18% of his total airtime.

In his policy proposals, Garotinho focused on the economy, the subject of 83% of the segments of his *future policies* appeal. This appeal's main theme was "employment and wages," present in 61% of the segments. Like José Serra, Garotinho emphasized the economy, concentrating his proposals on employment and wages.

Conclusions About Political Advertising on TV

The content analysis of the programs of the four main candidates suggests that each of them adopted a specific strategy. Lula gave priority to the analysis of the country's situation; Serra emphasized his government policy plans; Ciro focused on negative advertising; and Garotinho dedicated the most time to the presentation of his past achievements.

Moreover, political advertising played an important role in framing social problems as important national issues. While Brazil's main newscast devoted less than 5% of its news stories to social problems, opposition candidates, especially Lula and Ciro, stressed them in their free time on television. In other words, while TV news framed the economy as the key problem, opposition political advertising programs (especially Lula's) tended to define social problems as the central issue.

Main Hypothesis and Method

As we have seen, the newscast *Jornal Nacional* not only emphasized the economy in the 2002 presidential campaign, but the coverage of this issue was dominated by the interpretive frame promoted by official sources, the candidate of the government, and financial markets. According to this frame, it was very important for Brazil to keep President Cardoso's macroeconomic policies, including inflation control, to solve the problems of economic instability that the country was facing. On the other hand, opposition candidates used their political advertising programs to stress Brazil's social problems.

Taking these differences into consideration, I specify the main hypothesis derived from the interpretive controversies model in order to test the model in the setting of the Brazilian elections. The following hypothesis results from the previous analysis:

Higher levels of exposure to the newscast *Jornal Nacional* will make voters frame economic instability as the main national problem. On the other hand, higher levels of exposure to political advertising on television will make voters frame social problems, especially the fight against poverty, hunger, and social inequality, as important national issues.

To test this hypothesis, I use data from the Brazilian Electoral Study (ESEB), a postelectoral survey conducted with 2,513 voters 16 years of age or older in all states of the country between October 31 and December 28, 2002. The project was coordinated by the research centers CESOP (Universidade de Campinas) and DATAUFF (Universidade Federal Fluminense). The ESEB sample was divided in two random splits to allow experimental manipulation of some of the questions. Since one question that is central to the research presented in this article (exposure to political advertising) was presented to only one of the two splits, I work with the random subsample of the first split (total $N = 1,286$). It should be noted that there is no significant difference between the two subsamples of the ESEB survey.¹³

Results

The ESEB survey did not include specific questions about how voters interpreted the main campaign issues, especially in terms of economic instability and social problems. As a result, specific hypotheses in the framing fields of responsibility attribution, assessments about significance, arguments about consequences, and treatment recommendations could not be tested. As a proxy for the field of “problem definition,” which is central to framing contests, I use one question of the ESEB survey about voters’ evaluations of the most important national problems. Contrary to traditional agenda-setting research, which focuses on how the media set the agenda by influencing the salience of attitudes toward political issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1971, p. 177), I am more concerned with the power of television to define certain issues as problems in the first place than in its power to define the ranking of problems in the public agenda.¹⁴

To test the main hypothesis, I create a dependent variable with the following question of the ESEB survey: “In your opinion, what was Brazil’s biggest problem in the last four years?” The question was open-ended, and answers were coded according to three main categories in order to build an unordered categorical variable. The first category, “social problems,” includes all answers mentioning hunger, social inequality, and income distribution. The second category, “economic instability,” includes all answers mentioning inflation, the economy, exchange rates, economic crisis, and high interest rates.¹⁵ The third category, “all others,” includes the remaining answers, with topics such as unemployment, crime/public security, corruption, and so forth (see the Appendix for details). I then ran a multinomial logistic regression, with this unordered categorical variable as the dependent variable, to verify the effects of several factors, including exposure to *Jornal Nacional* and to political ads. The model also analyzes the influence of other types of variables on the framing of the most important problems.¹⁶ It includes electoral preferences, operationalized in terms of vote choice in the second round of the presidential election (vote for Lula versus vote for Serra). I also evaluate the impact of socioeconomic factors, including region, religiosity, age, gender, and education.

Table 1 presents the results of this multinomial logistic regression. The hypothesis about framing effects is generally confirmed. Exposure to *Jornal Nacional* has a positive and significant effect ($p < .015$) on attitudes that frame economic instability as the most important problem when compared to all other issues. Thus, higher levels of exposure to Brazil’s main newscast increased support in public opinion for the interpretation that stressed the need to keep inflation under control and to maintain the stability of the economy. As we have seen, this was exactly the interpretive frame that dominated *Jornal Nacional*’s election coverage.

In the case of political advertising, the hypothesis was partially confirmed. Contrary to the initial prediction, higher levels of exposure to political ads did not lead voters to frame social issues as the most important problems, compared to all other issues (no significant effect). Nevertheless, exposure to political advertising made voters reject the notion that economic instability was more important than all other issues, and the effect was significant ($p < .05$). In other words, the more voters watched political advertising, the less support they provided to the notion that economic instability was the main problem. This effect is consistent with the study’s expectations.

Although the results provide general support for the main hypothesis, the model does not control for endogeneity bias in terms of self-selection to ideologically congruent outlets.¹⁷ In other words, the model does not consider the possibility that voters who thought that the economy was the most important issue decided to watch *Jornal Nacional* because

Table 1
Multinomial logistic estimation of effects on attitudes about the most important problem of the country

Variable	Social problems as most important		Economic instability as most important	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	-1.904***	0.375	-2.240***	0.384
Exposure to <i>Jornal Nacional</i>	0.241	0.196	0.475**	0.190
Exposure to political ads—HGPE	-0.345	0.217	-0.398*	0.208
Lula voter (second round)	-0.397	0.216	0.165	0.244
Serra voter (second round)	-0.556*	0.273	0.436	0.266
Region (Southeast)	-0.095	0.186	-0.389*	0.181
Religiosity	-0.096	0.214	-0.364	0.209
Age	0.007	0.006	0.014**	0.006
Female	-0.062	0.185	0.196	0.183
Education	0.626***	0.194	-0.257	0.204
<i>N</i>			1,286	
Valid <i>N</i>			1,204	
Pseudo <i>R</i> ² (Cox & Snell)			.041	
χ^2 (18)			50.238	

Notes. The reference category is all other issues. *B* = estimated coefficients. **p* < .05; ***p* < .015; ****p* < .001.

Source: Estudo Eleitoral Brasileiro, ESEB, 2002.

they knew that it supported that interpretation. Although this possibility exists, it is very remote in the Brazilian context. As I have already noted, voters' partisan attachments tend to be weak in Brazil. Moreover, even after controlling for ideological orientation in terms of the right-left continuum, the effects of *Jornal Nacional* and HGPE remain strong and significant.¹⁸ Finally, the massive audience for both *Jornal Nacional* and political advertising suggests that the determinants of television viewing go well beyond ideological preferences.¹⁹

Other than exposure to *Jornal Nacional* and political advertising, only four variables have significant effects. Serra voters tended to reject the idea that social problems were the most important, compared to all other issues (*p* < .05). These results are consistent with the study's assumptions. As we have seen, it was President Cardoso and the candidate of his party (PSDB), José Serra, who were the main promoters of the frame that dominated news coverage and that emphasized economic goals. Thus, it makes sense that PSDB voters would tend to reject the emphasis on social problems. Individuals with higher levels of education considered social issues as the most important problems, compared to all other issues, and the effect is very significant (*p* < .001). Residents of Brazil's most populous and developed region (Southeast) tended to reject the framing of economic instability as the most important problem, compared to all other issues (*p* < .05). Finally, older individuals tended to agree that economic instability was the most important problem, compared to all other issues (*p* < .015).

Conclusions

Luis Inácio Lula da Silva was elected president of Brazil in 2002 with an unprecedented level of support for a leftist political challenger.²⁰ Television was the key arena in which Lula's election took place. As the results of this study show, television played an important role in the public's interpretation of some of the main controversies that characterized the 2002 presidential election. The findings suggest that political advertising programs are an important alternative forum for the representation of political reality that contributes to broadening the variety of interpretive frames that voters have access to during campaigns. As we have seen, while television news privileged the interpretive frame that was promoted by the incumbent administration and by financial markets, political advertising allowed opposition candidates unmediated access to voters and the opportunity to frame social problems as the most urgent issues.

The media and other elites frequently argue that it is anti-democratic to demand that the media broadcast political ads and often criticize this free access to prime time television by candidates. But the ESEB survey demonstrates that voters are aware of the importance of these programs for Brazilian democracy. When asked if political advertising programs on TV should continue, 68% of the respondents answered "yes" and only 32% said "no." These data prove that claims of lack of public support for political advertising, which the media frequently present, are simply wrong.

On the other hand, despite its "balanced" coverage, *Jornal Nacional* contributed to a scenario that demanded from all candidates their pledge to maintain President Cardoso's macroeconomic policy. Such policy continuity was considered the only way to prevent the economic instability that the country was facing. As we have seen, the predominance of this scenario resulted from the interpretive frame promoted in the news by the government, its candidate, and financial market forces, especially those linked to Wall Street banks. Martínez and Santiso (2003, p. 387) argue that, in a globalized financial world, "winning the political vote in your home country is not enough." According to the authors, in the confidence game that is now played out in emerging economies, leaders must fight to win the confidence of financial markets. The 2002 Brazilian presidential election demonstrates that while political advertising offers alternative interpretations to the electorate, television journalism tends to reinforce the dependency of electoral outcomes on the perspectives of globalized financial markets.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings presented here suggest that students of elections and political communication should not underestimate the role of the media in shaping controversies that take place during campaigns. The interpretive controversies model provides conceptual tools that enable analysis of the relationship between media frames and the symbolic disputes that are carried out by different political and social actors, including candidates, governments, and globalized financial market forces. The way such controversies are framed by the media during electoral periods could have enduring effects on the public policies that are adopted by newly elected governments, especially in emerging countries like Brazil with foreign-capital-dependent economies.

Finally, the results of the research presented in this article suggest that the emphasis on framing effects has great potential for improving our understanding of the role of the media in electoral campaigns. Absence of explicit media bias can lead to weak media effects on electoral behavior. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the media do not play an important role or that they are ideologically inert. Scholars should not ignore the process by which the media promote specific interpretations of the main campaign issues. Thus, the lack of plurality in media messages concerning the main controversies of an

election can lead to significant framing effects on voters' political deliberation, even when the media provide "balanced" and "impartial" news coverage.

Notes

1. The ESEB survey is described in the methodological section below.

2. The question about the variables that influence vote choice was the following: "From this list [the respondent receives a card], which was the most important way by which you decided on whom to vote for president?" According to the ESEB survey respondents, the four most important variables were debates on TV (29.7%), political advertising on TV (16.4%), conversations with friends and family members (14.2%), and TV news (7.1%).

3. The item on institutional performance was the following: "I will mention the name of several institutions and would like to ask you to evaluate each one's performance as excellent, good, bad, or terrible." The ESEB survey respondents who evaluated the institutions' performance as "excellent" or "good" were distributed as follows: Catholic Church, 86.0%; TV Globo, 79.4%; big companies, 66.7%; military, 61.9%; police, 53.3%; federal government, 52.0%; judiciary, 40.9%; Congress, 38.4%; and political parties, 35.3%.

4. Data from the Web site of TV Globo's Commercial Department (http://comercial.redeglobo.com.br/programacaojornalismo/jn_ap.php), assessed on June 28, 2005. See also Porto (2001).

5. Since the introduction of the new constitution (1988), elections for executive posts (mayors, governors, and presidents) include a second round if none of the candidates receive more than 50% of the valid votes in the first round. In these cases, the two leading candidates take part in the second round. Political advertising and spots precede both rounds. In the first round of the 2002 election, which took place on October 6, the free campaign time on radio and television lasted from August 20 to October 3.

6. I name these programs "political advertising" because it is the usual term used worldwide to designate programming that is designed to promote the interests of parties or candidates (see Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). Nevertheless, as Kaid and Holtz-Bacha note, the term "advertising" is often used in the United States to indicate the buying of commercial space, while a broadened concept of advertising is needed for other systems (such as the Brazilian one) "in which television time is basically given or provided to parties in an election year, rather than bought by the candidates, as is the case in the United States" (1995, p. 2). For more details on the Brazilian model of political advertising and definitional issues, see Porto (2006). In this article, I do not analyze the role of spots, candidates' short commercials that are broadcast during regular breaks in television programming.

7. I have developed this concept in more detail elsewhere (Porto, 2001). The concept of interpretive frame is very similar to Entman's (2004) definition of substantive frame.

8. Based on controlled experiments and focused interviews, I show that *Jornal Nacional's* ability to frame political issues and events in Brazil weakens when viewers have higher levels of political participation and more access to other sources, especially newspapers (Porto, 2001). I also show that some citizens actively oppose the interpretive frameworks presented by the news. But although the model recognizes that audiences are not passive, it states that the ability of citizens to resist media frames depends heavily on the diversity of interpretive frames available in media messages.

9. It should be noted, though, that this process of media opening has been irregular in Latin America, and many barriers remain for the establishment of more democratic and pluralistic media regimes in the region (see Hughes & Lawson, 2005).

10. This article does not deal with the other two presidential candidates, José Maria (PSTU) and Rui Pimenta (PCO). Both were candidates of small Trotskyist parties and received less than 1% of the valid votes. Following Brazilian convention, I refer to some candidates by their first names.

11. All news stories about the 2002 presidential elections broadcast by *Jornal Nacional* between June 1 and October 6 were coded. The analysis included only campaign coverage, that is, reports that mentioned the name of at least one of the presidential candidates or mentioned the presidential election. The sample included a total of 602 news stories. See Porto et al. (2004) for details on methodological procedures. The coding was done by Rodrigo Figueiredo de Vasconcelos, an

undergraduate student of the University of Brasilia, Brazil, who was trained and supervised by the author. Due to limited funds, tight time schedules, and limited access to video archives, reliability tests were not conducted.

12. See Porto et al. (2004), for details on methodological procedures. The coding was done by Bruna Barreto Bastos, an undergraduate student of the University of Brasilia, Brazil, who was trained and supervised by the author. Due to limited funds, tight time schedules, and limited access to video archives, reliability tests were not conducted.

13. I ran *t* tests with some basic socioeconomic variables (age, gender, education, etc.) and found no significant differences between the two subsamples.

14. It is important to stress, though, that agenda-setting research has incorporated a “second level of effects,” the so-called “attribute agenda setting,” to investigate how the media frame political issues (McCombs, 2004, chap. 6).

15. Thus, the operationalization of the category “economic instability” includes only answers more directly related to preelection instability, and not other economic factors such as unemployment and wage suppression (see the Appendix for details).

16. The Appendix presents the question wording, codings, and value frequencies of the independent variables. The effects of income were not tested to avoid the high number of missing cases that characterize self-reports of individual and family income in the ESEB survey.

17. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for calling my attention to this problem.

18. I performed cross tabulations to compare the ideological makeup of those who watch *Jornal Nacional* and political advertising (HGPE) 4 days per week or more and of those who watch less frequently. Only in the case of political advertising are there statistically significant differences (see the Appendix for question wording and codings in the case of ideological orientation). Those who define themselves as centrists (4, 5, and 6 on the scale) tend to watch fewer political advertising programs than leftists (0 thru 3 in the scale) and conservatives (7 through 10 on the scale). Nevertheless, when ideological orientation is introduced in the multinomial logistic regression, no significant changes take place, with the exception of the variables “region” and “age,” whose coefficients are no longer statistically significant. The variable ideological orientation was not introduced in the model because it increased the number of missing cases from 6% to 25%.

19. For example, the fact that telenovelas, the most popular genre of Brazilian television, are broadcast before and after *Jornal Nacional* helps to boost the audience for news.

20. Lula received 46.4% of the valid votes (blank and annulled votes excluded) in the first round of the election (October 6). Serra came in second (23.2%), Garotinho third (17.9%), and Ciro fourth (12.0%). Since Lula did not receive 50% of the valid votes, a second round took place on October 27 between Lula and Serra. Lula was elected president with 61.3% of the valid votes, while Serra received 38.7%.

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Appendix: Question Wording, Codings, and Value Frequencies

Most important problem (dependent variable of the multinomial logistic model): “In your opinion, what was Brazil’s biggest problem in the last four years?” (open question).

1. Social problems: includes all answers mentioning “hunger,” “poverty,” “social inequality,” and “income distribution” (12.2%).
2. Economic instability: includes all answers mentioning “inflation,” “exchange rate,” “economy,” “economic crisis,” and “interest rates” (12.3%).

3. All other issues: includes all answers mentioning “unemployment,” “violence,” “public security,” “corruption,” “education,” “health,” “wages/purchasing power,” “administration and policies of President Cardoso,” “drugs,” “external debt,” “politicians’ bad administration,” “draught,” “transport system,” “high taxes,” and “other problems” (75.6%).

Exposure to Jornal Nacional: “How many days per week do you watch TV Globo’s *Jornal Nacional*?” 1 = 4 days per week or more (41.9%); 0 = other answers (57.0%); missing values = 1.1%.

Exposure to political ads/HGPE: “How many days per week did you watch at least part of the free political advertising time on TV?” 1 = 4 days per week or more (28.2%); 0 = other answers (68.8%); missing values = 3.0%.

Lula voter: “For whom did you vote for president in the second round of the election, Lula or Serra?” 1 = Lula (55.2%); 0 = other answers (44.8%).

Serra voter: “For whom did you vote for president in the second round of the election, Lula or Serra?” 1 = Serra (22.7%); 0 = other answers (77.3%).

Region (Southeast): 1 = residents in Southeast (states of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Espírito Santo), the most populous and developed region (53.9%); 0 = residents in all other regions (46.1%).

Religiosity: “With which frequency do you attend masses or religious ceremonies?” 1 = several times per year or more (74.8%); 0 = never or rarely (22.9%); missing values = 2.3%.

Education: “To what school level did you study?” 1 = high school degree or higher (35.4%); 0 = less than high school degree (64.6%).

Ideological orientation: “Thinking in terms of left and right in politics, how do you locate yourself in this scale? [The respondent receives a card.] Zero means that you locate yourself in the left and 10 means that you locate yourself in the right.” Missing values = 22.7%.