

## El rol del periodismo en los debates presidenciales en la Argentina y Brasil

### *The role of journalism in presidential debates in Argentina and Brazil*

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#### **Abstract**

*Presidential debates are crucial in current election campaigns. The way they are staged is the outcome of difficult negotiations between media and politicians. This study aims to compare presidential debates' format between Brazil and Argentina, focused on the role journalists. To this end, literature and secondary sources have been reviewed and reconstructed to see the trajectories of presidential debates in both countries. While Brazil and Argentina are similar with respect to their political and media systems, presidential debate's histories differ significantly. This investigation's result show that journalists in Brazil, while having been marginalized from the overtly critical role they played on the first debates in the country, still play a role on them in current campaigns. In contrast, Argentine journalists are not allowed to participate on the debates, aside from a quiet moderating stance. This difference is likely due to the different timing on which presidential debates in one and the other country have taken place. While in Brazil debates started being organized early on (with the first direct and democratic elections), at a time where the mass media were undoubtedly dominant, in Argentina these have only recently taken place, just when the media systems (there and elsewhere) are increasingly fragmented and the objectivity and neutrality of journalist is being questioned.*

#### **Keywords**

*Presidential debates, Brazil, Argentina, journalism, electoral campaigns, formats, credibility.*

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## Resumen

Los debates presidenciales televisados son un momento central de las campañas contemporáneas. Resultan de tensas negociaciones entre medios de comunicación y políticos. A partir de un minucioso examen de archivo y fuentes secundarias, este trabajo compara la evolución del género en Brasil y la Argentina desde el retorno de sus respectivas democracias hasta la actualidad: dos países latinoamericanos con sistemas políticos y mediáticos similares, pero con resultados diferentes en este sentido. Se centra en los formatos que predominan en ambos países, con especial atención al papel de los periodistas. Se constata que, si bien periodistas brasileños han debido ceder parcialmente al rol “crítico” que tenían en los primeros debates del actual período democrático (retirada que refleja una pérdida de credibilidad), todavía participan en la mayoría de los encuentros entre candidatos. En la Argentina, en cambio, se ha prohibido expresamente que periodistas y representantes de los medios de comunicación tomen parte activa de los debates presidenciales televisados: se teme que tengan una actitud sesgada o poco objetiva. Las diferencias, argumentamos, tienen que ver con el diferente momento en el que los debates se originaron en cada país: más temprano en Brasil (en un momento de auge de los medios masivos de comunicación); más reciente en la Argentina, al calor de una creciente fragmentación del sistema mediático y de abiertos cuestionamientos al sector.

## Palabras clave

Debates presidenciales, Brasil, la Argentina, periodismo, campañas electorales, formatos, credibilidad.

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## Introduction

In today's democracies, the media system and the political system are a complex plot. Part of this complexity results from the fact that the media and political groups and individuals share a common objective: To challenge citizens to generate short or long-term collectives.<sup>1</sup> As mentioned by Silverstone (2004, p. 229) “Politics, like experience can no longer even be considered outside the media”. This article aims to capture how this complexity — inevitable and complicated — is concretized at a key moment for electoral campaigns in contemporary Latin American democracies: Televised presidential debates.

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1 See Verón (1998).

Our aim is to describe the evolution of televised presidential debates in two Latin American countries: Brazil and Argentina, with the specific purpose of characterizing the place of journalism, one of its central actors. After all, the conflicts that fuel the relationship between politicians, journalists, and audiences have in recent times become increasingly empirical as a result of the “media battles” that polarized the media-political scenario, in the context of the “left boom” of various countries of the region (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Balán & Montambeault, 2020, on the “war” between the “new left” and the major multimedia groups in Argentina and Brazil, see specifically, Kitzberger, 2016).

After presenting our methodological approach, we will begin by reviewing the history of televised discussions in both countries. We will address the formats that gender has adopted on both sides of the border. Then, we will focus on journalists, media representatives. We will assess the role they have played over the years in the discussions we are dealing with. We will note that while in Argentine debates the journalist is suspected and feared, and has almost no space to play a critical role, in Brazil the journalists still have an interrogative position in the meetings between presidencies, although they have had to give up space to new and varied forms of intervention by both politicians and citizens. To conclude, we will offer an analysis of all the differences observed in both countries.

## **Materials and methods**

The study is based on a comprehensive survey covering all the debates on which the democratic stages are recorded in Brazil (1985-cont.) and Argentina (1983-cont.). The investigation was done in two stages. First, we have conducted a very extensive review of secondary sources: press releases, civil or private publications and previous works — which will be mentioned later — with the aim of identifying encounters and recompiling the history of practice in one country and another. Secondly, we look for the greatest amount of information concerning the formats of the debates found in the first instance. To this end, we look for and classify the audio-visual archive of those broadcasts; after reviewing the videos found, we categorize each discussion according to what kind of information and intervention it presents — if it does — between three actors: journalists or moderators,

candidates, and audiences. Please note that this examination is part of a series of previous and larger work, to which we will refer where appropriate, which has enabled us to have a deeper look at our case studies, as well as additional materials, as an interview with organizers of Argentine debates.

We added two notes regarding the data obtained. First, Brazil has been subject of more examination than Argentina. Asymmetry is likely to be the product of the longest-time debates in the first case, as we will see below. For this reason, our argument regarding the evolution of practice in Brazil takes previous findings. Second, and in contrast, the audiovisual record of Argentine debates is more complete than that of its Brazilian counterpart. The difference is due to the recent incorporation of practice in that country — the origin of which is contemporary to the increasing use of streaming and digital means of transmission of information — but, also, to the public character that its organizers have given to it; conversely, in Brazil there are debates protected with commercial property rights. However, thanks to the addition of previous work in this area, we have collected enough data to give our work confidence.

In particular, at least 53 debates have taken place in Brazil since the return of the direct presidential elections in 1989, of which we have found 38 with sufficient information about their staging and format. In Argentina, as we said, the corpus is more limited and current, so we were able to get the debates in its entirety: these are four meetings, two of 2015 and two of 2019, of which there is a complete audiovisual record. Table 1 presents a summary of the meetings held in both countries since the return of the respective democracies, the history of which is described below.

**Table 1**  
*Argentine and Brazilian debates since the return of democracy*

Year	Round	Number of debates	Organizers
BRASIL			
1989	Total	10	TV Bandeirantes, Rede Manchete, SBT, Rede Globo/SBT/Rede Manchete/Rede Bandeirantes
	1°	8	
	2°	2	
1994	Total	3	TV Manchete patrocinado por Associação Comercial do Rio de Janeiro, TV Manchete patrocinado por Associação Brasileira de Imprensa, TV
	1°	3	
2002	Total	4	TV Bandeirantes, Rede Record, Rede Globo
	1°	3	
	2°	1	
2006	Total	7	Rede Bandeirantes, TV Gazeta, Rede Globo, SBT, Rede Record
	1°	3	
	2°	4	
2010	Total	13	Rede Bandeirantes, Folha de São Paulo/UOL, Emissoras TV Católicas de São Paulo, TV Gazeta/Estado de São Paulo, RedeTV!/Folha de S. Paulo, Universidade Católica de Brasília/TV Senado, Rede Record
	1°	9	
	2°	4	
2014	Total	9	Rede Bandeirantes, UOL/Folha de S. Paulo, TV Aparecida/CNBB/, Rede Record, Rede Globo
	1°	5	
	2°	4	
2018	Total	7	Rede Bandeirantes, RedeTV!/Istoé, TV Gazeta/UOL, TV Aparecida/CNBB, SBT/Folha de S. Paulo/UOL, Rede Record, Rede Globo
	1°	7	
ARGENTINA			
2015	Total	2	Argentina Debate
	1°	1	
	2°	1	
2019	Total	2	Cámara Nacional Electoral
	1°	2	

## **State-of-the-art and context. Presidential debates in Brazil and Argentina. A comparative story**

Presidential debates are intended to provide information to voters and to show political differences between candidates.<sup>2</sup> However, they are rituals that not only offer information, but also spectacle (Weber & Abreu, 2010). In Latin America, the first presidential debates took place in Brazil and Venezuela in the 1960s, as television progressively occupied the center of the mass media system (Verón, 2009; Carlón, 2012). However, the practice did not enter the continent's institutional political culture until the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> when democracy became a desirable future for the main forces of the local political spectrum.

Today, several Latin American countries hold televised presidential debates, and even many of them have enacted laws or other regulations in this area, including Brazil and Argentina, which are our focus. The democratic history in these two countries has important differences (Devoto & Fausto, 2008). However, the similarities unite them. On the one hand, the two opened competitive electoral regimes in the 1980s, as part of the so-called "third wave of democratization" (Huntington, 1994). On the other hand, those transitions occurred simultaneously with a mutation of the media ecosystem, characterized by the passage from media societies to mass societies (Verón, 1989). The return of democracy was parallel to the passage from "a regime of representations based on media dependence (the media are there to tell us the truth) to a regime of production of a real media in which the political appears strongly interdependent" (Escudero, 2007, p. 41). Television would acquire a dominant position at the time: both Brazil and Argentina had open television systems developed under the control of some channels with great territorial and population influence.

As can be seen in two aspects relevant to our subject matter, the political regime, and the media system, in the two countries are comparable. The history of televised presidential debates is, however, going through notoriously divergent paths. We shall proceed to restate them, focus on the diversity and evolution of the formats that have been acquired by the discus-

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2 Expected effects studied by the classical literature of reference. Cf. McKinney and Warner (2013).

3 At the end of the 1980s, discussions were held in Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Colombia. Peru and Mexico joined in the 1990s. For the current year (2021), excepting Cuba whose regime is not competitive, all the countries of the region have held at least one meeting between presidential candidates. The data come from an ongoing research, part of a Master's thesis.

sions in each of the two countries. The description will serve as a framework for examining the role of journalists. In other words, we aim to show differences in the history of televised debates and, hence, in the participation of journalists in such events by keeping the media-political systems of our two case studies “constant”.

## **Debates in Brazil: history, innovation and diversity**

Brazil is the Latin American country that first adopted pre-election debates on television. There is a record of one and improvised debate before the meeting between Nixon and Kennedy — which historiography hails as the inauguration of international practice (Schroeder, 2000) —. On September 15, 1960, TV Tupi, the first television station in Latin America, organized a debate between candidates for the presidency. It was relatively successful, since the main candidate and subsequent winner, Jânio Quadros, abandoned the debate (Ruiz & Albano, 2012; Leite, 2003). The military regime that ruled *de facto* from 1964 to 1985 did not allow further debates: as is evident, the coexistence of political and media censorship is not the appropriate ground for the organization of televised presidential debates. However, unlike other dictatorships in the region — such as Argentina, for example — Brazilian authoritarianism enabled parliamentary and subnational elections to be held under official and extra-institutional controls that guaranteed the triumph of officialism. Despite the uncompetitive conditions and, in particular, the Falcão Act, which restricted the possibility of deploying election campaigns, televised debates were organized between 1982 and 1985, in the heat of the growing social demand for democracy.

Due to the past attempts, it is not surprising that during the conflicting election campaign that occurred during the return of direct presidential elections in 1989,<sup>4</sup> six debates were organized for the first round on three out of the four main national broadcasters: TV Manchete, Rede Bandeirantes and Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão (SBT)—the country’s main media group,

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4 The 1985 elections, the first after the withdrawal of the dictatorship, were carried out by an indirect procedure, i.e., from the election of an Electoral College, a system designed by the outgoing military regime. This electoral system was not without questioning; in this line, the citizens’ demands for a change of electoral regime were expressed (outstanding the movement called “Diretas Ja”).

Globo, did not participate this time—<sup>5</sup>. However, the four stations in the second round, associated in a press pool, held two meetings in which the finalists Fernando Collor de Mello (National Reconstruction Party, PRN) and Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (Workers Party, PT) participated. These were meetings that had a great media and political impact at that time and later.<sup>6</sup>

These “inaugural” debates on the return of democracy adopted a “traditional” or “classic” format. Sitting or standing in lecterns, the candidates were involved in two types of interactions: between them and with journalists. For their part, they asked questions from both a panel and from the position of the moderator. The interactions occurred, in all cases, in the limits imposed by strict rules concerning themes, times and presentations.<sup>7</sup>

The televised debates of 1989, the first debates between Brazilian candidates, laid the foundations for a tradition that is now entrenched, despite their limitations. Still today, at the heart of the media and political agenda, the conduction of the television debates depends on the initiative of private commercial actors, who cooperate and compete between them. The debate on open and commercial television is one of the most important moments of Brazilian electoral campaigns since the return of democracy.

However, the above statement must be nuanced, since in the elections of 1994 and 1998, televised presidential debates were opposed for two concurrent reasons: on the one hand, by the refusal of the twice-elected Fernando H. Cardoso to debate (Leite, 2003; Machado, 2011); on the other hand, because certain requirements of the Electoral Code regarding the conduction of such events were incompatible with the commercial requirements of television, insofar as they were forced to invite all candidates of a highly fragmented system, and were afraid that it would be a long and boring broadcast that would not generate controversy (Weber & Abreu, 2010). Even so, there is a record of at least three debates between presidencies prior to the 1994 elections, all of which are the result of the initiative of various civil socie-

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<sup>5</sup> Instead, Globo opted for a series of individual interviews with the candidates.

<sup>6</sup> Globo presented a synthesis of the second of these pre-balloting debates, held three days before the election, on the news program *Jornal Nacional*, the most watched on television. The broadcast was the center of a major controversy for being considered biased, unfavorable to the PT candidate (Leite, 2003; Machado, 2011; Souza dos Santos & Fernandes, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Such is the trend in gender (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). Even though the time given to each candidate had been limited, some of the meetings prior to the first round had been extensive, mainly due to the large number of participants (Machado, 2011).



ty organizations. Again, the format of these debates was “classic”.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, in 1998 occurred the only presidential elections since the return of Brazilian democracy in which no televised debates were held between the candidates.

Under a legal umbrella less out of line with the needs of the media,<sup>9</sup> debates became customary since this millennium. In the 2002 elections, the impetus of the organizers TV Bandeirantes, Rede Record and Globo – each of which arranged their own meeting between presidencies before the first round of the elections – contributed to the future of televised debates in real media events.<sup>10</sup> As a novelty, during this election campaign, the path was opened to experimentation and diversification of formats to innovation within the possibilities offered by gender. For the first time, the meeting organized by Globo for the second round took the form of the American town hall meeting,<sup>11</sup> with the incorporation of live voter questions from the broadcast site.

A new player came into play on the scene of the debates: the common citizen, embodied in the figure of the undecided voter. The staging for the occasion accompanied the news: Globo placed the opponents, Lula da Silva and José Serra, in a sand in which they could move freely, without fitting to the rigidity of the stands. Despite some variants, the chain maintained the same scheme in the subsequent elections, but only for the meetings prior to balloting. Meanwhile, the confrontations before the first round are more similar to the classic format, both because of the willingness of participants and because of the dynamics of exchanges between politicians and a moderator or journalists, from which the public is excluded.

In any case, from the 2002 elections onwards (at least until the last elections in 2018), Brazilian chains organize, in total, more than one debate for each round. The impetus stems not only from the main commercial channels, but also from the promotion by regional channels, the press on their online pages and the religious media network. Most of the invited candidates participa-

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8 They led to interactions between the candidates, combined with questions raised by moderators and journalists. Sobriety in staging also continues. Thematic issues were addressed in line with the civil and sectoral nature of the organizers of the discussions. For a more detailed description of its future, see Sousa Rego (2011).

9 In particular, the obligation to invite candidates was limited to only those belonging to parties with parliamentary representation (Leite, 2003), which has been in force until now (art. 46 of the Electoral Code).

10 We follow Leite's reading (2003) based on the term Katz and Dayan (1992).

11 We find references to this format in Schroeder (2000) and Milcovic (2014).

te in different meetings (in fact, the practice is maintained despite the possible absence of leading candidates in the electoral campaign<sup>12</sup>). In 2006, three debates were organized for the first round and four for the second round; in 2010, nine and four, respectively; in 2014, five before the first round and four before the second; in 2018, there were seven debates before the first round of the elections. However, there were no debates before the second, due to the refusal of the favorite – and finally elected – J. Bolsonaro to attend.<sup>13</sup>

As can be expected from the above and given the large number of variables combined in the production of televised debates (Weber & Abreu, 2010; Machado, 2011), different formats coexist in the history of the debates in Brazil. As Falconi-Pires (2017) expresses by reference to the Weber and Abreu categories (2010), we find more conventional models alongside other interactive and complex ones.<sup>14</sup> Among the major new developments recently introduced, the incorporation of the technological possibilities offered by digital media is highlighted: the recent debates of 2018 added live analysis of trends in social networks and questions and comments by internet users. Issues such as duration, order of blocks and thematic selection and staging also vary, as well as levels of audience and impact on the media agenda of meetings. We will then discuss some of these issues when examining the future of the place of journalists within this growing variety of forms of debate in Brazil.

## **From the empty chair to the elections: Presidential debates in Argentina**

In contrast to the profuse history of Brazilian televised debates, the Argentine case can only be described as curbed. For the presidential elections

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12 Some “fouls” had more attention and criticism than others; for example, the controversy over the “empty chair” that Globo placed in the studio when Lula missed the debate for the first round of 2006 (Machado, 2011). In any case, we insisted, none implied that these events would no longer take place.

13 The then candidate was excused for the need to preserve his health after the attack suffered during a campaign. However, he simultaneously held an interview on the Record channel. We worked on the case in a previous brief (Franco-Häntzsch, 2020).

14 An example of a “conventional” debate, in this case “conventional with Platea-Stage”, is the final meeting for the second round of 2006. Instead, in the first round, we found a “complex colloquial debate” and a “simple interactive debate.” For details on these categories and the examples mentioned, see Machado (2011). We do not extend into this categorization here as it does not directly contribute to the aim of this paper.

of 1983, which opened the democratic period, the main open television stations, based in Buenos Aires but with national scope, were under the control of the State (Morone & De Charras, 2009; Postolski & Marino, 2009). In any case, accompanying the democratic opening, as was also the case in Brazil, Argentina witnessed a revival of the demands for citizen and cultural participation (Com, 2009).

In this context, there was a vocation to promote debates on television at various levels and with an unequal degree of success. The first time that a television broadcast the debate of two Argentine politicians was in 1984, following the call of the then President R. Alfonsín to elections aimed at knowing the will of the citizens regarding the way to solve the conflict of the Beagle. The meeting between representatives of the main political parties was broadcast on Channel 13, hosted by B. Neustadt.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it was the moment of the first televised debates between candidates competing for subnational positions. Thus, in 1987, debates were organized for Bonaerese governorate between A. Cafiero, candidate for the Justicialist Party (PJ), and J. M. Casella, candidate for the Radical Civic Union (UCR).

The debates between presidencies were different. In 1989, the candidates for the presidency for the PJ, C. Menem, the main opposition party, and UCR, E. Angeloz, Representative of the officialist party, were invited to discuss with Neustadt. Menem's absence, symbolized by an empty chair in the study, converted the debate into ordinary interview.<sup>16</sup> Menem by that time was heading the polls. His later and loose triumph – 47.51% against 37.10% – allowed to understand the officialism's incompetence to resolve hyperinflation was more important than the new president's television absence.

After this, presidential debates were left off the agenda during subsequent electoral periods. The main reason was the repeated refusal of the electoral career leaders to attend the debate on television. Such are the cases of Menem in 1995 and N. Kirchner in 2003 (paradoxically, in the latter case in rejection of the request of former President Menem). Additionally, the impossibility of the main political parties and their campaign teams to

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<sup>15</sup> It was about the acceptance or rejection of the firm of the Peace Treaty with Chile.

<sup>16</sup> The UCR took advantage of the situation with posters and a spot showing only an empty chair. The spot wondered in twelve seconds: "The polls say that many Argentine doubt Menem's ability to govern the nation. Is that why Menem denies the hand-in-hand debate against Angeloz?" The PJ doubled the bet with another warning showing several empty chairs, while the voice-over remarked: "Hubo debates que la UCR no fue capaz de sostener: con los empresarios, los trabajadores y los jubilados".

reach an agreement for a television debate in 1995 (Acosta & Campolongo, 2017, pp. 5-6) or, quite simply, the lack of initiatives that will promote such encounters as apparently happened between 2007 and 2015.

The tendency to fail to handle televised presidential debates in Argentina was reversed in 2015. An NGO that year, Argentina Debate, managed to hold two meetings. A first debate was broadcast by six national and regional TV channels and streaming with some setbacks arising from the impromptu absence of the pro-government candidate, D. Scioli, from the Front for Victory (FPV).<sup>17</sup> The success of this first debate most likely led to a second meeting: before the runoff, Scioli agreed to debate M. Macri in the live television. This second debate was broadcast on the five national channels<sup>18</sup> and on six cable channels, reaching a rating of 54.8<sup>19</sup> points; also, on streaming, where it obtained approximately 340 thousand live visits.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the media success of this first time, presidential debates in Argentina took over the law the following year. In 2016, the National Congress gave effect to Law 27,337, which punishes mandatory televised presidential debates. More specifically, it gives responsibility to the National Electoral Chamber to organize two debates between presidential candidates prior to the first round in the elections, and an additional one if a second round of elections is required. In addition, it punishes candidates who refuse to debate. Thus, in contrast to private and commercial interests in Brazil, in present-day in Argentina, presidential debates are initiatives of the state. The model was tested in the last elections: in 2019, the two debates scheduled before the first round of the presidential elections were held. The triumph of Alberto Fernández in the first round required a third round.

The format of the series of debates in 2015 and 2019 was the same. It was defined that direct exchanges between the candidates would dominate almost all the broadcast, followed by a closing monologue (segment common by all the debates presented in this work, both Brazilian and Argentine). Of course, as is the norm in gender, the times devoted to questions

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17 These are: Channel 26 (cable), Channel 9 (air), Televisa and Acequia TV (from Mendoza city) and Channel 13 of San Luis.

18 Specifically: America, Argentine Public Television, Channel 9, Telefe and El Trece.

19 The figure even exceeds one of the most seen events by Argentine: The 2014 World Cup final. See: <https://bit.ly/3rm5ysv>

20 The data are derived from an anonymous interview carried out for a previous work (Franco-Häntzsch, 2017) with a member of the NGO Argentina Debate, in charge of the broadcast.

and answers were prefixed and defined, as well as the order of exposure. The “thematic blocks” that guided the discussion were also predetermined. Neither journalists nor citizens questioned the candidates. Representatives of the former had the role of moderators, whose role was limited to the event, while the latter, had the role of spectators (either as assistants or as viewers), and euphoric manifestations were prohibited. Finally, the Argentine television debates of 2015 and 2019 were similar in their setting on stage, sober, but spectacular, marked in the discourse by memories of information communication situations (news and political opinion programs).<sup>21</sup>

### **Analysis. The margins of journalism: Information, suspicion, and experimentation**

We have succinctly presented the history of televised presidential debates in Brazil and Argentina. A long history in Brazil, with time for the exploration and diversification of formats, managed mainly by private channels, which contrasts with Argentina’s recent entry into the organization of televised debates, first because of the impetus of an NGO, and then the state. From these divergent paths, different models of debate emerge, which are observed, among other aspects,<sup>22</sup> in the variable places or roles of the media and journalists.

This distinction will be discussed in more detail below. While the formats currently in use in both countries restrict the performance of journalists, the limitations are less severe in Brazil than in Argentina, and it might be because of different motivations that can be synthesized as follows: a common recognition of the declining “authority” of journalism to the public; the Argentine presidential debates add the fear of political actors to the bias of the media.

Brazilian and Argentine journalists, as we have already mentioned, play an apparently similar and insignificant role in the debates. Let us begin by reviewing the way in which this phenomenon has been investigated in Brazil. Analysts of the televised presidential debates have emphasized the gra-

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21 See Franco-Häntzsch (2017, pp. 31-34).

22 We have examined in a previous paper both the relative role of citizenship and candidates (Franco-Häntzsch & Dagatti, 2021).

dual loss of role for journalists in the broadcast. Leite (2003), notes that when introducing the town hall meeting — Globo's new format for the second round of the 2002 elections, mentioned in the previous section — there was a "hesitation" of the journalist's critical role, which loses the possibility of freely interviewing the politician.

Additionally, after examining the evolution of the debates before the second round organized by Globo, Falconi-Pires (2017) finds that "there are aspects that point to a transformation in the behavior of the media in relation to the political discourse in the debate, more specifically with regard to genre". While TV station representatives could challenge the candidate in 1989, since "journalists had the credibility" to do so, with the new century "the journalist leaves the place of question, and gradually (...) occupies a place as mediator, promoting a shift in focus, which is now divided between the undecided candidates and voters present in the debates" (all references refer to 2017, p. 125).

Similarly, Verón (2003) mentioned about a *preventive* strategy. Television, as a media institution and organizer of the debates, led to a "elegant" retreat in the face of a progressive crisis of legitimacy of information discourse in the political field. The disarticulation of exchanges between politicians, undecided voters, and journalists who prescribed the rules of the new debate formats seemed to raise questions about journalism and a deterioration in public confidence in televised information. In the author's terms, the outline proposed for the 2002 meeting by the Globo chain:

It can then be understood, not as an expression of definitively acquired legitimacy, but as a set of precautions that could indicate that media managers know, or at least consider, that they are moving forward in a dangerous area. (2003, p. 174)

Such an interpretation of the critical, or at least interrogating, role of the media in the political field seems, at first glance, to fit the Argentine case. Let us recall, from the previous section, that the proposed outline for all the discussions to date — both in 2015 and 2019 — excludes the possibility for the moderator to ask questions or comments that interfere in the debate between the candidates. The media must be neutral. In fact, between the first and second meetings of 2015 — the first ones in the country — the rules of the debate were adjusted to strengthen the limits to the interference of journalists in the dialog between the candidates. Perhaps as a result of a more

“neutral” moderator role than expected in the first meeting.<sup>23</sup> In relation to the next, a clause was expressly incorporated that precluded comments from the presenters during the transmission.<sup>24</sup> In addition, as stated by a member of the Argentine NGO debate — the organizing institution of the events at that time,<sup>25</sup> the personalities appointed to the office were forced to sign a public record that committed them to abide the rules set between the parties. In addition, none of Argentina’s debates — neither the 2015 nor the 2019 inaugurals — incorporated panel journalists. In short, the role of journalists, as representatives of the media institution during the controversial development of debates, is negatively sanctioned — even in a regulatory manner.

While in Brazil the “withdrawal” of journalists has been argued, it seems to respond to their “anticipated?” loss of credibility; the Argentine case seem to illustrate the existence of an intersystemic tension —between the political system and the mass media system— that affects the powers of the media to political actors. The question is that the communication objectives of journalists and politicians overlap, they both want to question citizens, speak on behalf of them and express a feeling of society. The formers seek to legitimize their role as mediators between the latter and third parties; to do so, the usual solution is to plead the supposed neutrality of the environment. On the contrary, politics will exercise various strategies aimed at circumventing the intercession of journalism: it will strive to contain it, it will prefer controlled communication situations, and it will challenge the purported neutral place of the information discourse, denouncing its interests, its contradictions, its biases.

In Argentina in 2015, this conflict was open and was part of the public agenda. No one was unaware of kirchnerism’s disputes with major media corporations — and with some of the top journalists and political analysts — even

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23 The apparent reason for “adjusting” the rules seems to be that in the run-up to the first round of elections, on October 4, L. Novaresio, a journalist in charge of the two-block moderation, provided comments “in a personal capacity” (according to his words). Some implications of this fact were observed in the media between the events and expectations about his role. Hours after the event, the newspaper *La Nación* wrote “although everything was timed, the presenter took more minutes to explain the modality, acknowledged and expressed his opinion as a candidate.” See: <https://bit.ly/3HpPVWL>

24 The text stated: “During the live broadcast of the debate, it is the duty of the moderator to maintain a role strictly in accordance with the rules and principles agreed upon by all parties and expressed in this Style Manual” (Style Manual for the Second Round).

25 The data are derived from an anonymous interview carried out for a previous work (Franco-Häntzsch, 2017) to a member of the Argentine NGO Debate in charge of the broadcast.

if there were discrepancies about its motivation (Vincent, 2011; De Diego, 2014). Under such conditions, the attention addressed to the role of moderators in presidential debates was due to a certain suspicion that weighed on Argentine journalism around its vocation of truth, and to a fear of the political agents (the candidates, or some of them) to the “unpunished” question, purported but falsely “objective” and “independent” of journalists/moderators.

In a previous paper (Franco-Häntzsch, 2017) we suggest that the “cornered” place of journalists in the Argentine televised confrontations of 2015 appears to be the result not only of their loss of credibility, but also of high mistrust. According to what was stated by the representative of Argentina debate, journalists were silenced as requested by candidates. Otherwise, they would not agree to debate. In the words of the informant:

When you see the production of the debate, it was a debate that was ‘protecting’ somehow the candidates, so that they really encourage themselves to take that first step. (...) When we were going a little bit more aggressively, they stopped us (...). [what surprised us [was that] there was a lot of relation in the way of thinking of the campaign teams of all the candidates. For example, one of the things we wanted was for the moderator to ask a question. It was not accepted. They preferred the question between candidates rather than the question of a moderator of a channel who could have a particular intention. If you notice, the role of the moderator was pure moderation, without any content. (Interview. Emphasis is proper)

The latter may respond to the absence of D. Scioli, the official candidate, to the first debate.<sup>26</sup> The crisis of journalism’s legitimacy and the suspicion that political agents hold of this “falsely disinterested” informational vocation led to journalists having no choice but to be mediators; moreover, they impose on the medium “the burden of proof” of proving its intended neutrality. The referred rigidity of the rules that limited the performance of journalist-moderators constitutes a guarantee; according to María O’Donnell, one of the journalists appointed to moderate the 2019 presidential debate<sup>27</sup> “The candidates did not want journalists asking them questions”.

Similarly, another way to demonstrate the neutrality in the organization of Argentine debates was expressed by the search for balance between the

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<sup>26</sup> We comment on this absence in another work (Franco-Häntzsch, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Source: <https://bit.ly/3rm9Zne>



actors that occupied that role. According to the provisions of the Act, the name of the eight moderators of the two mandatory debates by 2019 was the subject of discussion and consensus among the candidates' teams. It was also expressly sought that the final election respected diversity in terms of gender, origin (according to a federal criterion) and institutional affiliation.<sup>28</sup> The marginal position of journalists-moderators in intervening as polemicists or interrogators in the debate — a task delegated exclusively to politicians — is then balanced in terms of representation and management of mediation. As mediators, journalists — and therefore, the media — regulate the relation between political agents and spectators; as representatives, they express from the point of view of the organizers, not so much the position of the citizens/public — since they cannot speak on their behalf, but on behalf of the media institution — as its composition and distribution —, but from a heteronormative and corporate point of view, i.e., balance between women and men, balance between capital and provinces.

The number and diversity of presidential debates in Brazil — whether compared with its centralized organization from the state or an NGO in Argentina — relativizes this representative dimension: organized by private channels and by various private and public actors from churches to regional media; each broadcaster appoints its own figures to embody the roles of journalists and moderators. They are journalists on the channel, not representatives of a centralized public service. Competition among media agents is paramount; public acquisition is as important as the dissemination of information for consumption and citizen profit. For that reason, the idea of neutrality or objectivity in each debate is defended in the name of an ideal of journalism and not in the name of a supposed neutrality and offset of the organizing institution, as in Argentina, where first an NGO first and then the State, from the National Electoral Chamber, claim to be apart to all sectoral interests.

Having noted the refusal of journalists to intercede during Argentine debates, we are thus returning to the analysis of Brazilians. When we opened this section, we referred to investigations that observed the gradual withdrawal of journalists from the protagonist place they knew they had in the first presidential debates in Brazil. As evidence, these tests offered the no-

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28 In this sense, it should be noted that in 2015 gender inequality in the election of moderators had aroused controversy.

velty of the format that the Globo chain introduced for the second round of 2002. In view of the media centrality of the leading broadcaster, and the continued application of this scheme, the assessment provides at least part of the evolution of the models of debate in the country. However, we consider important to clarify it. Not only in the light of the Argentine case, but also to provide a more detailed analysis of the diversity of debate formats that currently coexist in Brazil.

Let us begin by agreeing with the partial reduction in the participation of journalists during the debates in Brazil. During the first recorded broadcasts — 1989 and 1994 — it was normal for television station representatives to dominate the debate. For example, in the two debates that the radio station pool organized prior to the ballotage in the first direct presidential elections on the return of democracy, each of the four thematic blocks was opened with a question from the moderator to both candidates. L. da Silva and F. Collor de Mello. It was followed by questions from a panel of journalists. Given the nature of the organization in that moment, each station assigned its own moderators and journalists, who alternated during the meeting's development — apparently pointing out the relevance that, for the media, entails “being” on screen.

Similarly, in the debates in 1994, particularly in the one on TV Bandeirantes, the role of the specialized journalist was introduced, who was betting on giving authority to the media. Additionally, the Brazilian Press Association oversaw one of the three debates transmitted by TV Manchete. In short, in the early Brazilian televised presidential debates, the role of journalists was visible and central, especially in contrast to the place of voters — given the relevance that the latter acquired later, but also with the short time allotted for the candidates to question their opponents. By contrast, in subsequent years, as we have already pointed out, the debates in Brazil offer progressive visibility to the actions of the candidates themselves and figures representing the public, to put on the scene new types of interactions.

However, if observing at all the Brazilian debates, i.e., the plurality of meetings organized by various national and regional chains for both electoral rounds since the return of democracy, certain nuances are imposed.

We will begin by emphasizing that the space dedicated to media representatives to interview politicians, although it has been reduced, is maintained in most of the debates. For example, the one that RedeTV! organized for the first round of 2010 included three blocks of direct exchanges between

the candidates, and two in which the journalists initiated the dialog. In Rede Bandeirantes issue for the first turn of 2014, the balance was more noticeable: two blocks of each type. In the same year, SBT and Grupo Folha organized one in which journalists intervened in one of the three blocks.

In short, we find a balance slightly in favor of questions between candidates, but the role of journalists is still in force. In addition, many debates keep the opening question in the voice of the moderator, who in some cases is expressly allocated to producers, for example, each of the debates that organized TV Gazeta, RedeTV! and Bandeirantes for the first round of 2010; or that of Record in the first round of 2014 (although his host claimed that “the Record debate privileges interaction between the candidates”) or that of RedeTV! for the same occasion in 2018.

By adjusting the limits of the information observed, it should be noted that, in any case, the interventions of the representatives of the media appear to be less and less contentious compared with those in 1989. On the return of democracy, the moderators focused on specific issues and on the agenda. For example, M. G. Bastón de Toledo opens the first block of the debate on TV Bandeirantes during the first turn of 1989 interrogating: “[faced with the situation lived by Brazilians] how to reduce inflation, guarantee the necessary investments and maintain a satisfactory wage policy? How will the money be obtained, and what are the concrete measures?” The journalists who at that time played the additional role of interviewers did not miss an opportunity to challenge candidates on particularly sensitive issues: for example, questions about his faith to atheist F. H. Cardoso before the Brazilian believer audience in a debate for the Prefecture of St. Paul (Leite, 2003), or instigation, in the second turn of 1989, so Lula da Silva would give his opinion about the “lessons” that could be drawn from the Soviet experience in the face of a possible PT government (Falconi-Pires, 2017).

Today, the questions are far from that level of provocation. For example: “Candidate please choose the topic you consider more important to be presented tonight, 21 days before the election, and explain your position and your government proposal on this item” (debate in Rede Bandeirantes, prior to the second round of 2010), or: “Why does Mr. or Mrs. want to be President of the Republic?” (Discussion on SBT/ UOL Portal for the second round of 2014). As we can see, rather than polemize, recent questions introduce broad and general judgments, enabling the debaters to make a free opening.

On one additional point, we have found differences between the debates that are organized in Brazil in advance of the first and second round of elections. While in the first round journalists have spaces to participate, as we refer and exemplify, the tendency is to encourage direct interaction between candidates, with little or no intervention by journalists. It should also be stressed that the country's main channel, Globo, also proposes different formats before the first and second round of elections, but in no case does it envisage journalists to interrogate candidates.

## Results

The table below (Table 2) provides a synthesis of what has been presented in this paper.

**Table 2**  
*Results of the analysis: Presidential debates compared  
in Brazil and Argentina*

Main differences between Brazil and Argentina regarding the way in which televised presidential debates take place, with a focus on the place of journalists in debates in both countries		
	Brazil	Argentina
Length of the trajectory of the presidential debates in the country	Long: Debates are held from the first direct elections to the present (1989-2021), excepting in 1998.	Recent: Debates were held in the last two presidential elections (2015 and 2019).
Type of organizer	Commercial media (mainly)	In 2015 by an NGO; from 2019 onwards by the State, in accordance with the regulation in the matter.
Role of the journalist in debates	-Journalists ask candidates questions as moderators or panelists. -The role has decreased in two ways: the questions asked in the present are less controversial than those of the past, and today's debates are conducted in a variety of formats that do not always incorporate the possibility of journalists to be part of it.	Journalists do not ask questions to candidates. Moreover, it is expressly forbidden for them to take part in the conduction of the debate.

*Note.* Own elaboration, based on what has been researched for this work and in previous opportunities.

In short, our article has endeavored to emphasize that the role of journalists and media representatives in the conduction of presidential debates differs between Brazil and Argentina. While the former has gradually given up their inquisitorial role for candidates and voters to take the control in the interaction that is displayed in the television studio, their image retains some visibility that Argentine journalists fail to obtain. The latter, under the focus of suspicion, seem bound to demonstrate their balanced neutrality in a scenario sponsored by an agent who is invariably intended to be impartial, the Argentine NGO debates in 2015 and the national state from 2019 onwards (as prescribed in the 2016 Act). In this scenario, they can only aspire to stick to the much-needed conduct of the debate, without intervening or guiding the dialog between the debates.

## **Brief final considerations**

The electoral campaigns in Brazil and Argentina integrated the presidential debates as part of their agenda. As rituals, these are communicational practices that aim to measure the relationship between politics, media, and citizenship. The current diversity of models and formats in Brazil and the centralized organization in Argentina seek to attract, despite their contrasts, the attention and interest of the spectators. In each case, it is a precarious balance that exposes social, communication and political struggles between the different sectors involved.

The track record of presidential debates in Argentina and Brazil is uneven, but there are similar accolades and criticism (on the value of debates for democracy, on the role of journalists, on the low level of argumentation, on the limited participation of citizens, on the excessive care of candidates); which is specific to the genus (Schroeder, 2000; Milcovic, 2014), and is the cause to search centrality of the event. In the framework of this network of tense relations that underlie the televised encounters between candidates, we wonder what rules the effective place of journalists in Brazilian and Argentine broadcasts?

The answer arises from the convergence of the first and second sections of this article. Presidential debates were early in the gradual transition to a competitive regime in Brazil, in an era in which television was consolidated as a privileged arena of political exchange. In this scenario, large private

and commercial actors dominated, who took the initiative to organize debates among candidates, setting the tradition.

In Argentina, by contrast, in the context of a more complicated transition and with channels managed by the outgoing dictatorship, televised electoral debates were postponed. Henceforth, in the face of continued turbulence, candidates with the greatest chances of electoral success found excuses to circumvent the long-awaited encounter. The televised presidential debates only came to light after 25 years of democratic coexistence, in a transformed media environment, in two ways: one because of the penetration of new technologies and the international trade opening that questioned the privileged market position of the main media players privatized during the decade of 1990 (Becerra, 2015); on the other hand, the doubted legitimacy of media and journalists to be neutral spokesmen of “the people”, the citizenship-audience.<sup>29</sup> In view of this panorama, one civil organization and the state itself were then the guarantors of the neutrality of the dispute. A must in the debate was to restrict the actions of journalists, suspected of bias and personal interests.

Thus, the Argentine case invites to hypothesize on the marginalization of journalists in response to their ability to damage the public image of politicians. This is a complement to a hypothesis that the marginalization of journalists from debates is a consequence of their delegitimization as guardians of public truth, of the deterioration of their image that we have seen; it also seems to describe the trajectory of the formats of debate in Brazil. Along these lines, Brazilian journalists are not excluded from similar transformations to those that have limited their Argentine counterparts; however, nuances and differences suggest that “dependent trajectory” mechanisms exist (Pierson, 2004) in which the different moment since the beginning of this practice has consequences in one country and another.

The debates are at the center of the public scene before and after their conduction. Although everything seems to indicate that they do not change electoral trends,<sup>30</sup> they are important moments in presidential campaigns,

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29 During the development of this work, we have made references to “media battle” that Kirchnerism set with the main media of the country.

30 The assertion comes from various studies evaluating the extent to which a televised presidential debate modifies the expected election results (Stimson, 2004; Erikson & Wlezien, 2012). This conclusion does not deny that discussions may generate other types of effects, such as the degree of voter information about candidates or their positions.

and they are presented to the audience as a symbol of democracy. They are the result of arduous negotiations between representatives of the political world and representatives of the journalistic world. It is a delicate balance managed by parties with experience acquired throughout history, negotiations, interdicts, and containment.

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