COMMUNICATION, DEMOCRACY, AND DISINFORMATION
The co-optation of indigenous candidacies as a strategy of political manipulation

COMUNICAÇÃO, DEMOCRACIA E DESINFORMAÇÃO: a cooptação de candidaturas indígenas como estratégia de manipulação

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the practices of co-opting indigenous candidacies in Brazil's 2024 municipal elections, analyzing them as communicational disinformation strategies that compromise democratic integrity. Through an analysis that articulates political communication, disinformation studies, and official electoral data, the work examines how the instrumentalization of indigenous candidates operates through mechanisms such as diversity-washing, astroturfing, and misleading framing to legitimize interests contrary to those of indigenous peoples. The research reveals that despite a 33% growth in the number of elected indigenous councilors in 2024 (241 elected compared to 181 in 2020), co-optation practices persist that transform political representation into a disinformation tool. The results demonstrate that these strategies not only perpetuate indigenous under-representation - with only 0.162% of municipalities having indigenous mayors and 0.416% of councilors being indigenous, while representing 0.83% of the population - but also function as mechanisms for capturing democratic spaces that should amplify historically silenced voices.

KEYWORDS: Political communication; Disinformation; Indigenous representation; Democracy; Electoral cooperation.

Introduction

Contemporary democracy faces unprecedented challenges in terms of the integrity of the communication processes that sustain public deliberation and political representation. In the Brazilian context, these challenges are particularly acute when we analyze the political participation of indigenous peoples, historically marginalized from spaces of power and subject to multiple forms of silencing and instrumentalization (Viveiros de Castro, 2022). The 2024 municipal elections presented an apparently paradoxical scenario: on the one hand, there was a significant increase in indigenous participation, with 241 councillors elected (an increase of 33% compared to 2020) and 9 mayors elected; on the other hand, evidence emerged of systematic practices of co-optation that transform this apparent inclusion into a mechanism for legitimizing interests contrary to the indigenous peoples (FUNAI, 2024). It should be emphasized that this study is not criticizing the interethnic quota system, much less taking a stance against indigenous participation in instances of power, but above all, investigating forms and strategies of disinformation in this process.

This phenomenon cannot be properly understood without placing it in the broader context of contemporary transformations in information flows and communication manipulation strategies that characterize what several authors call the "age of disinformation" (Gomes & Dourado, 2019). The centrality of communication processes in the dispute over meanings about indigenous representation is revealed through multiple channels: the traditional media, which often reproduces stereotypes and simplifying narratives about indigenous peoples; digital platforms, which amplify hate speech and disinformation; party machines, which instrumentalize indigenous symbols and candidates for electoral purposes; and the state itself, which through its official policies and discourses promotes what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls "de-Indianization" (Viveiros de Castro, 2015).

The relevance of this research lies in the urgent need to understand how apparently inclusive practices can actually function as sophisticated disinformation strategies that compromise democratic integrity. When indigenous candidates are co-opted to legitimize anti-indigenous agendas, when cultural symbols are appropriated for electoral purposes without commitment to the agendas of indigenous peoples, or when political representation becomes merely symbolic and devoid of real power, we are facing phenomena that transcend the mere question of representativeness to become structural threats to democracy (Grutzamann & Schilling, 2023).

The concept of co-optation, as used in this study, refers specifically to the process by which indigenous candidates are incorporated into the political-electoral system in an instrumental way, serving primarily to legitimize the interests of the non-indigenous majority and endorse practices that ultimately harm indigenous peoples. This co-optation operates through multiple communication mechanisms that will be analysed throughout this work: political *diversity-washing*, which simulates inclusion while maintaining structures of exclusion; *astroturfing*, which creates appearances of popular support for candidates who do not genuinely represent indigenous interests; deceptive *framing*, which frames indigenous issues through narratives of "meritocracy" and "end of privileges"; and the systematic decontextualization of issues such as self-declaration and electoral quotas (Freire, 2023).

The general objective of this study is to analyze the practices of co-opting indigenous candidates in the 2024 municipal elections as communicational strategies of disinformation that compromise democratic integrity. The specific objectives include: (i) empirically verifying data on indigenous representation in the 2024 elections, establishing historical comparisons and regional analyses; (ii) identifying and typifying the main co-optation practices and their disinformational mechanisms; (iii) critically analyzing the effects of these practices on public opinion and democratic deliberation; and (iv) examining specific cases that illustrate both problematic practices and experiences of more authentic representation.

The central hypothesis guiding this research is that the co-optation of indigenous candidates functions as a sophisticated form of political disinformation which, by simulating inclusion and diversity, in reality perpetuates structures of exclusion and legitimizes anti-indigenous practices. This disinformation operates not through the dissemination of explicit false information, but through the manipulation of contexts, meanings and expectations, creating a "representation without representativeness" that empties the transformative potential of affirmative action (Santini, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Amerindian Perspectivism and the Challenges of Political Representation

A proper understanding of the challenges faced by indigenous political representation in contemporary Brazil requires a careful articulation between the contributions of Amerindian perspectivism, developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro,

and Western theories of political communication. Amerindian perspectivism proposes a radically different understanding of the relationship between nature and culture, subject and object, self and other. According to this perspective, there is no universal nature onto which different cultures project themselves, but rather multiple natures corresponding to different points of view or perspectives (Viveiros de Castro, 2004).

This understanding has profound implications for thinking about indigenous political representation. When we talk about "indigenous representation" in the Western democratic context, we often assume that it is about representing indigenous interests, demands or identities within a given, neutral and universal political system. Amerindian perspectivism invites us to question this assumption, suggesting that the Western democratic political system itself constitutes a specific perspective on what politics, representation and collectivity are (Lima, 1996).

Ailton Krenak, in his reflections on contemporary indigenous resistance, argues that indigenous peoples are not simply seeking to be included in the Western "civilizing dream", but to affirm other ways of existing and relating to the world. This statement implies that indigenous political representation cannot be thought of only in terms of inclusion or exclusion within a given system, but must consider the possibility that the very terms of representation need to be rethought (Krenak, 2019).

Political Communication and Disinformation

The analysis of indigenous political representation in the contemporary context cannot do without an adequate understanding of the transformations that characterize communication processes in 21st century democracy. The concept of *agenda- setting*, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), remains fundamental to understanding how the media influence not only what people think, but what they think about.

The concept of *framing*, developed by Erving Goffman and later applied to political communication studies, is equally relevant to our analysis. *Framing* refers to the processes through which events, issues or social actors are presented within specific interpretive frameworks that highlight certain aspects while obscuring others (Entman, 1993).

The emergence of digital platforms and social networks has introduced new complexities into political communication processes. The concept of *astroturfing* - the artificial creation of apparently spontaneous movements - becomes particularly relevant in the context of indigenous representation (Batista, 2019). Computational

propaganda, a concept developed by researchers such as Woolley and Howard (2018), refers to the use of algorithms, automation and big data to manipulate public opinion.

Disinformation as a Strategy of Domination

Understanding the co-optation of indigenous candidates as a disinformational strategy requires a careful analysis of the concept of disinformation and its specificities in the contemporary Brazilian context. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) propose a useful typology that distinguishes between misinformation (incorrect information disseminated without malicious intent), disinformation (incorrect information disseminated intentionally to cause harm) and malinformation (information that is factually correct but used to cause harm, often through violation of privacy or decontextualization).

The concept of *diversity-washing*, initially developed in the corporate context, can be applied to the political context to understand how apparently inclusive practices can function as strategies to legitimize exclusionary structures (Freire, 2023). In the context of indigenous representation, *diversity-washing* can manifest itself through the promotion of indigenous candidates who have no real ties to their communities of origin, who do not defend indigenous agendas, or who are used to legitimize anti-indigenous policies.

Methodology

This research adopts a mixed methodological approach that combines quantitative analysis of official electoral data with qualitative analysis of communication practices and specific documented cases. The quantitative data was collected through systematic consultation of the official databases of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) and the Regional Electoral Courts (TREs), with a specific focus on the 2024 municipal elections (TSE, 2024).

The qualitative analysis focused on identifying and typifying co-optation practices by examining documented cases, analyzing discourses and communication strategies, and investigating information flows related to indigenous representation. The state of Tocantins received special attention due to the significant growth in indigenous participation (31.25% increase in candidacies) and the diversity of ethnicities represented (TRE-TO, 2024).

Results

Quantitative Growth and Regional Distribution

The official data from the 2024 municipal elections shows a significant increase in indigenous political participation compared to previous elections. The total number of registered indigenous candidacies was 2,578, representing an increase of 16% compared to the 2,223 candidacies in 2020. The number of indigenous councillors elected grew even more significantly, from 181 in 2020 to 241 in 2024, an increase of 33.1%. The number of indigenous mayors elected grew more modestly, from 8 to 9, an increase of 12.5% (TSE, 2025).

The regional distribution of elected representatives reveals important patterns that reflect both the demographic concentration of indigenous peoples and specific regional political dynamics. The Northeast region concentrates the largest number of elected indigenous councillors (87, representing 36% of the total), followed by the North (77, representing 31.8%). The South, Midwest and Southeast regions have lower numbers: 30 (12.4%), 28 (11.6%) and 20 (8.3%) respectively.

Analysis of Gender and Under-representation

Analysis of the gender distribution of elected indigenous candidates reveals patterns of female under-representation that mirror broader trends in Brazilian politics. Among the 9 indigenous mayors elected, only 1 is a woman (11.1%), while among the 241 councillors elected, 39 are women (16.2%). These percentages are slightly higher than the national average for female representation in elected office, but still reveal significant under-representation considering that women represent approximately 50% of the indigenous population (Sacchi & Gramkow, 2012).

Impact of the TSE's Affirmative Actions

The TSE's decision to guarantee proportional distribution of resources from the Party Fund and the Special Campaign Financing Fund for indigenous candidates, implemented for the first time in the 2024 elections, had significant impacts that can be seen in both the quantitative data and the qualitative dynamics of the campaigns (TSE, 2024). The 16% increase in the number of indigenous candidates can be partially attributed to this measure, which created financial incentives for parties to register indigenous candidates.

Data specific to Tocantins

The state of Tocantins emerges from the 2024 data as a case of relative success in implementing more authentic indigenous representation. The 31.25% increase in indigenous candidacies (from 48 to 63) was accompanied by positive qualitative indicators. The turnout rate of indigenous voters in Tocantins was 93.33%, the lowest abstention rate recorded in the state, indicating high political engagement among indigenous communities (TRE-TO, 2024).

Typology of Co-optation Practices

Orange Candidacy: Formal Compliance with Quotas

The practice we call "orange candidacy" refers to the registration of indigenous candidates with the primary objective of formally fulfilling legal requirements or social expectations related to diversity, without any real commitment to representing the interests of indigenous peoples. The central disinformational mechanism of this practice is what we can call "legalistic *framing*", which presents formal compliance with legal requirements as evidence of commitment to inclusion and diversity (Entman, 1993).

Strategic Migration: Indigenous People in Anti-Indigenous Parties

The practice of "strategic migration" refers to the phenomenon whereby indigenous candidates join parties or coalitions whose agendas are historically contrary to the interests of indigenous peoples. The central disinformational mechanism of this practice is "party decontextualization", which presents indigenous candidates as legitimate representatives of their peoples regardless of the political-party context in which they are inserted (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Visual Performance of Indigeneity

The "visual performance of indigeneity" refers to the use of symbols, clothing, rituals and other visual elements associated with indigenous peoples in electoral contexts, often in a decontextualized and stereotyped way. The central disinformational mechanism of this practice is what can be called "political folklorization", which reduces the cultural and political complexity of indigenous peoples to visual elements that are easily consumed by non-indigenous audiences (Said, 2007).

Neutralizing Caucus Agreements

"Neutralizing caucus agreements" refer to political arrangements whereby elected indigenous candidates commit to voting against indigenous agendas or abstaining on crucial votes, in exchange for political support or resources for their electoral bases. The central disinformational mechanism of this practice is "representative *astroturfing*", which creates the appearance that there is legitimate division among indigenous people themselves on issues that affect their rights and interests (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

Party Machine Capture

"Party machine capture" refers to the process by which indigenous candidates are incorporated into party structures in order to subordinate their specific agendas to broader party priorities. The central disinformational mechanism of this practice is "controlled *agenda-setting*", through which the political priorities of indigenous candidates are redefined according to the strategic needs of the parties (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Discussion

Co-optation as a Sophisticated Form of Disinformation

The analysis of the 2024 data and the specific cases documented confirms the central hypothesis of this study: the co-optation of indigenous candidates functions as a sophisticated form of political disinformation that operates not through the dissemination of explicit false information, but through the manipulation of contexts, meanings and expectations (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

The sophistication of this disinformational strategy lies in its ability to anticipate and neutralize criticism of indigenous exclusion by presenting formal evidence of inclusion. This dynamic creates what we can call a "symbolic representation trap": the more indigenous exclusion is denounced, the more incentives there are for co-optation practices that simulate inclusion.

Democratic effects of structural disinformation

The democratic effects of the co-optation practices analyzed transcend the specific issue of indigenous representation to affect the general quality of Brazilian democracy. When political representation becomes a mechanism for legitimizing

interests contrary to those of the represented, the very foundations of representative democracy are compromised (Dahl, 2005).

The first democratic effect identified is the erosion of trust in representative institutions. The second effect is the fragmentation of indigenous representation and the creation of confusion about what the "true" interests of indigenous peoples are. The third effect is the legitimization of anti-indigenous practices through the endorsement of co-opted indigenous voices (Phillips, 1995).

Resistance and Possibilities for Transformation

Despite the sophistication of the co-optation practices analyzed, the research also identified forms of resistance and possibilities for transformation. The case of Tocantins offers insights into factors that can favor more authentic forms of representation. The first form of resistance identified is the maintenance of organic links between candidates and their communities of origin. The second form of resistance is the articulation of specific political agendas that cannot be easily appropriated by non-indigenous interests (Scott, 2013).

Final Considerations

This investigation into the practices of co-opting indigenous candidates in the 2024 municipal elections has revealed a complex phenomenon that transcends the specific issue of political representation to become a sophisticated form of structural disinformation that compromises democratic integrity. The quantitative growth observed in 2024 cannot be interpreted simply as democratic progress, since the qualitative analysis of co-optation practices reveals that a significant part of this growth may be being instrumentalized.

The typology developed in this study offers an analytical framework for understanding how apparently inclusive practices can function as strategies of domination. The case of Tocantins illustrates both possibilities for more authentic representation and limitations that persist even in relatively favorable contexts.

From a theoretical point of view, this study offers three main contributions: the articulation between Amerindian perspectivism and theories of political communication; the concept of "structural disinformation"; and the analysis of co-optation as a form of "representation without representativeness".

The practical implications include recommendations for improving affirmative action, developing stricter criteria for verifying the authenticity of indigenous candidacies, and creating monitoring and *accountability* mechanisms. Building truly inclusive democracies requires not only the inclusion of diverse bodies in spaces of power, but the transformation of those spaces themselves so that they can accommodate genuinely diverse perspectives on the world.

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RESUMO

Este estudo investiga as práticas de cooptação de candidaturas indígenas nas eleições municipais de 2024 no Brasil, analisando-as como estratégias comunicacionais de desinformação que comprometem a integridade democrática. Através de uma análise que articula comunicação política, estudos sobre desinformação e dados eleitorais oficiais, o trabalho examina como a instrumentalização de candidatos indígenas opera através de mecanismos como *diversity-washing*, *astroturfing* e *framing* enganoso para legitimar interesses contrários aos povos originários. A pesquisa revela que, apesar do crescimento de 33% no número de vereadores indígenas eleitos em 2024 (241 eleitos comparado a 181 em 2020), persistem práticas de cooptação que transformam a representação política em ferramenta de desinformação. Os resultados demonstram que essas estratégias não apenas perpetuam a sub-representação indígena - com apenas 0,162% dos municípios tendo prefeitos indígenas e 0,416% dos vereadores sendo indígenas, enquanto representam 0,83% da população - mas também funcionam como mecanismos de captura de espaços democráticos que deveriam amplificar vozes historicamente silenciadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunicação política; Desinformação; Representação indígena; Democracia; Cooptação eleitoral.

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga las prácticas de cooptación de candidaturas indígenas en las elecciones municipales de 2024 en Brasil, analizándolas como estrategias comunicativas de desinformación que comprometen la integridad democrática. A través de un análisis que articula la comunicación política, los estudios sobre desinformación y los datos electorales oficiales, el trabajo examina cómo la instrumentalización de los candidatos indígenas opera a través de mecanismos como el diversity-washing, el astroturfing y el framing engañoso para legitimar intereses contrarios a los pueblos originarios. La investigación revela que, a pesar del aumento del 33 % en el número de concejales indígenas elegidos en 2024 (241 elegidos frente a 181 en 2020), persisten prácticas de cooptación que transforman la representación política en una herramienta de desinformación. Los resultados demuestran que estas estrategias no solo perpetúan la infrarrepresentación indígena — solo el 0,162 % de los municipios tienen alcaldes indígenas y el 0,416 % de los concejales son indígenas, mientras que representan el 0,83 % de la población —, sino que también funcionan como mecanismos de captura de espacios democráticos que deberían amplificar las voces históricamente silenciadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comunicación política; Desinformación; Representación indígena; Democracia; Cooptamiento electoral.