

Framing Political Representations. Analyzing Trump and Biden's Televised Debate through Social and Self-Representations.

Emmanouil Takas*



* School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, manostakas@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the latest televised debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, on June 27th, 2024 on CNN, focusing on the use of their political discourse using framing strategies and representations. Political debates play a decisive role in modern electoral processes, influencing the perception and behavior of voters. The analysis focuses on the strategies the two candidates used to shape their own and their opponent's representations on key issues such as national security, economic performance and social justice. Through thematic and structural analysis four dominant clusters were identified: National Security, Foreign Policy, Domestic Policy and Economic Performance. The candidates' rhetoric reflected different ideological positions and frames. The study also explores how these strategies shaped representations of credibility and leadership. Trump used nationalistic rhetoric, portraying Biden as weak and ineffective, while Biden framed Trump as divisive and irresponsible. The findings show that self- and social representations, when strategically framed, play an important role in shaping voter perceptions and behavior.

Keywords: Political communication, social representations, framing, televised debates, US elections

Introduction

The last televised debate before the 60th presidential elections in the USA between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, which took place on June 27, 2024 and was broadcasted on CNN and simulcasted by CBS, ABC, NBC and Fox News Media, was characterized by intense confrontations focusing on issues such as the economy, immigration and foreign policy. Attention was internationally drawn to the overstatements of Donald Trump but mainly to the faltering speech and "muted" performance of Joe Biden as he faced criticism for his struggle to articulate his lectical choices, an issue that is thought to have contributed to his decision to step down from the presidential rally.

Nevertheless, political debates are an integral part of the electoral process in the United States constituting an opportunity for the voters to watch the candidates confront each other in live broadcast. Through this process, the candidates have the opportunity to defend their political suggestions, shape their (and their opponent's) image and appeal to a large audience. In this context, debates can shape social representations, frame the dynamics of political communication and influence voting behavior. Therefore, aim of this study is to focus on how these political protagonists communicated politically, the main themes of the debate, the way Donald Trump and Joe Biden strategically constructed meanings that contribute to the formation of

social and self representations and how each representation was constructed through different, opposing interpretations.

Televised debates and political communication

Televised debates have established themselves as a critical element of political dialogue at first in the United States and then around the globe. They provide candidates with an opportunity to present their views, defend their political positions and communicate directly with the electorate. Their strategic importance in political communication is multifaceted and can be analyzed through several dimensions. Debates offer voters the opportunity to compare candidates directly, since they allow voters to see candidates answer questions in real time and judge their ability to think and react under pressure (Schroeder, 2008). Debates can influence voting behavior, since well-designed and well-executed performances can enhance a candidate's credibility and appeal, while mistakes and weaknesses can have the opposite effect (Benoit, 2013). A typical example of the importance of televised debates is the one between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960, which is considered to have played a crucial role in Kennedy's election (Lang & Lang, 2018). Televised debates also serve as material for journalistic analysis and criticism, where journalists and analysts interpret the candidates' statements, thus providing the public antagonistic meanings for political issues and policy proposals (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990). Regarding strategic political communication, televised debates offer the candidates an opportunity to reach voters beyond their own base, by providing the opportunity to present their views to undecided voters (Jacobson, 2015). In the context of this study, televised debates in the United States serve as a platform of large ideological differences between Democrats and Republicans.

Democrats traditionally focus on social justice, equality, government intervention in the economy, progressive taxation, healthcare access, racial justice and economic equality (Steger, 2015) as well as climate change and renewable resources (Glaser & Berry, 2018) and expansion of the Affordable Care Act (Hertel-Fernandez & Skocpol, 2015). Republicans focus on limited government, free-market capitalism, lower taxes and less government intervention in the economy. In the latest debates, Trump and his Republican colleagues have underscored themes of law and order, economic growth through deregulation and tax cuts, and maintaining traditional social values (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). In conclusion, Economic themes also play a pivotal role, with Republicans arguing that tax cuts and deregulation are essential for economic growth and job creation (Bartels, 2016, 2018).

The aforementioned lead to the first research question namely *which were the dominant themes of the televised debate*. The answer to this reveals two issues a) if the candidates have remained in the "traditional" topics of their political party and b) their political views on what is important to be discussed and how these important issues are rhetorically addressed.

These themes are not self-evident situated randomly in an ideological void, but the way they are rhetorically formed, that is framed, and strategically placed offer interpretative ideological underpinnings that construct (and are constructed by) representations of the themes themselves. Representations and framing are critical tools in political discourse, as they influence public perception and shape social and political realities, therefore influencing the public's voting behavior.

Self and Social Representations

This study draws upon the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961/1976) and argues that even though social representations are a constant dialectic between a "network" of ideas, metaphors and images (Moscovici, 1995), each social and political actor, in this case Donald Trump and Joe Biden, carries and constructs his own self representations, as part of the wider dialectic between the individual and the social. Representations include feelings, attitudes, beliefs and practices (Jovchelovitch, 1996; Moscovici, 1961/1976). However, if representations are approached from this perspective exclusively, they underline a staticity, which refers to the concept of "theory", which includes practices and examples that support the theory itself. On the contrary, representations, from a dynamic approach, present a greater fluidity, as they involve the constant dialectic between a "network" of ideas, metaphors and images (Moscovici, 1988). The concept of social representations covers the weakness of more classical concepts, such as opinion, image, attitudes, concepts that do not include the dynamic and active participation of individuals, which through their interaction constantly constitute, reproduce and reconstitute social reality. In this way, the person is actively included in the creation of social meaning, while earlier approaches made it a simple receiver of a message from the external environment, which is considered to have already been formed. On the contrary, the concept of representation co-sociates every individual, who reshapes and reconstitutes the external environment and thus becomes itself a co-creator of his environment, in a continuous enriched reconstruction of both the individual himself and the environment.

The communicative dimension of representations is underlined by Moscovici (1984) considering that the characteristic of representation is not that it is self-evident, that it is common, but that its elements have been formed through communication and are constantly in an open relationship with communication. In the context of political communication and behavior, self and social representations lead the way in which voters interpret political information and evaluate political candidates. When voters are exposed to political discourse that focuses on specific subjects, such as the economy or security, social representations on these issues may affect their hierarchy on voting behavior (Bourdieu, 1991). For example, the intense focus of Donald Trump on migration and security during his 2016 campaign, shaped the representation of migration as a threat, influencing the voting of those citizens that were concerned on this issue.

In addition, social representations shape the perception of the personality and reliability of the political actors, since voters tend to vote for those candidates that are trustworthy, credible and are considered as capable of handling important issues of a country. The ability of the candidates to shape positive social representations for themselves is crucial for their electoral success (Goffman, 1974) and act as self representations. For example, Joe Biden in his 2020 campaign presented himself as a unifying leader, reinforcing the social representation of unity and stability over his opponent's divisive rhetoric.

Social representations shape also social identities and political attitudes of the voters, since social actors often vote based on their partizan identities and values, that are influence by the social representations that prevail in their community (Tajfel, 1974). Showcasing specific social groups and values by the political actors amplifies the belief of "us versus them", influencing voting behavior (Moscovici et al., 1981).

Therefore, in the present context of the debate between the two candidates for the American Presidency, the way in which strategic political communication constitutes the representation of Security, Policy and

other central concepts the protagonists bring idiosyncratic biases to the object (ie, beliefs, cognitive approaches, attitudes, individual representations) and shape their perception and interpretation.

In conclusion, representations in political discourse are a powerful tool that influences public perceptions and attitudes, thus providing understanding of political dynamics and social influence. Social representations are constructed through social interaction and communication and in the political speech play a crucial role in citizens' beliefs on issues and political protagonists. For example, Donald Trump uses often a discourse based on patriotic feelings and fears. By using his characteristic phrase "Make America Great Again", Trump promotes a representation of an America which was strong and prosperous in the past and that it should return to its former glory. This representation showcases a nostalgic patriotism and induces feelings of national pride, while at the same time it exploits fears of the decline of the country (Hochschild, 2016). This process, what Moscovici (1961/1976) named as "anchoring", uses pre-existing interpretations of the USA and exhibits his own representation of the image of his country as well as diffuses his interpretations to the wider society.

This leads to the second research question, namely *which are the dominant representations of both candidates in this televised debate*.

Framing of Representations

The way an issue is communicated, that is framed by a social protagonist thus leading to construction representations can greatly influence the understanding and perception of that issue by the public (Entman, 1993). How social actors picture problems, how they see them visually, and how they perceive these issues matters, since communicating a problem a certain way can lead to specific interpretations (e.g., as a question of fairness rather than as a question of liberty). Framing includes two basic functions: selection and salience. The term "selection" refers to the parts of information that are promoted for exposure, and "salience" refers to how a particular piece of information will be more salient, or memorable to the audience, thus increasing its accessibility and therefore affecting voting behavior (Entman, 1993). The use of emphasis, while at the same time drawing attention to a particular issue with specific fragments (facets) of information, signals the distraction of attention from some other parameters of the issue, a function that Bateson had also described in the "picture frame" analogy. While Entman's definition focuses more on the practical implications of framing, Reese's (2001) definition incorporates basic sociopsychological principles of persuasion. For Reese (Reese et al., 2001, p. 11) frames are "organizing principles, which are socially shared and temporally persistent and operate at a symbolic level to create meaningful constructions of the social world". Therefore frames, as organizing principles operate as socially shared interpretative schemata that construct different contents of representations.

In the context of political communication, framing plays a crucial role in shaping voting behavior, since the intentional use of certain words, images and themes can influence how voters perceive political matters and candidates, thus affecting the priorities of the voters by increasing the importance of political issues, that affects their voting choices (Iyengar, 1994). For example emphasis on economy during a campaign can lead voters to perceive financial policies as a core factor in their voting choice. Similarly, focusing on security issues can enhance the perception of a need for more strict security policies (Druckman & Nelson, 2003).

In addition, framing affects the representation of the trustworthy or capable candidate. When candidates are framed positively, as capable political or business leaders voters tend to perceive them as more capable of handling issues that affect their country (Scheufele, 2006). In contrast, negative framing such as focusing on scandals or political failures decreases the trustworthiness of the candidate to the perception of the voters (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Framing also affects the sentimental reactions of voters. By using emotionally charged words, such as "threat", "failure" or "success" political framing can produce strong emotions such as fear, anger or hope that affect voting choices (Marcus et al., 2000). A prime example of political discourse framing is the use of the term "security" during times of crisis. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many politicians implored social agents to regard compliance with protective measures as a public health and social responsibility issue (Bavel et al., 2020). Their framing attempted to harness—for the good of society—the representations we have of the words "health," "public," and "social." In an economic downturn, politicians often use framing as a spotlight to light up the "austerity" issue—all the while casting alternative frames under cover of darkness. Austerity can be framed as an unfortunate but necessary evil that helps stabilize the economy or it can be framed as unfair and economically destructive to the lower classes.

The way representations are framed in political discourse has important implications. Social representations, through framing, can affect the way in which voters perceive social reality and shapes their political choices (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The above lead to the third research question, namely *how did both candidates frame social and self representations*.

The latest debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden offers a rich text for analyzing representations and framing in political discourse, especially when it was considered as the last political debate, and in general presidential appearance of Joe Biden. Even though public discourse (e.g. traditional and social media) focused not on what Joe Biden actually said, but rather how he said (or did not achieve to say it), it is important to study the content of his and his opponent's political communication. Previous studies in televised debates have focused on the lectical choices of the candidates with different methodologies and theoretical concepts. For example, Benoit (2013) using functional theory highlighted acclaims, attacks and defenses in US House debates, House debates and mayoral debates. Jackson-Beeck (1979) used content analysis to highlight the narrative and symbolic strategies employed by the candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960 and the first debate of 1976 between Jimmy Carter and General Ford. Nirwana (2023) has focused on the notion of conceptual metaphors in the second debate between Trump and Biden, highlighting the different metaphors used by the two candidates. Labib (2024) used argumentative analysis to research the televised debate of April 20th, 2022 between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron and focused on the building of the positive ethical image of the candidates. Even though framing theory has been applied to political discourse (Aalberg et al., 2011; Brugman et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2019) less attention has been given to the framing attempts in televised debates and even less to the analysis of televised debates with framing theory and social representations theory.

Both candidates use specific rhetorical strategies to frame their policies and political personas while attempting to reframe the opponent's positions negatively, to increase their own sphere of political influence and affect the voters' political choices. This analysis examines how Trump and Biden construct their representations and employ framing to shape voter perceptions.

For theoretical clarification, “themes” are approached as the general, wider topics that are discussed, such as “Social Policy” or “Domestic Issues”, or “National Security”. Individual (or self) representations carry an evaluative sign and are approached in two ways a) the way each candidate framed his representation of the “trustworthy” or “capable” leader and b) the way each candidate framed and constructed specific political issues such as the image of the USA (eg USA represented as a great or a failing nation) or the country’s financial focus (representation of a free-market vs representation of a social state). Social representations refer to the dynamic interplay between individual representations, serving as raw material for wider dialectic discourse in the societal and political context.

Therefore, the research questions guiding this research are the following:

Research Question 1: Which were the dominant themes of the televised debate?

Research Question 2: Which are the dominant representations of both candidates in this televised debate?

Research Question 3: How did both candidates frame self and social representations?

Methodology

To answer the aforementioned research questions, this study employs thematic and structural analysis using the Iramuteq software (Ratinaud, 2009), which relies on R and Python programming languages.. Its suitability for the present analysis lies in the fact that Iramuteq can process this extensive and multileveled discourse of the televised debate in a way that yields statistically valid thematic structure. In this structure the software provides objectivity in the grouping of themes, combines quantitative measures with qualitative interpretation and enables direct comparison between speakers, showing how each candidate framed his political concepts (see also Ramos et al., 2018; Souza et al., 2018). The methodological framework combines hierarchical clustering, correspondence analysis and the selection of typical segments to systematically address the research questions

Hierarchical clustering groups words from the text into thematic clusters based on the statistical significance of their co-occurrence. The “rainette” library in R was utilized to categorize the debate’s vocabulary into thematic clusters. Words in each cluster were categorized based on the Chi-Square (X^2) statistic, which measures the statistical significance of word co-occurrence. For instance, the word “security” frequently appeared alongside “threat” and “border,” highlighting their association within the discourse.

Correspondence analysis was employed to explore relationships between the identified thematic clusters and the candidates. Using contingency tables, this analysis produced two-dimensional plots (see Figure 2), illustrating the relative proximity and distinctions of themes as constructed by each candidate. This visual representation enhances the understanding of the candidates’ rhetorical strategies and thematic emphasis. To ensure robust qualitative insights, typical segments are presented based on word frequency and their statistical association with clusters. For each cluster, the ten most typical phrases from the candidates were identified and ranked by the highest χ^2 values. These phrases exemplify how language choices reinforced specific frames and representations. These typical segments are hierarchically ordered based on the cumulative χ^2 value of the verbal choices contained and co-occurring in each typical segment. In this way, the analysis of qualitative data is achieved without the risk of inadvertently selecting individual and specific excerpts without specific criteria. Thus, the researcher avoids the error of being inadvertently carried away

by the dynamics of the subject to be studied in the gleaning of the verbal contents. Co-occurrence refers to capturing relationships between verbal options in a text, based on the NLP (Natural Language Processing) method (Grivell, 2002; Zhou, Reid, Qin, Chen & Lai, 2005).

The methodological design integrates quantitative findings with the theoretical concepts of framing (Entman, 1993) and social/self-representations (Moscovici, 1984). For example, clusters related to "National Security" were analyzed through the lens of framing theory, revealing how the candidates emphasized threats and protection to construct their political image. This integration ensures that the analysis moves beyond descriptive findings to offer deeper insights into the communicative efforts of the candidates.

By employing this systematic approach, the study effectively combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the debate's thematic and rhetorical dynamics. .

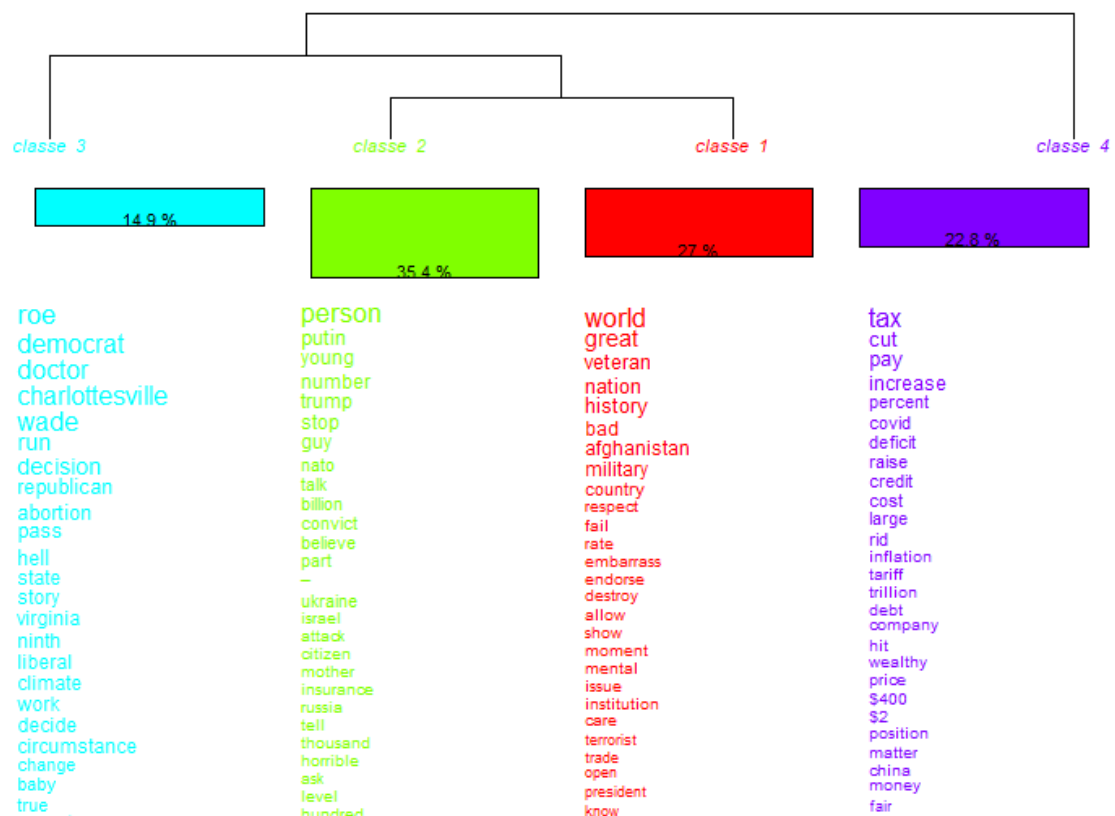
The full transcript of the televised debate can be found at the website:

<https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2024/06/27/politics/read-biden-trump-debate-rush-transcript>

Results

The following figure (Figure 1) depicts the thematic and structural analysis of the debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Analyzing the figure from the upper part downwards, the clusters are divided into two pathways. The first is cluster 4 and the other consists of cluster 3 and the combination of clusters 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Hierarchical clustering of the debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden



The thematic and structural analysis of the debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, as depicted in the dendrogram (Figure 1), reveals the central issues raised by the two candidates as well as their relative importance. This analysis, separating the words and phrases into four clusters, allows a better understanding of the communication and framing strategies they used.

Cluster 1: National Security and Military Policy

This cluster includes words such as "world," "great," "veteran," "nation," "history," "bad," "Afghanistan," and "military," which collectively indicate a strong focus on national security and military strength. It constitutes 27% of the total corpus, with Donald Trump as the statistically significant category ($p=0.004$). Typical statements from Trump emphasize themes of failure and threat, such as his criticism of Biden's handling of Afghanistan, which he described as the "most embarrassing moment in our country's history." Conversely, Biden highlights military excellence and national pride, framing the United States as "the most admired country in the world."

These findings reveal contrasting framings of national security: Trump constructs a narrative of decline and crisis, aimed at evoking fear and anger, while Biden emphasizes resilience and leadership, invoking pride and hope. According to framing theory (Entman, 1993), these contrasting frames shape public perceptions by selectively emphasizing specific aspects of national security. The ten most typical segments follow, based on their cumulative χ^2 score, to provide a more detailed overview:

1. did you **fire** anybody that's on the **border** that's **allowed** us to have the **worst border** in the **history** of the **world** did anybody get **fired** for **allowing** 18 million people many from **prisons** many from **mental institutions** (Trump, $\chi^2=127.29$)
2. we are the most admired **country** in the **world** we're the **United States of America** there's nothing beyond our capacity we have the finest **military** in the **history** of the **world** the finest in the **history** of the **world** (Biden, $\chi^2=112.84$)
3. he should have **fired** every **military** man that was involved with that afghan – the **Afghanistan** horror **show** the most **embarrassing moment** in the **history** of our **country** he didn't **fire** did you **fire** anybody (Trump, $\chi^2=109.01$)
4. we're going to make **America great** again we're a **failing nation** right now we're a seriously **failing nation** and we're a **failing nation** because of him his policies are so **bad** his **military** policies are **insane** (Trump, $\chi^2=107.20$)
5. not only poor there but throughout the entire **world** we're no longer **respected** as a **country** they don't **respect** our leadership they don't **respect** the **United States anymore** we're like a third **world nation** (Trump, $\chi^2=106.98$)
6. and that's why i had the **highest** approval **rating** of the **history** of the v a so all of these things – we're in a **failing nation** but it's not going to be **failing anymore** we're going to make it **great** again (Trump, $\chi^2=104.23$)
7. in fact i think he encouraged Russia from going in I 'll tell you what happened he was so **bad** with **Afghanistan** it was such a horrible embarrassment most **embarrassing moment** in the **history** of our **country** (Trump, $\chi^2=99.06$)

8. the whole **country** is exploding because of you because they don't **respect** you and they have to **respect** their **president** and they don't **respect** you throughout the **world** what we did was incredible– rebuilt the **military** (Trump, $\chi^2=98.85$)
9. name me a **single** major **country president** who wouldn't **trade places** with the **United States of America** for all our **problems** and all our opportunities we're the most progressive **country** in the **world** in getting things done (Biden, $\chi^2=97.51$)
10. all over the **world** they're **pouring** in and this guy just left it **open** and he didn't **need** legislation because i didn't have legislation i said close the **border** we had the **safest border** in **history** (Trump, $\chi^2=88.77$)

Trump has often framed himself as a strong leader who promotes American power and respect globally, while Biden has pointed to the previous administration's mistakes and failures in foreign policy and defense strategy. Trump criticizes strongly the management of the situation in Afghanistan from Biden, calling it "embarrassment" and suggests that the United States have failed because of Biden's policies. He also criticizes the management of the borders stating that the borders are open and without control. On the other hand, Biden insists on the United States' military superiority and highlights his belief that USA remains the most progressive country in the world.

Cluster 2: Foreign Policy and National Security

The largest cluster (32.4% of the corpus) revolves around foreign policy and national security issues, with Biden as the statistically significant category ($p=0.01$). Words such as "Putin," "NATO," "stop," and "talk" indicate discussions centered on international relations. Biden's framing portrays Trump as irresponsible, particularly in handling international alliances and threats. For example, Biden refers to Trump's alleged complacency toward Russian President Vladimir Putin, framing him as a liability to global stability.

In this cluster, Biden emphasizes themes of collaboration and accountability, representing himself as a global leader, whereas Trump's framing focuses on strength and independence, reinforcing a nationalist narrative. To provide more insight, the ten most typical segments follow with their cumulative chi square values:

1. then he came along the **numbers** – have you seen the **numbers** now it's not only the **18 million people** that i **believe** is even **low** because the gotaways they don't even **talk** about gotaways (Trump, $\chi^2=78.13$)
2. the **idea** he' s refusing – will you denounce these **guys** will you denounce the **people** we're **talking** about now will you denounce the **people** who **attacked** that **capitol** what are you going to do tapper (Biden, $\chi^2=77.79$)
3. he should have had him out a long time ago but **Putin** is probably asking for **billions** and **billions** of **dollars** because this **guy** pays it every time we had two cases where we paid \$6 **billion** for five **people** i got 58 **people** out and i paid essentially nothing (Trump, $\chi^2=74.27$)
4. by 2035 we will have cut pollution in half we have – we have made significant progress and we're **continuing** to make progress we set up a climate corps for **thousands** of **young people** will learn how to **deal** with climate just **like** the peace corps (Biden, $\chi^2=71.01$)

5. the **fact** is that there was no effort on his **part** to **stop** what was going on up on **capitol** hill and all those **people** every one of those who were **convicted** deserves to be **convicted** (Biden, $\chi^2=69.96$)
6. joe could be a **convicted** felon with all of the **things** that he's done he's done **horrible things** all of the death caused at the border **telling** the Ukrainian **people** that we're going to want a **billion dollars** or you change the prosecutor otherwise you're not getting a **billion dollars** (Trump, $\chi^2=69.73$)
7. the **fact** is that **Putin** is a war criminal he's killed **thousands** and **thousands** of **people** and he has made one **thing** clear he wants to reestablish what was **part** of the soviet empire (Biden, $\chi^2=67.99$)
8. a lot of **people** are dead right now much more than **people** know you know they **talk** about **numbers** you can double those **numbers** maybe triple those **numbers** he did nothing to **stop** it (Trump, $\chi^2=67.34$)
9. and what did – and the **young** woman got killed i spoke to the **mother** and she – they **asked** him they said what – well what do you think of those **people** (Biden, $\chi^2=66.56$)
10. that was **part** of this **deal** we **put** together this bipartisan **deal** more fentanyl machines were able to detect drugs more **numbers** of **agents** more **numbers** of all the **people** at the border (Biden, $\chi^2=64.42$)

This cluster includes issues such as Climate Change, Justice, Immigration and Corruption, therefore it highlights the representations of Foreign Policy and National Security. Trump accuses Biden of corruption, especially regarding Russia and Biden characterizes Trump as a criminal, based on the invasion of the Capitol Hill. Both candidates try to discursively construct the image of the “other”, more specifically Trump uses personal stories and attacks against Biden to construct an image of his opponent as weak and untrustworthy, while Biden is trying to weaken the image of Trump, presenting him as irresponsible and dangerous. Both attempts aim to destabilize the image of the other candidate and provide delegitimize the political options presented by the opposing political actor.

Cluster 3: Domestic Politics and Social Issues

Cluster 3 is the smallest cluster (14.9% of the corpus) and addresses topics such as abortion, healthcare, and racial justice. In this cluster, Biden's framing highlights progressive values and inclusiveness, as seen in his emphasis on restoring Roe v. Wade, namely the rights of abortion. Trump, in contrast, frames these issues around tradition and morality and presents himself as a protector of the “core” family, aligning with conservative principles.

Framing theory and social representations theory provide valuable interpretations for the strategies used by the two candidates. Biden seeks to evoke hope and solidarity, while Trump appeals to fear and concern about societal change, both by framing core political issues. These frames are anchored in the candidates' broader ideological contexts appealing to different electoral audiences. The ten most typical segments follow, with their corresponding cumulative chi-square score:

1. that's the last – no **politician** should be making that **decision** a **doctor** should be making those **decisions** that's how it should be **run** that's what you're going to do and if I'm elected I'm going to restore **roe v wade** (Biden, $\chi^2=170.21$)
2. so that means he can take the life of the **baby** in the **ninth month** and even after birth because some **states democrat run** take it after birth again the governor – former governor of **Virginia** (Trump, $\chi^2=136.19$)
3. **wade** and everybody wanted to get it **back** to the **states** everybody without exception **democrats republicans liberals** conservatives everybody wanted it **back** religious leaders (Trump, $\chi^2=133.49$)
4. under **roe v wade** you have late **term abortion** you can do whatever you want depending on the **state** you can do whatever you want we don't think that's a good thing (Trump, $\chi^2=125.36$)
5. i **supported roe v wade** which had three trimesters first time is between a **woman** and a **doctor** second time is between a **doctor** and an extreme situation (Biden, $\chi^2=124.79$)
6. he's **lying** that is **simply** not **true** that – **roe v wade** does not provide for that that's not the **circumstance** only when the **woman** s life is in danger she's going to die (Biden, $\chi^2=116.70$)
7. and what i did is i put three great supreme court justices on the court and they happened to **vote** in favor of killing **roe v wade** and moving it **back** to the **states** this is something that everybody wanted (Trump, $\chi^2=106.74$)
8. a third time is between the **doctor** – i mean it'd be between the **woman** and the **state** the idea that the **politicians** – that the founders wanted the **politicians** to be the ones making **decisions** about a **woman** s health is **ridiculous** (Biden, $\chi^2=94.13$)
9. i don't know where the **hell** he has been the idea that dana he said is **true** I've **passed** the most extensive it was the most extensive **climate change** legislation in history in history (Biden, $\chi^2=89.41$)
10. jake both of you know that **story** s been totally wiped out because when you **see** the sentence it said 100 percent exoneration on there so he just keeps it going he says he **ran** because of **Charlottesville** (Trump, $\chi^2=85.14$)

This cluster covers mainly issues such as abortion, the rights of women and the legislation on Roe v. Wade, a court's decision regarding the rights of abortion. Biden argues that abortions are a matter of personal choice and should, therefore, be treated by doctors and not legislation. On the contrary, Trump suggests that abortion rights should be legislatively foreseen by each state. Each candidate draws upon his respective ideological context, where Biden highlights social issues and insists on the need for progressive change, while Trump emphasizes traditional values and strengthens conservative positions.

Cluster 4: Representing Financial Performance

The fourth cluster (22.8% of the corpus) is constructed by economic themes, with Trump emphasizing tax cuts and economic growth and less interference as achievements of his administration. Biden criticizes Trump's policies as benefiting the wealthy while increasing the national deficit. For example, Biden's statements highlight economic justice, framing the economy as a tool for equality and opportunity.

Through the framing of financial issues, Trump constructs a representation of himself as a successful and capable leader, leveraging nostalgia and pride. Biden, however, positions himself as a defender of the middle

class, focusing on fairness and sustainability. These frames mobilize distinct voter identities, influencing their economic priorities. The first ten typical segments, based on their cumulative χ^2 score, are used to provide a more in-depth analysis:

1. and you know the fact of the **matter** is that we **found** ourselves in a **situation** where his **economy** – he rewarded the **wealthy** he had the **largest tax cut** in American **history \$2 trillion** (Biden, $\chi^2=213.11$)
2. he had the **largest** national **debt** of any president four **year** period number one number two he got **\$2 trillion tax cut** benefited the very **wealthy** what I'm going to do is fix the **taxes** (Biden, $\chi^2=200.88$)
3. so no one after – i would not **raise** the **cost** of social **security** for anybody under **\$400 000** after that i **begin** to make the **wealthy begin** to **pay** their **fair** share by **increasing** from 1 **percent** beyond to be able to guarantee the program for life (Biden, $\chi^2=192.25$)
4. look the fact of the **matter** is that he's dead wrong about it he's **increased** the **tariff** – he's **increased** – he will **increase** the **taxes** on **middle class** people i said I'd never **raise** a **tax** on anybody making less than **\$400 000** (Biden, $\chi^2=184.14$)
5. **reduce** our **deficit** tremendously and **give** us a **lot** of power for other things but he – he made a statement the only thing he was right about is i **gave** you the **largest tax cut** in **history** (Trump, $\chi^2=179.58$)
6. now when we **cut** the **taxes** – as an example the corporate **tax** was **cut** down to 21 **percent** from 39 **percent** plus beyond that – we took in more revenue with much less **tax** and **companies** were bringing **back trillions** of dollars **back** into our **country** (Trump, $\chi^2=173.22$)
7. nobody s ever **created** an **economy** like us nobody ever **cut taxes** like us he's the only one i know he wants to **raise** your **taxes** by four times he wants to **raise** everybody s **taxes** by four times (Trump, $\chi^2=152.55$)
8. when we **cut taxes** as i said we did more **business** apple and all these **companies** they were bringing **money back** into our **country** the worst president in **history** by far and everybody knows it (Trump, $\chi^2=151.68$)
9. he wants the trump **tax cuts** to expire so everybody including the two of you are going to **pay** four to five times nobody ever **heard** of this before all my life I'd grow up and I'd see politicians talking about **cutting taxes** (Trump, $\chi^2=151.10$)
10. the **middle class** has been devastated by you now you want a new **tax cut** of **\$5 trillion** over the next ten **years** which is going to fundamentally bankrupt the **country** (Biden, $\chi^2=150.46$)

Trump has touted tax cuts and economic growth as key achievements of his administration, while Biden has criticized Trump's economic policies, arguing they favor the wealthy and increase the deficit.

To see how these clusters intermingle Correspondence Factor Analysis (Figure 2) was constructed.

Discussion

The analysis of the debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden confirms the findings of the literature on the importance of social representations and framing in political communication. Social representations influence electoral behavior and the perception of political candidates (Bourdieu, 1991). Furthermore, using framing to reinforce social representations allows candidates to create positive or negative images of themselves and their opponents, thus leading to electoral choices (Bavel et al., 2020).

Regarding the first research question, the main themes of the presidential debate were national security and military policy, foreign policy, domestic politics and social issues and financial performance. These themes seem to represent the issues that mostly concern the majority of the social actors (McKay, 2021).

Regarding Research Question 2, the dominant representations formed are a) Representations of Financial Performance, b) Representations of Foreign Policy, c) Representations of Security and d) Self-representations, each of those was differently framed by the two candidates (Research Question 3), thus providing different interpretations that targeted to enlarge each candidate's sphere of political influence and persuade voters for their

The issue of Financial Performance has always been in the epicenter of the American political communication (Schor & Vallas, 2021; Wood, 2018). Trump's framing of his administration centers around the narrative of *"unprecedented economic success"* and frequently cites the pre-COVID economy as *"the greatest economy in the history of our country"*, a frame designed to highlight his competence and the benefits of his policies and construct a representation of himself as a capable leader (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). By repeatedly emphasizing economic metrics such as stock market highs and job creation, Trump constructs an image of himself as an effective leader of the economy and ignites positive feelings towards himself and his administration, a strategy that influences positively the voters' behavior as shown by Ward et al (2021). Trump has consistently framed his administration as a period of unprecedented economic success, interrupted only by the COVID-19 pandemic as he argued that his economic policies, particularly tax cuts and deregulation, were the catalysts for a strong economy and job creation. This is aligned to the specific representations of the Republican party, as discussed by Bartels (2016, 2018). Trump's lectical choices aimed to highlight his role in the economic recovery and portray Biden as a threat to that prosperity: *"We had the best economy in the history of our country... No one thought it was possible. The only jobs it created are for illegal immigrants and repatriation jobs"*. This positive framing is juxtaposed with his portrayal of the Biden administration as incompetent, particularly in managing inflation, which he claims is *"killing our country"*.

Trump has often used framing with an emphasis on security and the economy, touting the need for tighter security measures and economic reforms. The use of words such as "threat," "failure," and "success" heightened feelings of fear and anger, influencing voter choices (Marcus et al., 2000). For example, Trump repeatedly cited economic growth and job creation during his tenure before the pandemic, framing the economy as his main area of success.

Biden used framing with an emphasis on social justice and equality, highlighting the need for an economy that works for everyone, not just the rich. Biden used framing with an emphasis on health and social justice, trying to evoke feelings of hope and confidence, emotions that influence positively voting behavior (Rudi, 2014). He cited the need to strengthen the health system and protect vulnerable groups, framing the

pandemic as a humanitarian crisis that requires a coordinated and science-led response. He framed the economy in terms of justice and equality, representing the economy as a system that should work for all citizens and not only the rich or the big corporations. By frequently using slogans such as *"dignity of the workers"* and *"rebuilding of the American middle class"*, he also created the representation of himself as a defender of the middle class and the American workers. Biden also framed the economy by constructing the representation of a viable growth as a basis for economic performance, a frame that also affects voting behavior especially in favor of those who support climate change and renewable sources of energy.

Regrading Foreign Policy, Trump frames his administrative achievements in terms of strength and respect, contrasting his approach with Biden's, which he characterizes as weak and embarrassing. He asserts that under his leadership, the U.S. was respected globally and did not engage in new wars, thereby constructing a narrative of peace through strength. In contrast, Biden's handling of Afghanistan is framed as the *"most embarrassing day in the history of our country's life"*, suggesting a loss of dignity and power under Biden's leadership. Biden, in contrast, is portrayed as the president who brought real peace, ending wars and restoring US credibility. He argued that Trump's policies have isolated the country and damaged its international standing: *"The truth is, I'm the only president in this century who didn't have any troops dying anywhere in the world"*. In addition, Biden represented the USA as a defender of democratic values and human rights, issues that also affect positively voting behavior and framed Foreign Policy in terms of international allies and renewal of commitment on behalf of the USA to international institutions such as UN and NATO. Therefore, Trump represented the Foreign Policy of the USA in terms of strength that will restore the "lost respect" towards the country, while Biden framed this representation in terms of international co-operation, different frames that are central to the American voters.

In representing "Security" the candidates focused on COVID-19, where Trump frames his actions as decisive and necessary, representing himself as a leader who prevented a potential economic depression, linking security with financial stability. He asserts that his administration did *"a great job"* and that he deserved credit for managing the crisis. This framing extends to the narrative of vaccine mandates, where Trump frames Biden's mandates as disastrous, thereby positioning himself as a protector of personal freedoms against government overreach. Trump has repeatedly referred to his administration's efforts to deal with the pandemic, arguing that it was doing a great job and that deaths from COVID-19 were higher under Biden's leadership. Biden frames Trump's COVID-19 response as inadequate, emphasizing the higher death toll during Trump's tenure and the chaos of the vaccine rollout. He frames himself as a steady hand who improved the situation through mandates and a more organized response. This framing positions Biden as a competent manager of public health crises, contrasting with Trump's alleged mismanagement. Biden focused on the failures of Trump's handling of the pandemic, portraying his approach as irresponsible and ineffective and argued that Trump's decisions led to more deaths and worsened the crisis. Biden's representation of the COVID-19 pandemic focused on the human cost and the need for a coordinated, science-based response. This representation aimed to highlight the failures of the Trump administration and position Biden as a more competent and compassionate leader. Conversely, Trump's representation focused on the economic impact of lockdowns and portrayed his actions as decisive measures to protect American lives (Lakoff, 1995). The representation of security being framed as "personal freedom" vs "government overreach" and generally the limit of the government has always been an issue on the political life of the

USA (Bernholz, 1979; Villa, 2017) and reflects different ideological underpinnings between the two major political parties.

Framing social issues was also evident in this televised debate, even though it was not one of the core issues. Biden framed issues of racial justice and inequality as fundamental problems that require structural changes and social progress. He insisted on need for justice and equal rights for all, evoking feelings of support and solidarity (Alexander et al., 2021). Trump, on the other hand, used the frame of security and order, evoking fear and concern regarding the criminality (Hochschild, 2016).

Framing the self has been evident throughout the debate as an effort to construct representations and political images that are crucial for the success of a political campaign. The political profile, that is presented to the public, represents the values and characteristics, with which voters can identify (Benoit, 2013). Joe Biden tried to represent himself as a leader that can unite and restore the "soul of America" by promoting dignity and compassion, notions that affect positively voting behavior especially for those who favor the Democratic Party. On the other hand, Donald Trump created a representation of a decisive leader that protects America from outer threats and inner enemies. This representation was connected with a frame focused on national security, economic growth and resistance to "political correctness", that from this point of view, is considered as a threat to American traditional values. Trump often used nationalist and patriotic rhetoric, trying to restore the social representation of America as a strong and admirable country, as shown by his slogan "Make America Great Again" (Hochschild, 2016). Adding the televised picture, the representation of unity framed by a candidate that often hurdled to communicate effectively versus a representation of power formed by a patriotic and divisive rhetoric by a more energetic and often offensive candidate, may add more content to the televised images of the two candidates.

Conclusion

The present study aspired to highlight how a televised debate between two major political protagonists can function as a micrography of the content and ideological struggles that shape political communication. Beyond the specific policies presented by the candidates, the key interest lies in the way that discourse is being framed and therefore acquires meaning-making power. Framing theory and the sociopsychological concepts of self- and social representations provide the analytical background to comprehend that political communication functions beyond the transmission of information, to the construction of social reality through symbols, narratives and emotions.

The strategic use of representations by the two candidates demonstrates that every act of political speech is an attempt to create identities. Trump, by highlighting the rhetoric of power and national restoration, seeks to re-establish the United States' image as a superpower and to mobilize emotions of fear and pride. Biden, on the other hand, projects himself as a responsible and inclusive leader, who links security with cooperation and social justice. These representations do not constitute mere personal strategies, but draw on deeply embedded social meanings.

The contribution of this analysis is to show how a debate, as an act of political discourse, becomes a field where social representations are rhetorically transformed to political capital. Political actors do not simply exchange arguments, but attempt to impose their own frames and interpretations. Connecting these findings to political communication highlights that framing is not a neutral choice, but it determines which issues are

salient and which marginalized. In addition, the theory of social representations offers a valuable perspective, since they do not operate as static images, but as a dynamic process, that both shapes and is being shaped by communication. Each debate, therefore, is a symbolic place where social meanings are reinforced, reshaped or contested. The analysis also shows that framing strategies affect the way that the citizens are being positioned and what is expected of them. When security is framed in terms of threat and decisive leadership is necessary, the citizen is positioned as a fearful individual in need of protection. On the contrary, when security is framed in terms of shared responsibility and cooperation, the citizens see themselves as active members of a community. Such differences have long term implications for the functioning of democracy itself, as they construct opposing visions of the relationship between state and citizens. Finally, the findings highlight a broader reflection on the role of televised debates in modern western democracies. As mass-audience events, they concentrate on society's core divisions, contributing to shaping social values and ideological boundaries that dominate the social tissue.

While the study highlights the rhetorical strategies and framing mechanisms employed by the candidates, as well as the rhetorical construction of representations, it faces limitations. The analysis focused on the lectical choices of the debate, excluding visual and tonal dimensions, which could enrich the findings. Future research could expand on these findings by examining the verbal, visual, and tonal elements. Further, exploring audience reception of these contesting frames and representations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on voter behavior.

Bibliographical references

- Aalberg, T., Strömbäck, J., & Vreese, C. H. d. (2011). The Framing of Politics as Strategy and Game: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 162-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911427799>
- Alexander, R., Aragón, O. R., Bookwala, J., Cherbuin, N., Gatt, J. M., Kahrilas, I. J., Kästner, N., Lawrence, A., Lowe, L., & Morrison, R. G. (2021). The neuroscience of positive emotions and affect: Implications for cultivating happiness and wellbeing. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 121, 220-249.
- Bartels, L. M. (2016). Elections in America. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 667(1), 36-49.
- Bartels, L. M. (2018). Partisanship in the Trump era. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(4), 1483-1494.
- Bavel, J. J. V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Cichocka, A., Cikara, M., Crockett, M. J., Crum, A. J., Douglas, K. M., & Druckman, J. N. (2020). Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature human behaviour*, 4(5), 460-471.
- Benoit, W. L. (2013). *Political election debates: Informing voters about policy and character*. Lexington Books.
- Bernholz, P. (1979). Freedom and constitutional economic order. *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft/Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*(H. 3), 510-532.

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). Social space and symbolic space [1994]. *Contemporary sociological theory*.
- Brugman, B. C., Burgers, C., & Vis, B. (2019). Metaphorical Framing in Political Discourse Through Words vs. Concepts: A Meta-Analysis. *Language and Cognition*, 11(1), 41-65.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/langcog.2019.5>
- Chang, D., Chen, R., & Krupka, E. (2019). Rhetoric matters: A social norms explanation for the anomaly of framing. *Games and Economic Behavior*, 116, 158-178.
- Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.*, 10, 103-126.
- Cnn. (2024, 2024/06/28). *CNN Presidential Debate: President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump*, CNN. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v-8wJkmwBY>
- Druckman, J. N., & Nelson, K. R. (2003). Framing and deliberation: How citizens' conversations limit elite influence. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(4), 729-745.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of communication*, 43(4), 51-58.
- Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), 1-37.
- Glaser, J. M., & Berry, J. M. (2018). Compromising positions: Why republican partisans are more rigid than democrats. *Political Science Quarterly*, 133(1), 99-125.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Grossmann, M., & Hopkins, D. A. (2016). *Asymmetric politics: Ideological Republicans and group interest Democrats*. Oxford University Press.
- Hertel-Fernandez, A., & Skocpol, T. (2015). Asymmetric Interest Group Mobilization and Party Coalitions in US Tax Politics. *Studies in American Political Development*, 29(2), 235-249.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2016). The ecstatic edge of politics: Sociology and Donald Trump. *Contemporary Sociology*, 45(6), 683-689.
- Iyengar, S. (1994). *Is anyone responsible?: How television frames political issues*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jackson-Beeck, M., & Meadow, R. G. (1979). Content analysis of televised communication events: the presidential debates. *Communication research*, 6(3), 321-344.
- Jamieson, K. H., & Birdsell, D. S. (1990). *Presidential debates: The challenge of creating an informed electorate*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Jovchelovitch, S. (1996). In defence of representations. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 26(2), 121-135.
- Labib, M. (2024). Argumentative Strategies in Political Debate Television debate LE PEN/MACRON on 20th of April 2022. *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, 84(1), 1-22.
- Lakoff, G. (1995). Metaphor, morality, and politics, or, why conservatives have left liberals in the dust. *Social Research*, 177-213.
- Lang, K., & Lang, G. E. (2018). *Television and politics*. Routledge.
- Marcus, G. E., Neuman, W. R., & MacKuen, M. (2000). *Affective intelligence and political judgment*. University of Chicago Press.
- McKay, D. (2021). *American politics and society*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Moscovici, S. (1961/1976). *La psychanalyse, son image et son public*. Presses universitaires de France.

- Moscovici, S. (1984). The phenomenon of social representations. In R. M. Farr (Ed.), *Social Representations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Moscovici, S. (1988). Notes towards a description of social representations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18(3), 211-250.
- Moscovici, S. (1995). Geschichte und Aktualität sozialer Repräsentationen. *Psychologie des Sozialen—Repräsentationen in Wissen und Sprache* (S. 266-314). Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt.
- Moscovici, S., Mugny, G., & Papastamou, S. (1981). " Sleeper effect" et/ou effet minoritaire? Étude théorique et expérimentale de l'influence sociale à retardement. *Cahiers de Psychologie Cognitive/Current Psychology of Cognition*.
- Nirwana, I. (2023). The Second and Final Presidential Debate of Donald Trump and Joe Biden: A Conceptual Metaphor Analysis. *Journal of Literature, Linguistics, & Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 1-15.
- Ramos, M. G., do Rosário Lima, V. M., & Amaral-Rosa, M. P. (2018). IRAMUTEQ software and discursive textual analysis: interpretive possibilities. World conference on qualitative research,
- Ratinaud, P. (2009). IRaMuTeQ: Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires. *Téléchargeable à l'adresse: <http://www.iramuteq.org>*.
- Reese, S. D., Gandy Jr, O. H., & Grant, A. E. (2001). *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world*. Routledge.
- Rudi, T. (2014). Emotions towards leaders and voting behaviour. *Personality Politics*, 215-240.
- Scheufele, B. (2006). Frames, schemata, and news reporting. *Communications*, 31(1), 65-83.
- Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of communication*, 57(1), 9-20.
- Schor, J. B., & Vallas, S. P. (2021). The sharing economy: Rhetoric and reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 47(1), 369-389.
- Schroeder, A. (2008). *Presidential debates: fifty years of high-risk TV*. Columbia University Press.
- Souza, M. A. R. d., Wall, M. L., Thuler, A. C. d. M. C., Lowen, I. M. V., & Peres, A. M. (2018). The use of IRAMUTEQ software for data analysis in qualitative research. *Revista da Escola de Enfermagem da USP*, 52, e03353.
- Steger, W. P. (2015). *A citizen's guide to presidential nominations: the competition for leadership*. Routledge.
- Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social science information*, 13(2), 65-93.
- Villa, R. D. (2017). Security Community or Balance of Power? Hybrid Security Governance in Latin America. *Power Dynamics and Regional Security in Latin America*, 77-99.
- Wood, G. S. (2018). Ideology and the origins of liberal America. In *Thomas Paine* (pp. 271-283). Routledge.