

## The Impact of Social Media on Brazilian Elections

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### Abstract

This research aims to address the current discussion regarding the impact of social media on voting behavior and election outcomes. Social networks are considered key platforms for the affirmation of political discourse. Nowadays, these platforms bring more information and facilitate the debate between the electorate, but at the same time, these networks can bring new potentialities for the false information to be spread causing attacks on the public opinion formation. Social media's role in elections can influence millions of people, and thus, it is important to fully understand its consequences on the decision-making process of the voters during an election. The main hypothesis stands on the idea that these same new platforms where political discourse has been most debated, can motivate the electoral base to go in search of new direct information. However, when selecting, understanding, and adhering to this discourse these same base platforms can be influenced by the phenomenon of low quality false misinformation disseminated by influential electors, bringing the false truth and attacks on the base of public opinion, undermining the political performance of political actors for voter mobilization in favor of the attacker. Despite the number of available empirical analyzes have grown in recent decades, there is a scarcity of theoretical and methodological discussions in the field concerning the causal relationships between advertising campaigns and election results. Therefore, the second hypothesis motivating this research is that a proper data and methods combination which can model the votes distribution of an electoral process and test the counterfactual effects of possible interventions can also capture the public opinion's polarization effect during the Brazilian electoral contest.

### 2. Introduction

Partly as a result of the public availability and low costs, and partly in recognition of the potential influence or power these media were believed to behold, many candidates for

office had begun using social media as a prominent feature of their campaigns, often with the goal of influencing the electorate's support to the benefit of their candidate or party. Similarly, the role of online networking information campaigns on Brazil's most recent presidential election is of particular interest regarding the beliefs and practices revolving around this use (Pischetola, 2016). This contention, however, is explored in the context of Brazil's electoral system and on how the candidate or messages are spread on online social networks, while also taking into consideration how they are received on these networks. This last concern is centred on the political uses of information and communication on the internet, especially regarding their manifestations on online social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Here, could it be said that Brazil's system of government displays, by its nature, a typical almost seasonal alternation in the cycles of democracy; once every year, largely varying from municipal to federal levels, around the country, different individual chambers are elected. Voting is mandatory and done almost always at e-voting machines (Destiny Apuke & Asude Tunca, 2018). But voting is not the only aspect of the activity, the culture of political participation in Brazil has been increasing anew and more broadly, in the last years, notably through the use of social media.

### **3. Background of Brazilian Elections**

The first Brazilian elections were held in 1824, albeit reserved to privileged (mainly white, male, and property-holding) voters. About a century later, in 1932, extensive electoral reforms were enacted in a bid to foster political modernisation. As a result, universal male suffrage was instituted for the first time. Women, however, were only allowed to vote in 1934. In 1945, the Estado Novo dictatorship was overthrown, so with it, limits on suffrage, now once more granted to literate and property-owning voters. In 1964, Brazil fell into military rule, which lasted until 1985. New electoral rules were enforced, these increasingly favoring the two-party system. In contrast to their pro-democracy counterparts, the pro-regime parties voted cohesively in chambers. Elections were indirect and rolling, with only half the legislature being renewed every election cycle. In 1979, as a response to democratization pressures, the regime expanded the supervisorate Supreme Electoral Court, mocking up direct elections as part of the wider effort to foster the illusion of a democracy (Billings, 2017).

Since the redemocratization process was consolidated in 1989, Brazilian elections are held every four years to fill most executive and legislative positions. Municipal, state, and federal elections are strictly separated, each marked by presidential candidates running on the same ticket as gubernatorial ones. “Primary” elections, used to homologate parties’ nominees for president, state governors, and mayors of state capitals, were held for the first time in 2018 (Pacheco, 2023). The electoral system is mixed, combining proportional representation at the lower chamber with a majority-runoff system at the upper one. Redistricting is constitutionally restricted and only occurs every twenty years, following census results. This has triggered a longstanding legal-dynamic as electoral districts become gradually less democratic due to uneven population growth rates. In line with the Westminster model, Brazil adopted a “winner-takes-all” system: under-represented “loser” political groups minorities can hardly expect such norm’s consideration. Voting is mandatory for literate citizens aged 18 to 69 and voluntary for illiterates, senior citizens above 69 and the 16-17 age range. The electorate is registered based on citizenship and only those holding TSE-issued photo ID are allowed to vote. Voting preferences are predominantly informed by family traditions, geographical criteria, and class interests, with party and candidate behavior playing a minor role.

#### **4. Social Media Landscape in Brazil**

Social media usage in Brazil has grown at an extraordinary pace in recent years. It has become widespread as well as popular across all age groups, social classes, regionalities, and even genders. Even though a digital divide is still present nationwide, high proportions of people are connected to the internet and this number is likely to grow with the expansion of 4G and 5G networks (Pischetola, 2016). According to a report, 58% of Brazilians use a smartphone to access the internet, 62% use social media networks, and 58% use messaging services.

In 2018, WhatsApp gained an important role in Brazilian society, surpassing Facebook as the most used app and spreading fake news at an alarming speed. By 2019 the five most popular social media were Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger. Considering social media platforms, Facebook stands out as the most popular, mostly used by the older population (65% of users are older than 18), and in general by

the lower socioeconomic class. WhatsApp is more used in the North and Northeast regions, by people with less formal education, and by the older population. Twitter is used mainly by the more affluent population (classes A and B), mostly in urban centers, and most are young male individuals. Instagram stands out for being the only network in which women are the majority, while also concentrating the highest percentage of young individuals (18 – 24 years old) and richer population. Social media networks are irresistible to information seekers, even though people still perceive recommendations on television news to be more reliable and accurate. Hence, television is considered still today the biggest source of political information in Brazil. Thereby, social media platforms have also become vital tools of political communication, especially popularizing YouTube (albeit only 38% of users), Facebook (73%), and Instagram (24%). Social media are changing the nature of politics and civic engagement by adding another dimension to the public sphere, offering an array of voices and an unfathomable potential of interaction and engagement between candidates and voters, public institutions, and private organizations, among themselves, communities, and the media (Cristiano Gabardo et al., 2019). Social media, thus, have a broad societal implication that policymakers must consider in pursuit of a better functioning democracy, and which also inherently challenge the responsibility of tech companies and legislators in regulating online content, cyber-integrity, and customer information governance. As a result, political campaigns have leapt into a digital age, evolving from a time “where parties mattered and long alliances were established, where TV debates were defining”, to a time connecting voters more easily to candidates and influencers, where a young politician can become an idol overnight, where a digital influencer’s endorsement can decide one election.

### **5. Influence of Social Media on Voter Behavior**

An interesting turn of events has been happening in Brazil. Is this just a moment or a symptom of the powerful impact of social media on the informational behavior of Brazilian voters? Would social media be press/non-form, as defined by political scientist Shanto Iyengar, operating changes in the informations that Brazilians are exposed to, in light of a digital democracy? Social media, according to researcher (Everett Curry, 2018),

impacts the way citizens perceive and incorporate political decisions. It provokes mobilization, awareness, and voter turnout. Social platforms like Facebook, Twitter and more recently WhatsApp were behind a series of events that led voters to take actions that would not have taken otherwise. (Pereira Pinheiro de Souza et al., 2018) On the evening of October 26, supporters of the far-right candidate gathered in the south of the country, as Jair Bolsonaro, of the Social Liberal Party, was elected as the 38th President of the Fifth Republic of Brazil. The state is known for being one of the main battlefields of the civil wars. Many consider the election of Bolsonaro as a risk for democracy, he ended up being a proxy duel of known historical rivalries. However, if southern Brazilian voters only had access to social media, Bolsonaro would have received a much more significant vote against his main adversary, as the number of positive events about Bolsonaro and the period was more than 3 times the number of press events about his adversary. Research would conclude that the restriction in the range and content of informations is likely to leave both voters who generally approve the mandate vulnerable to a diversity of supportive evaluations and voters who generally disapprove it equally vulnerable to the views of like-minded individuals. Social media showcases a homogeneous informational result with users somewhat motivated or pressured to like and share content. Studies on media coverage and voter choices suggest ways to explain voters turning to Bolsonaro as a plausible though unlikely event. At the same time, there is likely to be a much larger number of events showing voters turning to immediate actions. Social media certainly makes it easier for alternative explanations for voter actions to be proposed and disseminated to a wider audience. But in trying to understand patterns of action that resulted from the dynamic interactions between social media and voter actions suggests the way social media interacts with this informational behavior was a necessary individual vote decision.

## **6. Role of Social Media in Political Campaigns**

Social media became a significant platform for political campaigning during the 2014 elections in Brazil. This change was prompted by restrictions on campaign financing introduced in a political reform of 2013. As a result, political parties and candidates required the creation of digital strategies that, in many respects, altered the well-

established Brazilian campaigning methods. This alteration was not only because of the limits on funds but also because this reform occurred during the rise of a strong wave of digital communication in Brazil. A critical moment took place during the World Cup, during which the strong marketing of political campaigns on Facebook, Twitter, and Google lasted for several months at the same level of the event's marketing. This digital approach, chiefly from the marketing team responsible for presidential candidate Aécio Neves, although late compared to the innovative strategies that other candidates were already doing, revolutionized election marketing in Brazil. Nonetheless, strategies from all major candidates exhibit essential implications for understanding the role of social media in politics (Destiny Apuke & Asude Tunca, 2018). This is a quantitative study based on a large database of Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter profiles in order to investigate how politicians construct and promote their image in the largest South American country, analyzing different strategies to reach Brazilian electorates. Due to the complexity of the country, particular attention is paid to how social networks construct a unique political imaginary for each Brazilian state by focusing on the 2014 Brazilian national elections. It uses growth curve modeling to control for eclectic candidate effects and sociodemographic characteristics. Results evidence four main strategies: “hub” (connecting many users), “authority” (high critical mass of followers and authority signs), “local” (favoring local ties rather than publicity), and “sociable” or social capital. Candidates more intensively use that political marketing are likely to keep their lead in the number of followers during the campaign. Three successful cases of small-medium politicians are discussed by contrasting growth curve graphics of the hub, authority, local and sociable strategies. Finally, the study anticipates an increasing adoption by politicians of the “machines” strategy, devolution of online political marketing to marketing professionals.

## **7. Regulation and Misinformation on Social Media**

Concerns about social media companies' impact on elections have grown in Brazil, among other countries. In 2019, Brazil's Electoral Justice launched the discussions of its first-ever regulation on social media advertisements. The country experienced turbulent times: in less than two weeks in 2018, hundreds of pieces of false content had been



widely spread in the country, as a study later showed. Almost all the misinformation was supportive of far-right-wing Presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro (Iglesias Keller, 2021). But the fear now is to see elections undermined by another important side of misinformation: the deeply polarized debates which lack the base of common facts. Three different fronts will be seen that look to respond to the phenomenon with different tools: government, big tech, and civil society.

First, it discusses how social media companies have been pressured to take responsibility for the content shared on their platforms, which conflicts with their business model and with the core principle of free speech. A list of potential solutions is then presented, building on the experience of other countries and local initiatives; Second, debates on Brazilian governance challenges are outlined –as well as recent announcements and alliances that might mitigate, yet not properly address, those issues. Regarding the sanctions, two announcements of extra power for the electoral justice are discussed, showing how the major tool on the table seems impractical due to budget limitations. Lastly, the still fragmented and not fully funded civil initiatives looking to investigate and disseminate accurate information on the campaigns, their revenue, and broader statistics on social media are critiqued.

Despite the importance of those latter fronts, the main empirical part and the most urgent matters are concerning how the Electoral Justice will deal with the extremely delicate issues of what to do about the posts in such reports. Japanese Brazilian candidate Kphthmann, from the Social Liberal Party (PSL) –the same of Bolsonaro, and biggest advertiser on WhatsApp after the October blackout– was also involved in an improper use of the messaging app.

## **8. Case Studies of Social Media in Past Brazilian Elections**

### **Introduction**

Political communication is a particularly relevant form of communication for social media (Pacheco, 2023). That is due to its very nature, the topics covered, and the number of stakeholders. A vivid illustration of this is provided by the emerging and developing democracies of Latin America in general, and Brazil in particular. In those countries, political communication in the digital age faces several challenges like a precarious

financing of political parties and candidates, a historically dependent and one-off nature of the relation that parties and candidates have with media, and a very recent meager history of democratic elections. Brazil only had its first directly elected president almost 30 years ago, after more than two decades of military dictatorship. The Brazilian case is particularly insightful since the country not only has some of the most active and numerous online users but is also among the most developed online economies. Furthermore, Latin America in general, and Brazil in particular, is a fertile and largely unexplored ground for research on the use of the Internet in political communication. That is due to the contrast found in the region with “older” democracies in terms of the age of its democracy. Also, there is a paucity of research on the subject in developing countries. Lastly, another good reason for the study of this region is the existence of a number of elections held in the region in 2018. Due to their size, and actions taken there, they are quite revealing about the challenges, current practices, and misuse of the new electronic tool.

## **9. Conclusion and Future Implications**

Currently, social media is being regarded as a powerful tool, which could provide a space for the exchange of opinions, building political habits, engaging in civic activities, increasing public support for policies, and boosting electoral results for different parties (Destiny Apuke & Asude Tunca, 2018). This is based on the assumption that users are exposed to an array of ideas that challenge their perceptions by presenting diversity in opinions. Over the last several decades, elections have become events where the use of social media is no longer used just to present the positions of different candidates and parties but also an indispensable tool to consider in the strategical battleground. Strategists and journalists report that the popularity of social media grew in the current election scenario. Even though being “the most contested in decades” also occupy a position in the anteroom of social media, which in its turn occupied the anteroom of political discussions. All the steps in the quest for votes are orchestrated on the internet, and it’s not difficult to imagine that the developments of social media platforms have taken account of the importance they proclaim to offer on boosting some aspects of the democratic process, such as amplifying the reach and speed of communication potentially



leading to more informed voters and, subsequently, to improved participation, scrutiny and oversight; and increasing the accountability and the transparency of politicians. Moreover, in countries such as Brazil where inequality is rampant and mainstream media outlets are controlled by three or four groups, the existence of a new communication channel seems to amplify the voices of the masses. Now, with the ambition of reflecting on the future challenge of the effects of social medias in a more equal world where fake news strategies keep persisting, the implications of the findings for the role of the congress on a potential surveillance on the usage of social media for electoral purposes are discussed. Scopes for further research are also proposed.

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