

**DISTRUST OF THE ELECTRONIC VOTING MACHINE IN THE 2020 SÃO PAULO
LOCAL ELECTIONS**

***DESCONFIANÇA DA URNA ELETRÔNICA NAS ELEIÇÕES MUNICIPAIS DE SÃO
PAULO DE 2020***

***DESCONFIANZA DE LA MÁQUINA DE VOTACIÓN ELECTRÓNICA EN LAS
ELECCIONES MUNICIPALES DE SÃO PAULO 2020***



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ABSTRACT: Brazil has few surveys on the reception of disinformation. Understanding the effects produced by this type of narrative can bring a contribution that allows understand the complexity of this phenomenon. In this sense, the research carried out during the local elections in the city of São Paulo aimed to analyze the sources of information most consulted by voters and to verify how they positioned themselves in relation to disinformation. To carry out the study, two research techniques were adopted: discussion group and in-depth interview. The discussion group methodology is the most appropriate as it allows one to understand the attitudes and behaviors of groups within a given social reality and in-depth interviews allow conversations with people who can offer information relevant to the research objective. A semi-structured interview script was used and two ideological profiles were selected, progressive and conservative, subdivided by age and socioeconomic classification.

KEYWORDS: Electoral system. Local elections. Disinformation. Conservatism. Progressism

RESUMO: O Brasil conta com poucas pesquisas sobre recepção de desinformação. Acreditamos que compreender os efeitos produzidos por esse tipo narrativo traz uma contribuição que amplia a compreensão da complexidade desse fenômeno. Nesse sentido, a pesquisa realizada durante as eleições municipais de São Paulo de 2020 teve como objetivo analisar as fontes de informação consultadas pelos eleitores e verificar como se posicionavam em relação à desinformação. Para a realização do estudo foram adotadas duas técnicas de pesquisa: grupo de discussão e entrevista em profundidade. A metodologia de grupo de discussão é das mais adequadas por permitir que se compreenda as atitudes e comportamentos de grupos inseridos em uma dada realidade social. As entrevistas em profundidade permitem a conversação com pessoas que podem oferecer informações relevantes para o objetivo da pesquisa. Foram utilizados roteiro de entrevista semiestruturada e selecionados dois perfis ideológicos, progressista e conservador, subdivididos por idade e classificação socioeconômica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Urnas. Eleições municipais. Desinformação. Conservadorismo-progressismo.

RESUMEN: Hay poca investigación en Brasil a cerca de la recepción de la desinformación. Creemos que comprender los efectos producidos por este tipo de narrativa nos ofrece una contribución que amplía la comprensión de la complejidad de este fenómeno. Así, la investigación realizada durante las elecciones municipales de São Paulo tuvo como objetivo analizar las fuentes de información de los electores y verificar cómo se posicionaron frente a la desinformación. Para realizar el estudio se adoptaron dos técnicas de investigación: grupo de discusión y entrevista en profundidad. La metodología de grupos de discusión es la más adecuada ya que permite comprender las actitudes y comportamientos de los grupos dentro de una determinada realidad social y las entrevistas en profundidad permiten conversar con personas que pueden ofrecer información relevante para el objetivo de la investigación. Se utilizó un guion de entrevista semiestructurada y se seleccionaron dos perfiles ideológicos, progresista y conservador, subdivididos por edad y clasificación socioeconómica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sistema electoral. Elecciones locales. Desinformación. Conservadorismo-progresismo.

Introduction

During the 2020 municipal election in the city of São Paulo, NEAMP (PUC-SP's Center for Studies in Art, Media and Politics) conducted a survey of voters to understand the information diet during the electoral process. In addition to understanding how voters sought information about the election, they also sought to capture voter behavior in relation to disinformation.

Although during the 2020 elections the issue of fraud in the electoral system did not feature strongly in the public debate, it was possible to detect its presence in pieces of disinformation on social media. In this article we will look at the construction of the narrative around electronic voting machines and the electoral system since the municipal elections in São Paulo, which helps us to understand the movement of supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro, a leadership that has intensified its attacks on the electoral system and, in particular, on electronic voting machines since February 2021, as observed in recent studies (RECUERO, 2020; FGV DAPP, 2020; DOURADO, 2021).

The aim of the research was to understand the attitudinal and behavioral values of progressive and conservative voters in the city of São Paulo (INGLEHART; BAKER, 2000). The researchers were motivated by the lack of studies on the information diet of voters during electoral processes, considering the importance of information consumption during this period on issues related to the election and, especially, by the significant growth in the sharing of fake news and disinformation in the 2018 presidential elections, as can be seen in several studies (RECUERO, 2020; DOURADO, 2020, RUEDIGER, 2019).

The research adopted two methodological techniques: the focus group and the in-depth interview, as they were considered suitable for achieving the research objectives. 6 focus groups (online) were held with progressives; 1 group with conservatives; 3 in-depth interviews with progressives; 7 in-depth interviews with conservatives, all of whom were voters in the following age groups: 16 to 24; 25 to 35; 36 to 45; 46 to 55, all online, given the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic period.

The participants in the discussion groups and the informants in the in-depth interviews were defined because they shared characteristics in the conservative and progressive ideological profiles, having passed a prior recruitment filter, with a battery of socio-economic and ideological questions. The terms conservatism-progressivism are understood here as relational dyads conducive to understanding the values and behaviors of the interviewees. Qualitative

research was chosen because it is best suited to the study of reception and allows us to delve deeper into these perceptions (BAUER; GASKELL, 2008).

To select the interviewees, we presented a filter divided into two parts: the first part consisted of questions for socio-economic identification and questions related to gender, race, income, education and media consumption habits. In the second part of the filter, we highlighted controversial issues from the social and political debate of the last decade in the country with the aim of identifying their political and ideological positioning in order to categorize them as conservative or progressive.

During the discussion groups and in-depth interviews, we applied the script and, in one of the stages, presented the participants with images in the format of memes published on digital networks. The three main pieces of disinformation that circulated on digital networks during the research period were presented. These were pieces of disinformation selected from a survey carried out by agencies that check facts, data and statements (CONCEIÇÃO, SEGURADO, 2020).

Disinformation, it is important to note, should not be thought of as synonymous with fake news, as Wardle and Drakhashan (2017) point out. Initially, the authors consider the term fake news to be inaccurate. If we look at the field of news and journalism, one of the guiding principles for professionals is that when information is false, it should not be broadcast, given that journalistic practice presupposes fact-checking procedures. In addition, it is essential to think that politicians have appropriated and vulgarized the term fake news, using it when they are questioned about their actions, either by journalists or by any citizen who questions their decisions or manifestations.

Disinformation is characterized by intent (WARDLE; DRAKHASHAN, 2017), i.e. it is often used to damage the reputation of individuals, groups or even a country considered to be an adversary. This strategy is increasingly present in international politics and has become a concern for progressive segments of society, considering the impacts generated in the debate between different actors, groups and institutions. From the same perspective, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define the phenomenon as news articles that are deliberately false, reinforcing the idea of intentionality in the production of falsification.

From another perspective, Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2018) point to "a new type of political disinformation marked by factual dubiousness". For the authors, people tend to consume news that reinforces their opinions, their points of view on different aspects of reality.

This dynamic works as a kind of confirmation bias that occurs when individuals look for information to support their own ideas or beliefs.

Disinformation works to reaffirm beliefs and ideas in the context of political disputes and in highly polarized environments, and tends to feed the so-called bubbles, preventing open and democratic debate between opposing parties. This dynamic implodes bridges, dialogues and debates with some consistency beyond mere unfounded opinions, which can be damaging, depending on the extent to which it spreads. It can lead to reputation lynchings and even the physical elimination of those with whom one disagrees, creating a hostile, polarized and extremely dangerous environment.

Another important perspective is that false content and disinformation influence the configuration of social and political debate by virtue of their reach; "they need to mobilize a large number of audiences - including witnesses, allies, reactions and shares, as well as opponents to contest, signal and deny" (BOUNEGRU *et al.*, 2017, our translation). Considering the widespread use of digital technologies for sharing disinformation, it is necessary to emphasize the importance that these devices occupy in the process of sharing disinformation. In this respect, it is essential to discuss the central role of socio-technical mediators in this process, such as algorithms and artificial intelligence. Automated mechanisms, amplified by the presence of artificial intelligence, are increasingly important and alter the perception of what is received and shared on different digital media platforms.

Parisier (2011) helps us to understand the so-called filters/bubbles and their potential risks to democratic society. Algorithmic operations have content filtering processes and exert a kind of direction on what should be seen by users on social media. It is also important to realize that this filtering logic has influenced even the media, which are increasingly looking for strategies to gain a foothold among different groups. The author states that the computer screen acts as "a kind of mirror that reflects our own interests, based on the analysis of our clicks by algorithmic observers" (PARISIER, 2011, p. 50, our translation).

This means that algorithms act as a kind of filter, a curator that directs users' attention to certain content, causing a kind of editing of reality by increasing exposure to uninformative content. Algorithmic logic acts invisibly, based on the information provided by users themselves on the networks through the so-called digital footprints that leave traces of data generated by accessing websites, applications, file forums, among others. Data is fundamental to the formation of *big data*, which can be understood as the process of collecting, storing,

organizing and analyzing a large volume of data used for strategic actions by groups or companies with the aim of targeting more assertive campaigns to influence specific groups.

It is worth remembering that the scandals involving the company Cambridge Analytica, responsible for the political marketing of the 2016 campaign that elected former US president Donald Trump, brought to light the methods used by the use of big data and data analysis, demonstrating that tracking human behavior through digital traces makes it possible to make predictions and influence opinions and behaviors and, as observed in that election, can alter electoral results.

Farkas and Schou (2019) point out that fake news is an intrinsic component of contemporary political struggles and that politicians use this term to delegitimize and attack their opponents. Based on Laclau's studies on populism, the authors claim that the term fake news acts as a kind of floating signifier and allows it to be used by far-right politicians in relation to their opponents, for example, against the mainstream media, when it criticizes the spread of disinformation produced by them. By accusing the press, this leadership profile seeks to delegitimize, discredit and associate them with their opponents.

Another important factor is that individuals receive information from people they consider to be trustworthy, i.e. people they are close to and who are considered to be above suspicion. The context is also very important in increasing or decreasing the credibility of this information. In times of social and political tension, people tend to be more vulnerable to misinformation and fraudulent news. Bruno and Roque (2019) state that even those who believe the content with reservations or those who do not care whether the news is false or true can share it, as long as it is in line with what they think about the content received.

Bail (2018) states that the participation of algorithms in the formation of bubbles in polarized political dynamics must also take into account that these devices filter content based on user preferences, and it is essential to think that searches for certain content act as a confirmation bias to validate our ideas or pre-established conceptions, regardless of any verification or checking process, and can cause these users to reinforce their convictions.

It is important to point out that the process of sophistication and speed in the creation of technological devices for the production and dissemination of disinformation raises a number of concerns, especially for electoral political processes.

Although fake news already causes frightening damage, the use of artificial intelligence and deep learning techniques, which gave rise to deepfakes, allows for the rapid and high-quality creation of false digital

content, which has the potential to alter the truth and erode trust, giving fake news "authenticity" (HASAN; SALAH, 2019, our translation).

Machine learning presents significant challenges for society and not just for the research community, given that the impacts caused by these devices affect various dimensions of social and political life, as these tools become popular and accessible (PATRINI *et al.*, 2018).

The possible effects in relation to misleading or false content are more effective as they bring out strong emotions such as fear, anger and end up being important factors in increasing sharing and, consequently, engagement becomes more powerful. This type of phenomenon has been addressed in studies that show the influence of these practices on political debate and was also verified in our study with voters during the 2020 elections in the municipality of São Paulo.

A brief contextualization of the debate on election security in Brazil

Questioning the security of electronic ballot boxes and the electoral system in general is not new in the country. It has been going on since the electronic voting system was implemented in 1996, but it gained greater repercussions in the 2014 presidential elections, with the reaction of the then candidate of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) in the polarization with the Workers' Party (PT) and in 2018, reflecting the changes in the configuration of political forces (SANTOS, 2017; TARAUCO, 2022; LIMA *et al.*, 2019).

The polarization between the PT and the PSDB can be traced back to the 1990s and continued until the 2014 elections. In 1994, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) won his first presidential election and was re-elected in 1998, with his main opponent in both elections being Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (PT).

Unable to find a successor in 2002, the PSDB had its candidate José Serra defeated by Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. The Workers' Party's cycle as president began. In the 2010 elections, Lula succeeded in making his successor to continue his political project. Dilma Rousseff (PT) was elected in a very contentious election that signaled a moment when the antagonism between the two political forces was changing levels and becoming more aggressive (COUTO, 2014; REIS, 2014; BORGES; VIDIGAL, 2018).

For approximately 20 years, the polarization between the PT and PSDB practically monopolized the country's political debate, with the other political forces articulating themselves, to a certain extent, around these two political projects. Throughout this period, we can identify moments of great tensions, conflicts and antagonistic positions on various issues

of national interest. However, it is important to emphasize that until 2014, the dispute between the two parties took place within the democratic game, even if in some specific moments it is possible to identify the intensification of the dispute for hegemony (ALVES, 2010).

In the 2014 presidential elections, Aécio Neves (PSDB) was defeated by Dilma Rousseff (PT) by a small margin and did not accept the results of the polls. The PSDB filed a request with the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) asking for access to various documents, in addition to auditing 684 ballot boxes, as stated in the 2014 election audit report. This moment can be considered a turning point in the questioning of the security of electronic ballot boxes, considering that the existing suspicions, until then, came from minority political groups, influenced by conspiracy theories, which always sought to call into question the basic principles of the democratic order with the clear aim of creating instability to question electoral processes such as the direct choice of representatives through universal suffrage. Suspicion of the elections began to take on new dimensions and we have seen that in recent years it has become one of the new elements in the radicalization of conservative and extremist forces in the country. A movement that political scientist Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos (2017) noted when he outlined the 2016 parliamentary coup, which is based on the conservative discourse of rejection of the economic progress of the vulnerable classes sculpted into a discourse against corruption. "First they accuse the victors of electoral fraud, then of corruption" (p. 34, our translation).

Questioning the fairness of the electoral process and institutions like the TSE, which is responsible for ensuring the integrity and transparency of Brazilian elections, became the central focus of criticism from political leaders, especially conservatives. The narrative that the electronic ballot boxes are not auditable and can therefore be rigged began to take shape, as allegedly happened in 2014, even though the TSE had already completed its investigations without detecting any fraud in the ballot boxes.

According to scholars of electronic voting systems, this kind of argument is unjustified. On the contrary, they have shown that electronic ballot boxes allow for greater transparency and agility in the process of disseminating the results of votes, with the process of voting and sending the results having several stages of verification of the vote until the final result is released.

All access areas to the inside of the electronic ballot boxes are sealed to ensure inviolability. Any attempt at fraud has to break through more than 30 protective barriers⁴ during the electoral process, which include physical sealing of the ballot box; software testing by various teams; opening the source code; hardware security chain; hardware and software design dedicated to the election; encryption at various stages; derivation of ballot box keys; shuffling of votes in the RDV; printed ballot box bulletins; hash and digital signature verification; verification on election day of the authenticity and integrity of the programs installed in the ballot box.

The issue, as has been pointed out, goes beyond the technical aspect. Questioning the security of electronic voting machines is the backdrop to a broader strategy to cast doubt on elections as a fundamental pillar of democratic society and, from this mechanism, to question the elections and cast doubt on the political process, delegitimize electronic voting, question elections based on conspiracy theories and weaken representative democracy.

For the most radicalized sectors on the right, the electoral process is an important moment for questioning democracy (NICOLAU, 1988). This strategy can be seen internationally and expresses a pattern in ultraconservative discourses, a kind of primer adopted by this ideological spectrum, as seen with Donald Trump in 2020 in the US, Jeanine Áñez in Bolivia in 2019 and Keiko Fujimori in Peru in 2021. It can be seen that these candidates adopt a discourse based on the logic of destabilizing the electoral process through the chaos generated by the avalanche of disinformation widely shared on social media.

Part of this strategy is aimed at asserting themselves as anti-establishment representatives, which should not be confused with the similar movements of the 1990s. One of the main voices of the anti-establishment movement is Steve Bannon (arrested at the end of 2021 in the US on charges of money laundering, conspiracy and fraud), who advised Donald Trump, and was at the head of networks propagating far-right values around the world. Bannon, who has maintained close contact with the Bolsonaro family, declared at the "*Mike Lindell's Cybersymposium*" event, organized by the American far right in August 2021, that "Bolsonaro will win" the 2022 race for the presidency "unless it is stolen"⁵.

⁴ More at: "Urna eletrônica tem mais de 30 camadas de segurança". Disponível em: <https://www.tre-sp.jus.br/imprensa/noticias-tre-sp/2021/Junho/urna-eletronica-tem-mais-de-30-camadas-de-seguranca-1>. Access: 09 Oct. 2021.

⁵ More at UOL: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2021/08/24/pf-monitora-ataques-urnas-bannon-estrategista-trump.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>. Access: 16 Sept. 2021.

This type of discourse paves the way for authoritarian political leaders to aspire to govern without the backing of the vote and, in the event of an opposite result that indicates defeat, threaten to inflame the people to contest the official election results, an instrument that was widely used by candidate Jair Bolsonaro during the 2022 re-election campaign and after his defeat, culminating in the violent and anti-democratic acts of 8 January 2023. Causing instability in the electoral scenario is part of the logic of action of ultraconservative groups and it is through the production of disruptive narratives that these leaders legitimize themselves as anti-system. Jair Bolsonaro's recurring line - "I'm going to put an end to everything that's there" (our translation) - indicates his strategy of destabilizing democratic institutions and procedures.

The questioning of electronic ballot boxes is not new. Bills for printed ballots in addition to electronic voting machines did not start with Bolsonaro. They went through Congress in 2009 and 2015⁶ but were repealed when they were ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (STF) in 2013 and 2018, respectively.

Jair Bolsonaro is not exactly new to this kind of questioning either. In 2015, when he was a federal deputy, he presented a proposal to amend the Constitution so that voting records would be printed. In other words, the ballot boxes should print the voting receipt, which would be checked by the voter himself and then deposited in a sealed container. This movement, which received support from part of the Brazilian Army, was contested by various groups. To focus on more recent experiences, a paper by Figueiredo, Silva and Carvalho (2022) entitled *The forensics of fraud: Evidence from the 2018 Brazilian presidential election*, subjected the results of the 2018 elections to a series of mathematical tests, and found no evidence of irregularities in the electronic ballot boxes. In an investigation into the source codes of the electronic voting system, experts from the University of Campinas (Unicamp), the University of São Paulo (USP) and the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE)⁷ "attested to the security and auditability of the systems and equipment that will record the votes of Brazilians" (our translation). Tests of the integrity of the electronic ballot boxes carried out by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) after the first round of the 2022 general elections on 641 ballot boxes also demonstrated the efficiency of the use of the electronic system.

⁶ More at Folha de S. Paulo: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/05/testado-em-2002-voto-impresso-causou-confusao-e-tornou-urna-eletronica-vulneravel-a-fraude.shtml>. Acces: 27 July 2021.

⁷ More information at: <https://www.unicamp.br/unicamp/noticias/2022/08/25/unicamp-usp-e-ufpe-chancelam-seguranca-das-urnas-eletronicas>

Disinformation about electronic ballot boxes: digital networks in São Paulo's 2020 municipal elections

Brazil has little research on the reception of disinformation. Understanding the effects produced by this type of narrative makes a contribution that broadens our understanding of the complexity of this phenomenon. In this sense, the research carried out during the municipal elections in São Paulo in 2020 aimed to analyze the sources of information most consulted by voters and verify how they positioned themselves in relation to the disinformation circulating on digital network applications during the period.

The research used two techniques: focus groups and in-depth interviews. The focus group is one of the most appropriate methods for achieving the desired results, as it allows us to understand the attitudes and behaviors of groups within a given social reality. Its use was fundamental to achieving the research objectives and being able to understand the strategies adopted by the informant-interviewees to compose their respective information diets. The group discussion technique was carried out using the European format, in which the participants interacted and the moderator directed the dialog.

The participants in the discussion groups and the informants in the in-depth interviews were defined because they shared common characteristics within the ideological profiles established by the research between conservatives and progressives, having passed a prior recruitment filter with a battery of socio-economic and ideological questions. To select the interviewees, we presented a filter divided into two parts: the first consisted of questions for socio-economic identification and questions related to gender, race, income, education and media consumption habits.

In the second part of the filter, we highlighted controversial issues in the social and political debate of the last decade in the country with the aim of identifying their political and ideological position in order to categorize them as conservative or progressive. In this part, we presented some phrases for them to tell us using the following scale: totally agree; partially agree; partially disagree; totally disagree and neither agree nor disagree. We also included a question for ideological self-identification: do you consider yourself right-wing, center or left-wing and the possibility of a spontaneous response if you did not want to state your position⁸.

In order to broaden the range of analysis and achieve the expected results, we opted for the qualitative research methodology because it is best suited to the study of reception and

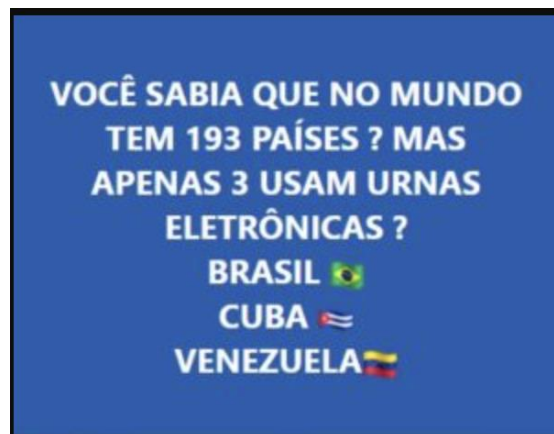
⁸ For methodological procedures see *Fake News & Desinformação nas eleições de 2020* at: <https://www.editorafi.org/ebook/515fakenews>

allows us to deepen these perceptions (BAUER; GASKELL, 2008). In our qualitative research with focus groups and in-depth interviews to understand the main sources of information used by voters in the city of São Paulo, we verified the information diet, the perception of the circulation of fake news and disinformation during the electoral process.

The electoral system has garnered a great deal of engagement among users and tends to endure over the years (FGV DAPP, 2020), overcoming false rhetoric such as that which occurred with the "gay kit" or "gender ideology", themes that were seen in the 2018 elections. The denialism about the electoral process and the issue of electronic ballot boxes resumed in 2018, with a strong increase in the 2022 elections, reinforced the path of symbolic violence that makes enemies of opponents and promotes an escalation of rumors and disinformation that seeks to confuse and undermine the differentiation of factual truth, fake news and post-truth (DA EMPOLI, 2019).

During the discussion groups and in-depth interviews, we applied a script in which, in one of the stages, the participants were presented with images in meme format that had been circulated on digital networks. We selected the three pieces of disinformation that circulated the most on social media during the research period, two of which focused on the topic of electronic ballot boxes. Here we present the results of the analysis of one of the images.

Image 1*



*The image reads: "Did you know that there are 193 countries in the world? But just 3 make use o electronic ballot boxes? Brasi, Cuba, Venezuela
Source: Agência Pública

Image 1 above was the one that sparked the most debate in the discussion groups, where participants discussed the electoral system, and it was possible to identify differences in the positions of the two groups, conservatives and progressives. It should be remembered that in

order to preserve the anonymity of the subjects, the participants are not identified in the speeches presented.

Discrediting the Eletronic Ballot Boxes

The topic of electronic ballot boxes had already been circulating in the social media ecosystem since 2014, rising sharply during the 2018 elections, and resuming during the 2020 municipal elections (FGV DAPP, 2020, p. 11). It is interesting to note that content that disbelieves in the electronic ballot box obtained engagement even in non-election years (DOURADO *et al.*, 2021, p. 16), a strategy adopted by supporters of the printed ballot to maintain a united base of followers. Considering this, we sought to understand how voters position themselves in relation to this issue. At its core is distrust in the mechanisms of how electronic ballot boxes work and in the security and transparency of the electoral process. This mechanism is particularly noticeable among members of conservative groups whose *modus operandi* is anti-politics (AVRITZER, 2020).

We presented the group of interviewees with image 1, which was disseminated on digital networks and other media. The use of this image, which says that there are only 3 countries that use electronic voting machines, was essential as we sought to understand the reception of disinformation about electronic voting machines and whether it would interfere in the electoral process.

The image presented brought out different positions regarding electronic voting machines, with participants with a conservative profile showing greater empathy with the issue, while progressives were more suspicious of the content. Among the conservatives, the position was not unanimous, with participants opposing the demand for a printed ballot, in favor of a printed ballot, distrusting the ballot boxes and the electoral process and manipulation of the election results. Among 10 conservatives, 3 were vehement in pointing out that the image was a lie, the 3 belonging to the only group of conservatives who agreed to meet virtually. While 3 perceived misinformation in the image, four participants showed a clear fear of the security of electronic ballot boxes, advocating the issue of some kind of voucher or even the end of electronic ballot boxes because they are susceptible to manipulation, with a 30-year-old conservative saying that the information presented in the meme worries him "because the two other countries are countries considered to be socialist dictatorships" (our translation). Another conservative voter referred to the image as "informative" and two said they did not know if the

image was true because they had not seen it in other media. Still among the conservatives, one of the interviewees from the 16-24 age group said that "Cuba and Venezuela are not democracies" (our translation), which is where his fear of the polls comes from.

The topic of the ballot box has appeared in debates on the networks to discredit the electoral process, commented a conservative participant from the 46 to 55 age group, recalling that the topic was in Bolsonaro's speech in 2018. "Aécio had questioned Dilma's election" (our translation), recalled another conservative participant.

The discourses of those who distrust the electoral process via electronic ballot boxes are justified by the defense of improving the system and democracy. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) write that "one of the great ironies of how democracies die is that the very defense of democracy is often used as a pretext for its subversion" (LEVITSKY; ZIBLAT, 2018, p. 94, our translation).

Progressive groups expressed a more cohesive reaction, assuring that the material presented was false. Interviewees from this spectrum were quick to use words like "fake news", "lie", "laughing stock" to refer to the disinformation presented.

A survey by the *Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (IDEA)⁹ reveals that 26 of the 178 countries use electronic voting, with another 16 using the technology in regional elections. According to a check by Agência Lupa¹⁰, Cuba has an electoral system with printed ballots, while Venezuela has a hybrid system, with electronic voting followed by a stage of printed ballots deposited in a ballot box for what is known as "citizen verification".

Disinformation about electronic ballot boxes in Cuba, Venezuela and Brazil has been circulating on social media since at least 2018, when the first check was made by the *Aos Fatos* agency¹¹.

The dissemination of false content on social networks favors the preservation of a climate of favorable opinion, which is permanently susceptible to contact with these publications (GOMES; DOURADO, 2019). The act of sharing information in digital environments establishes the place where conflicting discourses are authorized and deauthorized in a dynamic that depends on the visibility given by the users themselves (RECUERO, 2020).

⁹ More at IDEA: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/question-view/742>. Access: 05 Aug. 2021.

¹⁰ More at Agência Lupa: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2020/09/30/verificamos-brasil-urnas-eletronicas/>. Access: 05 Aug. 2021.

¹¹ More at Aos Fatos: <https://apublica.org/chechagem/2018/06/truco-imagem-falsa-diz-que-so-tres-paises-tem-voto-eletronico/>. Access: 06 Aug. 2021.

The delegitimization of the electronic voting model discussed based on the exposure of disinformation about electronic ballot boxes did not prevail among conservatives with an "impression of consensus", as was also verified by Recuero (2020, p. 385) in another survey on disinformation and electronic ballot boxes, but it did appear among a few conservatives.

One conservative, aged between 36 and 45, pointed out that the "intention is to discredit the electronic ballot box". The word "lie" was mentioned by a conservative, aged 36 to 45, and by a conservative man aged 46 to 55: "I didn't receive it (the post), but it's a lie" (our translation). According to this interviewee, the purpose of delegitimizing the electronic ballot box is to "cast doubt on the electoral process" and "generate doubt in the democratic process" (our translation). He justifies his view based on the idea of political interests in creating uncertainty, a fact that he spontaneously associated with Bolsonaro. In this conservative's view, Bolsonaro is using the strategy of delegitimizing the electronic ballot boxes to prevent the possibility of defeat in the 2022 elections.

We observed greater distrust of electronic ballot boxes in the discussion group in the 16 to 24 age group and also in the 46 to 55 age group. A conservative man in the younger age bracket anticipated his expression of uncertainty by justifying that he was not an "electronic ballot box flat-earther" and naturally related his view of the electronic ballot box to that of the President of the Republic: "I believe that in addition to the vote in the electronic ballot box, there should be something to prove that vote, like the proposal by current President Bolsonaro, while he was still a member of parliament, regarding the printed vote. Mainly to compare and see how effective it is" (our translation).

Jair Bolsonaro (PL) has cast doubt on the electronic ballot boxes in the 2018 electoral process¹². At the end of the campaign that elected him, he said that he would not accept an outcome other than his victory¹³. During his term in office, he assured that he had won in the first round of the elections, pointing to alleged electoral fraud for which he never presented proof¹⁴, despite having long claimed to have it¹⁵. The then President of the Republic, in a social media live called to present the evidence, ended up not showing it¹⁶, but insisted on the

¹² More iat Folha de S. Paulo: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/07/bolsonaro-diz-eleicoes-estarao-de-qualquer-maneira-sob-suspeicao.shtml?origin=folha>. Access: 09 Aug. 2021.

¹³ More at El País Brasil: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/09/28/politica/1538156620_841871.html. Access: 10 Aug. 2021.

¹⁴ More at Folha de S. Paulo: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/03/sem-apresentar-provas-bolsonaro-diz-que-houve-fraude-eleitoral-e-que-foi-eleito-no-1o-turno.shtml>. Access: 10 Aug. 2021.

¹⁵ More at Correio Braziliense: <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/politica/2021/06/4930103-bolsonaro-eu-fui-eleito-no-1-turno-eu-tenho-provas-materiais-disso.html>. Access: 10 Aug. 2021.

¹⁶ More at Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NimDa_Xs6Xg. Access: 29 Aug. 2021.

destabilization discourse. Regarding the security of the ballot boxes, the Federal Police found no records of fraud in their investigations¹⁷.

Defining himself by a "radical" view of the electronic ballot box, another young conservative presented a similar perspective, arguing that the electronic voting model is a "scam machine" that "anyone can hack" (our translation). The interviewee also defended the printed ballot counting procedure. A conservative interviewee, aged 46 to 55, claimed that he was not convinced of the security of the electronic ballot box, as he considers the system to be fragile: "it doesn't transmit 100% confidence" (our translation). According to the interviewee, the STF and some media outlets treat people as "ignorant", and many of these media outlets do not show the "positive" side of the Bolsonaro government.

Contrary to his speech delegitimizing the ballot box, Jair Bolsonaro defended the electronic model in 1993¹⁸ to combat fraud. The former president's occasional opportunism, finding a banner to signal to the electorate, seems to be a strategy to hide his real intentions of weakening democracy.

The authority of the leader who originates a false discourse is a point of legitimization for his supporters, according to Recuero (2020). The delegitimization of electronic ballot boxes causes uncertainty in the electoral process, undermining democracy in Brazil (RECUERO, 2020, p. 388).

Then-president Bolsonaro threatened institutions by saying that Brazil could have a "worse problem"¹⁹ than the violence we saw in the US legislature after Donald Trump's defeat. Another threat came from the Minister of Defense, General Walter Braga Netto, who in a message to the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Arthur Lira (Progressistas-AL) announced that there would be no elections in 2022 if the "auditable" printed ballot was not in place²⁰. Braga Netto was the vice-presidential candidate on Jair Bolsonaro's (PL) ticket in 2022. According to Bolsonaro, "democratic" elections would only take place with a "public vote count"²¹. These statements were made a few days after the then president's speech (18 July

¹⁷ More at Estadão: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,pf-se-recusa-a-mostrar-registros-de-irregularidades-nas-urnas-eletronicas,70003787578>. Access: 12 Aug. 2021.

¹⁸ More at O Globo: <https://oglobo.globo.com/epoca/ha-25-anos-bolsonaro-defendeu-informatizar-apuracao-das-eleicoes-para-combater-fraudes-23160301>. Access: 12 Aug. 2021.

¹⁹ More at Estadão: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,se-nao-tiver-voto-impreso-em-2022-vamos-ter-problema-pior-que-eua-diz-bolsonaro,70003573533>. Access: 13 Aug. 2021.

²⁰ More at Estadão: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,ministro-da-defesa-faz-ameaca-e-condiciona-eleicoes-de-2022-ao-voto-impreso,70003785916>. Access: 13 Aug. 2021.

²¹ More at Estado de Minas:

https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2021/08/01/interna_politica,1291873/bolsonaro-eleicoes-democraticas-somente-com-contagem-publica-dos-votos.shtml. Access: 13 Aug. 2021.

2022) to ambassadors summoned to the Planalto Palace, when Bolsonaro reinforced his questioning of the electoral system without proof.^{22 23}

It is noteworthy that during this election period, the Armed Forces took upon themselves the non-constitutional task of acting as election inspectors, having initially talked about auditing the ballot boxes. When questioned and summoned by the president of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) to present the ballot box audit report, the Ministry of Defense claimed to have carried out an inspection, not an audit. The report was only delivered after the second round of the elections without proving fraud in the ballot boxes.

Another element observed in the speeches of the conservative camp was the fear of Brazil coming closer to "socialist/communist" countries, which would be corroborated by the meme presented. A 21-year-old conservative voter said: "In addition to the ballot box, there should be a voucher. The information that only 3 countries use it (the electronic ballot box) makes me more suspicious and more likely to want proof of vote," he said, although he pondered that "image does not generate reliability" (our translation).

There is an ecosystem of sources for confirming news that is difficult to escape the "bubbles", as the interviewees themselves put it. When they do get out of their bubbles, they look for confirmation on search engines or mainstream media portals. As one conservative voter aged between 36 and 45 says, she "follows the information with her husband, who listens to CBN, Bandeirantes and Datena" (our translation). The same voter says she trusts G1 and is suspicious of UOL. And she says she does not like the weekly magazine *Veja*²⁴ because it is linked to the Globo Group. "For me it belongs to Globo, there's no point in saying it does not" (our translation).

While voters in the conservative camp were sympathetic to the information presented in the meme because it linked Brazil to "socialist/communist" countries, in the progressive spectrum the image was viewed with suspicion precisely because it made a connection considered "untrue" in the opinion of the majority.

²² More at Folha de S. Paulo: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2022/07/bolsonaro-repete-teorias-da-conspiracao-e-ataca-urnas-stf-e-tse-a-embaixadores.shtml>

²³ This speech earned the president a trial for abuse of political power, and he was tried and sentenced to ineligibility for eight years. Available: <https://www.tse.jus.br/comunicacao/noticias/2023/Junho/por-maioria-de-votos-tse-declara-bolsonaro-inelegivel-por-8-anos>

²⁴ *Veja* magazine was owned by Abril Cultural and was sold in December 2018 to businessman Fábio Carvalho. Both are competitors of Globo Group.

Disinformation and hatred as a strategy

Although lying was cited as a characteristic of disinformation in both ideological spectrums, it was more frequent in progressive groups. Among the 9 voters from this spectrum exposed to the image, only one (aged 46 to 55) even showed concern about the issue of ballot box security and said he had not come to a conclusion about the system's reliability. The others described the image as "biased", "fake news" and "lies", as already mentioned.

Two progressive voters made the connection between the meme and the US elections and the actions of former president Donald Trump, who also questioned the outcome of the polls. Upon seeing the image, a progressive woman between the ages of 46 and 55 said that "it could be Trump's people who put that up (the image). They're outraged by the ballot there". The progressive voter who expressed concern about the security of the ballot boxes said he had not come to a conclusion about which system is more susceptible to fraud after following the elections in the United States. Donald Trump articulated the discourse of possible fraud in the US elections in the months leading up to the election, culminating on 3 of November (election day in the US and the period between the first and second rounds in Brazil) when the former US president declared that he would not accept defeat by Joe Biden, and expanded his attacks on the voting system, which is conducted by paper ballot in most of the US territory. The discourse of suspicion created the conditions for actions by extremist groups who, in January 2021, invaded the Capitol.

The episode demonstrated the impact of anti-systemic discourse and its ability to mobilize extremist groups (a reaction also observed in Brazil on 8 January 2023).

The troubled political process that deteriorated the atmosphere of the elections in Brazil and the United States was present in the speeches of the research participants. The perception of the scope of disinformation that is systematically and organized on social networks permeated the speeches of participants from both ideological groups, and the dissemination of hatred was perceived as a political strategy. A 35-year-old progressive participant, commenting on the intention behind the image presented about the electronic ballot boxes, said: "They want to stir things up. Those who are more alienated will accept this information. Hatred is an important part of this process" (our translation).

We can see that ideology and prejudice are elements that surround discourse on the electronic ballot box, where the subject reproduces and reaffirms an opinion common to a group, becoming hostage to these ideas and losing the ability to exercise their autonomy and singularity (CHAUI, 2008). Even in an election in which the voters participating in the survey

showed a certain weariness of the polarization seen in the 2018 elections, ideological disputes took place on social media, anticipating debates in the 2022 electoral campaign and maintaining the flame of polarization that sustains the engagement of groups vying for power around issues that cause the weakening of democratic institutions (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018), deserving society's attention.

In August 2021, the Constitutional Amendment Bill (PEC 135/19), which would have obliged "physical ballots" to be issued after electronic voting, was rejected in the Chamber of Deputies, having received 229 votes in favor, 218 against and one abstention. To be approved, the PEC needed 308 votes. It is worth noting that the only abstention came from Aécio Neves (PSDB), the same person who in 2014 did not recognize his defeat to former president Dilma Rousseff (PT) and called for a recount of the votes, demonstrating difficulty in recognizing the will of the voters expressed at the polls.

Even though PEC 135/19 was rejected in the Chamber of Deputies, ex-president Bolsonaro and his groups of supporters who cultivate distrust in the electoral system continued their activities, spreading disinformation, as can be seen from the objective data of the research carried out by FGV DAPP (Portuguese initials for Directorate for Public Policy Analysis). The study analyzed posts accusing the electronic ballot box of fraud and defending the printed ballot in Facebook posts between November 2020 and January 2022. We were struck by the fact that this monitoring began during the same period in which we held our focus groups with voters in the municipality of São Paulo. In this sense, it is interesting to see that the images that appeared in the information checks in 2020 were in the same perspective as the monitoring carried out by the FGV, demonstrating Bolsonaro's strategy of keeping its networks fed with conspiracy theories about fraud in the electronic ballot boxes and distrust in the electoral system.

Between November 2020 and January 2022, the monitoring found 394,370 posts published on 27,840 personal and public group profiles about fraud in the electronic ballot box and the defense of the printed vote. In addition to the posts, it was possible to identify 111 million interactions, demonstrating that these messages provoked reactions in users of the social network.

During 2021, there was intense group activity on pages in favor of the printed ballot and it is possible to observe that there was a higher average number of interactions since 2014, when the debate gained momentum, showing the strong capacity for mobilization of networks by groups that support the agenda of questioning electronic voting.

Another fact is the organization of the dissemination of disinformation. Twelve accounts have the highest number of interactions on Facebook posts, including former president Jair Bolsonaro and federal deputy Carla Zambelli, who were responsible for 1,576 posts during the monitoring period.

Final considerations

Electoral processes occupy a fundamental place in liberal democracies and play an important role in the democratic game, often being referred to as the "festival of democracy".

Electronic voting machines were introduced in Brazil in 1996. Although in some elections doubts have been raised about the results, in no other period has there been such an intense campaign to question their reliability.

The results presented in this survey of conservative and progressive voters in the 2020 municipal elections in the city of São Paulo show that the two groups have different perceptions and beliefs about electronic voting machines. Progressives do not express categorical questions about the reliability of the ballot boxes, while conservatives, albeit not homogeneously, tend to present arguments that demonstrate greater distrust of the results.

The group of conservatives stated that the information presented in the image (meme) is important, reaffirming the need to establish ways of verifying the vote, with this group showing greater concern about the possibility of fraud at the polls. They also pointed out that the meme's assertion that electronic voting machines exist in only three countries increases distrust about the security of the elections, using this (dis)information to expose the risk of Brazil becoming like countries considered to be socialist or communist, in the words of some participants, with this group presenting a fragile model for checking information, as presented above.

The group of progressives accused the image presented of "fake news", characterizing the post as biased in the interest of delegitimizing the national elections by associating Brazil with countries identified with the communist ideology. One of the participants made a connection with the US elections and former president Donald Trump's attempts to delegitimize the US elections, and expressed concern that Brazil would repeat the events of the attempted invasion of the Capitol.

The process of questioning the fairness of the elections and delegitimizing democracy has been an important tactic of the extreme right. This movement is motivated by the reaction

of conservatives to the achievements of the diversity of interests and social values in social structures. In the words of researcher Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos, the "rejection of the economic and social progress of the vulnerable classes" (2017, p. 32, our translation) is a denominator that permeated the coups of 1950, 1964 and 2016.

The civilizing process that fights against the social strategy of alienation and discrimination has increasingly exposed divergences and tensions that do not recognize in democratic ways a structure for overcoming and conciliation, betting on the modus of anti-politics and the dismantling of democracy as the way to solve their particular problem, as Avritzer (2020) explains. It was within this logic that the then deputy Jair Bolsonaro came to command the executive branch. "He came to the presidency not as a political leader, but as someone willing to destroy policies and politicians" (AVRITZER, p. 5, our translation).

In this context, the phenomenon of disinformation has become more relevant in recent years, given the advance of digital tools for disseminating news (or supposed news), and electronic messaging tools, weakening public debate and impacting democracy. For some authors, such as Charles Tilly (2007), we are witnessing a process of de-democratization. When dealing with advances and setbacks in the processes of democratization and de-democratization, Tilly lists three aspects as elements of the state's ability to increase or reduce democracy: 1) advances or setbacks in the relationships of interpersonal networks of trust (kinship, religious groups and business relationships) that affect public policy decisions; 2) an increase or reduction in inequality and 3) greater or lesser autonomy of coercive power centers over public policies, which would avoid clientelist practices (TILLY, 2007, pp. 23 - 75, our translation).

A scholar of the dynamics of confrontation, the author's research focuses on the issue of "durable inequality". The structures of inequality can be amplified by delegitimizing democracy, reducing the participation of minority groups, eliminating rights, even under a democracy. These are "pathological traits", in the words of Nelson do Valle (2004), which maintain inequalities in the country, with under-representation of minorities of race, sex, gender and economic power. The state's capacity to supervise and guarantee the democratic process determines whether the democratic system can advance or retreat. In Tilly's words, low state capacity inhibits democracy. In the Brazilian case, we could ask ourselves whether there is a low capacity or a low will to sustain democracy. Returning to Avritzer's thinking (2020), the crisis of Bolsonarism extends beyond attacks on the ballot box and elections. It affects the making of politics and the understanding of democracy. The issue of systematic and organized

attacks on the electronic ballot box is part of the anti-politics of a government that catalyzes crises and has in this mode of operation a source of cohesion for conservative groups.

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