

YOUTH AND ADHERENCE TO DEMOCRACY IN THE SOUTH OF MINAS GERAIS

JUVENTUDE E ADESÃO À DEMOCRACIA NO SUL DE MINAS GERAIS

JUVENTUD Y ADHESIÓN A LA DEMOCRACIA EN EL SUR DE MINAS GERAIS

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ABSTRACT: The research ‘Southern Minas Gerais identity’ produced relevant data on adherence to democracy in the South of Minas Gerais according to different age groups. These data allow us to question the extent to which younger people have demonstrated greater support in this region compared to older age groups and how young people relate to the main institutions of representative democracy, particularly elections, and parties. The article carries out this discussion and analysis after presenting a bibliographical survey on youth and adherence to democracy. Among the results, it is worth highlighting that there is an indication that the adherence of young people from the South of Minas Gerais is higher than that of other age groups, but there is no statistical evidence for this. Distrust in the most traditional institutions of democracy is great, and the lack of understanding of the difference between politics and government seems to leave out greater possibilities of approaching those in power.

KEYWORDS: Youth. Democracy. South of Minas Gerais.

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RESUMO: *A pesquisa ‘A identidade sul-mineira’ produziu dados relevantes sobre a adesão à democracia no Sul de Minas Gerais, de acordo com as diferentes faixas etárias. Esses dados permitem interrogar até que ponto as pessoas mais jovens têm demonstrado maior adesão à democracia nesta região em comparação com faixas etárias mais velhas e como os jovens se relacionam com as principais instituições da democracia representativa, em destaque eleições e partidos. O artigo realiza esta discussão e análise após apresentar um levantamento bibliográfico sobre juventude e adesão à democracia. Entre os resultados, destaca-se que há uma indicação de que a adesão dos jovens sul-mineiros é superior às dos demais grupos etários, mas sem comprovação estatística para tal. A desconfiança nas instituições mais tradicionais da democracia é grande, e a falta de compreensão sobre a diferença entre política e governo parece deixar de fora maiores possibilidades de aproximação com os governantes.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Juventude. Democracia. Sul de Minas Gerais.*

RESUMEN: *La investigación ‘Identidad del Sur de Minas Gerais’ produjo datos relevantes sobre la adhesión a la democracia en el Sur de Minas Gerais según diferentes grupos de edad. Estos datos nos permiten cuestionar hasta qué punto los jóvenes han demostrado un mayor apoyo en esta región en comparación con los grupos de mayor edad y cómo se relacionan los jóvenes con las principales instituciones de la democracia representativa, en particular las elecciones y los partidos. El artículo realiza esta discusión y análisis después de presentar un estudio bibliográfico sobre juventud y adhesión a la democracia. Entre los resultados, vale destacar que hay indicios de que la adherencia de los jóvenes del sur de Minas Gerais es mayor que la de otros grupos etarios, pero sin evidencia estadística para ello. La desconfianza en las instituciones más tradicionales de la democracia es grande, y la falta de comprensión sobre la diferencia entre política y gobierno parece dejar fuera mayores posibilidades de acercamiento con quienes están en el poder.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Juventud. Democracia. Sur de Minas Gerais.*

Introduction

Since at least the 2013 Protests, Brazil has been shaken by a series of street demonstrations. These protests were followed by a range of others, some of which were progressive, such as the high school student occupations in 2015 and 2016,

while others carried conservative overtones, with large gatherings during those same years calling for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. This was followed by the 2018 elections, with a clear rightward shift in national and state levels across the executive and legislative branches. Representative democracy and its institutions, which once seemed solidified, found themselves seriously questioned by both left- and right-wing ideological arguments. Large street demonstrations, which had appeared to be a thing of the past, returned to the political forefront until the COVID-19 pandemic. An intensifying political polarization, unprecedented in the post-dictatorship period, began to characterize social life, seeping into individuals' daily lives and family dynamics.

One pressing issue now revolves around the stability and consistency of Brazilian society's commitment to representative democratic values. Since the end of the military-civil dictatorship, Brazil has experienced an uninterrupted period of democratically elected governments up to the 2016 impeachment and a minimum threshold of democratic guarantees respected and upheld by political institutions¹. This question, which seemed easier to answer before 2013, has since taken on increasingly complex and ambiguous responses, especially following the election of a president and multiple other officials who adopt heavily anti-democratic rhetoric.

A series of surveys have been systematically conducted in Brazil and other countries to assess public support for democracy. A key question in these surveys, which has become standardized, was included in the research agenda of *A identidade sul-mineira: diagnóstico cultural, social, político e econômico do Sul de Minas Gerais*² (The South-Minas Identity: Cultural, Social, Political, and Economic Diagnosis of Southern Minas Gerais). This question asked whether respondents considered democracy the best form of government in any situation. This question is treated here as an entry point to understanding the degree of democratic support among the South Minas population, with particular attention to age group differences.

We hypothesize that younger generations are more inclined toward democracy, given recent election outcomes by age group (showing younger voters tending to support fewer far-right candidates with anti-democratic rhetoric) (PODER360, 2023) as well as youth participation in progressive protests since 2013. The aforementioned research (PODER360, 2023), alongside other studies on diverse social issues, defines youth as those between 16 and 24 years old, which is the approach taken in this study. Although the 2013 Youth Statute (Brazil, 2013) defines youth

¹ For the purposes of this article, Robert Dahl's definition of democracy is adopted, which must meet criteria relating to political equality, electoral competitiveness and public accountability (Dahl, 2009).

² The research was developed by the Federal University of Alfenas (UNIFAL-MG), through the Pro-Rectory of Research and Postgraduate Studies and had the participation of professors from several courses at the Institution.

as those aged 15 to 29, from a sociological perspective, the category of youth up to age 24, in countries like Brazil, better demarcates the end of typically youthful experiences. These include academic pursuits (particularly higher education), lack of financial independence, residing with parents or guardians, and engaging in youthful social spheres. Furthermore, it is worth noting that voting rights become optional starting at age 16.

Field Research Methodology

According to the regional division by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2017), the South of Minas Gerais encompasses 162 municipalities located within the intermediate regions of Pouso Alegre and Varginha, further divided into 15 immediate regions: five within the Pouso Alegre intermediate region and ten within that of Varginha. The immediate regions and the number of municipalities surrounding each are as follows: Pouso Alegre (34); Poços de Caldas (8); Itajubá (14); São Lourenço (16); Caxambu-Baependi (8); Varginha (5); Passos (15); Alfenas (13); Lavras (14); Guaxupé (9); Três Corações (6); Três Pontas-Boa Esperança (5); São Sebastião do Paraíso (5); Campo Belo (5); and Piumhi (5).

The estimated population for this region was approximately 2,900,000 residents, based on 2021 population estimates from IBGE. Using this estimate, the sample size was calculated at 1,320 cases, with a margin of error of 2.7 percentage points and a confidence level of 95%. Subsequently, 20 municipalities were selected to cover all regional divisions defined by IBGE (2017) for the South of Minas Gerais.

The decision to include 20 municipalities was based on the university's location and the intention to cover the entire region as defined geographically by the IBGE. Four municipalities were intentionally selected: Alfenas, Poços de Caldas, and Varginha, where the Federal University of Alfenas (UNIFAL-MG) has facilities, and Pouso Alegre, the principal municipality within its respective intermediate region. The remaining 16 municipalities were chosen through a simple random draw, ensuring representation across all 15 immediate regions. The sample was stratified by gender, household income, age group, and educational level, based on 2010 Census data. According to the 2010 data, the population aged 16 to 24 accounted for 14.88%. Respondents within this age range made up 16.1% of the survey participants, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Distribution of Interviews by Age Group

Age range	N	%
16 to 24 years	213	16,1
25 to 34 years	260	19,7
35 to 44 years	264	20,0
45 to 54 years	213	16,1
55 to 64 years	246	18,6
65 or older	124	9,4
Total	1320	100,0

Source: Based on data from the research Project *A identidade sul-mineira* (The Identity of South Minas Gerais), UNIFAL-MG, 2022.

The study, *A identidade sul-mineira mineira* (The Identity of South Minas Gerais), covered various aspects of culture, economy, politics, religion, labor, human rights, and regional characteristics. The primary question for this study concerned the form of government. This question was presented as follows:

Some people say that democracy is always better than any other form of government. Others believe that, in certain situations, a dictatorship is better than a democracy. I will read two statements, and I would like to know which one is closer to your way of thinking: Democracy is always better than any other form of government; In some situations, a dictatorship is better than democracy (UNIFAL-MG, 2022, n.p., our translation).

Respondents could spontaneously answer, “**It doesn’t matter,**” although this option was neither prompted nor suggested. It was not possible to respond with disagreement to both statements.

Additional questions that assist in the analyses pertain to: a) youth perceptions of the importance of elections, political organization, and the understanding between politics and government; b) levels of trust (some, a lot, total, little, or none) in organizations and social groups, including religious groups, social movements, the Federal Police (PF), elections, political parties, the National Congress, the Legislative Assembly of Minas Gerais, Municipal Councils, the Presidency of the Republic, the State Government of Minas Gerais, Municipal Governments, and the Federal Supreme Court (STF).

In light of these considerations, two guiding questions shape the analyses in this article: What are the similarities and differences in the ways South Minas youth express adherence to democracy? Which institutional and social elements are engaged by youth in South Minas?

Beyond the questions posed in the survey, a literature review specific to this article was conducted using the keywords “youth” and “democracy.” The selected

sources were compared with one another and included in works examining youth participation in contemporary social movements in Brazil. From this, we developed categories for data analysis. This discussion of the literature review and the analytical categories is presented in the following section.

In the third section, we analyze the survey data concerning adherence to democracy, considering different age groups. In the fourth section, we examine data on youth trust in major institutions of representative democracy, with a focus on elections and political parties. The article concludes with final considerations that summarize the main findings.

Youth and Democracy in Contemporary Brazil: Some Considerations

In conducting a literature review using the descriptors “youth” and “democracy” within Scielo and the CAPES Periodicals Portal, we identified 117 works. Of these, six were particularly notable in their potential contributions to the topic of this article, as they specifically addressed youth support for democracy.

The first work, by Borba and Ribeiro (2021), connects support for democracy to formal education. The article tests the hypothesis that increased access to schooling would enhance “popular support for democracy.” Using time-series analysis techniques and logistic models based on opinion survey data from 1998 to 2018, the study concludes that there is no evidence in this data to suggest increased support for democracy among the general population. It finds that short-term factors significantly impact support and satisfaction with democracy and, ultimately, that the primary effect of schooling is seen in “normative adherence to democracy.” Regarding age range, the authors focused on youth aged 16 to 24 years, the same range as previously mentioned for the analyses presented here.

To reach these conclusions, Borba and Ribeiro (2021) offer an insightful conceptual and theoretical discussion, contributing to the construction of analytical categories relevant to this article. They draw from David Easton’s concept of legitimacy, defined as “support conferred by citizens to a political regime” (Borba; Ribeiro, 2021, p. 2, our translation), which has two levels: “diffuse support for basic values” (a more normative dimension associated with political socialization) and “specific support for the concrete functioning” of institutions and the performance of those operating them. The article aims to adopt a longitudinal perspective on the legitimacy of the democratic regime, examining the predictions of “political socialization” theories (which argue that learning democracy generates a lasting legacy) alongside “democratic performance” theories (where support is linked to the regime’s ability to deliver results, whether in the form of democratic goods, such as freedom, or tangible goods, like economic growth).

Concerning the “effects of formal education” on support for democracy, studies and theories generally assert that these effects are positive but decline over time. Nevertheless, schooling becomes increasingly essential for democracy’s sustainability, as democracy itself continues to present ever-greater “informational and cognitive challenges” to individuals as it progresses.

In their data analysis, Borba and Ribeiro (2021) considered three main metrics, examining opinion surveys conducted between 1998 and 2018: “support for democracy” (based on the question presented in the introduction about the desirability of democracy in any situation); the “importance of political parties in democracy” (based on a question about the viability of democracy without political parties); and the “degree of satisfaction with democracy.” While satisfaction with democracy showed a downward trend and support for democracy without political parties rose early in the period and then stabilized, support for democracy (considered the best regime in any situation) displayed no clear trend, with frequent fluctuations.

Paradoxically, while a far-right president was elected in 2018, support for democracy reached the highest rate in history. For Borba and Ribeiro (2021), this can be explained by Russell Dalton’s hypothesis of “political realignment,” where a profound ideological and cultural cleavage (specifically the political-ideological polarization at least since 2015) reorganizes the connections between voters and parties.

In another study, Fucks *et al.* (2016) highlighted that support for democracy in Brazil should be understood from a multidimensional perspective, meaning that people support different specific principles of democracy rather than simply supporting it as a whole. Examining data from individuals who identify as democrats, the authors found that this support is strongest in its participatory dimension and less significant in the procedural and representative dimensions. Similarly, the study by Gimenes and Borba (2019) produced analogous results that challenge analyses viewing democracy support data in a binary manner.

Casalecchi and Vieira (2021), examining political participation as a core pillar of democracy, noted the decline in satisfaction with the representative system, which has led to decreased participation in traditional mechanisms like party actions and voting. The authors analyzed whether increased participation in media channels has fostered a shift towards qualified debate, suggesting a form of political digital activism. Among the data analyzed, drawn from the 2018 AmericasBarometer, they created indicators for the intensity of digital activism and its potential influence on democratic values, including the question of democracy as the best form of government. Their primary conclusion is that “digital activism does not have a statistically significant effect on support for democracy” (Casalecchi; Vieira, 2021, p. 140, our translation).

Specifically regarding the relationship between age groups and support for democracy, we find relevant data in the works of Del Porto (2012) and Paulino (2016). Both studies raise questions about how living under two different regimes, dictatorial and democratic, throughout one's life affects support for democracy, particularly in comparison to generations that have experienced only democracy. Del Porto (2012) analyzes surveys covering the period from 1989 to 2006 in Brazil, while Paulino (2016) utilizes data from the 2012 AmericasBarometer, which includes 17 countries in Latin America, Brazil included. Del Porto (2012) asserts that there are no significant differences between the generations; however, education has an impact on the preference for democracy among those who experienced their youth during the period of redemocratization. In contrast, Paulino's (2016) analysis of Brazil indicates that the generation that has lived only after redemocratization shows less adherence to democracy (nearly 64%) compared to the generation that experienced its youth during the dictatorship (almost 71%); Brazil mirrors the trend observed in other analyzed Latin American countries, where the generation that lived under both regimes tends to demonstrate greater support for democracy.

In conjunction with the aforementioned studies, which highlight quantitative data across large population and temporal scales, primarily using concepts from political science, we juxtapose works that address youth from a more sociological perspective, often emphasizing qualitative data. Among these are studies applying concepts from the field of political socialization (Baquero, Baquero, Morais, 2016; Baquero, Baquero, 2014), and, more recently, those utilizing the concept of political subjectivation (Castro, 2016, 2008). For the purposes of this article, however, we find it more pertinent to discuss works that examine the engagement of contemporary Brazilian youth in social movements. These movements articulate the expectations of youth for a deepening of democracy and a desire for greater participation in decision-making processes. They engage with, and indeed challenge, the forecasts presented in the initial articles concerning adherence to democracy, as well as the studies on political socialization (which tend to be pessimistic regarding the democratic engagement of youth); thus, they align more closely with the perspective of political subjectivation. Given these expectations among youth in social movements, it is crucial to question, based on the data, whether the youth from Southern Minas share these sentiments and to what extent.

Groppo and Silveira (2020) developed the notion of the dialectic of youth condition, which has been reaffirmed by recent student movements, such as the secondary school occupations in 2015 and 2016, as well as by the intense involvement of youth in the large protests of the 2013 Journeys. The dialectic of youth condition posits that young people hold the potential to break away from the paths of socialization determined by older generations and social institutions, experimenting with

alternative or even rebellious social values, practices, and forms of organization—what Karl Mannheim (1982) describes as a rich repository of social innovations. Some youth generational units develop progressive radical values and behaviors, revealing the limitations and contradictions of the period known as ‘*Lulismo*’ (the governments of the Workers’ Party (PT) from 2003 to 2016), while also advocating for a deepening of participatory democratic experience.

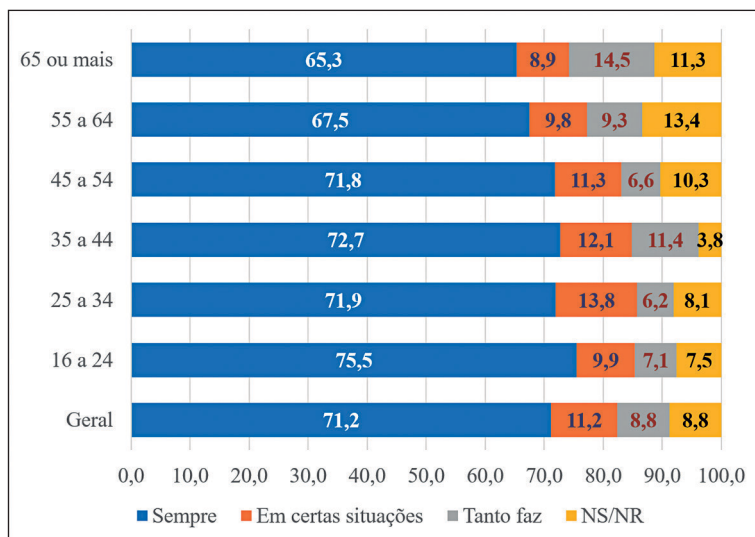
Conversely, other youth generational units have veered towards adherence to a different political-ideological extreme, specifically the conservative and far-right currents that gained prominence in the 2018 presidential elections and have become a significant political force in our country in recent years. According to Pinheiro-Machado (2019) and Silveira and Groppo (2019), there is a considerable gender dimension in these distinct political-ideological alignments among Brazilian youth: women tend to be more progressive, whereas men tend to lean towards conservatism. Even the class cleavage, which is typically powerful, is challenged by the gender bias in political adherence, as Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2018) reveal in their ethnographies in the peripheries of the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, observing girls leading the occupation of their school while boys from the same class align with the far-right.

Therefore, it is important to analyze how youth from Southern Minas expressed their perspectives regarding adherence to democracy, the legitimacy attributed to a regime of government, the levels of this adherence (diffuse-normative or specific-concrete), and the influences of their lived experiences concerning education, socialization, and the tangible aspects of the regime. Additionally, measures related to adherence, parties, and institutions may provide insights into young people’s understanding of the political regime.

Adherence to Democracy Among Age Groups

When analyzing the data on adherence to democracy, the following indication emerges, as shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1 – Democracy as the Best Form of Government by Age Group (%)³



Source: Based on data from the research Project *A identidade sul-mineira* (The Identity of South Minas Gerais), UNIFAL-MG, 2022.

The data appear to indicate a greater propensity among young individuals who consider democracy to be the best form of government, as the percentage of those who hold this view is higher than that of other age groups, at just over 75%. This figure is nearly four percentage points above the overall population value, which was 71.2%. However, it is important to note that due to a margin of error of 2.7 percentage points (p.p.), this difference is not statistically significant. Across the four age groups ranging from 16 to 54 years, the intervals between the maximum and minimum values, calculated with the margins of error, indicate that it is not possible to assert statistically significant differences among the opinions of these age cohorts. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the general trend suggests an inverse relationship between adherence to the assertion that democracy is the best form of government and age, as adherence increases with older age groups.

Furthermore, if we combine the percentages of those who indicated that democracy is the best form with those who believe it is the best in certain situations, we find values that are quite close for the four age groups ranging from 16 to 64 years: 85.4%, 85.8%, 84.8%, and 83.1%, respectively.

Therefore, it is observed that there is a relatively high frequency of individuals who consider “democracy to always be the best form of government,” regardless of

³ Translation from left to right: Blue: Always; Orange: In certain situations; Gray: Whatever; Yellow: NS;NR.

age, given that 939 out of 1,320 responses, or 71.2% of the total sample, affirm this view. In contrast, it is noteworthy that 116 individuals, corresponding to 8.8% of the sample, indicated “not knowing” or “not responding” to such a pertinent topic for Brazilians.

In general terms, the sample exhibited a proportional distribution across age groups, with variation between 16% and 20% of the sample among those aged up to 64 years, and only the last age group showing a lower percentage of 9.4%.

To determine whether the variables Democracy and Age are independent or dependent, a statistical χ^2 (chi-square) test was conducted. The obtained result is $\chi^2 = 34.050$, with 20 degrees of freedom, which is significant for $\alpha \leq 0.026$. Therefore, it can be concluded, with a risk of less than 2.6%, that Democracy and Age are dependent. It is essential to clarify that the relationship of dependency between democracy and age is one of association or correlation, not causation, since the former varies according to age group, but it does not make sense to assume that the value attributed to democracy exerts any influence on age.

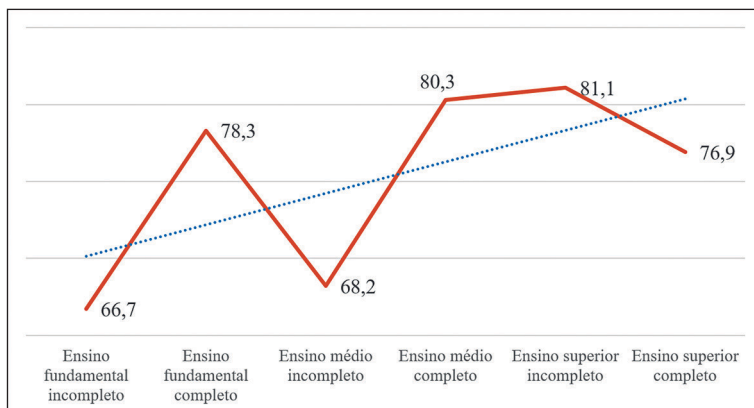
Since the hypothesis of dependence between the variables has been accepted with a high probability of being true, 97.4%, it is important to assess the strength of this association. In this case, calculated using the contingency coefficient (C) for the categorical variables of age group and best form of government, the results yield $C = 0.159$, indicating a moderate association, as C ranges from 0 (minimum) to 1 (maximum). When specifically analyzing young individuals⁴, concerning sex and education, we find several aspects worthy of reflection.

Regarding sex and the indication that democracy is always the best form of government, no significant difference was noted: young women reported a percentage of 74.8%, while young men reported 75.7%. This finding contrasts with the indications by Silveira and Groppo (2019) and Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2018), which suggest that young women tend to be more progressive.

In relation to education, there is an increase in the adherence rates among young individuals, which rise from 66.7% for those with incomplete elementary education to 81% for those with incomplete higher education.

⁴ Among 213 young people, the profile was as follows: sex: 102 men and 111 women. For family income: up to two minimum wages – 73; more than two up to five – 97; more than five up to ten – 34 and over ten – 8. Regarding education: incomplete elementary school – 30; complete elementary school – 22; incomplete high school – 43; complete high school – 67; incomplete higher education 37 and complete higher education 14.

Figure 2 – Relationship between Education and Adherence to Democracy among Young People in Southern Minas Gerais (%)



Source: Based on data from the research Project *A identidade sul-mineira* (The Identity of South Minas Gerais), UNIFAL-MG, 2022.

However, as indicated in Figure 2, there is a variation between educational attainment and adherence to democracy. After increasing among the first two groups of less educated individuals, adherence declines to 68.2% among those with incomplete secondary education, then rises again in the subsequent levels, complete secondary education and incomplete higher education—before falling to nearly 77% at the highest level, which is complete higher education. The research data regarding Southern Minas do not support Borba and Ribeiro’s (2021) assertion that there may be a relationship between formal education and the persistence of democracy.

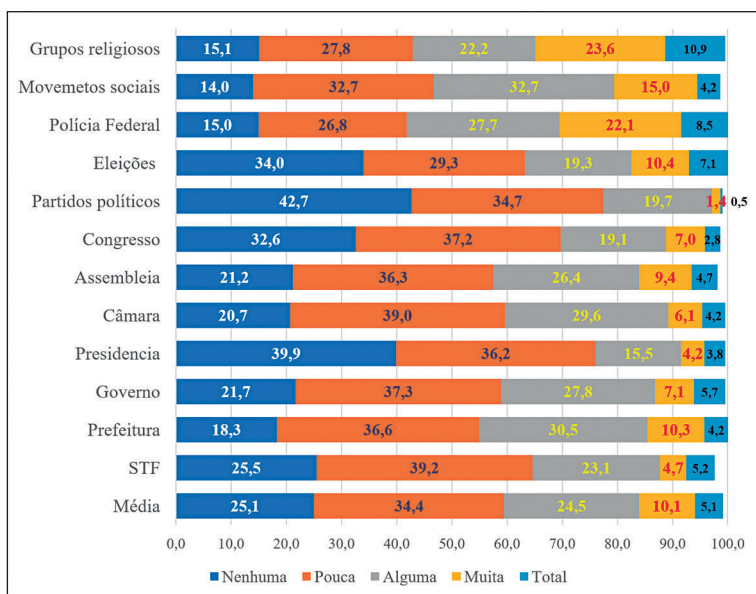
While it cannot be definitively stated that young individuals in Southern Minas regard democracy as the best form of government more than other age groups do, there seems to be a regional specificity when compared to other studies on the subject in the country, where the trend has been that adults report higher percentages than youth regarding democracy as the best form of government.

Thus, the research *A identidade sul-mineira* identified a different situation in the region in 2022 compared to Paulino’s (2016) analysis, which asserted that in Brazil, the generation that has lived only after the re-democratization adheres less to democracy (almost 64%) than the generation that experienced their youth during the dictatorship (almost 71%). This trend aligns with that observed in other analyzed Latin American countries, where the generation that lived under both regimes tends to show greater adherence to democracy.

Trust in Institutions

The indication that young people from Southern Minas consider democracy to always be the best form of government was also evaluated in relation to their level of trust in institutions and mechanisms employed for its exercise, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Level of Trust of Young People in Institutions (%)



Source: Based on data from the research Project *A identidade sul-mineira* (The Identity of South Minas Gerais), UNIFAL-MG, 2022.

Young individuals indicated a complete lack of trust in political parties and the presidency, reporting levels of 42.7% and 39.9%, respectively. They also expressed limited confidence in these spheres, with rates of 34.7% and 36.2%, respectively, which raises the levels of distrust to over 70% for both institutions. Only 0.5% stated they had complete trust in political parties, while 1.4% expressed a high level of trust. The youth indicated a high or complete level of trust, with percentages exceeding 30%, only in religious groups and the Federal Police (PF).

In general, there appears to be a degree of distrust towards political parties and the presidency, which decreases in relation to other political actors and spaces, such as municipal councils and state and local governments. Among these, the municipal government exhibited the highest level of trust, although the difference is minimal compared to the others, at 30.5%. In this same regard, social movements were appreciated, with over 32% expressing some level of trust.

It is noteworthy that elections, which are central to democratic processes, are viewed with skepticism, as 34% of young individuals indicated they have no trust at all, and 29.3% expressed little trust. As the reasons for this distrust were not explored, it is important to consider that it may pertain both to the electoral process itself and the functioning of governments in the effective exercise of the mandates granted through elections.

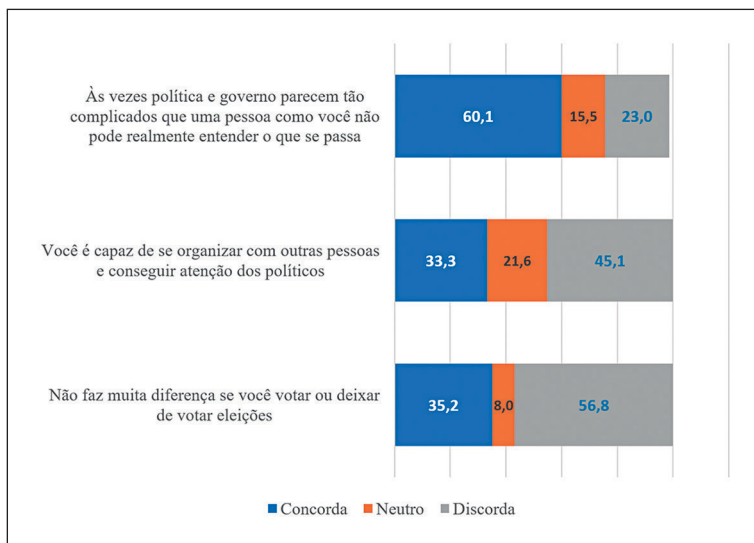
The presented data suggest that, in Southern Minas, young individuals maintain a more normative relationship with democracy, as emphasized by Fucks *et al.* (2016), since their adherence is more closely related to the values and principles of the regime than to its actual development, particularly concerning political institutions. The trend of diminishing importance of parties for the democratic government, as noted by Borba and Ribeiro (2001), is evidenced by the low levels, nearly nonexistent, of trust that young people in Southern Minas have in political parties.

The youth of Southern Minas affirm the legitimacy of the democratic regime, as they support it; according to Borba and Ribeiro (2021), their support aligns with basic values in a more diffuse manner and is related to political socialization rather than specific support associated with the functioning of institutions and the performance of political actors. This distances their support for democracy from procedural and representative dimensions, seemingly favoring participatory dimensions.

The data from the research *Identidade sul-mineira* indicate, as highlighted by Casalecchi and Vieira (2021), a decline in political participation; however, the data presented do not allow for the conclusion that there has been a shift to digital media. What is perceptible is the distrust in traditional institutions and forms of political representation and trust in other instances, such as the Federal Police (PF) and religious organizations, and to a slightly lesser extent, in social movements.

Perhaps the following question regarding the relationship between governments, politics, and participation may help illuminate the challenges of understanding the forms of participation in democracy and recognizing its functioning and modes of representation. In addition to the high levels of distrust in institutions characteristic of a democratic regime, young individuals expressed perceptions and opinions regarding their belief in elections, the purpose of organizing to engage with politicians, and their knowledge and discernment regarding the relationship between politics and government, as illustrated in Graph 4.

Graph 4 – Level of Agreement Among Young Individuals Regarding the Functioning of Politics (%)⁵



Source: Based on data from the research Project *A identidade sul-mineira* (The Identity of South Minas Gerais), UNIFAL-MG, 2022.

According to Graph 4, just over half of the young individuals aged between 16 and 24 years disagree with the notion that it makes no difference whether or not one votes, while slightly more than 35% agree with this indifference. Such indications correspond to a lack of adherence to normative values. It is important to highlight, however, that over one-third of the youth demonstrate indifference towards such a significant social and political issue.

Moreover, 34% of young people consider themselves capable of organizing with others to attract the attention of politicians, while more than 45% reported feeling incapable of such mobilization. In this regard, individuals aged 16 to 24 tend to refrain from exercising their citizenship through group organizations for negotiations or discussions with politicians. Difficulty accessing these forms of organization may be one cause, but it is also worth considering the apathy among certain groups or the lack of understanding regarding the functioning of the system, as evidenced by the data concerning knowledge about politics and government presented in the same Graph 4.

⁵ Translation from top to bottom: Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like you can't really understand what's going on; You're able to organize with other people and get attention from politicians; It doesn't make much difference whether you vote or don't vote in elections.

Nearly 60% of young people indicated that politics and government are complicated to the extent that they do not understand the ongoing situation, while 23% claimed to understand the difference.

There appears to be a limited comprehension of the ways in which the democratic regime operates, particularly concerning the main institutions that support it, such as government and political organizations in general. This aspect underpins adherence to the basic values of democracy, viewing it as a legitimate regime without fully understanding or granting legitimacy to its principal modes of functioning. In this context, it seems plausible to understand the high degree of importance attributed to voting, with over 56%, despite the difficulty in grasping the relationships between government and politics essential for the functioning of the regime.

Although there is a tendency towards political socialization as a more prominent means of recognizing the legitimacy of the democratic regime, one-third suggest they have the capacity to organize for advocacy or engagement with politicians.

Final consideration

The youth of Southern Minas Gerais exhibited a tendency toward greater adherence to democracy compared to other age groups; however, it cannot be statistically affirmed that they are more democratic than their counterparts. The rate of adherence to democracy among young individuals from Southern Minas is higher than the overall average for the region, as well as the national average, based on various surveys. In this sense, it can be asserted that the data indicate a difference in the adherence of Southern Minas youth to democracy when compared to older age groups, both in Southern Minas and throughout the country.

However, when considering the reported trust in institutions, the main institutional bases of representative democracy, such as elections and political parties, do not instill confidence among the youth of Southern Minas. Thus, there appears to be a more prescriptive than normative adherence, stemming more from the process of political socialization than from the knowledge and recognition of the functioning and importance of institutions within the democratic regime. This situation seems to align with the trend noted by Borba and Ribeiro (2001), which identifies a lack of faith in democratic institutions such as political parties and elections.

The difficulty in understanding the distinction between politics and government, along with a certain apprehension about organizing access to politicians, may reflect some of the challenges faced by the youth of Southern Minas in their political engagement.

Nonetheless, it is essential to consider new forms of adherence to democracy that may emerge during collective actions and protest cycles, which activate

processes of political subjectivization. On the other hand, while social movements enjoy a degree of trust among the youth, religious groups command even higher levels of confidence, potentially revealing distinct youth generational units in Southern Minas (progressive and conservative) or young individuals who combine progressive and conservative values, thus recreating a political ambiguity that has historically characterized political opinions in our country (Pinheiro-Machado, 2019). In any case, among the youth, the more traditional institutions sustaining democracy, such as parties and elections, are viewed with significantly less trust than social movements and religious groups concerning initiatives aimed at improving living conditions.

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