

Candidates, Voters, and Bots: The Forces at Play in the October 2018 Brazilian Elections

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 140 million Brazilian voters will go to the polls on October 7 to choose a new president, 27 governors, and hundreds of representatives at the federal and state levels. It is likely to be the most consequential election that Brazil has seen since the reinstatement of democracy in the 1980s. It is also proving to be one of the hardest to predict, as the electorate remains skeptical of the political class four years into an unprecedented corruption investigation that has now seen the imprisonment of leading political figures and businessmen. The prevalence of social media and the rise of fake news in a country with over 116 million internet-users has only added to the uncertainty.

With one month to go before the critical vote, the Brazil Institute hosted an in-depth conversation on the elections. Although some of the panelists argued that the presidential runoff will likely end up as a traditional race between the right and the left, all agreed that the situation remains highly fluid. A number of new factors, including recent changes to campaign finance laws and an unusually polarized electorate make this year's election difficult to predict based on previous general election cycles in Brazil. The presidential candidates themselves seem to have sensed that the best route to the runoff is to mobilize their base instead of playing to the center. As a result, any candidate who can secure 20 percent of the vote on October 7 will progress to the second round--a low bar, compared to previous elections, and one that increases the chances of a more extreme candidate winning the presidency.

After considering the outlook for the vote, experts specifically examined the potential role of social media and fake news. Political polarization between left and right on social media is currently similar to what was seen during Brazil's 2014 elections. However, fragmentation within the right, left, and center is growing, likely due to mistrust in politicians and political institutions, and bot activity is present along the entire political spectrum. Given the near impossibility of regulating bots and fake news before the election, the best approach may be simply raising public awareness of this issue.

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6th Floor, Woodrow Wilson Center

PANEL I: ASSESSING THE FIELD OF PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS

In his introduction, **Paulo Sotero**, Director of the Brazil Institute argued that the upcoming election in Brazil is the most critical election since Brazil's return to democracy. After years of economic challenges, rising crime rates, and unending corruption scandals, the electorate has lost faith in the political class. The 2018 campaign cycle has been marked by deep polarization and uncertainty. Just one month out from the general elections on October 7, the race is still far from decided. Yet whoever wins will face a new challenge: governing a profoundly fragmented country with significant and urgent structural, fiscal, and social issues.

Mauricio Moura, CEO and Founder of Ideia Big Data, highlighted several voting trends that have emerged from his company's public opinion surveys. Although Brazil has mandatory voting laws, the percentage of null or blank ballots cast has been increasing in recent years. In the first round of presidential election in 2014, Moura noted that 28.5 percent of the votes were null or blank votes. The level of null votes in more recent municipal elections in Brazil has been significantly higher and Moura predicted that this trend will carry over into federal and state elections this year. He expects that the percentage of null and blank votes in the first round of this year's election could be as high as 35 percent of the ballots cast.

Such an outcome would have serious implications in the upcoming elections. A high protest vote would lower the bar for moving to the second round, compared to the previous four elections. Moura anticipates that candidates who receive just 20-25 percent of the vote will continue to the runoff. As a result, most candidates (in particular, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Congressman Jair Bolsonaro), have focused on motivating their core voters: essentially, they are treating this initial round of elections much like a primary.

Moura expects the two candidates who make it to the second round to subsequently moderate their positions in order to win more votes in the runoff election. Moura also pointed out that party resources are limited due to recent campaign finance laws that restrict private donations, forcing candidates and their parties to limit travel and focus predominately on a single region.

Despite these unprecedented conditions, Moura still expects this election to follow the trend of Brazilian presidential elections since the return to democracy in the 1980s. Moura predicted that the second round election will have one candidate who represents the more progressive side of the political spectrum in Brazil, and one candidate who represents the more conservative side. The current contenders on the left are Lula (PT), Marina da Silva (Rede), and Ciro Gomes (PDT). On the right, the most likely contender is Jair Bolsonaro (PSL). Center-right Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB) remains a possibility, but he has struggled to attract voters.

Monica de Bolle, Director of Latin American Studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, focused on why candidates have targeted their messaging, almost exclusively, to their core voters. According to the median voter theorem in political science, the electorate should be distributed along a bell curve distribution, or a normal curve. As a result, the so-called "median voter" is crucial, since they make up the majority of the votes and hold the election to the political center; more extreme voters, located on the tails of the distribution, have very little sway.

De Bolle argued, however that in the current polarized political environment of Brazil, one is no longer dealing with a single bell curve distribution but with several



Left-right: Paulo Sotero, Mauricio Moura, Ricardo Mendes, Monica de Bolle, and (via Skype) Sergio Fausto

different bell curves, each with their own median voter. De Bolle suggested that candidates have intuitively realized this and are each focused on their unique median voter niche. This has made it particularly hard to predict on the outcomes of the presidential elections.

According to de Bolle, not only are the current candidates faced with navigating an unprecedented electoral process, but the eventual winner will face the very real challenge of governing Brazil. She stressed the country's fiscal challenges, citing the current budget deficit and rising debt to GDP ratios as two urgent issues the new president will need to address. De Bolle warned that—if the budget deficit trend persists and economic growth continues to lag—then the debt-to-GDP ratio could rise from the current 83 percent to 100 percent by 2020. The fiscal situation at the state level in Brazil is even worse. De Bolle cited the recent fire at the National Museum as one example, arguing that the tragedy was evidence of states' finances being stretched to the limit. There is a need for concerted fiscal reform at both the state and federal levels in Brazil.

Concluding her remarks, de Bolle expressed concern—in light of the poor fiscal legacies of President Michel Temer and his predecessor, President Dilma Rousseff—that the current candidates for the presidency could prove

unwilling or unable to make unpopular yet important reforms. Although the majority of candidates recognize the need for change (such as fiscal reform and pension reform), none have released substantive proposals for tackling these issues, and Brazil's fragmented Congress and convoluted governance structures will complicate any effort to pass and implement reforms.

Ricardo Mendes, Managing Partner at Prospectiva Consulting, began by explaining his concern over this year's "disturbing" elections. The multitude of new forces at play—such as the on-going corruption investigations, the ban on private-sector contributions to campaigns, and the shortened television and radio ad time allocated to campaigns—have made this election impossible to predict and difficult to compare to previous ones. Mendes cited another new force that could play a role in the upcoming elections: social media. However, he does not expect social media to be a "game-changer," and emphasized that traditional factors are likely to be the deciding factors in this year's elections.

Mendes defined four traditional factors to watch. The first factor is the socioeconomic context of these elections. Brazil is slowly emerging from the largest economic recession in its history and anti-establishment sentiment is high among voters.

The second factor is the ideological profile of the population. According to Mendes, 80 percent of Brazilian voters identify as center, center-right, or center-left. However, many voters this year may decide to vote for a candidate they deem a true contender instead of the candidate who most closely matches their ideological preferences (in order to prevent a candidate from the opposite side of the political spectrum from winning the presidency).

The third factor is resources. Campaigning in a large country like Brazil requires vast amounts of resources. While financial resources are essential for a competitive campaign, human resources are equally vital, which explains why parties with the most organized structures or those with the biggest coalitions are typically victorious.

The fourth factor is the personal attributes of each candidate and how they interact with their base.

Although new factors will have an important impact on this year's elections, Mendes concluded that the traditional factors mentioned above should not be discounted when analyzing potential outcomes. As a result, Mendes supported Moura's earlier prediction of a traditional left v. right runoff election.

Sergio Fausto, Executive Director of the Fernando Henrique Cardoso Institute, expressed concern that the election will not produce the change Brazil currently needs. Given the extremely fragmented electorate and field of presidential candidates—polls still show no clear second round matchup—Fausto expects that the threshold vote to make it to the runoff will be the lowest since Brazil's return to democracy. A candidate who effectively communicates with an ideologically extreme minority of the electorate could readily make it to the second round, and see that minority turn into a victory, Fausto warned.

Yet this means that whoever is elected president could lack the political capital to push through needed reforms. At the same time, Marina Silva and Geraldo Alckmin are reaching for more moderate voters, which would allow them to assemble a larger coalition should either of them reach the second round.

Regardless of who wins, Fausto hopes that they will be able to address what he deemed one of Brazil's greatest present crises: fiscal irresponsibility at the federal and especially state levels.



Top: Maurioc Moura, Ricardo Mendes, and Monica de Bolle

Right: Paulo Sotero

Bottom: Paulo Sotero, Mauricio Moura, Ricardo Mendes, and Monica de Bolle

PANEL II: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA, BOTS, AND FAKE NEWS IN THE BRAZILIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Meg King, Director of the Digital Futures Project and Coordinator of the Science, Technology and Innovation Program at the Wilson Center, pointed out that digital technology is simply the most recent of many tools used throughout history to spread disinformation and propaganda. While the scale of fake news campaigns and the ease with which they are spread may be new, the political threat of rumors and conspiracy theories spread maliciously or naively is not.

Luckily, King assured the audience, today the field of digital forensics exists, allowing specialists to follow the “digital trails of breadcrumbs” left behind by internet users and exposing repeat offenders, fake accounts, and bots. With the ongoing rise of artificial intelligence, King explained that the fact-checking process can even be automated to keep up with the increasing volume of fake news spread using that same technology. Although the threat from internet-based fake news is real and growing, King reported that we do indeed have the means to contain it.

Marco Aurélio Ruediger, Director of Public Policy Analysis at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas-RJ, began by detailing the political polarization of Brazilian social media, which mirrors the polarization currently seen across Brazilian society. Ruediger explained that, even though political polarization between left and right is relatively similar to what was seen during Brazil’s 2014 elections, fragmentation within the right, left, and even center on social media is growing for the first time around the many candidates scattered across the political spectrum. He suggested that this fragmentation stems from the growing mistrust in politicians and political institutions, which has pushed voters into skepticism and disinterest. Bots in 2014 reflected the bipolarization of the time, with fake profiles on social media overwhelmingly supporting either the left-leaning PT or center-right PSDB.

This election cycle, however, bots are grouped not just around candidates on opposite sides of the spectrum but also in the middle. The success of the extreme-right, namely Jair Bolsonaro, on social media has

Left-Right: Paulo Sotero, Meg King, and Marco Aurélio Ruediger





Left: Meg King; Right: Paulo Sotero, Meg King, and Marco Aurélio Ruediger

allowed Bolsonaro to circumvent traditional political power structures and forced Geraldo Alckmin and the PSDB—which has historically united Brazil’s right during elections—to focus more on voters at the political center.

The majority of the bots tracked and identified using digital forensics techniques were created in foreign countries. A large number of bots of Russian origin have been participating in the virtual Brazilian political debate since 2014, revealed Ruediger. He showed how these foreigners’ fake profiles can be identified by finding multiple pieces of suspicious information: common markers include a profile with an unlikely Brazilian name, a non-Brazilian city in Latin America listed as the person’s location, a profile picture found on Google Images, and an exceptionally high volume of political posts.

In 2016, foreign bots participated in online Brazilian debates over the election of U.S. President Donald Trump. More recently, new bots have appeared in several foreign countries, including overwhelmingly pro-Lula bots in

Venezuela and Mexico, which have attempted to influence this year’s Brazilian elections, according to Ruediger.

Ruediger defended awareness promotion as the most potent approach to countering the rising threat of fake news and bots. Almost all internet users in Brazil have heard about fake news, but many are not aware of the scale at which it is produced and disseminated. Although regulation can be a useful tool in some cases, Ruediger argued that it is not a solution or even the most effective way to address disinformation campaigns online. Despite the growing cognizance about this issue—especially among young people who have grown up within internet culture—many internet users still do not understand how to sift through the information they consume online and differentiate facts from fiction. This applies especially to older generations, Ruediger noted, who are relatively new to social media and more apt to believe and share fake news than younger generations.


He contended that a continued push to spread awareness and strengthen internet-age critical thinking should remain priorities in the fight for truth and transparency. Ruediger exemplified this push by presenting the effort Digital Democracy Room #observa2018—an initiative by Fundação Getúlio Vargas’s Department of Public Policy Analysis (DAPP) that aims to monitor the electoral and political debate in Brazil. The platform seeks to provide public daily analyses on discussions regarding electoral themes and the automated mechanisms that manipulate the political process.



Marco Aurélio Ruediger



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