Brazil’s election: as polarised as can be

Jonathan Wheatley  Nov 04 18:59 Comment

What you see above is a graphic representation of something anyone who followed the campaign that led to the re-election of Dilma Rousseff as Brazil’s president on October 26 already knows: the election was the most polarised in the country’s history.

The country was split down the middle, not only numerically (Dilma got 52 per cent, Aécio Neves 48) and geographically (Dilma won in the less developed north, Aécio in the more prosperous south). The twittersphere, too, was divided into two camps. Not only that; they hardly talked to each other at all.

“The tension during the election split the two sides in a way and with a strength that has never been seen in Brazil before,” says Marco Aurélio Ruediger, head of public policy analysis at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, an educational institution, in Rio de Janeiro.

Ruediger and his team generated the image above from an analysis of 620,000 tweets sent on October 25, the eve of the election’s second round run-off. The red cloud represents tweets and retweets of messages mentioning policies proposed by Dilma and her supporters; the blue cloud does the same for the Aécio camp. What is remarkable, says Ruediger, is the almost total absence of retweets by supporters of either side of messages mentioning the other side’s policies.

“Aécio’s supporters were tweeting about inflation, corruption and so on, and Dilma’s supporters about themes like income distribution,” he says. “Earlier in the campaign the candidates on each side did try to engage with the other’s chosen issues, but it didn’t get them anywhere.”

Most supporters of each side, he says, simply ignored any messages about the issues that concerned the other.
Ruediger says his team used an array of software to analyse Brazil’s twittersphere, including Brandwatch social media monitoring. They have continued to monitor Brazilian tweets since the election and the prospects for reconciliation are so far not very encouraging.

“We can see just the beginning of a sharing of messages between the two sides,” Ruediger says, “but it is still very polarised.”

With the country split in so many ways, it is up to Dilma to build bridges with the other half of the country, Ruediger says. “I am optimistic that she will do so. But the ball is very much in her hands.”

The next sign of the way things will go will come when the president makes the big appointments in her government, especially those of finance minister and central bank governor.

Rumours were floating around the twittersphere on Tuesday that Dilma, under pressure from her predecessor Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was about to appoint Henrique Meirelles to the finance ministry. Meirelles was Lula’s central banker, brought in as part of a positive shock to calm markets that had been thrown into near panic by his election in 2002. Such a move now would certainly cheer many on the blue side of the picture and would certainly be a bridge worth building. We shall see.

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