

# THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM IN THE 2020 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN BRAZIL

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The buzz of distrust in the electoral system  
on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter



Rio de Janeiro, December 2020

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# **THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM IN THE 2020 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN BRAZIL:**

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Rio de Janeiro

**FGV DAPP**

2020

Dados internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação  
Ficha catalográfica elaborada pelo Sistema de Bibliotecas/FGV

The digital ecosystem in the 2020 municipal elections in Brazil [recurso eletrônico]:  
the buzz of distrust in the electoral system on Facebook, Youtube and Twitter /  
Coordenadores Marco Aurelio Ruediger, Amaro Grassi. - Rio de Janeiro : FGV DAPP,  
2020.

1 recurso online (43 p.) : PDF

Dados eletrônicos.

Inclui bibliografia.

ISBN: 978-65-86845-08-2

1. Eleições locais. 2. Crime eleitoral. 3. Desinformação. 4. Fake news. 5. Redes  
sociais on-line. 6. Mídia social. I. Ruediger, Marco Aurelio, 1959- . II. Grassi, Amaro.  
III. Fundação Getulio Vargas. Diretoria de Análise de Políticas Públicas.

CDD – 324

**How to cite**

RUEDIGER, M. A.; GRASSI, A. (Coord.). **The digital ecosystem in the 2020 municipal elections in Brazil**: the buzz of distrust in the electoral system on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Policy paper. Rio de Janeiro: FGV DAPP, 2020.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research analyzes the flux of content and narrative that supports the distrust in the electoral system in Brazil. The study is based on a corpus of 1,426,687 posts published on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter between November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup>, a period that comprised the municipal elections of 2020 in Brazil. Through structured linguistic rules, we gathered content regarding ballot fraud, vulnerability of electronic ballots, electoral manipulation, intense defense of paper ballots, among others, originating from these three platforms of social media. The analysis is divided into two parts: the first one examines the evolution of the publications in the electoral month, and the second one examines the network of narratives that amplify this kind of debate in the digital environments. This document is more of an effort in the sense of understanding the scenario of disorder and informative manipulation with anti-systematic and conspiratorial qualities that has been emerging in the online public sphere and supported processes of public opinion distortion in Brazil, especially in electoral contexts.

Key-words: Online Public Discussion; Electoral Distrust; Ballot Fraud; 2020 Elections; Social Media.

## MAIN RESULTS

- Almost 1.5 million posts that tackle topics of distrust in the electoral system were published on social media platforms between November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup> of 2020 – mostly on Twitter, followed by Facebook, and, lastly, YouTube.
- The United States elections, the hack to the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) and the breakdown in the ballot counting in the first round in the municipal elections in Brazil boosted the debate about electoral distrust, in which specific episodes of fraud allegations associated to the national election had little expression.

- Adjacent episodes and the electoral climate constituted a bridge to the discursive restructuration of the argument of supposed ballot fraud, with greater predominance of the mobilization around paper ballots.
- The hashtags #votoimpresso2022 (paper ballots 2022) and #votoimpressojá (paper ballots now) appear among the most shared in the investigated period, adding up to almost 90 thousand mentions.
- The map of interactions made through the YouTube system of recommendations shows a predominance of the repercussion of fraud allegations in the elections on the United States among the Brazilian channels. Among alternative and hyper-partisan channels, content from the great press are key elements in attracting adherent audiences to the anti-systemic discourses.
- The organization and coordination around the topic produced expressive engagement when directed to the criticism to the electoral system; regarding its defense, there was no relevant mobilization.

## PRESENTATION

This is the second policy paper in the context of the project [Digitalisation and Democracy in Brazil](#), a partnership between the Department of Public Policy Analysis of Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV/DAPP) and the German Embassy in Brazil. Until 2022, a series of applied research and initiatives, such as seminars and workshops, will be developed with the goal of amplifying the understanding and seeking solutions to complex problems that involve the relationship between politics, democracy and social media platforms – especially the flux of messages, the public discussion, and the collective action that are based on potentially deceitful, extremist and antidemocratic information. The project seeks to gather efforts to build knowledge and develop mechanisms in order to slow down online threats, as well as to fortify democratic values in Brazil.



In this study, we analyzed the presence and predominance of publications related to the distrust in the electoral system that circulate on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in the context of the municipal elections of 2020 in Brazil. This report is a continuation of the document *Online Disinformation and the Elections in Brazil: The Circulation of Links about the Distrust in the Brazilian Electoral System on Facebook and YouTube (2014-2020)* that can be download [here](#). While in the current report we focused on the elections of 2020, in the previous study, we documented the history of links that circulate longitudinally in two of the main spaces of information trade, and social interaction for Brazilians. The goal was to highlight contents capable of generating misconception and disinformation are reutilized in electoral and non-electoral years thanks to its easy online access.

This time, we expanded the focus of analysis in order to allow for a deeper view of the topic in question through a specific event. In this sense, we chose to not outline the research around the links, but to investigate the evolution and the dynamic of the debate through the dislocation of the content. We added Twitter to the study, aside from Facebook and YouTube, an environment that anchors the processes of formation (and distortion) of public opinion because it gathers the most influential leaders of opinion in the country, such as journalists, analysts, intellectuals, politicians, and digital influencers of all the ideological spectrum. Our proposal was to observe different platforms with the goal of understanding the conformation of this digital ecosystem connected to popular narratives that support the idea that suggest that the system of Electoral Justice, the vote counting, and the election results are flawed and fraudulent.

We comprised in the range called “Distrust in the Electoral System” topics and sub-topics associated with fraud allegations in the electronic ballots, demand for paper ballots as a viable alternative to electronic ballots, accusations of one ballot supposedly computing votes to another candidate, illegitimate interference of national and international actors with the goal of manipulating the results, elections as a farce or as a plotted process in favor of political groups, and manipulation of the process of establishment and counting of votes. It is important to point out that the study does not consider critical positions that seek to improve

the security and efficacy of the electoral process as contesting actions that are harmful to the democratic health. It is a fine line, of course, but it is important to emphasize that the target of concern of this project are discussions and actions online that either flirt or are aligned with conspiracies, authoritarianism, and disinformation. They are, therefore, content of anti-systematical qualities.

Discourses related to the distrust in the electoral system, such as the thesis of fraud in the ballots and the support for paper ballots, tend to be more connected to the presidential elections in Brazil. That was different in the year of 2020, and these topics were brought to the municipal race as well. This can be explained by a few reasons, and one of them is the dislocation of the debate from the North American context to the Brazilian one. The same argument of electoral fraud and vulnerability of the ballots brought by Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, only a Federal Congressman then, was the main rhetoric of Donald Trump (Republicans) in 2020 in order to bring suspicion and deny the result that showed Joe Biden (Democrats) as a winner. At the same time, there was a hacker invasion in the TSE systems on November 15<sup>th</sup>, during the process of vote establishment in the first round of the municipal elections.

Relying on the idea that the Brazilian elections are rigged, the reinsertion of paper ballots as supplementation to the electronic ballots that are eligible to recounting was included in the mini electoral reform in 2015 by undertaking of Jair Bolsonaro<sup>1</sup> and considered unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (STF) in the year of 2018 through a preliminary decision<sup>2</sup>. In a brief preamble, it is important to mention that the return of paper ballots had already been approved by the National Congress in 2009 (Act N° 12034/2009), also through a mini electoral reform, which saw identification vote prints linked to the digital signature of the elector starting on the elections of 2014. In 2011, the Supreme Court conceded a

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<sup>1</sup> Available in:  
<https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/ministros-do-tse-criticam-voto-impresso-que-deve-custar-r25-bi/> Access in: 12/15/2020.

<sup>2</sup> Available in:  
<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/06/maioria-do-stf-suspende-voto-impresso-nas-eleicoes.shtml> Access in: 12/15/2020.

precautionary measure to suspend the use of paper ballots<sup>3</sup>. Since then, as seen in 2015, this topic returns as a bill and becomes a captive topic to electorate niches.

On September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Supreme Court ruled the merit of the measure and confirmed the unconstitutionality of the legal prevision established in the mini reform of 2015<sup>4</sup>. Since 2019, it is pending on the Congress the Proposal of Amendment to the Constitution (PEC) 135/19, nicknamed as *Paper Ballot PEC*, conducted by the Federal Congresswoman Bia Kicis (PSF-DF) with the same goal of using paper ballots so that auditing is possible. Until December 2020, the PEC had not still been contemplated by the plenary assembly<sup>5</sup>. This topic, as seen, is completely linked to institutional politics. Regarding this scenario, the present research seeks to understand the counterflow of messages about the distrust on the electoral system in social media platforms in the elections of 2020.

## METHODS

This second report investigates the set of publications about distrust in the electoral system published on social media platforms in the month of November 2020, in the context of municipal elections. Our goal is to understand the origins and the conversation networks that reverberate these narratives regarding the Brazilian municipal race. As such, we focused our study in three platforms that are central to the national public discussion, which are Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The period of analysis comprises the days between November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup>, which includes the days of voting of both the first and second rounds (November 15<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, respectively).

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<sup>3</sup> This history can be consulted on the website from TSE. Available in: <https://www.tse.jus.br/eleicoes/urna-eletronica/urna-eletronica>. Access in: 12/16/2020.

<sup>4</sup> Available in: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/09/14/stf-forma-maioria-a-favor-de-declarar-inconstitucional-possibilidade-de-voto-impresso.ghtml>. Access in: 12/15/2020.

<sup>5</sup> The pending process can be followed in the website of the Chamber. Available in: <https://www.camara.leg.br/propostas-legislativas/2220292>. Access in: 12/16/2020.

The data gathering is oriented by a linguistic structure of thematic characterization in the environment of FGV DAPP<sup>6</sup>. These linguistic rules – also applied in the [first part](#) of this cycle of study – are specific to the topic of electoral distrust and comprise several narratives and sub-narratives regarding: ballot fraud, paper ballots, electoral irregularities, equipment damage, illegitimate interference of national and international actors in the elections, imminence of a coup d'état, threats of electoral manipulation, and distrust in the process of voting establishment and counting.

The procedures of data gathering were conducted in consonance with the possibilities of each platform. On Facebook, the posts were gathered from verified profiles, as well as pages and public groups with more than 100 thousand followers monitored by the tool CrowdTangle. On YouTube, the research used the public API of the platform. On Twitter, the used tool was TrendsMap. At first, a basis of raw data in the Portuguese language was structured containing 10281987 posts originating from these three platforms.

In a second moment, it was necessary to exclude publications that mentioned the electoral system, its actors and institutions in an informative mode or in conversation on the electoral topics not related to the narratives of distrust, such as accountability, disclosing of candidacies, information on the process of voting, announcement of debates and ordinary movements of campaigns for City Hall and Municipal Chambers. We also excluded content related to fraud, but not on the elections, such as messages about financial and commercial scams. Finally, the corpus of the research gathered a total of 1426687 publications, most of the originating from Twitter, followed by Facebook and YouTube (Chart 1).

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<sup>6</sup> The creation of linguistic rules is property of FGV DAPP and this process can be consulted in the document “Not so #Simple: The Challenge of Monitoring Public Policies in the Social Media” (RUEDIGER et al., 2017)

**Chart 1 – Quantity of posts and final corpus (November 2020)**

<b>Collation by Platform</b>	<b>Brute Data</b>	<b>Filtered Data</b>
<b>Facebook</b>	326114	96001
<b>YouTube</b>	10573	862
<b>Twitter</b>	9945300	1330600
<b>Total</b>	10281987	1426687

Source: FGV DAPP

We defined two sections of analysis. The first one examines the variation of publications that tackle this topic during the electoral month of 2020. The second one focuses on the content of these publications. A set of tools from the field of digital research methods (ROGERS, 2017a; 2017b) was organized for each phase of the research and according to each platform. The tools and techniques used will be presented in the sections of analysis.

## RESULTS

### 1. Evolution of the Narratives in the Electoral Month

This first step of the analysis consists of quantifying the posts published on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter over the topics of distrust in the electoral system over the month of the municipal elections of 2020 in Brazil, between November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup>. This analysis seeks to measure which are the peaks in the period associated to the main political events. The results are presented separately by platforms of social media. As explained in the

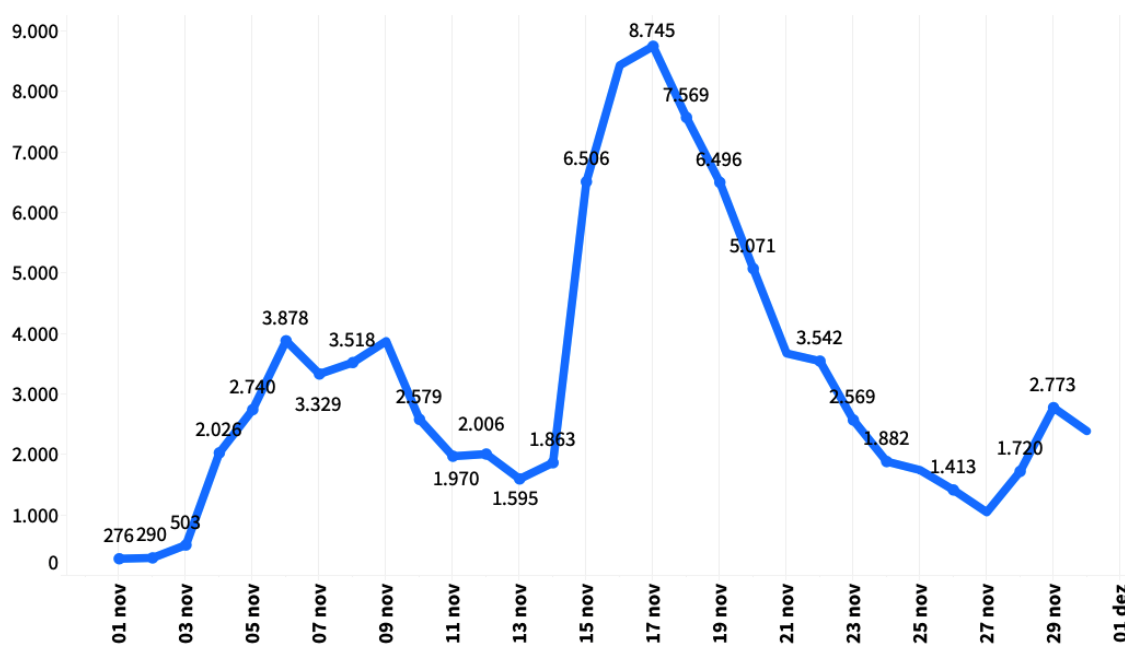
methodology section, the procedures of data gathering are distinct because they consider the possibilities of each platform. We extracted the data, therefore, through different ways using the tool CrowdTangle on Facebook, the API of YouTube, and TrendsMap on Twitter.

## Facebook

96001 posts about the topic of electoral distrust published on Facebook between November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup> of 2020 were identified. These posts were made by 12862 pages and public groups, as well as by profiles verified by the platform. The average of publications per day was 3200, and the average of posts by page, public group or verified profile was of 7.2.

**Graph 1 - Evolution of posts per Day**

Period of analysis: from November 1st to November 30th



Source: Facebook | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The distribution of posts per day points to three main moments in the debate. The first one occurred between November 4<sup>th</sup> and November 10<sup>th</sup>, and it was motivated by the controversy caused by Trump over the possibility of electoral fraud after the disclosing of the presidential elections' results of the United States. This period concentrated 21942 posts, which represents 22.8% of total gathered posts. Regarding the engagement, it is possible to note a similar periodization, even with a more significant drop after the 10<sup>th</sup>. Between the days of analysis, 2.4 million of interactions were observed, which represents 24.5% of the total engagement. Among the main actors, the highlights were groups, pages and verified profiles connected to the right-wing political field, which commented on the declarations of the former mayor of New York and Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, as well as of the Republican candidate himself.

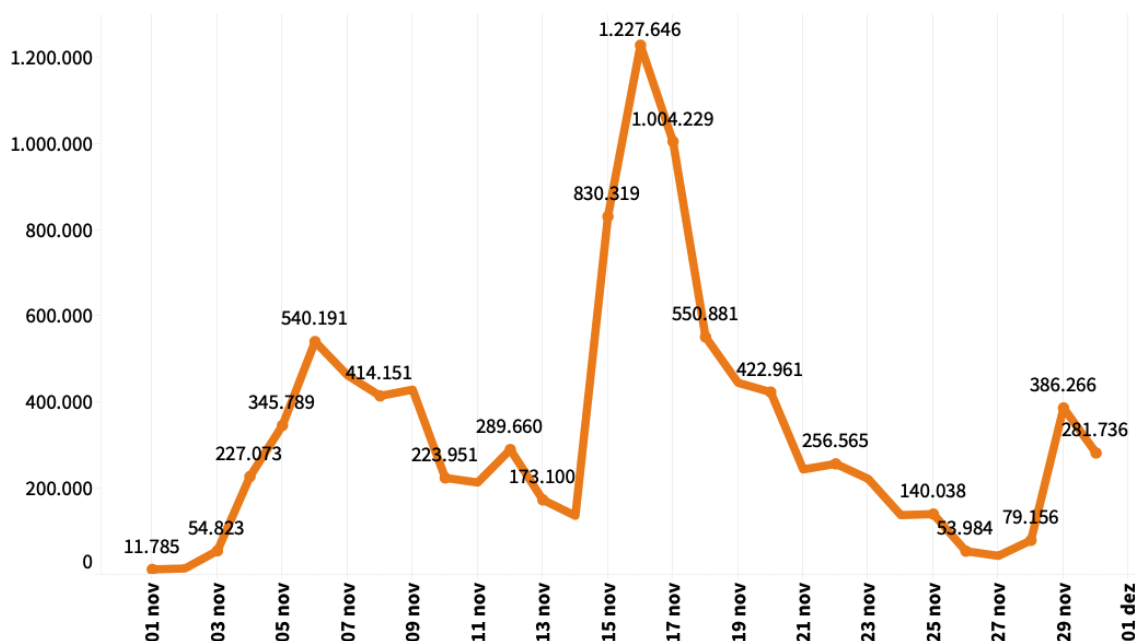
Eight among the 10 most shared links in this period were originated from YouTube channels that published videos about supposed evidence of electoral fraud in the hands of Trump. They commented on the accusations regarding the use of technology from the company Smartmatic (recurringly associated to electoral frauds in different countries) (RUEDIGER; GRASSI, 2020), and shared an edited video in which the President-Elect Joe Biden supposedly admitted the occurrence of fraud. Still among the main links, a highlight was the presence of a list organized by the blogger Allan dos Santos from the website *Terça Livre*, with 42 links of foreign pages with supposed evidence of fraud<sup>7</sup>. This list was shared by 50 groups and unified a thread originally posted on Twitter.

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<sup>7</sup> Discredited narrative. Available in: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/estadao-verifica/video-de-joe-biden-e-editado-para-parecer-que-ele-assume-fraude-eleitoral/>. Access in: 12/10/2020.

## Graph 2 - Evolution of the Engagement per Day

Period of analysis: from November 1<sup>st</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup>



Source: Facebook | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The second moment occurred between November 15<sup>th</sup> and November 20<sup>th</sup>, and comprised the first-round voting of the municipal elections of 2020 in Brazil. It was the period with most posts – 42818 (44.6%) – and interactions – 4480552 (45.4%) – motivated, especially, by the hacker attack suffered by Superior Electoral Court in the day of the voting, as well as by the problem presented in the totalization of votes – which led to significant delay in the disclosing of final results.

Just like in the first period, YouTube presented great relevance among the most shared links, occupying five of the ten first placements. The other links were divided between three websites of alternative media aligned with the government, *Terça Livre*, *Jornal da Cidade Online*, and *Terra Brasil Notícias*, and two websites of the great press, *G1* and *BBC*. It is interesting to note the appropriation of these websites according to the content of the headlines. Regarding *G1*, the news tackled the request from the President of TSE Luís Roberto



Barroso to the Federal Police to investigate the attacks suffered in the first round<sup>8</sup>, being shared on news websites with a lower degree of polarization, and left-wing groups, such as *Somos 70 por cento*, *União das Esquerdas* and *Pérolas dos Coxinhas*. Regarding the link from *BBC* that revealed the exemption of bid to the purchasing of the “supercomputer” of TSE that delayed the voting<sup>9</sup>, it was shared by pages, profiles and groups aligned with the government, such as *Carla Zambelli*, *Aliança pelo Brasil*, and *Bahia Conservadora*.

Finally, the third moment occurs between November 28<sup>th</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup>, days that comprise the voting of the second round. It is the least expressive among the analyzed periods, with 6878 posts (7.1%) and 747158 interactions (7.5%). Although it comprised the period of the second round of the municipal elections, the discussions in this period were not related to possible fraud in the race, but to prolongations of topics that were predominant in the two previous periods.

The instigation to the distrust in the Superior Electoral Court’s work is constantly observed, especially with criticisms to the Court President Luís Roberto Barroso (2020-2022). Three happenings motivate the peaks observed in the period: the first one was the declaration from President Jair Bolsonaro that there was fraud in the elections of the United States, followed by the defense of the implementation of paper ballots in Brazil. The main means of publicizing this declaration were websites of the traditional media vehicles, such as *Uol* and *Veja*, which highlighted that there was no evidence presented to sustain that information.

The second most relevant topic in the period was the news of a conjunct measure from the Federal Police among the Portuguese police to the arrestment of a 19-year-old hacker suspected of invading systems of the Superior Electoral Court<sup>10</sup>. This topic was mobilized, mainly, by right-wing groups, who used the age and the resources by the suspect to put in

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<sup>8</sup> Available in:

<https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2020/noticia/2020/11/16/presidente-do-tse-pede-a-pf-inquerito-para-apurar-ataque-cibernetico-no-dia-da-eleicao.ghtml>. Access in: 12/15/2020.

<sup>9</sup> Available in: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-54971298>. Access in: 12/15/2020.

<sup>10</sup> Available in:

<https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2020/noticia/2020/11/28/policia-federal-e-policia-portuguesa-prendem-hacker-suspeito-de-invadir-sistemas-do-tse.ghtml>. Access in 12/15/2020

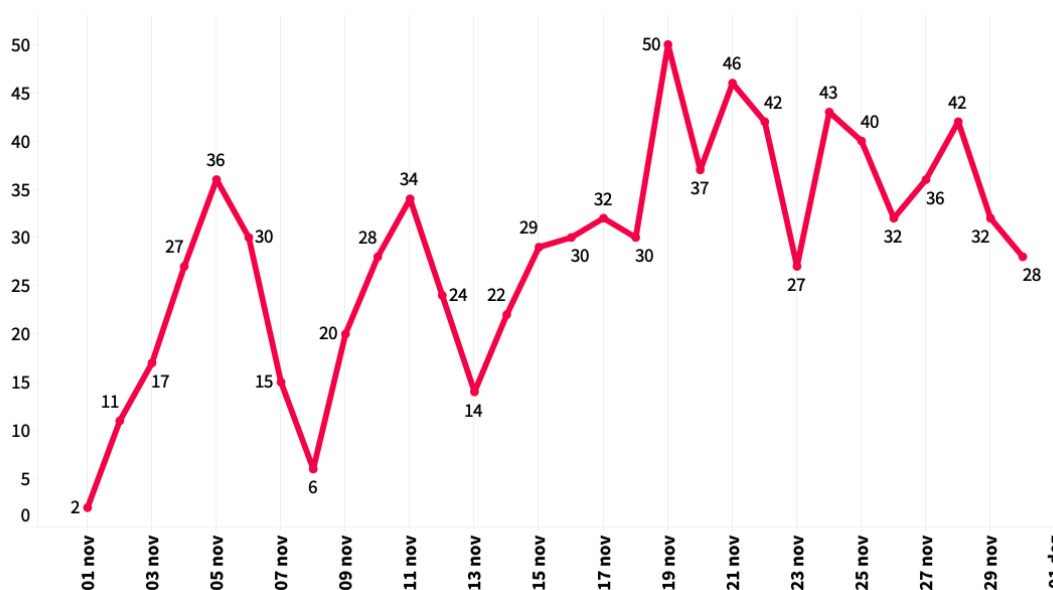
question the security of the electoral system. The third topic that motivated the increase of mentions were posts with registers of the protest against electoral fraud, which took place on November 28<sup>th</sup> on Avenida Paulista, São Paulo.

## Youtube

862 videos about ballot fraud and subjects related to the topic of distrust in the electoral system on YouTube during the electoral month of 2020. This group of data may be represented by the average of 28.7 videos per day, having the value 30 as medium, which shows some equivalence in the distribution of content throughout November on YouTube. In total, this collection of videos was published by 510 channels and added up to 18129202 views. There were videos being published in every day of the month, but the peaks are visible in the period that followed the day of voting in the United States, after the first round and in the second round of the municipal dispute in Brazil (Graph 3).

**Graph 3 – Evolution of Videos per Day**

Period of analysis: from November 1<sup>st</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup>



Source: YouTube | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

Specifically, 56 videos were published a day before, on November 3<sup>rd</sup> and the day after, which resulted in 1876606 views; 86 videos were published a day before, on November 15<sup>th</sup> and the day after, which led to 2895310 views; and 115 videos were published a day before, on November 29<sup>th</sup> and the day after, adding up to 888737 views.

In regards to supply, there was an increase of publications of videos related to the elections, with an accentuation on the second round. The days with higher volume of videos were November 19<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup>, in this specific order. 57 videos were published on the 19<sup>th</sup>, when the Superior Electoral Court communicated the creation of a commission that would cross the investigations on the cyberattack in the electoral system with the offensive actions against the ministers of the Supreme Court<sup>11</sup>. The second highest peak happened on the 28<sup>th</sup>, eve of the second round, when a hacker who was suspected of invading the system of the Superior Electoral Court was arrested in Portugal<sup>12</sup>. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, in turn, 51 videos were published – although there was no recent news about this topic, the Superior Electoral Court had emitted on the day before a statement that refuted fake news that claimed that cities had elections invalidated due to evidence of fraud in the ballots<sup>13</sup>. The facts and events here presented are with a purpose of context, not inference.

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<sup>11</sup> Available in:

<https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/2020/11/19/tse-tentara-cruzar-dados-de-ataque-ao-sistema-com-investigacao-sobre-fake-news> Access in: 12/07/2020.

<sup>12</sup> Available in:

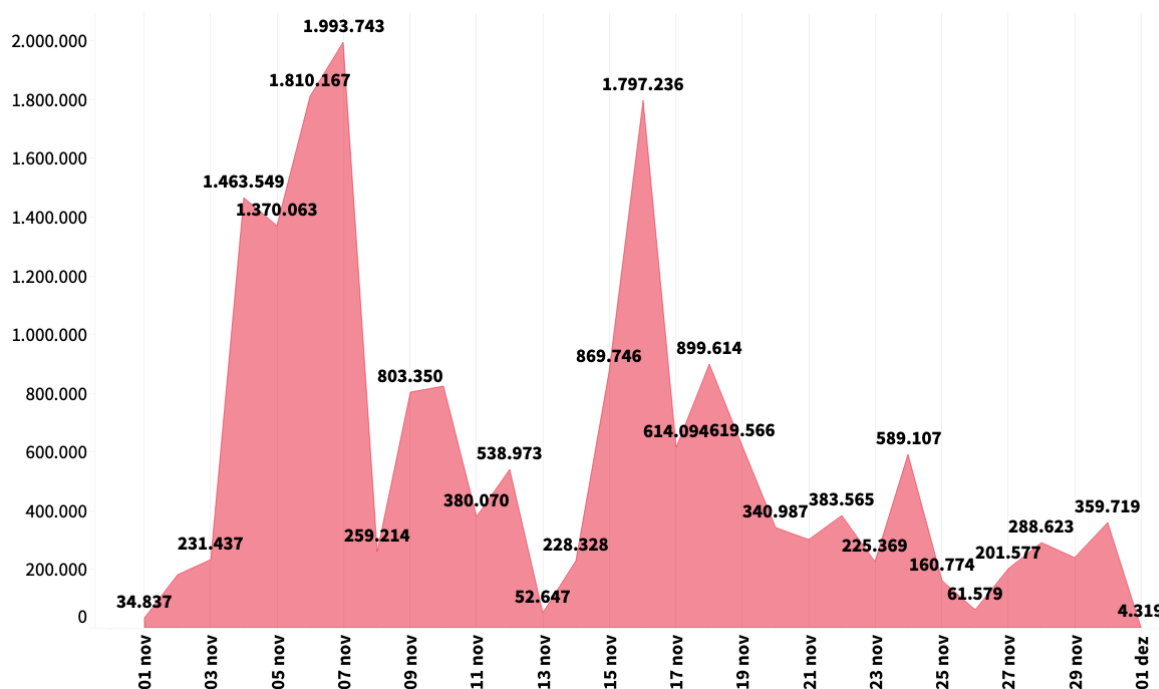
<https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2020/noticia/2020/11/28/policia-federal-e-policia-portuguesa-prendem-hacker-suspeito-de-invadir-sistemas-do-tse.ghtml>. Access in: 12/07/2020.

<sup>13</sup> Available in:

<https://www.tse.jus.br/imprensa/noticias-tse/2020/Novembro/nota-de-esclarecimento-sobre-noticias-falsas-a-respeito-de-anulacao-de-eleicoes>. Access in: 12/07/2020.

#### Graph 4 - Evolution of Views per Day

Period of analysis: November 1st to November 30th

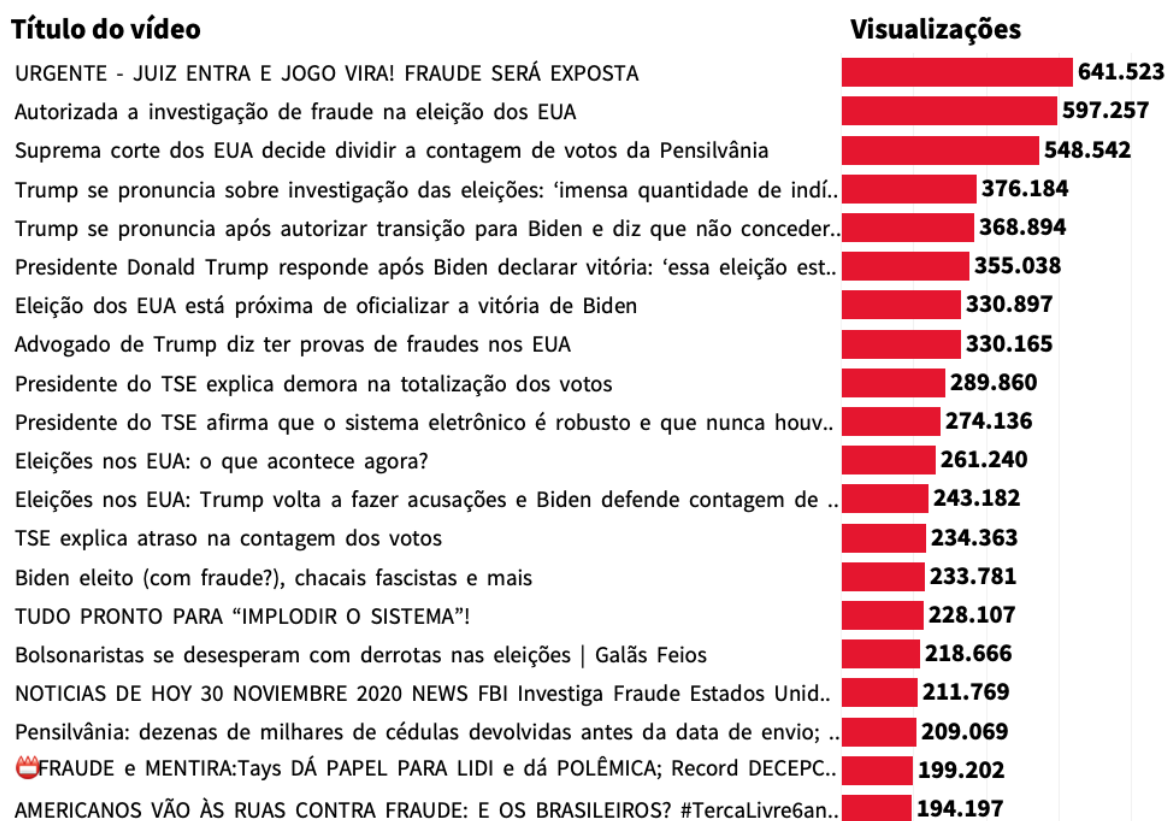


Source: YouTube | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

In regards to demand, the higher volume of views occurred in the beginning of November motivated by the tension created with the case of the United States, with a reduction in the second round. The peak did not occur precisely on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, but on the days that followed (especially the 7<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>, in this order), and also on the day following the first round (the 16<sup>th</sup>, more specifically). In YouTube's case, although the peak of posts had been higher on the second round, the videos that received more attention were related to the repercussion of the suspicion brought by Donald Trump over his defeat. This demonstrates the importance and influence that movements from far-right Americans have over conservative and ultra-conservatives in Brazil.

### Graph 5 – Main Videos on YouTube about Election Fraud

Period of analysis: from November 1<sup>st</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup>



Source: YouTube | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

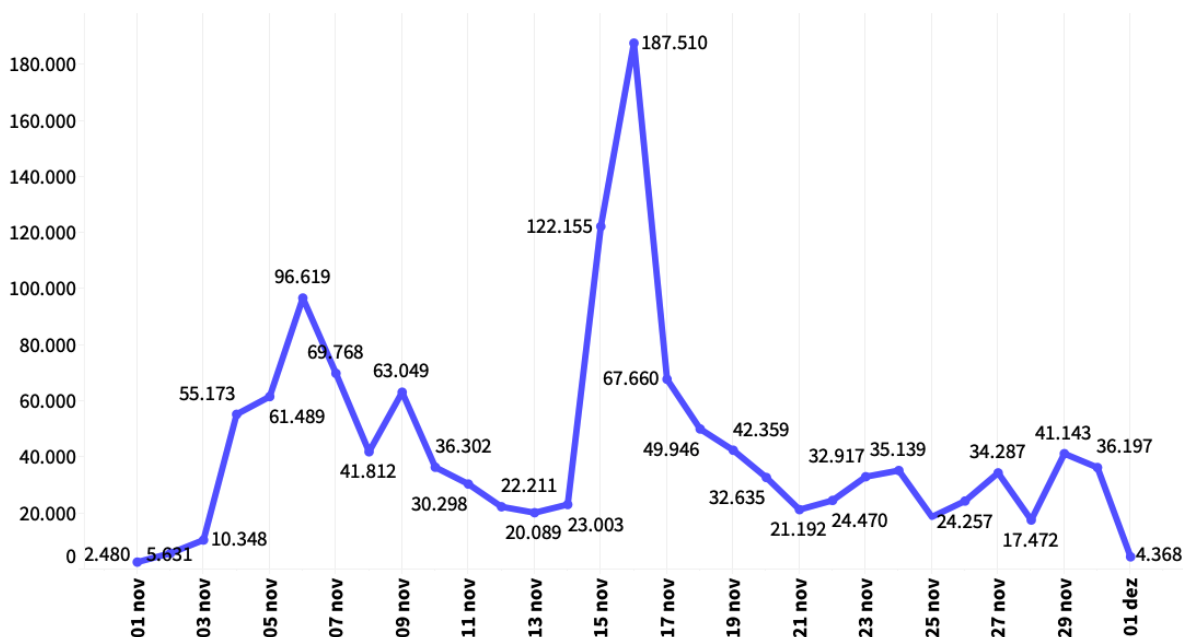
The most view videos were those with a biased perspective of the facts through Trumpian lenses, as well as an ecosystem of ultra-conservative channels, or content from the great press that very specifically frame the matter of electoral fraud, be it as news or as a debate. On the Graph 5, it is possible to tell the tone of some of this content, such as “Urgent, the Judge Enters and the Tables Turn! The Fraud Will Be Exposed” published by the channel *Questione-se*, followed by “The Investigation of Fraud in Ballots in the USA Elections is Authorized” from the channel *Os Pingos nos Is (Jovem Pan)* and “Supreme Court of the USA Decide to Divide the Counting of Votes in Pennsylvania” from the channel *Jornal da Record*. The examples illustrate this entanglement in this use of alternative, hyper-partisan, and the

great press channels as source of information related to the topic of distrust in the electoral system.

## Twitter

On Twitter, between the days of November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1330600 tweets were registered, from which around 65% were retweets. Also in this segment of the debate, the topic of electoral distrust is divided in three moments, and are associated to the presidential elections of the United States, as well as the first and second rounds of the municipal elections in Brazil – although, differently from Facebook and YouTube, the period referring to the elections in the second round did not increase the volume of the debate significantly on Twitter.

**Graph 6 – Evolution of Mentions on Twitter**  
Period of analysis: from November 1<sup>st</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup>



Source: Twitter | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

Throughout the month of November, the average of daily posts was of 44353. The concentration of posts appeared between November 4<sup>th</sup> and November 9<sup>th</sup>, and corresponded to 30% of the general debate, as well as the days 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, which alone added up to 25%. The 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> accumulated 6% of the mentions to the topic. The contents were mostly related to the discourses of fraud in the American elections, to the cyberattack suffered by the Superior Electoral Court, and to the establishment of results in the second round of the elections. However, it is worth noting that the entire period was marked by discourses that bring distrust in the Brazilian electoral system and contest the electoral results in the United States.

In the first moment, with the publicizing of a hacker invasion to the informatics system of the Superior Court of Justice(STJ), before the attack to the Superior Electoral Court, and the insistence in the allegations of fraud in the American elections, supporters of the Brazilian federal government raised questions to the inviolability and trustworthiness of the electoral processes, relying on the defense of paper ballots. On the other hand, a few profiles that reached relevant interactions exalted the Brazilian electoral system – comparatively to the American one – and considered the discourse of fraud and in favor of paper ballots to be strategic in order to discredit the next elections in the country.

The voting and establishment of votes in the first round of the municipal elections added to the event of cyberattack faced by the Superior Electoral Court generated an accentuated volume of mentions to the topic on Twitter, and gave momentum to the narrative that the electoral system is susceptible to fraud. The delay in the establishment, the poor performance of the E-Title and the impossibility of a manual physical counting of votes were pointed out as supposed evidence of fraud. Thus, the number of posts defending the use of paper ballots was amplified, and, besides that, the Superior Electoral Court and its president Luís Roberto Barroso are increasingly a target of criticism.

Lastly, the second round of the elections highlight the criticism to Barroso, to the Superior Electoral Court, and to the concentration of the institution throughout the realization, audit,

counting and inspection of the entire electoral process. In addition, a declaration from President Bolsonaro about the existence of fraud in the American elections kept the main thematic axis of the debated heated up. It is worth noting that the discourses of fraud and distrust in the electoral process in the United States overlapped with all of the events throughout the analyzed period; however, regarding the Brazilian elections, the concern lies more in the prospects for 2022.

## Discussion

This section had the goal of observing the evolution of the topics of distrust in the electoral system in the context of the Brazilian municipal elections of 2020 on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The analyzed corpus gathered 1426687 publications – 96001 being from Facebook, 862 from YouTube, and 1330600 from Twitter. Although the correspondent finding from each network had been treated differently, it is possible to point out some similarities in the standard of distribution of the posts in the three analyzed periods.

Although posts related to the topic had been registered throughout the month, the American elections and the first and second round of the Brazilian municipal elections boosted the digital debate, registering peaks of occurrences linked to such political events in the three analyzed platforms. In general, the elections and the establishment of votes in the United States registered more pulverized occurrences and interactions, reaching higher visibility between the days of November 3<sup>rd</sup> and November 10<sup>th</sup>, though remaining present throughout the month. The first round of municipal elections and the publicizing of the cyberattack suffered by the Superior Electoral Court generated the most accentuated peak of mentions to the topic, and gave opportunity to the narratives that the Brazilian electoral system is flawed and susceptible to fraud; content that defend the implementation of paper ballots also get momentum. The least expressive moment in occurrences and interactions among the three was during the second round of the elections, in which topics associated to the other two



moments were more present; in other words, the mobilization was related not to the events of the race itself, but to the overlapping of topics that were predominant in the two previous periods.

Lastly, even if the flow of the discourses and the oscillations of the debate had presented similar configurations in the analyzed networks, it is worth pointing out that a macro and multiplatform analysis represent a challenge that this study does not contemplate. The events and behaviors observed in the distinct platforms might help and reinforce the interpretations brought here based on the perception of the average public debate through these social media platforms; however, they are not exhaustive given the different uses and interfaces proper of each network.

## **2. The Content of the Narratives**

In the understanding of the evolution of the debate and the identification of the contextual milestones that motivated the peak of mentions to the discourse of distrust in the electoral system are important steps for a first exploration of the topic. A forward step consists in a methodological deepening that allows for a detailing about the structures and the discursive constructions related to each political group present in the debate.

In this section, this deepening will be made through two distinct methodologies: the first one – used for the analysis of posts collected on Facebook – will consist in a modeling of topics, a technique that seeks to identify discursive topics based on the occurrence of words; the second methodology will be used for the analysis on Twitter and YouTube, and will consist in an analysis of graphs, maps of interactions and relations between different actors/unities. In the analyzed case, the map of interactions of YouTube will be formed based on the system of recommendations generated by the algorithm of the platform through the seed-list of initially collected videos; regarding Twitter, the network will be constructed based on the retweets of

posts about the topic. The analysis of the graph of Twitter is complimented by an investigation about the use of hashtags in the period.

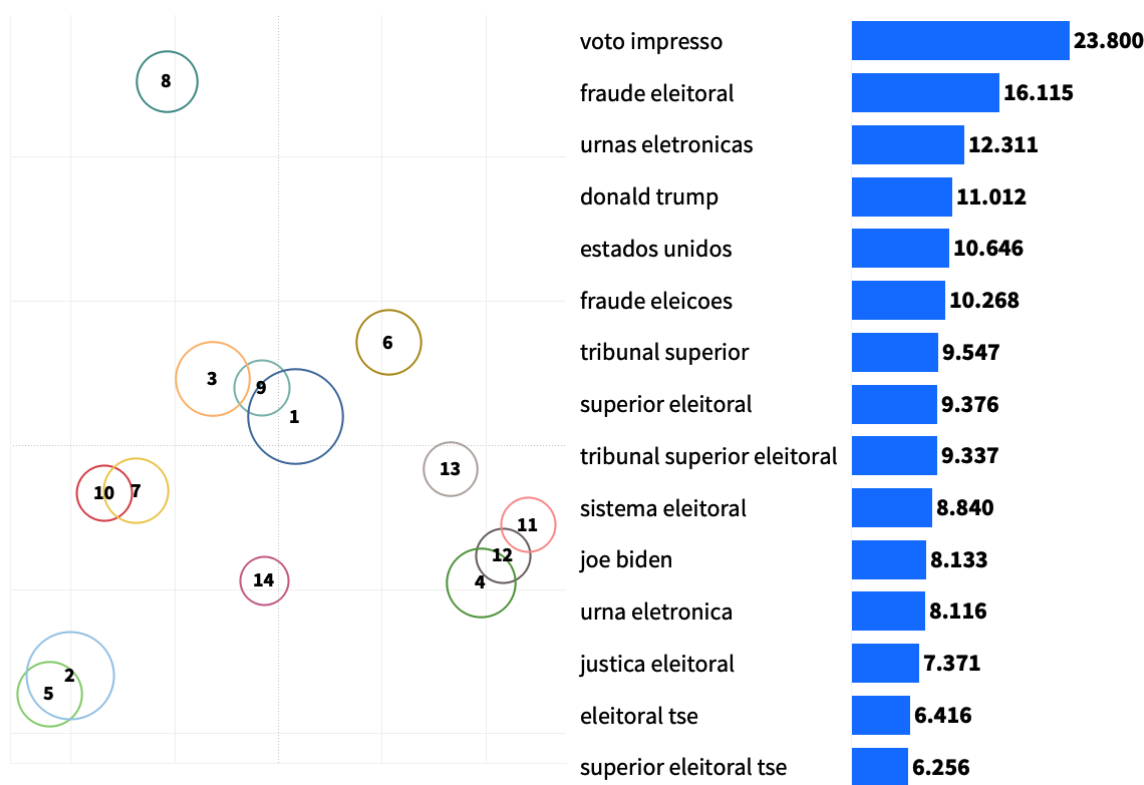
With this, a distinction between the involved groups and the declared discourses is sought, identifying how the previously mapped events are interpreted and elaborated as political narratives in the social media platforms.

### **Facebook: Modeling of Topics**

The 96001 posts on Facebook referring to the topic of electoral distrust present different textual elements, which vary from original texts from the posts to titles and links contained in the published images. The gathering of this material formed a corpus with more than 992 combinations of words, which were treated and analyzed according to the algorithm of the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic model (SIEVERT; SHIRLEY, 2014). The modeling of topics allows, through statistical techniques, for an analysis of an expressive collection of texts, identifying the main present terms in the analyzed universe and grouping them. Thus, an advance for the understanding of the discursive constructions present in the general collection is possible, going beyond the analysis of the texts and most shared links.

In the visualization below, each circle represents a collection of words (topic) that were group according to an LDA algorithm. The size of the circle represents the prevalence of the topic in relation to the general corpus of the study, and the distance between the circles indicates the higher or lower degree of association of the topics. The list of less frequent terms, in turn, includes their counting.

**Graph 7 – Spatial Distribution of Topics and 15 Most Frequent Terms in the Debate about Electoral Distrust**



Source: Facebook | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

Among the 10 most present terms in the database, mentions to three big collections are found, which align with the findings of the analysis of the evolution of the debate: 1) the accusations of electoral fraud in the elections of the United States; 2) criticisms and attacks to the performance of the Superior Electoral Court in the first round of the elections; 3) the demand for the implementation of the paper ballots in the elections of 2022 in Brazil.

The spatial distribution amplifies this thematic division, with topics more related to the American election (2, 5, 7, 10, 14 for example); a collection of topics that established a bridge between the elections of the United States, the electoral system of Brazil, and the debate about paper ballots (1, 3, 6, 9, for example); and a group of topics focused on criticisms and repercussions of the performance of the Electoral Justice, its institutions and actors, during

the electoral process (4, 11, 12, and 13, for example). The topic 8 also refers to questions of the American electoral process, but it is distant from the group for grouping a collection of closed texts and with a very specific vocabulary (mostly links and headlines in English).

Still regarding this list, the prevalence of the term “paper ballots” in comparison to “electoral fraud” is highlighted, suggesting that, despite the high engagement around the accusations of fraud in the USA elections, the narratives are not only criticisms. They also become propositional. This debate can be observed in the speech of authorities such as Jair Bolsonaro and his political supporters, but its predominance among the terms in the general group of analysis points out to its capillarity and dissemination among the publications in general.

**Graph 8 – Most Relevant Terms of the Topics Related to “Paper Ballots”**

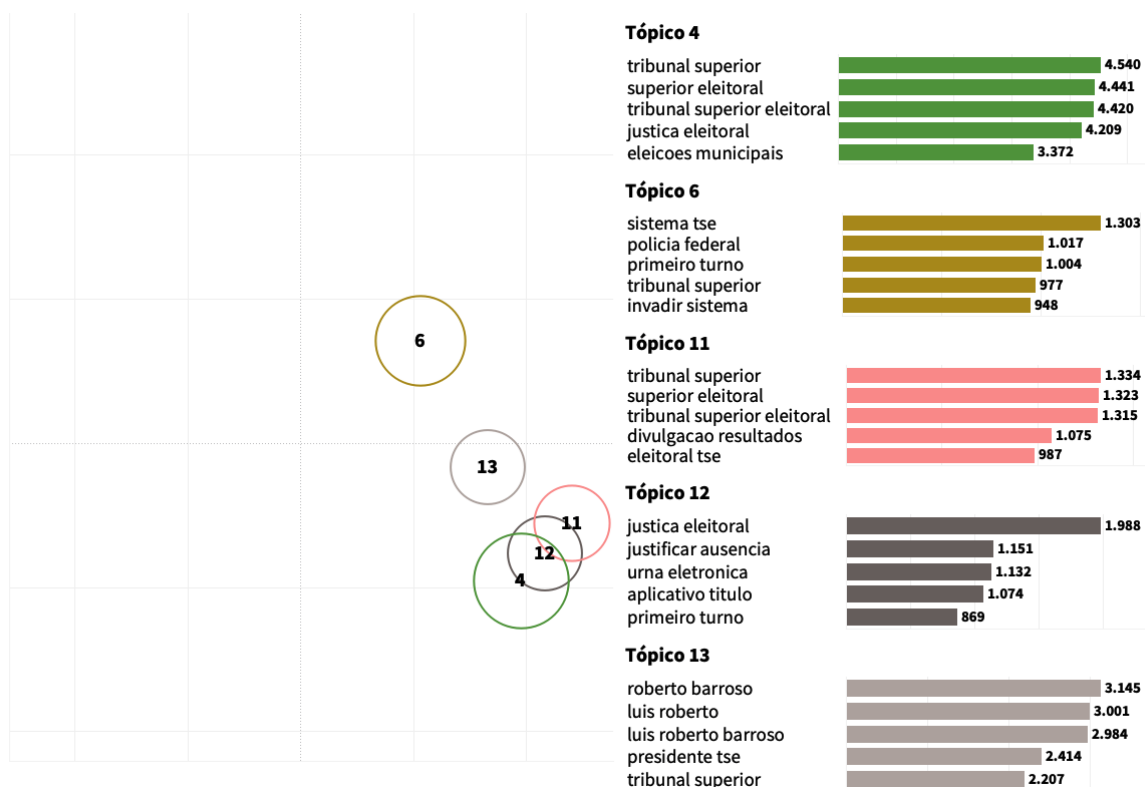


Source: Facebook | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The term “paper ballot” is distributed in topics of different quadrants, which indicates that it was mobilized in all of the three narratives and discourses predominant in this period. The main one (1) is focused exactly in the middle of the quadrants and congregates the most propositional discourse about the implementation of paper ballots in the Brazilian electoral system. The topic 10 appears in relation to “fraud elections”, “USA elections”, “fraud USA elections”; in other words, it establishes parallels between the accusations in the USA and the paper ballots in Brazil through the argument about the possibility of recounting of votes. The topics 6 and 11 incorporated the discussion about paper ballots in light to the attempt of a hack in the system of the Superior Electoral Court, and the problem of the vote counting in the first round.

Another aspect that is highlighted is centrality of the institutions and actors connected to the Electoral Justice among the most mentioned terms. There is an evident and justified relation between the criticisms to the involved actors and institutions; however, a discursive difference among the constructions about the electoral distrust that happened in 2018 is noted, which were marked by the narrative of collusion and the rigging of these institutions by left-wing parties, especially PT (GOMES, DOURADO, 2019). The observation of the topics that brought centrality to the Electoral Justice and its actors, this time, shows that the debate was established more distantly from this narrative connected to communism, keeping the conspiratorial aspect, but presenting itself as more relating to notes of transparency and security.

**Graph 9 – Most Relevant Terms of the Topics Related to “Superior Electoral Court”**



Source: Facebook | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The spatial distribution of the topics presents them majorly in the same quadrant, with great proximity. The detailing of the terms in each one of them reinforces this point, but also allows for a distinction among the tackled topics. The problem with the vote counting and the attempt of hack were also mentioned in the topics related to the term “Superior Electoral Court”. Other topics shed light to new narratives that endorsed the discourse of distrust in the electoral system during the municipal elections of 2020, such as the topic 12, which incorporated the matter of distrust tied with the information about the justification of vote in the app E-Title; as well as the topic 13, in which the president of the Superior Electoral Court Luís Roberto Barroso was among the terms with most relevance. The declarations from Barroso mocking the paper ballot system made him a preferential target to critics of the Brazilian electoral system.

In sum, it is possible to say that the municipal elections of 2020 were constituted in a very active period, and, possibly, in an initial milestone to a new moment of the debate about electoral distrust. Although the debate had decreased after the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, the supposed frauds in the USA, the flaws in the process of counting, as well as the attempts of hacking in the system of the Superior Electoral Court, gave new momentum to the new narratives about the subject. In general, the Court is the biggest target for criticisms now, with less presence of supposed influences from the left wing. The demand for paper ballots is strengthened, relying itself the flaws of the Superior Electoral Court, indicating its fragility and lack of security, and the elections of the USA, which are still seen as a model thanks to the possibility of recounting, despite being currently in the middle of a discussion of fraud themselves. The narrative, therefore, started even though there was no episode or evidence of fraud in the Brazilian municipal elections, sophistically anchored in adjacent events and gaining a propositional aspect with the strong demand for paper ballots.

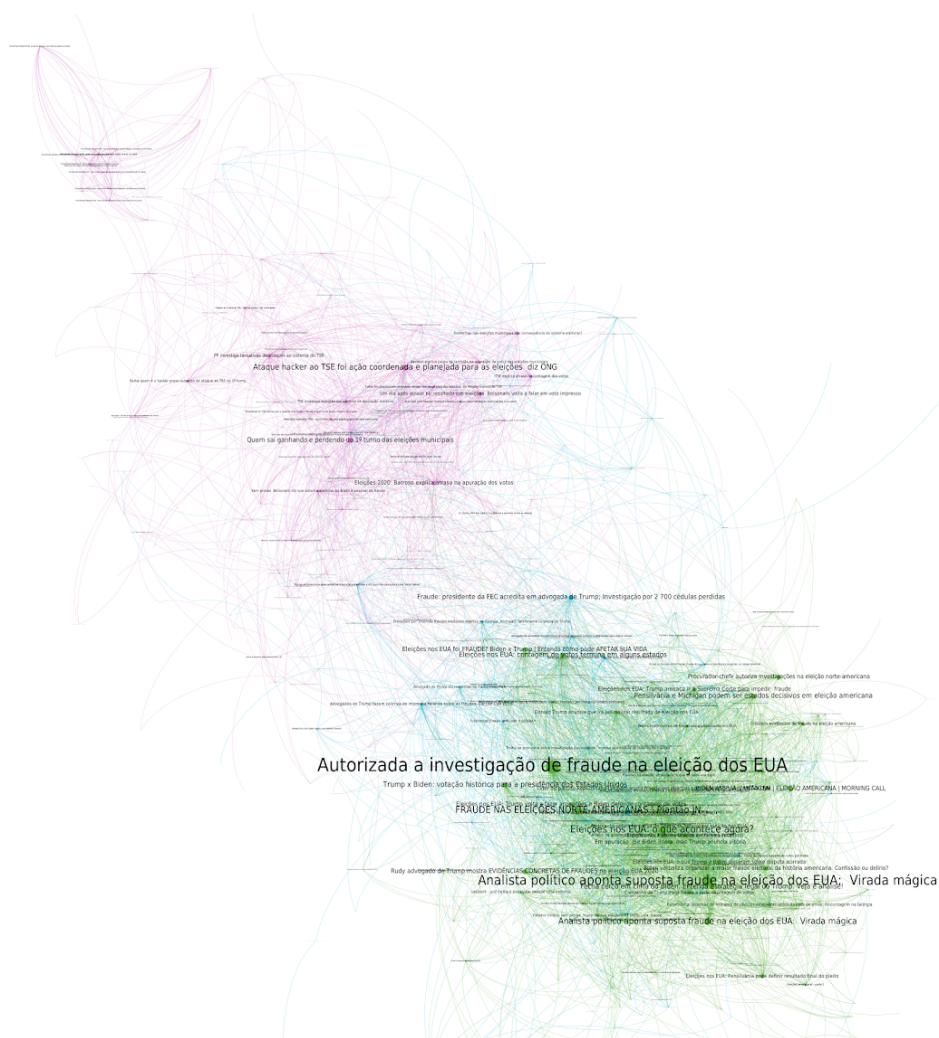
### **YouTube: System of Recommendations**

In this step, the proposal was to analyze how the system of recommendations of the 826 published videos on YouTube in the month of November of 2020 is configured, in the context of the municipal elections, regarding topics that involve distrust in the electoral system of Brazil. Through the script Video Network Module from the tool YouTube Data Tools, we sought to understand how these videos are inter-related and how they connect to each other inside specific networks. The analysis considers, in this sense, that there is a connection between video A to video B if video B is in the list of related videos of the video A.

Based on the quantity of participant channels and the volume of interactions of the published videos, the largest, most cohesive, and most influential cluster will be represented in green (30.3% of profiles and 54.6% of interactions). The pink is the second grouping of videos with better performance on YouTube (25.4% of profiles and 26.6% of interactions), albeit with half

the size and being positioned more distantly from the green group. Next, there is the blue cluster (15.7% of profiles and 18% of interactions), visibly imbricated with the green cluster. The overview of the clusters can be observed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 – The Clusters of the System of Video Recommendations on YouTube**



Source: YouTube | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The videos that might be considered references on YouTube for being related to others tackle the fraud allegations in the United States' elections. The 15 main videos in the system of recommendation are, in general, opinion reports about the establishment of the American

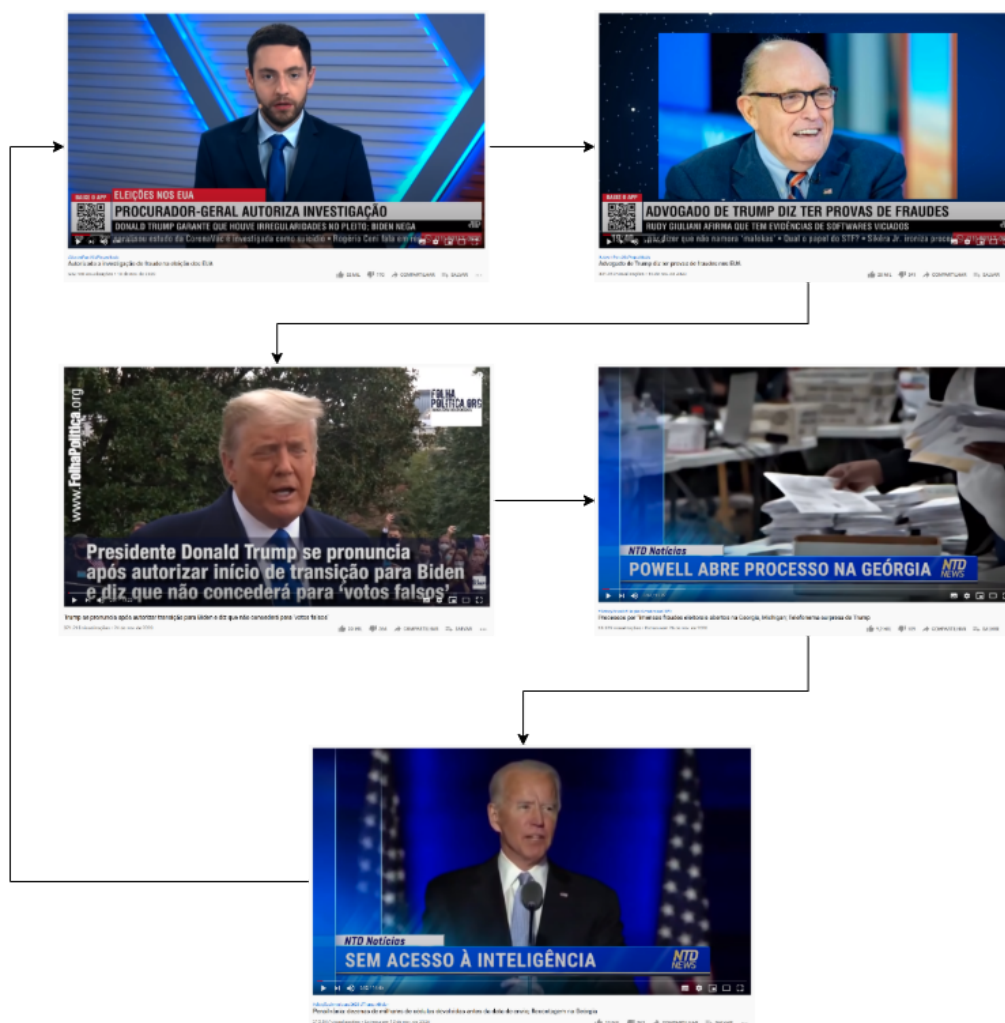


elections. Only two of them tackle facts tied to Brazilian municipal elections: the coordinated hack in the system of the Superior Electoral Court, published by *Olhar Digital*; and a balance of the first round, which mentions the episode of hacking and data stealing from the Electoral Justice, published by *BBC News Brasil*.

The recommendation system in the green cluster is observed through trails of videos from channels that range from the traditional media to Brazilian youtubers who openly support the reelection of Trump, as well as the thesis of electoral fraud in the American race. In this myriad, the videos range from journalistic reports, commentaries from political analysts in news shows, and content produced by youtubers who mostly reflect a right-wing conservative and skeptical bias. The most relevant video during the whole analyzed period, and consequently most central in the green cluster, is originated from the channel of the show *Os Pingos nos Is*, from *Rádio Jovem Pan*. The video in question is about a conversation between journalists and political commentators who sated suspicions and defended evidence of fraud in the process of counting of votes in the United States, as well as in Brazil, also considering Trump's attitude legitimate when he attacked the candor of the electoral process.

The participation of analysts who defend the thesis of electoral fraud in the USA are not only found on *Jovem Pan*. Among the most popular videos in the channel of recommendation of the green cluster is, for example, the panel of the show *Opinião do Ar*, from *RedeTV! Journalismo*, with a focus on the speech of a political analyst who believes that there are “strange things happening.” The statements are based on rumors or fake news spread on social media, treated by him as “evidence.” The picture of distrust is painted by the largest part of the remaining participants of the show, anchored by Luís Ernesto Lacombe. For context, it is possible, among other cases, to find videos from *Jornal da Band*, from the channel *Band News*, in which the same reporter does a live stream in front of a hotel in Florida where republicans were following the establishment of votes. In less proportion, in the case of journalistic vehicles, there are still videos that are electoral informative balances and that entered in the system of recommendation because they possibly tackled the same topic and attracted the same standard of audience.

**Picture 1 – Example of Trail of Popular Videos Present in the Green Cluster**



Source: YouTube | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The blue cluster is imbricated to the green one, and it is composed of videos that more explicitly frame the climate of suspicion over the establishment of votes in the United States. To the user who watches the most relevant video from this network – more especially “Fraud: President of FEC believes in Trump’s Lawyer; Investigation for 2700 lost ballots” published by the channel *NTD Português*, an affiliate of the TV company New Tang Dynasty in the Portuguese Language (founded by practitioners of the Chinese religious movement Falun

Gong) – is offered content such as “Paulo Figueiredo Brings the Latest Information about the Elections in America” (*Jornal da Cidade Online*), “Trump’s Lawyers Hold a Press Conference Talking about the Frauds. USA Elections 2020” (*Richard Sanchez*), and “Lawsuits over ‘Immense Electoral Frauds Open on Georgia, Michigan; Surprise Phone Call from Trump’” (again from the channel *NTD Português*). Among others, in this cluster there are still videos from the traditional media, such as from the channel *Os Pingos nos Is (Rádio Jovem Pan)* and *CNN Brasil*, in which they comment on the positioning from Donald Trump’s lawyer who claimed to have evidence of fraud that could invalidate the results, and that the American electoral system might be compared to the systems from Cuba and Venezuela.

Differently from the previous two, the pink cluster, in turn, shows to be more associated to the Brazilian municipal elections. It is found in this channel mainly videos related to the delay of the establishment of votes in the first round, and to the hack on the website from the Superior Electoral Court. On the top, there is the news report “Hack to the Superior Electoral Court Was Coordinated and Planned for these Elections, Say NGO”, from *Olhar Digital*, specialized in technology. In this sequence, there are videos such as “Who Wins and Who Loses in the First Round of the Municipal Elections” (*BBC News Brasil*); “2020 Elections: Barroso Explains the Delay in the Establishment of Votes” (*Band Jornalismo*); “One Day After the Delay of the Result of the Elections, Bolsonaro Resumes to Talk about Paper Ballots” (*Jornal da Record*); or “Federal Police Investigate Attempts of Hack in the System of the Superior Electoral Court” (*Jovem Pan News*). Other related videos are also from the traditional media, with the exception of a video from the conservative organization aligned with the right wing *Terça Livre TV*, with the title, “Americans Take the Streets Against Fraud: What about the Brazilians?”.

The graph formed by the system of recommendations of YouTube adds two important elements to the analysis on the construction of the discourses about electoral distrust in the period of the municipal elections made on Facebook. Firstly, the cross of the main discourses elaborated in both platforms give strength to the influence of the discussions in Brazil about the American elections, making it excessive in both platforms. Additionally, a more centrality of journalistic vehicles in the covering of the topic on YouTube is observed, which differs from

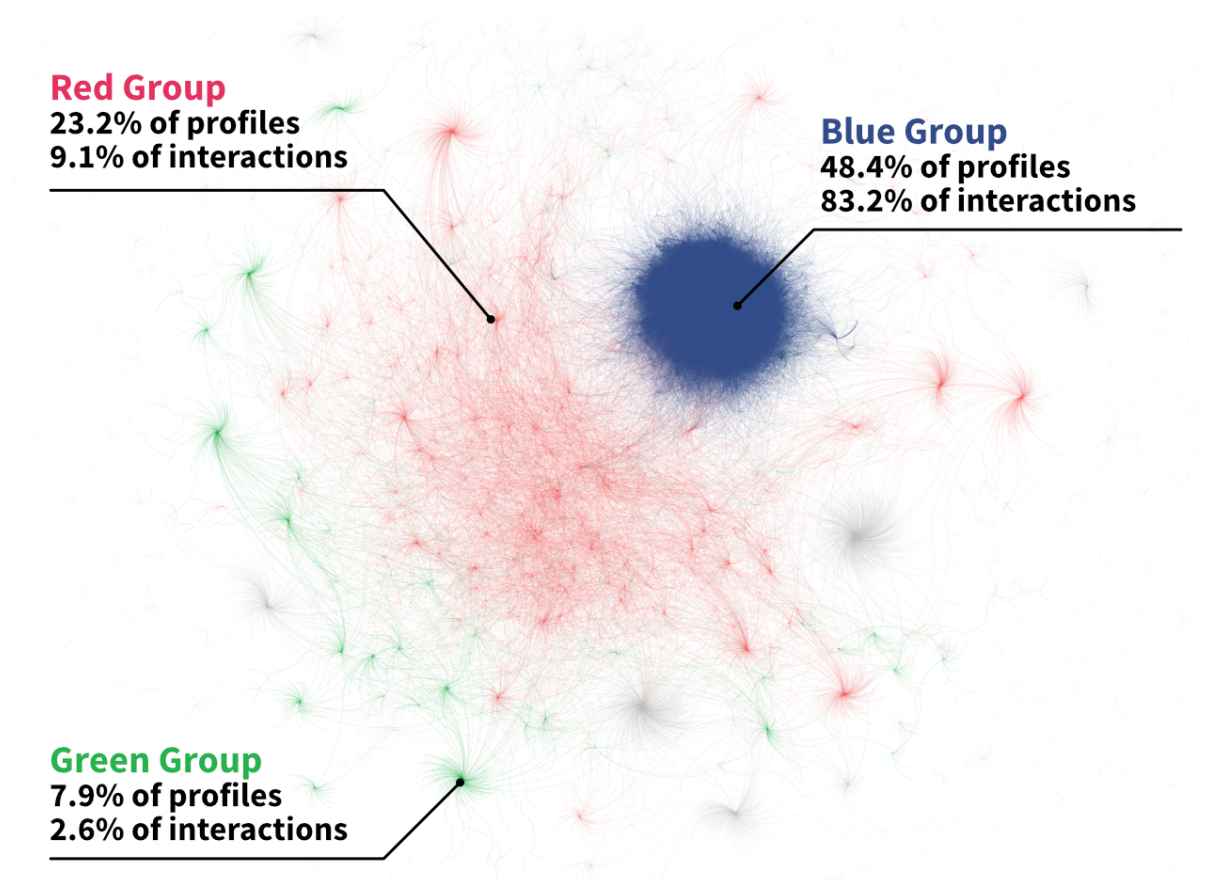
the standard observed on Facebook, in which actors connected to the institutional politics were constituted as main influencers of the debate. Although the analysis in this section focuses on the narratives, it is not possible to disassociate the discursive structuration of the types of issuers who, in conjunction, consolidate an informative ecosystem that feeds itself.

### **Twitter: Analysis of the Clusters**

The configuration of the networks and narratives forged in the environment of Twitter were systematized through a sample of profiles and total interactions about the topic of electoral distrust. In this way, taking into consideration the distinctive characteristics of the platform, we opted for the analysis of networks and engagement through hashtags, techniques that allow use to identify the dynamics of mobilization and coordination of individuals and groups, and understand the thematic flows that influence the public opinion. The following graph presents a more ample structure of the network, as well as established connections among profiles that get close to each other through retweets and networks of influence.

**Figure 2 – Map of Interactions about Fraud in the Elections**

Period of analysis: November 1st to December 1st



Source: Twitter | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The blue group, composed mainly of profiles aligned with the federal government, presented high activity and engagement, focusing 48% of the profiles and 83% of the total interactions. Among the main profiles are politicians, bloggers and influencers who support the government. The posts strongly commented on the cyberattack occurred on the day of the elections, questioned the inviolability of the process, the trustworthiness of the results of the municipal elections, and, even though they treated the American elections as fraudulent, defend the paper ballots in the country. In this basis, among the profiles that generated most engagement, are the Federal Congresspeople @carlazambelli38, @bolsonarosp, @biakicis,

@danielpmerj, @filipebarrost; the candidate to City Councilor @alanlopesrio; and the right-wing bloggers and influencers @leandroruschel, @allanldsantos, @bernardokuster2, @oswaldojor, @opropriolavo e @taoquei1. A strong cohesion in the discourses in juxtaposition among the ones who retweet and the ones retweeted is observed, a common standard presented by the basis aligned with President Bolsonaro.

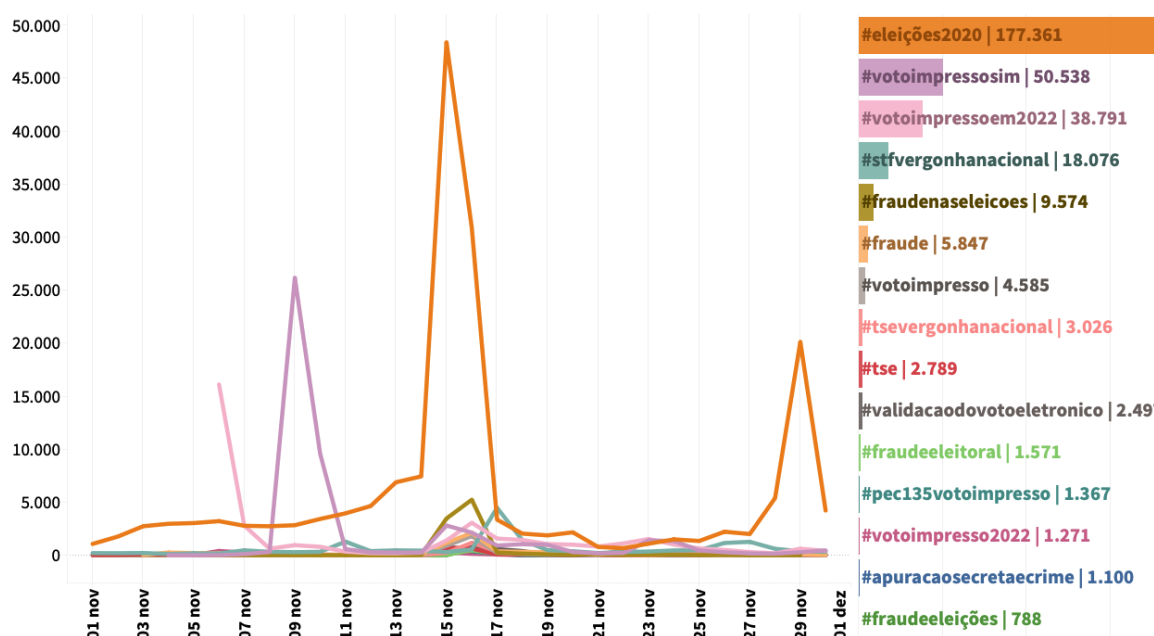
The profiles that do not participate in the basis aligned with the government add up to 31% of the total, and gather 11% of the interactions. The content of the posts from the red and green groups – composed mainly of profiles of the traditional press, journalists and influencers who criticize the government – argue, in general, that the defense for the paper ballots and the questioning to the candor of the electoral process are harmful to the democracy of the country. Furthermore, they point out similarities to the discourses and behaviors from Presidents Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, besides the incoherence in the discourses of politicians elected by the Brazilian electoral system that stimulate its distrust. Among the main profiles from the red group are the influencers @felipeneto, @marceloadnet, @guganoblat; profiles from the traditional press and journalists @folha, @g1, @uolnoticias, @miriamleita, @terra30 (also in this group is the profile @tsejusbr). It is worth noting that, differently from the blue group, there was not an expressive presence of political leaders captaining the discussion. The green group was constituted by profiles with reduced number of followers, but that gathered high engagement in posts composed of memes and viral tweets about the establishment of votes, mainly in the electoral dispute in the city of Sao Paulo, as well as mocks to the discourses of fraud and paper ballots.

In order to understand the distribution of the predominant topics and taking into consideration the platform's own characteristics, following next are the main hashtags mobilized in the debate about the elections and the electoral distrust on Twitter.



### Graph 10 – Evolution of Mentions of the Main Hashtags Associated with Fraud in the Elections

Period of analysis: November 1st to December 1st



Source: Twitter | Elaboration: FGV DAPP

The predominance in number and engagement of hashtags that motivate the distrust in the electoral system – being 90% in number, totaling 60% of the mentions – and the most generic terms gather 10% in number, and 40% of the mentions. In a chronological perspective, the hashtags #eleições2020 (2020 elections) and the ones that defend paper ballots – #votoimpressosim (yes for paper ballots) #votoimpressoem2022 (paper ballots in 2022) – are the first ones to reach relevant visibility, and although they began in the context of the elections and the establishment of votes in the United States, they overlapped the extension of the debate. The main hashtags mobilized in the debate depict its content besides the manner and efficiency connected to the capacity of certain actors/groups in the organization and amplification of the engagement. Under this perspective, the sample shows that the organization and coordination in the platform were much more efficient around the questioning of the candor of the electoral process. Although the hashtags also have the

function of giving visibility to a certain subject, in the perspective of the defense of the electoral system, there was no mobilization through engagement of hashtags. It is worth emphasizing that the engagement of hashtags attributes visibility that can be initiated through digital platforms, but produce trending topics that reach the public debate, and, at best, organize the collective action (OMENA et al., 2020).

## Discussion

In accordance to the findings about the discursive construction in the two other networks, Twitter presented, just like Facebook, high engagement related to the setbacks that happened in the Brazilian municipal elections. Just like in YouTube, the presence of vehicles of the traditional media and journalists is relevant, but it is possible to note differences regarding the framing of the topic by profiles grouped in the green and red clusters, with less space for the endorsement of conspiratorial narratives.

The analysis of hashtags on Twitter allows for the crossing of construction of arguments in favor of the paper ballot with periods of political mobilization for the boost of the topic. Focused on the days of the disclosing of the results of the elections in the United States, the mobilization was more concentrated on Facebook, where we observed the engagement to be more scattered overtime. Just like in the case of the issuers, the discursive construction in a context of coordinated mobilization also implies a series of differences, for example, with the narratives produced in the everyday informative consumption, thus being relevant to be analyzed in order to understand the phenomenon more widely.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that each of these networks present distinct characteristics, and that also implies very different standards of posts, argumentation, exposition, and interaction. The networks englobed by YouTube and Twitter, for example, are based on relations of distinct natures, one of them being centered in the algorithmic



recommendation, and the other being the actions of the users themselves. The analysis performed, therefore, seek to map the debate in each one of the networks, assuming that users have different experiences in each one of them, pointing to possible relations between platforms that might be indicative of the dynamics of dispute in the contemporary public sphere, at the same time it signals the need of new studies that will complement the findings of this publication.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study proposed to analyze the network of narratives that foster the sentiment of distrust in the electoral system in the context of the Brazilian municipal elections of 2020. We examined a corpus of 1426687 publications in platforms of social media – 96001 from Facebook, 862 from YouTube, and 1330600 from Twitter – that were gathered and filtered through structured linguistic rules in order to comprehend narratives and sub-narratives in this thematic spectrum. In this spectrum, there are content and messages regarding ballot fraud, vulnerability of the electronic ballots, electoral farce and manipulation, acute defense of paper ballots, among others. As we have emphasized, the research did not seek to cluster, for example, intolerable and uncivil political messages in comparison to those that tackle the subject through democratic ways, but, rather, it focused on the appropriation of content generated by the journalism, groups and users, of anti-systemic content – in this case, against the institution of the Electoral Justice, against the system of electronic ballots, and, at worse, against the elections themselves.

The analysis was divided in two levels. Initially, we studied the evolution of publications that encouraged or attracted an audience that sympathizes with the thesis of farce and electoral fraud in the month of November, when the first and second rounds of the elections took place. Next, we used different techniques in the analysis of the great mass of data to examine the content of these publications. Generally, it is urgent to highlight the large quantity of

posts – almost 1.5 million – in the period of 30 days that are used to reinforce a climate of online opinion inclined to electoral conspiracies. The largest volume of publications came from Twitter, followed by Facebook and YouTube. This does not mean that they are more accessible to the public through the microblog. If we take into consideration the digital interactions, which is inevitably parameterized through different measures, the videos published on YouTube were seen more than 18 million times, and publications on Facebook attracted 2.4 million in digital engagement, for example<sup>14</sup>. The main results are highlighted right at the beginning of this document, and at the end of each section.

We showed in the previous study (RUEDIGER, GRASSI, 2020) – which was restricted to Facebook and YouTube – published at the end of October of 2020, that the life of links that tackle the distrust in the electoral system is lasting in the digital environment. Publications that referred to the elections of 2020, therefore, were added to this context, expanding also the variety of harmful arguments and deceitful information that might be used in the path to 2022. This study, however, has unmistakable limitations. The main one is that we cannot guarantee that the identified volume represents the universe of publications about the topic of distrust in the electoral system, and that is for two reasons: the impossibility of assuring the tracking of everything that was published both by the digital platforms as well as by the linguistic rules used to guide the process of data extraction – in this last case, specific terms are added continuously in the process of online conversion; no matter how much we track, the movement might still occur after the structuration of the database.

The study did not contemplate the flow of messages on WhatsApp, which might be considered a limitation due to the importance of this app in the communicative process of Brazilians, and due to the fact that other content about this subject certainly scaped us. Another central point to highlight as limitations, and that might be converted as suggestion for future research, is the use of material from the great press as a link of the informative consumption oriented by the polarization and hyper-partisanship. As we have seen, media

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<sup>14</sup> On Twitter, we did not measure the interaction because TrendsMap brings only the total of publications.

may become a source of information when the subject is distrust in the electoral system through different ways: when scheduling a subject, when framing the news report through lenses that draw attention to the target audience (often times, a title that directly uses the words “fraud” and “ballots” is enough) or when welcoming shows and commentators who either give or openly defend conspiracy theories. Future studies about the topic of distrust in the electoral system might, therefore, directly look to the role that media related to digital channels has in the promotion of this narrative, as well as other approaches, such as characterizing the networks of actors that are used to electoral conspiracies, and distinguishing the networks of fake and automatized accounts that participate in this process. It is also promising to return, through different methodologies, to the discourses and content that involve the topics of distrust in the electoral system. Researchers might also add efforts to construct criteria that might characterize the hostile and anti-democratic bias present in the narratives of electoral fraud and manipulation.

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