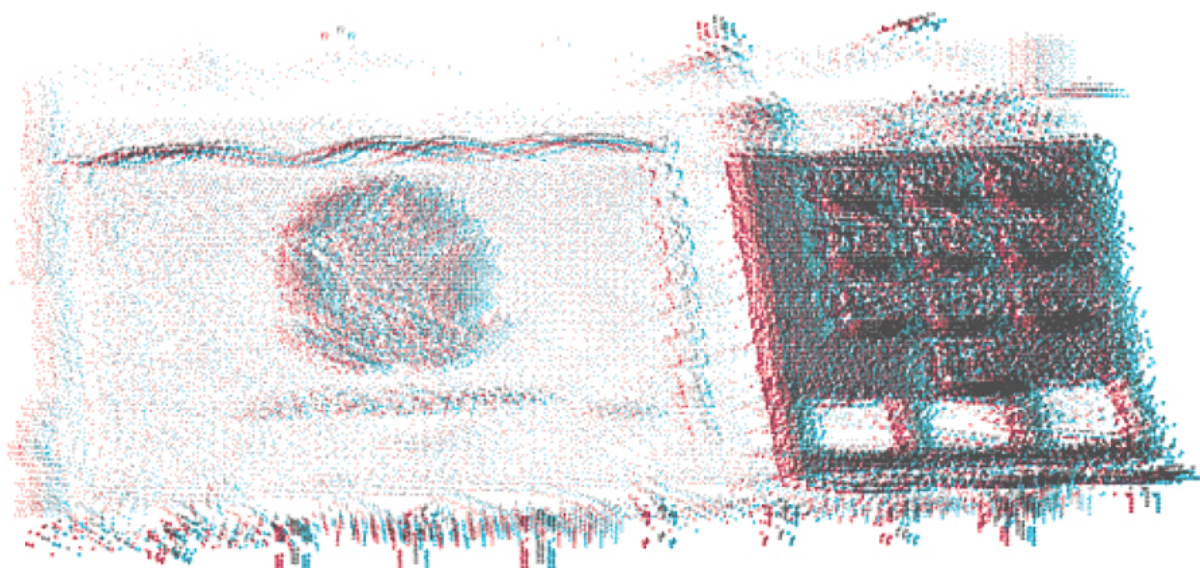


ONLINE DISINFORMATION AND ELECTIONS IN BRAZIL

The circulation of links about mistrust
in the Brazilian election system on
Facebook and YouTube (2014-2020)



Rio de Janeiro, October 2020

Support



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ONLINE DISINFORMATION AND ELECTIONS IN BRAZIL:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates the circulation of content that incites the public to believe in the existence of ballot fraud and election manipulation in Brazil on **Facebook** and **Youtube** between 2014 and 2020. The analysis is based on a corpus of 103,542 posts with links in Portuguese on both platforms. Our goal is to provide a documentation on the history of narratives that feed disinformation processes regarding the electoral system in Brazil. In general terms, **the research has shown that this discursive production follows the trend of peaks of circulation of URLs in election years, but persists during non-election years thanks to a verified potential of engagement.** Given the harmful effects of the publication of fraudulent statements, among which we highlight questioning the legitimacy of processes that are fundamental to the health of democracy, **this document focuses on digital engineering and electoral mistrust.** In this context, this study is part of contemporary discussion both inside and outside Brazil, which has mobilized multiple actors aligned with the maintenance of mechanisms that sustain democratic regimes, beliefs and institutions.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

- Posts and URLs on the alleged existence of ballot fraud and election manipulation in Brazil are becoming increasingly numerous on Facebook and YouTube. The circulation of publications about these topics has increased steadily in years between elections (2015, 2017 and 2019), in general election years (2014 and 2018), and in municipal election years (2016 and 2020).
- As expected, the frequency of messages about mistrust in the electoral system was exponentially higher in 2018, but 2020 has already become the second year with the most content of this type. Putting together the reports and suspicions of manipulation of vote counting by the electronic voting machines in 2018, we highlight links with calls to action, using official instruments of public consultation of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.
- In seven years, we identified 337,204 publications that raised suspicions about the legitimacy of Brazilian elections. Most of them, 335,169, were located on Facebook and added up to 16,107,846 interactions. The rest were 2,035 posts on YouTube, with 23,807,390 views. The YouTube statistic is more representative of the reach of these messages because it consists of everyone who watched the content, not only those who interacted with it through reactions, comments or shares. This demonstrates that the reach of the message on Facebook was higher than the data obtained through the statistics in this platform.

- Some of the most popular links that spread online are repeated in different years. The most shared link was published in 2016, but reached a higher level of engagement in 2019. A significant portion consists of hyperpartisanized channels and pages.
- In 2020, the most shared links were also republications of old content that is easily accessible online. That does not mean that there is no new content in the topics analyzed. In this municipal election year, the page Jornal da Cidade Online alone hosted six of the new links that are among those most frequently shared.

PROPOSITIONS

Considering the formation of polarization and intolerance patterns identified in the disinformation narratives, this study indicates the urgency of articulating actions at different levels of cooperation in order to insert different actors into a broad debate about ensuring the democratic instances in the digital sphere.

By offering a Brazilian perspective on the mechanisms of disinformation, this research expands the efforts to understand this phenomenon, indicating the need to disseminate the production of knowledge that supports robust reflections on the fight against polarizing and intolerant behaviors.

In addition, it indicates the urgency of the provision of greater openness by the platforms regarding data that might enable research on the engineering of disinformation. Despite the cooperation with the Electoral Court and greater openness to dialogue on the topic, the study demonstrates the need for research methodologies that offer contributions to allow the ongoing discussions to move from denunciation to accountability.

PRESENTATION

This first policy paper on disinformation, politics and the democratic process integrates the newly launched project **Digitalization and Democracy in Brazil**, an initiative of the Department of Public Policy Analysis of Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV DAPP) with the support of the German Embassy in Brazil. The project will run until 2022 and take advantage of FGV DAPP's experience with research applied to social networks and

expertise in public policy analysis developed over the past decade. The goal is to develop strategies to fight and understand the new and imminent challenges faced by the Brazilian democracy, which is now represented by an established scenario of digital extremism and its consequences for society. To that end, the project focuses first and foremost on the strengthening of democratic values and on the development of the necessary mechanisms and knowledge to promote a digital public debate that is consistent and fruitful. This first study is also launched in a cooperation between FGV DAPP and the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), seeking to improve the public debate on issues related to disinformation in electoral processes.

Over the next months, FGV DAPP will maintain the constant publication of new documents and research on the impact of disinformation on the national political scenario, touching on different spheres of the digital ecosystem and of the online debate on public policies in the country. The proposal also includes the development of research and analysis methodologies on social networks, as well as studies, workshops and webinars with the participation of important actors of the public discussion about the topic, focusing on fundamental issues for the maturity and improvement of democratic and institutional relations.

Narratives that encourage mistrust in the election system have been mobilized in recent times in Brazil and in other countries, such as the United States, and their effects have had an impact on the democratic processes, institutions and actors. In this context, this study will conduct a series of investigations, particularly seeking to understand the temporal and discursive evolution of the topic in the scope of the social media platforms. Our main motivation comes from the perception that the accusations and engagement in narratives that disqualify the national elections are some pieces of a wider framework of attacks against the institutions. Since this discursive strategy undermines trust in electoral processes and is persistent, it constitutes a central object of investigation in order to understand not only political and electoral behavior, but also the belief in democracy itself.

However, it is worth questioning whether digital political engagement around this issue can be harmful, since public contestation and inclusiveness are elements that preserve and strengthen democracy (DAHL, 1971). Due to the characteristics identified above, attention is paid to the way in which the contestation supports the potential effects of deceptive content and information fraud on democratic beliefs and values.

The following discussion is based on the mapping of the URLs that circulated the most in the platforms – originating from traditional media websites, blogs, and partisan or non-journalistic content portals – and attracted the most digital engagement in the period between January 2014 and October 2020 on Facebook and YouTube. According to our initial research findings, the contents that question the legitimacy of the electoral system generate a higher level of engagement and are more frequent over time. Although this and other findings do not present an optimistic perspective, in a first and more immediate moment, our study brings about long-term reflections and benefits. Among them is the political involvement and the insertion in public debates, which stimulate social learning that is fundamental to building an appreciation for democratic beliefs and norms.

Firstly, we will present the methodology used in the study according to the research standards developed by FVG DAPP, describing the tools, data collection procedures and the corpus analyzed. Secondly, we will contextualize and give a theoretical framework to the topic of mistrust in voting processes. The results are presented in three stages: the first part is dedicated to mapping the occurrence and circulation of links; the second part evaluates digital interactions and reach; and the third part focuses on the scenario of the 2020 municipal elections. In general, the findings are consistent with the perception that the circulation of publications on the targeted topic is increasing, and that these discourses have been more significant in terms of volume, reach and interactions.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigated the circulation of links related to narratives that disqualify the voting systems in Brazil, written in Portuguese between January 2014 and October 2020 on Facebook and YouTube, in order to examine in depth the formation of opinions that involve this type of mistrust. The research focused on a corpus of 103,542 publications containing URLs (101,509 from Facebook and 2,033 from YouTube) that circulated in general election years (2014 and 2018), municipal election years (2016 and 2020), and years with no elections (2015 and 2017).

The organization of the research corpus was determined by the availability of data on both platforms, as well as by the procedures of privacy protection and preference for aggregated data for analysis. For Facebook, the database of publications was composed of public pages and groups – that is, we did not take into account content shared by personal profiles or pages and groups with restricted access. On YouTube, the data collection was based on textual search for videos available on the platform which were still online at the time of historical data collection.

The links selected for the research (URLs present in the textual corpus of videos on YouTube and in posts on Facebook) come from any online sources, including websites of professional media outlets, blogs with journalistic content, portals of political parties, websites of public or private institutions, or general content portals, not necessarily with an emphasis on politics or elections.

The research was an effort to analyze Facebook and YouTube comparatively, as those are two of the largest networks in terms of active users in the country – 130 million and 120 million users, respectively¹. In addition, we sought to describe the circulation of misleading content about electronic voting machines, elections and the Electoral Court on platforms other than Twitter, which is the focus of most of the studies related to this topic as revealed by the literature review.

¹ Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2020>. Accessed on: 10/23/2020.

We collected data during the first two weeks of October 2020 by establishing linguistic structures for thematic categorization, as widely applied by FGV DAPP since 2014 (RUEDIGER et al., 2017). We organized research rules to identify narratives and semantic axes associated with the general object “ballot fraud”, which includes different sub-narratives, namely: questions about the electronic voting machines, demands for printed voting, allegations of electoral irregularities, equipment damage, illegitimate interference in the elections by national and international actors, and mistrust in the process of vote counting. The complete methodology can be accessed online ([on this link](#)).

We used the CrowdTangle to extract data from public Facebook pages and groups and the YouTube public API to obtain data and metadata from video channels. A series of procedures had to be performed in order to clean the databases, excluding content published in languages other than Portuguese, since the encoding originating from publications and metadata by language is quite limited on both platforms. It is important to highlight that the research focuses on an online event with anti-system and anti-establishment content, capable of promoting generalized misinformation, which we examined here based on what was propagated on social media via links (that is, websites). Communications that circulated on the platforms in video, image, text and audio format without containing URLs are not part of the corpus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The spread of messages questioning the legitimacy of national elections is an important piece of the problem of disinformation campaigns and circulation of fake news on social media platforms in Brazil (RUEDIGER, GRASSI, 2018; RUEDIGER et al., 2018). Posts whose messages directly attack the legitimacy of electronic voting machines and the electoral system are vocal not only because they are numerous, but also because they attract a large amount of interactions and shares in digital environments that are more popular and easier to access such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and in private

communication apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram. However, stories that support the argument of alleged farces in elections have been around for a while. These types of theses and arguments have been growing year after year, election after election, amplifying the climate of social animosity, institutional mistrust, radicalization of politics and, in more practical terms, generating confusion regarding casting votes on election day.

Voting days provide episodes that clarify where this can lead. On October 7, 2018, the first round of the latest race for the Presidency of the Republic in Brazil, a video published on Facebook and quickly disseminated online reported that one of the voting machines was autocompleting votes for the PT candidate, Fernando Haddad, when the number 1 was typed². The material disseminated contained footage (which is prohibited by law) of a vote being filled out in the voting machine and a narration swearing at it. The content was disproved by fact-checking projects supported by the analysis of technicians from the Regional Electoral Court of Minas Gerais (TRE-MG), which demonstrated indications of image manipulation, attesting to its falsehood. However, the video had already been shared by influential people, such as Senator Flávio Bolsonaro (Republicanos-RJ) and Congresswoman Joice Hasselmann (PSL-SP), and by popular pages, such as *Conservadores em Ação* and *República de Curitiba*, to the point that those more prone to believing in it resisted admitting the fact-checking, as can be seen in the comments of the tweet published by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE)³.

This was not an isolated case of fake news. In the same election, another very popular story among profiles and support pages for the then candidate Jair Bolsonaro (PSL) started to circulate, claiming that the number of votes for Fernando Haddad was supposedly greater than the number of voters in the overseas precinct of Japan⁴. On the voting day for the second round, October 28, 2018, another set of false information appeared on-line as if it represented indisputable facts. One of the most emblematic cases

² Fact-checking available at <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2018/10/07/verificamos-video-urna-autocompleta/>. Accessed on: 10/22/2020.

³ Available at <https://twitter.com/TSEjusbr/status/1048975386963587074>. Accessed on: 10/21/2020.

⁴ Fact-checking available at <https://g1.globo.com/fato-ou-fake/noticia/2018/10/08/e-fake-imagem-de-extrato-de-urna-em-que-votos-para-haddad-superam-numero-de-eleitores-aptos.ghtml>. Accessed on: 10/21/2020.

was the video in which a voter reported that the voting machine had annulled the vote he cast to Bolsonaro⁵. The polling station supervisor was assaulted when she tried to stop the man, who later went to prison, from filming the voting machine. Other cases of imprisonment for filming inside the polling station were recorded in the cities of João Pessoa (PB) and Florianópolis (SC), as well as in the Federal District.

Situations like these seem like an extended version of the concept of informational moral panic, conceived by the sociologist Stanley Cohen (1972), regarding public anxieties caused by the perceived threat to society's values and interests and triggered by mass media coverage (COHEN, 2011; DROTNER, 1999) – which can be revisited analogically for the consumption of information on social media. More than 20 years of internet use and improvement of digital technologies have expanded all sorts of mobilization and political transformation, including illiberal, anti-system and anti-democratic content, which has become more visible in the public sphere since 2016. The flood of content about a single subject indicates that improved techniques are used repeatedly to attract digital engagement through conflict, agitation, indignation, exaggeration and discontent, using memes, hashtags, waves of harassment and fake news, in a sort of piracy in the attention economy (boyd, 2017; MARWICK, LEWIS, 2017; WALSH, 2020) that caught democracies off guard (MILLER, VACCARI, 2020) between the second and third decades of the 21st century.

Although posts that raise suspicions regarding the electoral system have had a presence on the internet and been denied over the years, they have been monitored more systematically as part of the online misinformation scenario since 2018. A monitoring study by FGV DAPP showed that there were 1.1 million tweets with allegations of fraud in the electronic voting machines until the first round, based on publications demanding printed voting and reporting alleged errors when casting votes (RUEDIGER et al., 2018). Untrue stories of fraud in the electronic voting machines are among the fake news topics that usually attract the most digital engagement, surpassing popular narratives in the area of moral conservatism such as the “gay kit” and “gender ideology” (DOURADO, 2020; RUEDIGER et al., 2018). Between August and October in 2018, the three final months of the

⁵ Fact-checking available at <https://www.aosfatos.org/noticias/nao-e-verdade-que-urna-no-para-anulou-voto-para-jair-bolsonaro/>. Accessed on: 10/21/2020.

electoral campaign, 33 different narratives were identified and proven to be false by fact-checking projects, related to the assumption of fraud in the electronic virtual machines and/or the threat of a coup in Brazil (DOURADO et al., 2020).

For Recuero (2020), legitimation strategies work as a kind of authorization for the reproduction of discourses in digital environments, including those that integrate remarkably disinformative events, as shown in the examples above. When observing the context of disinformation on Twitter in the week of the second round of the 2018 elections, Recuero noticed that the most widespread posts about fraud in the voting machines were supported mostly by the personal authority of those who posted or shared the message, that is, in the personality of the discourse, combined with the general moralizing or rationalized framework of the topic (RECUERO, 2020, p. 401). Another similar survey also demonstrated that the electoral fraud argument was used as a political mobilization strategy in the 2018 election campaign, through pages and websites aligned with the ecosystem of the new right wing, but especially reproduced by opinion leaders as candidates, also leaning towards the far right, who encouraged their followers to be prepared to inspect irregularities on voting day (GOMES, DOURADO, 2019, p. 39).

In the context of electoral mistrust, the accusation of fraud in the voting machines can be considered the most recurrent approach to fake news – and fact-checked falsehoods – in the 2018 scenario. In addition, electoral mistrust was the topic that branched out into the most subthemes, 26 in total, all of which had in common the allegation that the adulterations were intended to harm Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy (CHAVES, BRAGA, 2019). The discourses mentioned in the fake news pieces about fraud in the voting machines indicate that the interested public, to some extent, is used to this type of content, since, in many cases, one must consider certain premises or make inferences to interpret the message (KEYS, BRAGA, 2019, p. 513). This is because the repertoire involving allegations of fraud in the voting machines and election manipulation has been adapted to different media and new political contexts since electronic voting began in Brazil, especially when it became 100% electronic in 2000.

Between 2014 and 2020, the year 2018 stands out because it represents the intensification of a process of political polarization that extrapolates partisan issues, becoming more actively mobilized by a perception of threat and by negative feelings towards politically defined social groups, an understanding included in the concept of affective polarization (SOUSA, 2019). However, this polarized, radicalized and intolerant online public discussion became more clear in the Brazilian social, political and digital communication scenario as of 2014, the initial mark of this study, when Dilma Rousseff (PT) was re-elected president by a margin of just 3.24% of the votes, running against then Senator Aécio Neves (PSDB). At a time when the conservative side began to dispute public attention on the internet more intensely (BRUGNAGO, CHAIA, 2015), antipetism (being opposed to the Workers' Party, PT) became an important variable for understanding the future political directions.

In light of this context, a study that analyzed the evolution of partisan sentiment between 2002 and 2014 in Brazil, showed the decline in people's satisfaction with parties, mostly the PT, indicating that antipetist voters are much more present in the social structure and that the groups that evaluated both PT and PSDB poorly showed less interest in politics (RIBEIRO, CARREIRÃO, BORBA, 2016). The argument that fraud in the voting machines and election manipulation are able to perpetuate PT's power was strengthened in this environment, marked by a tougher political dispute. Another monitoring illustrates that the thesis of fraud in the voting machines has been constructed since the beginning of the 2014 electoral race, until it became more visible online in the month of the election – in contrast, discourses that supported the impeachment started to stand out in October (ALVES, 2018).

The intention of this theoretical exercise was to offer a framework for the issues involved in the production of political, individual and collective knowledge, based on online disinformation campaigns, particularly in Brazil. This shows that issues related to the disqualification of the electoral system, associated with the intensification of the political dispute, are at the center of the context of mistrust that has threatened a public sphere based on democratic parameters in Brazil.

RESULTS

In this section, we will present and discuss the results of the study. The general objective was to identify patterns of distribution and frequency in the dissemination of links, and engagement around posts that discredit the voting system in digital environments, focusing on YouTube and Facebook between the years 2014 and 2020.

Part 1: Circulation of links

The frequency of posts containing links questioning the legitimacy of elections in Brazil has been increasingly fluctuating according to electoral events on Facebook and YouTube. The list of publications behaved similarly on these two social media platforms, with peaks in the general election years (2014 and 2018), slight increases in the years with no elections (2015, 2017 and 2019), and more significant growth in municipal election years (2016 and 2020).

The volume of publications confronting the electoral system increased exponentially during the presidential race in 2018, as predicted, but this trend continued throughout 2020 in the context of the upcoming municipal elections, although with a lower average of interactions⁶ per post, which will be explained in the next topic. Together, these two years represent half the posts on Facebook (48.2%) and on YouTube (45.3%). Similarly, 2018 and 2020 together add up to 50,931 posts with links, which represents half (49.1%) the corpus of 103,542 publications analyzed over these seven years.

In light of this, 2020 has become the second year with the most content about the topic in the period, even with only nine months of data. Until the first half of October 2020, the volume of posts with links about the topic represented 56.0% on Facebook and 72.4% on YouTube of the volume during the entire year of 2018. As shown by the figure below, there were at least 32,052 links published on Facebook during the election year of 2018, which represents 30.9% of the sample.

⁶ We define interactions as the set of engagement metrics in each platform; on Facebook, this means reactions, comments and shares; on YouTube, this means views, likes, dislikes and comments.

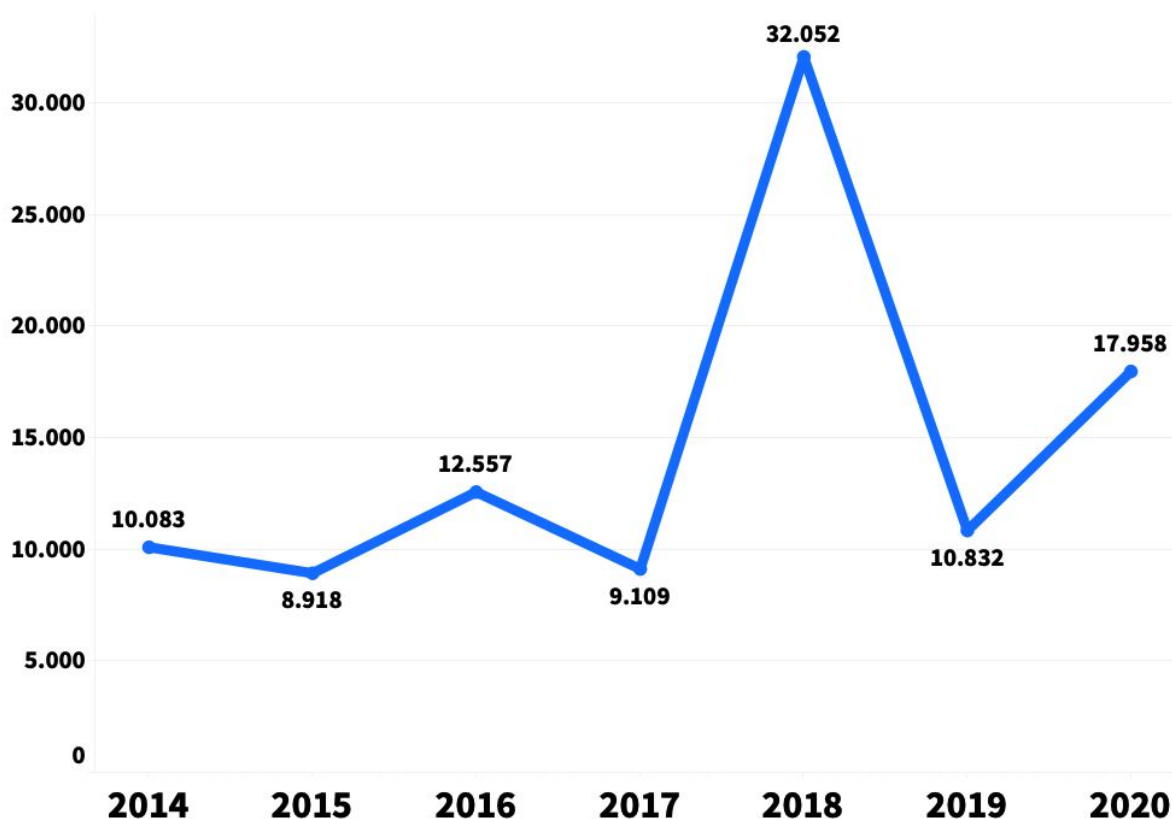
However, the epicenter of the circulation of electoral conspiracies was 2018. In the context of the last presidential race, fake news and misleading content that circulated containing websites as distribution vectors reiterated the suspicions about the voting machines. One such link claimed the Supreme Electoral Court handed the voting machine codes to Venezuela⁷, and another one stated that massive affiliation to PSL would be converted into votes for Jair Bolsonaro using a link from the party. There were also stories that resorted to defending military intervention. One of them, published on the page República de Curitiba, claimed that the Military were on hand to ensure the electoral result, an idea that became more publicly accepted in the context of the truck drivers' strike in the pre-election period⁸.

The topics and claims that incite the public to discredit the Brazilian electoral system continued to circulate shamelessly on social media platforms in 2020. They addressed different cases such as Jair Bolsonaro's claim of alleged fraud in the country's voting machines, a mysterious fire that destroyed electronic voting machines in Venezuela, the existence of documents that supposedly reveal that the Brazilian president was elected in the first round, and, among other examples, technicians who "expose" voting machines, to the despair of ministers of the Supreme Court. The subjects appear to be closely related to fraudulent information that circulated in previous years about the same topic and with events linked to the political reality. In March 2020, Jair Bolsonaro said that he did not win the 2018 race in the first round due to fraud, claiming that he would present evidence on that and that Brazil needed to "pass a secure system of vote counting".

⁷ Fact-checking available at <https://www.aosfatos.org/noticias/tse-nao-entregou-codigos-de-seguranca-das-urnas-venezuelanos-licitacao-citada-se-quer-ocorreu/>. Accessed on: 10/26/2020.

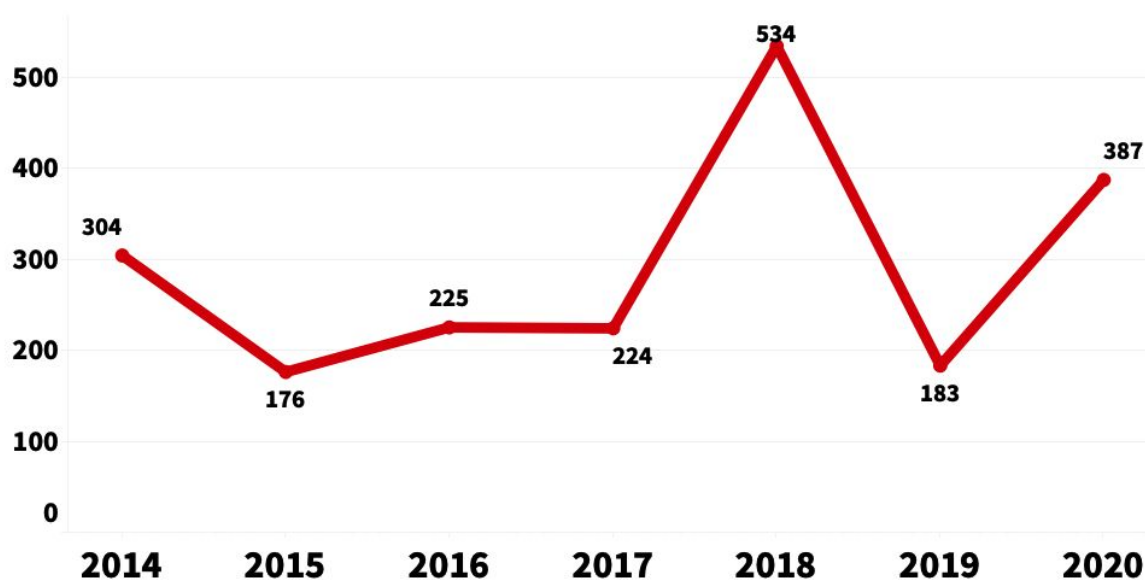
⁸ Available at <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-44244583>. Accessed on: 10/21/2020.

Figure 1 – Posts with links about electoral mistrust on Facebook



Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

Figure 2 – Videos about electoral mistrust on Youtube



Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

Regarding other years, 2014, our starting point, saw 10,387 links in circulation (10,083 thousand on Facebook and 304 on YouTube), representing 10% of the sample, which is a significant volume that reflects the scenario of political polarization, at that time between PT and PSDB. The content addressed the supposed expansion of communism in Latin America, with the PT as the main threat in Brazil. The year 2015 saw the lowest incidence of links about the target topics in the digital arenas, out of the seven years analyzed. Even so, 9,094 URLs circulated during that year (8,918 on Facebook and 176 on YouTube); the most popular ones contained alleged evidence that supposedly proved that electoral fraud happened in 2014.

In 2016, as the country turned to the debate around President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment process, 12,782 messages with links (12,557 on Facebook and 225 on YouTube) were disseminated on social media, discrediting the legitimacy of the elections. Little-known websites published information claiming that a hacker revealed how to tamper with voting machines in Rio de Janeiro, that the United States officially endorsed electoral fraud, or that a judge released evidence of violations of the electronic voting system, among other texts.

The volume was slightly lower in the following year of 2017, but the spread of these narratives did not slow down. There were 9,333 publications (9,109 on Facebook and 224 on YouTube), representing 9.0% of the sample, accessible on the internet and on social media platforms, including dossiers on alleged fraud in the voting machines and reports against the company Smartmatic. The list of the most popular URLs in that year included, in particular, a publication of the portal The Journal commenting on a supposed statement made by the then congressman Jair Bolsonaro about the presidential race of the following year: "If the voting machines are not replaced by printed voting, we will have Lula as president."

Figure 3 – Top 5 most shared links each year**2014**

EXCLUSIVO: Smartmatic recebeu R\$ 136 milhões para ROUBAR as Eleições Presidenciais em 2014	elodanotcia.wordpress.com	144
04 DE OUTUBRO, DIA NACIONAL DA DESOBEDIÊNCIA CIVIL ELEITORAL E DA LUTA CONTRA A CORRUPÇÃO. OPERAÇÃO DETER..	www.facebook.com	134
O TSE e a descoberta do programa de fraude nas urnas eletrônicas	jornalggn.com.br	112
Folha Política: Jornal da Band denuncia fraude nas urnas eletrônicas; assista	www.folhapolitica.org	112
OLAVO DE CARVALHO - GOLPE ELEITORAL DO PT - 26/10/2014	soundcloud.com	105

2015

Almir Quites: CONTO DA URNA ELETRÔNICA	almirquites.blogspot.com...	314
EUA podem endossar oficialmente tese de fraude eletrônica nas nossas eleições 2014	br.noticias.yahoo.com	251
Almir Quites: A URNA ELETRÔNICA É DESONESTA? SÓ ELA?	almirquites.blogspot.com...	130
04 DE OUTUBRO, DIA NACIONAL DA DESOBEDIÊNCIA CIVIL ELEITORAL E DA LUTA CONTRA A CORRUPÇÃO. OPERAÇÃO..	www.facebook.com	126
Hacker de 19 anos mostrou como fez para fraudar eleições no Rio de Janeiro	folhacentrosul.com.br	123

2016

FRAUDE NAS URNAS ELETRÔNICAS: Juiz divulga provas das fraudes e avisa "O cerco se fechou"	www.saudeenoticia.com	177
Ministro Dias Toffoli se torna réu por causa de urnas eletrônicas, em ação movida por ex-procurador	folhacentrosul.com.br	114
Especialistas explicam fraude nas urnas eletrônicas como pode?	relacaoplena.tk	110
Almir Quites: CONTO DA URNA ELETRÔNICA	almirquites.blogspot.com...	107
EUA passam a endossar oficialmente tese de fraude eletrônica nas nossas eleições 2014	br.noticias.yahoo.com	102

2017

Terremoto mundial, Smartmatic assume fraude nas URNAS ELETRÔNICAS	www.noticiasbrasilonline.c...	121
CONTO DA URNA ELETRÔNICA	almirquites.blogspot.com...	65
SUMÁRIO URNA ELETRÔNICA	almirquites.blogspot.com...	64
Jair Bolsonaro alerta: "Se as urnas não forem substituídas por voto impresso teremos Lula como Presidente em 2018"	www.thejornalbrasil.com.br	54
[COMPROVADO] ESCÂNDALO QUE TODO MUNDO SUSPEITAVA! ELEIÇÕES 2014 100% FRAUDADAS, LEIA...	www.newsatual.com	35

2018

TSE entregou códigos de segurança das urnas eletrônicas para a Venezuela e negou acesso para auditores brasileiros (..	www.jornaldacidadeonline..	782
Senado Federal - Programa e-Cidadania - Consulta Pública	www12.senado.leg.br	464
	www12.senado.leg.br/	199
PSL - Partido Social Liberal 17	www.pslnacional.org.br	576
forms.camara.leg.br	forms.camara.leg.br	228

2019

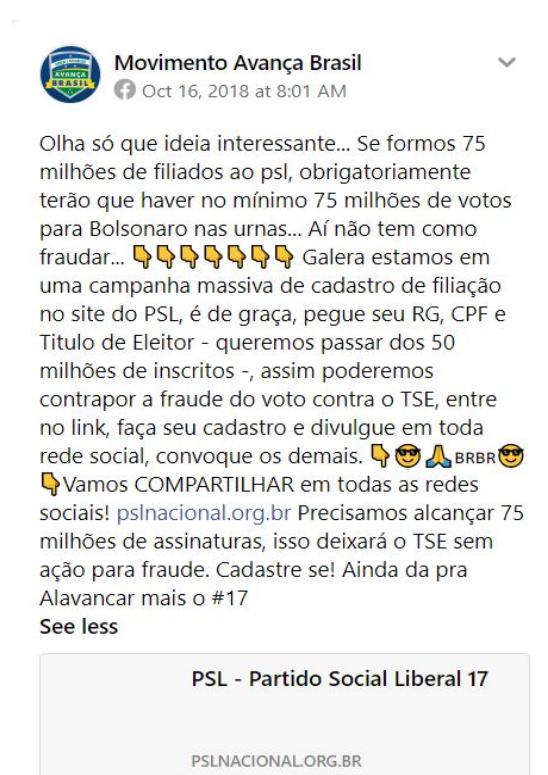
PF desmantela quadrilha que cobrava até R\$ 5 milhões para fraudar urnas eletrônicas	folhacentrosul.com.br	252
Países em que EXISTE justiça eleitoral: Brasil - SIM, Portugal - NÃO, EUA - NÃO, Inglaterra - NÃO, Itália - NÃO...	twitter.com	129
Bolsonaro quer lei que torne voto impresso obrigatório no Brasil	gazetainformante.wordpre..	34
TSE quase entregou códigos de segurança das urnas eletrônicas para venezuelanos e negou acesso para auditores brasileiros, s..	www.jornaldacidadeonline..	22
MAIS IMPORTANTE QUE AS ELEIÇÕES É A URNA ELETRÔNICA BRASILEIRA	almirquites.blogspot.com	17

Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

The year 2018 saw a significant increase in discursive disputes, as described above. On Facebook, unlike what happened in other years when the major links were alleged reports and information about the potential manipulation of the vote count in the electronic voting machines, in 2018, the highlights were links with a call to action by the supporters of the then candidate for the presidency for the PSL, Jair Bolsonaro. Official public consultation instruments of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies were shared by different groups supporting his candidacy in order to coordinate actions to defend the

proposals presented in his campaign, particularly the consultation about the proposal to enable printed voting in 100% of electronic voting machines. The narrative of fraud in the electronic voting machines was also mobilized together with a strategy to attract affiliates for the PSL. A text, which was accompanied by the official PSL website, encouraged the affiliation into the party as a way to avoid possible manipulation of the vote count in the electronic voting machines:

Image 1 – Post example



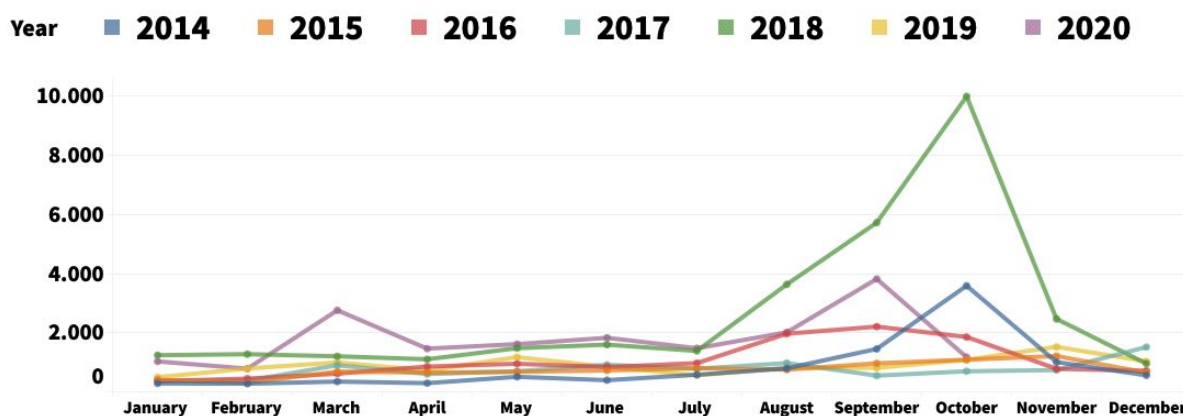
Source: Facebook

In 2019, there was a decrease in the volume of messages about the target topic. This could be related to Jair Bolsonaro's victory in the 2018 elections, since, at least since 2017, his support group became the major group disseminating information against the legitimacy of electronic voting machines. Still, the debate remained based on the publication of links that were among the most shared in past years. In addition, there were links indicating the

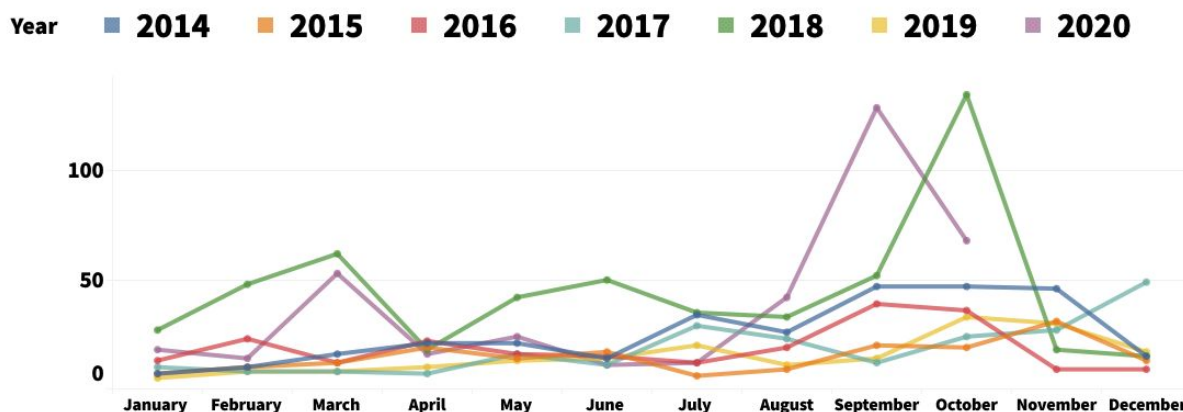
construction of a broader narrative of mistrust in the electoral system, such as a tweet questioning the existence and the efficiency of the Electoral Court in Brazil.

In general, Facebook saw a predominance of links to news websites, particularly hyper-partisan channels such as *Folha Política*, *Folha Centro Sul*, *Blog Almir Quites*, *The Journal Brasil* and *Jornal da Cidade Online*. As we have observed, the major links focused on alleged complaints about the vulnerability of the voting machines based on police reports, specialist opinions, and actions taken by the Judiciary Branch. On YouTube, the links mentioned in videos about this topic contained mostly references to the Supreme Electoral Court's social network profiles and to addresses of profiles of those channels on other networks. This pattern established a distinct informative dynamic in which the links were used to support the content published in the videos. The analysis of the 2020 data will be presented in detail in the third section of this study.

Figure 4 – Evolution of posts per month on Facebook



Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

Figure 5 – Evolution of posts per month on Youtube

Source: Youtube | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

Another characteristic is that the months with the highest concentration of posts with links were the same on Facebook and YouTube in all election years, whether for general or municipal elections, with an increase between June and July and peaks between September and October. Three aspects stood out. Firstly, the volume of posts on YouTube in the month of September 2020 was almost equal to the volume in October 2018. Secondly, there was a more constant, low-frequency behavior with no significant peak in 2016, the least relevant election year on the two social media platforms.

Thirdly, there were peaks in March 2020 on Facebook, and on YouTube, in 2018 and 2020. Starting with the current year, an association can be made with the claim made by President Jair Bolsonaro that if there had been no fraud, he could have been elected in a single round. In March 2018, a professor at Unicamp revealed the existence of security flaws in the electronic voting system in a communication with the Federal Senate. Material coming from the official Senate website was commented about in new right-wing websites. Lastly, in the years between elections, the frequency of posts proved to be more stable on Facebook, without significant increases and with clearer fluctuations on YouTube.

Part 2: Digital interactions and reach

As seen above, in both general and municipal election years, it was possible to observe greater volumes of interactions and reach⁹ in posts related to the target topic. However, it stands out that there was a dissemination of these contents in years without elections, and that they show an increasing trend in the period analyzed. This means that, even though there were some decreases over the years, the pattern observed shows the general and progressive increase in interactions.

The variation in the volume of interactions and reach over the years on Facebook and YouTube follows the trend of the circulation of links, which evidences that this is an oscillation in the debate itself and not a particular behavior present in either platform. In general, the election years concentrate peaks of interactions with these contents over the months of September and October, when the campaigns and voting take place. Non-electoral years, on the other hand, present a stable pattern in terms of occurrence and engagement. In the period between January 2014 and October 2020, 16,107,846 interactions were recorded on Facebook and 23,807,390 views were recorded on YouTube.

Once again, we highlight the exceptionality of 2018, which represented 6,609,658 (41%) of the total interactions on Facebook and 12,391,949 (52%) of the total views on YouTube. However, even though the volume of occurrence of links about the target topic was concentrated in the years 2018 and 2020, the measures of engagement and reach were more significant in 2017 and 2018. The year 2017 accumulated 2,007,303 (12.5%) interactions on Facebook and 3,613,910 (15%) views on YouTube. Although 2017 was not an election year, contrary to the lower numbers expected during such years, it is possible to assume that the high numbers seen in that year provided a favorable environment for the spread and adherence to the topic in 2018. In addition, the year 2020 has shown a drop in interactions and reach on both platforms, representing 1,514,885 (9%) of the interactions on Facebook and 1,808,784 (7.5%) of the views on YouTube, a low number,

⁹ Available at

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/04/um-mes-apos-acusacao-bolsonaro-nao-apresenta-nenhuma-suposta-prova-de-fraude-nas-eleicoes.shtml>. Accessed on: 10/19/2020.

even considering only the data collected until October. The implications of this will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Figure 6 – Links with the most engagement on Facebook


















Title	Channel/Domain		
PF desmantela quadrilha que cobrava até R\$ 5 milhões para fraudar urnas eletrônicas	folhacentrosul.com.br		102.458
TSE entregou códigos de segurança das urnas eletrônicas para a Venezuela e negou acesso para auditores brasileiros (veja o ..	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com...		94.947
Atacar o Judiciário é atacar a democracia, diz Toffoli	noticias.uol.com.br		65.666
Urna com problema tumultua sessão eleitoral em Curitiba	paranaportal.uol.com.br		49.156
Filho de Bolsonaro pede que eleitores filmem urnas em caso de problemas	jovempan.com.br		39.855
PF prende três em suposto esquema para fraudar urna eletrônica neste ano	g1.globo.com		37.539
Durante conferência nos EUA, hackers invadem urnas eletrônicas em questão de minutos	jornalivre.com		32.312
Após Bolsonaro denunciar fraudes, TSE quer reação institucional forte contra o presidente (veja o vídeo)	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com...		31.752
Hacker de 19 anos mostrou como fez para fraudar eleições no Rio de Janeiro	folhacentrosul.com.br		31.319
Dilma sofre nova derrota e voto impresso nas eleições passa a ser obrigatório - PSDB - Partido...	www.psdb.org.br		28.892
Juizes e juristas movem ação para que 100% das urnas tenham voto impresso já em 2018	republicadecuritiba.net		26.441
Sem a confiança da população, PSL solicita e TRE fará auditoria pública de urnas eletrônicas na sexta	www.mblnews.org		24.273
Brasil é único país do mundo que utiliza urnas eletrônicas inaudíveis e obsoletas	www.ilisp.org		22.007
Eleitor agride mesária e alega fraude ao tentar votar 17 para governador; assista vídeo	www.feedclub.com.br		21.827
Filho de Bolsonaro pede a eleitor que filme urna; prática é crime eleitoral	veja.abril.com.br		21.379

Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

The qualitative evaluation of the messages reinforces the indication that discourses questioning the legitimacy of the electoral system stood out in terms of volume and interactions. The fifteen links with the most engagement about the topic were published

by 804 pages in different groups, reaching 629,823 interactions. The most popular link addressed the alleged criminal group that charged up to R\$ 5 million to defraud electronic voting machines and was shared every year since 2016, generating greater engagement in 2019 – a year with no elections. Sharing links in different years was also a characteristic of the 2nd (2018, 2020), 9th (2014, 2015, 2016 and 2020) and 13th (2017, 2018) most shared links.

Figure 7 – Most viewed videos on Youtube

Title	Channel/Domain		
 TENSÃO NO STF: PERITOS DESMASCARAM URNAS ELETRÔN..	Top tube Famosos		1.515.580
The Noite (19/08/14) - Entrevista com Diego Aranha	The Noite com Danilo Gentili		633.142
FRAUDE COMPROVADA NAS URNAS ELETRÔNICAS NESSA ELEIÇÃO TIAGO FONSECA	Tiago Fonseca		543.423
 BOMBA: "TSE E O CANCELAMENTO DAS ELEIÇÕES" POR FR..	Top tube Famosos		488.389
FRAUDE NAS URNAS ELETRÔNICAS: ELEITORES NO BRASIL TODO CONFIRMAM A FARSA!	Manual de YAUH יחור		354.729
Recadastramento Biométrico #SomosTodosOtários @CanalDoOtario	Canal do Otario		334.180
Perito prova que video de urna fraudada não é fake	GLEITONFREIRE		267.682
Cabo Daciolo questiona Alckmin sobre possíveis fraudes em urnas eletrônicas	Band Jornalismo		246.411
Vídeo denuncia urna eletrônica computando votos sozinha	Ficha Social		207.824
Bolsonaro faz grave denúncia sobre plano de fraude no TSE para sabotar eleições de 2018	Ficha Social		200.885
BOLSONARO REAGIU E URNAS ELETRÔNICAS DA CHINA	Paula Marisa		197.171
Joice posta flagra de urna favorecendo Haddad " Eleições 2018 "	Universo		188.227
Entenda por que Bolsonaro acha que houve fraude na eleição de 2018	Poder360		185.037
A FRAUDE ELEITORAL EM 2014. EXPLICADO COMO FIZERAM A FRAUDE.	Klinger Neto		162.033
Veja como fiscalizar as urnas eletrônicas: VOCÊ FISCAL	EDUARDO BOLSONARO		159.880

Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

The videos with the most views were a measure adopted to estimate reach on YouTube. These videos show elements that help confirm the hypothesis of greater engagement and reach in general election years. Eleven of the fifteen videos with the most views were published in 2014 (three) and 2018 (eight). One highlight among the videos published in

2020 was the repercussion of Bolsonaro's statement in which he questioned the legitimacy of the vote counting process, which shows the importance of public figures engaging in this debate over time.

YouTube also had greater reach compared to Facebook pages. As pointed out previously, the fifteen links with the most interactions on Facebook added up to approximately 630 thousand interactions. In turn, the top 15 YouTube videos added up to 5.6 million views, almost ten times more. This characteristic warrants a discussion about the roles that each social media occupies in the contemporary informational process, in order to form a communicative ecosystem that has spaces for interaction and information.

Once again, the data revealed a significant presence of hyper-partisan pages and channels, with content that stimulates mistrust in the electoral system. This observation is relevant as there are signs of an association between a hyper-partisan media and disinformation (RECUERO et al., 2020). The implications of the continuous circulation of these contents – mostly through Facebook pages, whose environment provides the feeling of belonging and trust and, therefore, political action (BENNETT, SEGERBERG, 2013; MILAN, 2015; MILAN, BARBOSA, 2020) – can foster dynamics that threaten the democratic stability.

Part 3: 2020 Elections

The analysis carried out in the previous sections of the narratives that create a context of mistrust about the elections showed that this topic has been constantly discussed over the past seven years, with special emphasis during moments of general elections. However, the figure showing the evolution of the topic on Facebook presented in the first section signaled an increase in posts about the topic in 2020, reaching, in just nine months, higher levels than those recorded in 2014, the second year with the highest incidence of these discourses. This movement was also observed in other social media such as WhatsApp and Twitter¹⁰.

¹⁰ The specific characteristics of the different metrics used on Facebook and YouTube prompted the distinction made between the terminology of engagement and reach.

As seen in the first section, the figure showing the evolution of the topic on Facebook indicates an increase in posts about the topic in 2020, reaching higher levels in just nine months than those recorded in 2014, the second year with the highest incidence of these discourses. This section seeks to understand the reasons for this increase and to identify how electoral fraud narratives are being forged in the context of the municipal elections, in which there is greater fragmentation of the debate compared to general election periods. The analysis comprised the fifteen most shared links in 2020 and identified how they were shared over the analyzed period.

Figure 8 – Most shared links in 2020 over time

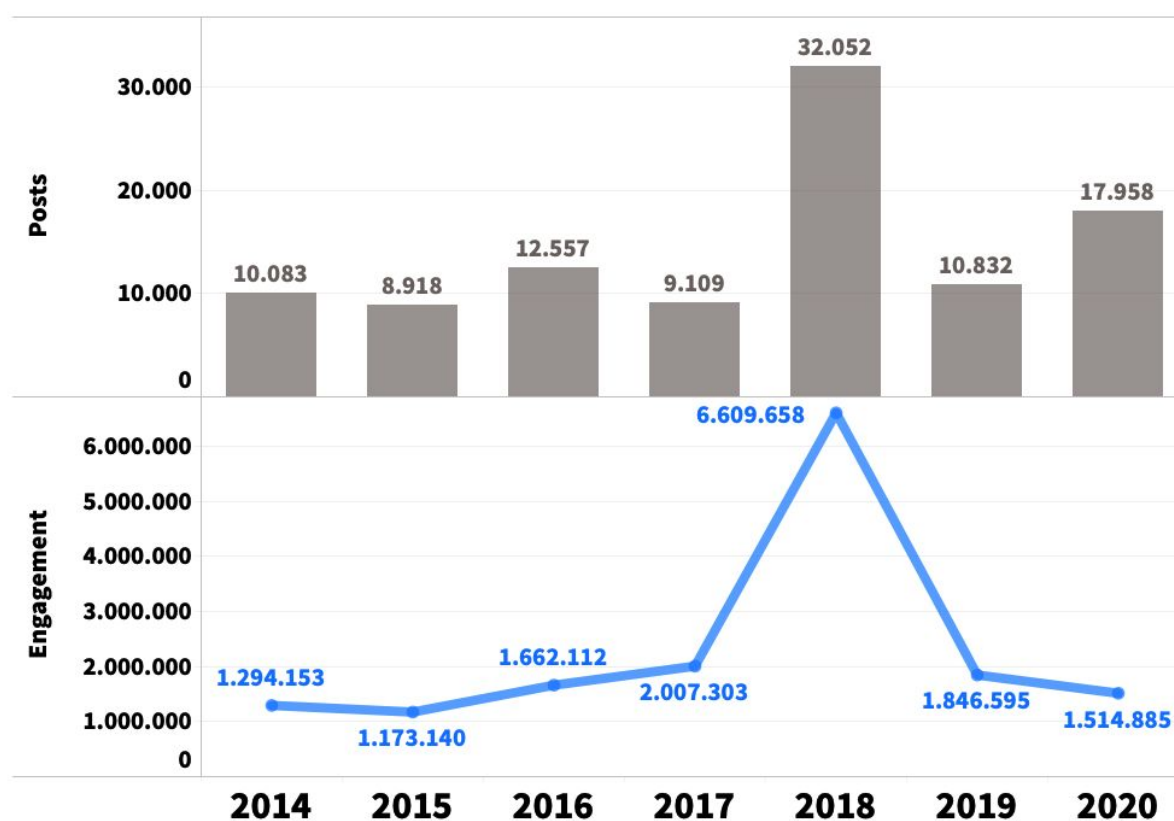
Title	Domain	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
TSE entregou códigos de segurança das urnas eletrônicas para a Venezuela e negou acesso para auditores brasileiros (veja o vídeo)	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br					782	22	291
PF desmantela quadrilha que cobrava até R\$ 5 milhões para fraudar urnas eletrônicas	folhacentrosul.com.br			5	3	40	252	191
Hacker de 19 anos mostrou como fez para fraudar eleições no Rio de Janeiro	folhacentrosul.com.br	80	123	96	3			129
Bolsonaro denuncia fraude no Brasil e Incêndio "misterioso" destrói urnas eletrônicas na Venezuela	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br							289
Fraude eleitoral: Documentos mostram que Bolsonaro foi eleito no primeiro turno em 2018 -	oantiagonista.com							228
Dossiê Urnas Eletrônicas COMPARTILHE	youtu.be					117	1	93
Bolsonaro abre o jogo e diz que tem provas de que foi eleito no 1º turno e que houve FRAUDE em 2018 (veja o vídeo)	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br							147
O risco latente: Todo poder emana de quem controla as urnas eletrônicas	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br							122
FRAUDE ELEITORAL: O mundo precisa saber o que aconteceu no Brasil nas últimas décadas (veja o vídeo)	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br							112
Após Bolsonaro denunciar fraudes, TSE quer reação institucional forte contra o presidente (veja o vídeo)	www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br							74

Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

We observed that the three most shared links are, in fact, old publications with a strong presence on the networks since at least 2018. This is an important characteristic if we take into account that their circulation can be revived with the publication of new links, images and texts.

However, the old links were also accompanied by six articles that were first published in 2020. The number of new links, together with the general increase in shares about the topic, suggests the existence of an intentional campaign to promote this topic. In addition, we highlight the presence of links on the pages Jornal da Cidade Online, which hosted six of the most shared links, and Folha Centro Sul, with three links.

Figure 9 – Posts vs. engagement on Facebook



Source: Facebook | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

However, this movement to create a “disinformation campaign”, which saw an increase in publications in 2020, was not accompanied by an increase in engagement about the topic, as shown in the figure above. This movement deserves further investigation by means of a research designed to understand the factors that cause this disparity between increased posts and degree of engagement.

Some hypotheses may be formulated based on the set of data presented here. Firstly, the low level of engagement could be explained by the nature of the elections in question – in this case, municipal elections, whose fragmented dynamics could dilute the engagement about the topic, especially compared to general election years. Secondly, this movement could be explained by the dynamics of the communicative environment on Facebook, whether due to the engagement of fewer pages and groups, or due to the decrease in the reach of the pages due to number of followers, algorithmic interventions or political disarticulation. Lastly, although a less likely hypothesis given the trend of the debate about the topic, it is not possible to rule out a decrease in interest on the topic, both due to an increase in trust in the institutions and because of the overlapping discussions that emerge with more urgency in the public debate.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is the result of an effort to conduct a historical analysis of how the circulation of content about alleged ballot fraud and election manipulation in Brazil behaved over time and discursively on social media platforms. Specifically, we observed the presence of posts that contained links disseminated on Facebook and YouTube between the years 2014 and 2020. The analyzed data validated the perception that the narratives of mistrust in the electoral system, in this period, were associated with higher engagement and recurrence in digital environments. Therefore, it was possible to observe a wide circulation of dangerous, hyper-partisan content and fake news in the study corpus, which

suggests patterns of polarization, intolerance and disinformation in the country's recent history.

This context of polarization, together with the growing engagement around topics that cause the gradual weakening of democratic institutions and norms, is an alert for urgent reflections (LEVITSKY, ZIBLATT, 2018). Exposure to content in digital environments that promote deception and disinformation can lead to scenarios that are harmful to democratic regimes (BENNETT, LIVINGSTON, 2018). As this study explains, links that disrupt the electronic voting process have increased in the digital environment in recent years and can be easily retrieved and redistributed in different elections and contexts. These publications reach high numbers of online interactions within the scope of the like economy, even though such publications are essentially conspiracist, fraudulent and disinformative.

One of the gains of studies that take social media as an object of investigation is the fact that the metrics of each platform offer a parameter about the reach of the messages. Therefore, this study can be understood as encouragement for the development of new research methodologies in this area, but also, and particularly, as an element to promote a research agenda dedicated to the effects of digital communication processes on contemporary democracies, based on the Brazilian experience.

The contributions of this study are not limited to the purposes of the research; they can expand analytical horizons due to their comparative potential. In addition, they shed light on the illiberal content that permeates communication dynamics, particularly the circulation of content that questions the legitimacy and belief in democratic institutions and procedures, as well as the production of information through click-hunting and sources that encourage intolerant and polarizing behaviors in society.

However, there are limitations inherent to the theoretical and methodological choices made in this research effort. Firstly, it should be noted that the content analyzed here does not necessarily correspond to the content that went viral about the topic each year. We know that discourses may be presented digitally in multiple formats, and that a series of fake news and other types of information fraud are disseminated as videos, audios,

texts, etc. without being accompanied by URLs. It is also important to mention that, because YouTube is a platform for storing videos, posts with links are not as central in its infrastructure as they are on other networks. In Youtube's case, the links are in the description of the videos and may go unnoticed by many users. Lastly, other posts with URLs may have been subject to content moderation in the analyzed period. If this happened, they were not included in the data collection. In future opportunities, we intended to offer more complex levels of analysis, as well as data sets that integrate more platforms.

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