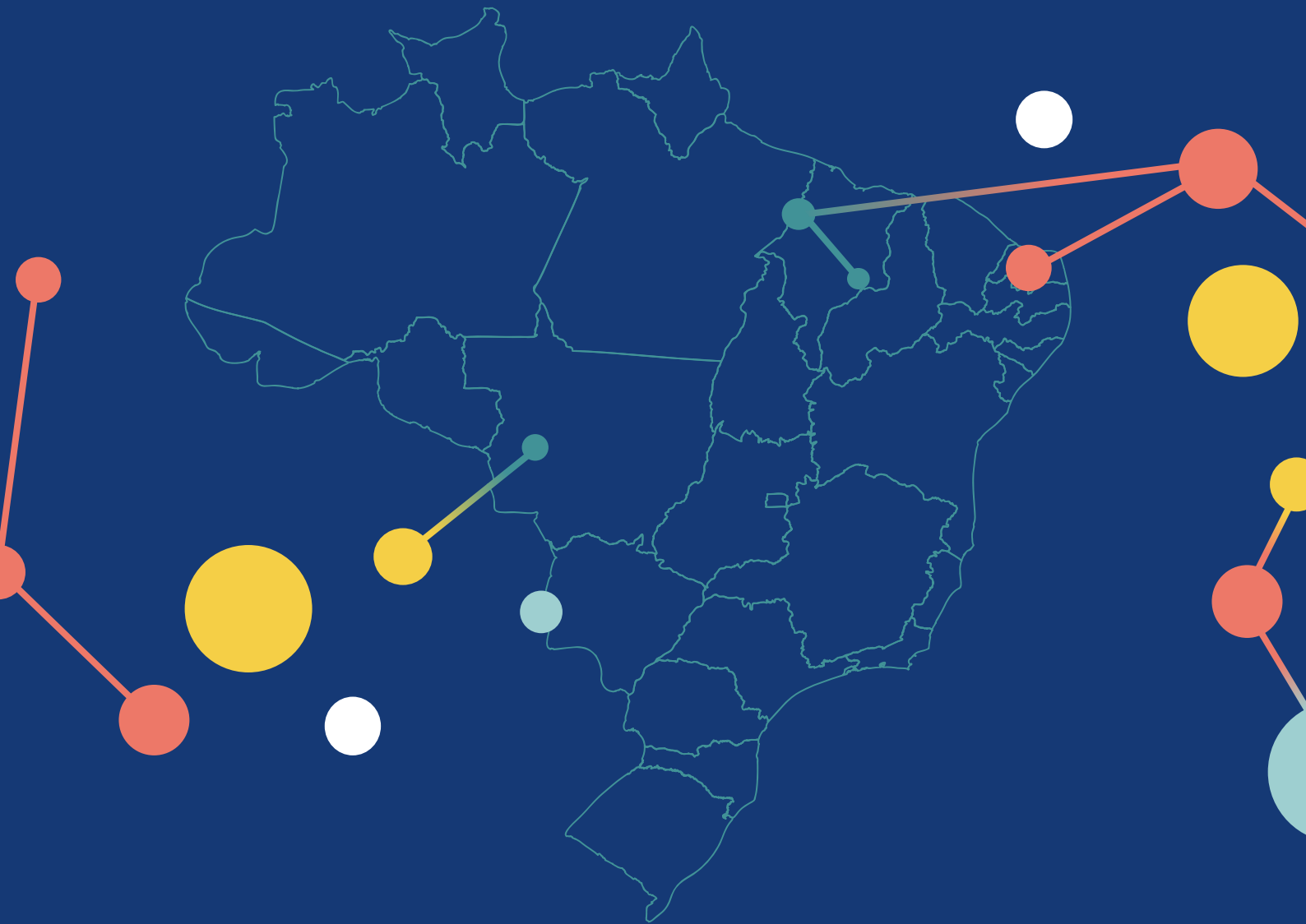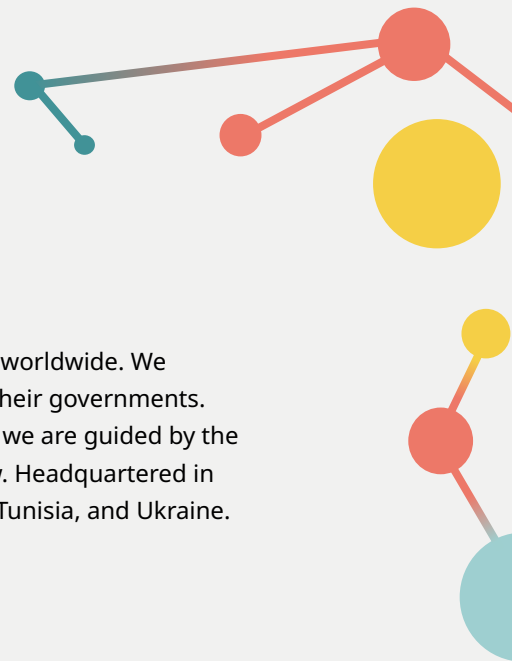DEMOCRACY
REPORTING
INTERNATIONAL

2024

ELECTION INTEGRITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE:

ONLINE RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BRAZILIAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

About Democracy Reporting International

DRI is an independent organisation dedicated to promoting democracy worldwide. We believe that people are active participants in public life, not subjects of their governments. Our work centres on analysis, reporting, and capacity-building. For this, we are guided by the democratic and human rights obligations enshrined in international law. Headquartered in Berlin, DRI has offices in Lebanon, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

About the Media and Democracy project

Fundação Getulio Vargas School of Communication, Media, and Information (FGV ECMI) and the European Union (EU) have established a partnership to strength the Brazilian democracy and the integrity of digital spaces. The initiative is carried out in partnership with the fact-checking platform Lupa, Democracy Reporting International (DRI), the Diversity and Inclusion Program and the Centre for Technology and Society, both from FGV Direito Rio. The project focuses on debates on gender issues, racial inequality, minority rights, hate speech and other important issues for Brazilian politics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 Brazilian municipal elections will push local issues across 5,568 municipalities to the forefront of the country's political landscape. These elections represent an important opportunity for candidates to consolidate their local influence or recapture support in their regions. At the same time, national politics, the economy, and issues such as public health and education significantly impact local elections in Brazil. Within this context, integrating digital tools has transformed campaign strategies, amplifying opportunities for outreach and increasing the risk of disinformation and hate speech. As municipal elections fall in the period between national, presidential votes, they also gauge public sentiment towards the current administration, and can influence future national politics.

This report examines vulnerabilities across four categories in Brazil (state, politics, media, and society) to understand potential risks and develop recommendations for key actors. Regarding the **state,** the lack of legislation around digital platforms and harmful content online allows the Brazilian judiciary branch, through the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), autonomy in creating and enforcing norms to regulate issues such as disinformation and hate speech. In the **political** context, politicians are capitalising on an overall distrust in politics by using emotive and divisive communication on social media, with polling show-ing the population's declining trust in political parties. The **Media** also plays a vital role in Brazilian elections, with alternative media outlets impacting voters, as Brazilians consume news mainly on digital platforms such as Google and WhatsApp. Brazilians also say they avoid consuming news due to increasing distrust in the media, and that they rely more on international outlets than national ones. Lastly, Brazilian **society** is highly polarised, with an information ecosystem flooded with emotional and controversial political content. There is also a need to improve levels of media literacy to increase resilience against digital threats.

This report maps risks to the fairness of the online campaign in the following areas:

▶ HATE SPEECH

Increased Aggression and Violence:
Online hate speech during the campaign for the upcoming local elections may esca-late into physical violence, particularly targeting marginalised groups, such as women, LGBTQIA+, and BIPOC people.[1]

Erosion of Public Discourse:
Politicians mobilise their audiences using online hate speech, including misogynistic and transphobic messaging, undermining respectful and constructive political debate, diminishing the quality of democratic discourse, and potentially disenfranchising voters who feel threatened or alienated.

Normalisation of Harmful Views:
The unchecked spread of hate speech on digital platforms in Brazil can lead to the normalisation of extremist views, making radical ideologies more mainstream and difficult to combat.

▶ DISINFORMATION

Undermining of Electoral Integrity:
Disinformation campaigns during the 2024 municipal elections will likely continue to focus on the legitimacy of the electoral process, creating confusion about and distrust of election outcomes among voters.

Manipulation of Public Opinion:
False information regarding critical issues such as public health and environmental policies is likely to be spread and to skew public perceptions and influence voting behaviour, based on misleading or incorrect reports.

Erosion of Trust in Institutions:
Some actors use disinformation campaigns as political communication strategies. They aim to spread inaccurate information and erode trust in key democratic institutions, including the judiciary and electoral bodies, weakening the overall democratic framework if the election results are not in their favour.

▶ POLITICAL ADS

Spread of Disinformation:
Despite regulations, political ads in Brazil can still be vehicles for disinformation, subtly or overtly, which can mislead voters about candidates and/or issues.

Targeting and Microtargeting Issues:
Sophisticated data analytics allows for hyper-targeted political ads that can manipulate voter perceptions and exploit vulnerabilities, raising ethical and privacy concerns.

Unequal Playing Field:
The significant financial resources required to fund extensive digital ad campaigns can create disparities among candidates, giving an unfair advantage to those with more funding, and potentially distorting democratic competition.

Recommendations to key actors:

ELECTORAL AUTHORITIES

→ **Strengthen Oversight and Training:** Brazilian electoral authorities should enhance their monitoring capabilities and provide comprehensive training to electoral bodies to ensure that new and existing regulations against online risks, such as hate speech and disinformation, are implemented effectively.

→ **Promote Transparency and Voter Education:** Authorities must increase transparency in electoral processes and actively engage in voter education campaigns. These campaigns should focus on the impact of disinformation and polarisation, and should aim to equip voters with the necessary skills to critically evaluate the information they encounter online.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS

→ **Enhanced Content Moderation:** Platforms should employ advanced artificial intelligence (AI) tools, combined with human moderation, to more effectively identify and mitigate hate speech, disinformation, and polarising content. To maintain public trust, regular transparency reports detailing content moderation practices and outcomes should be published.

→ **Algorithm Adjustments:** Algorithms should be adjusted to reduce the visibility of misleading or harmful content, while promoting diverse viewpoints and reputable news sources to counteract the effects of "echo chambers". Platforms should also provide transparency reports on labelling political ads, to assess the impact of paid content during critical moments, such as elections.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS (CSOs)

→ **Advocacy and Public Engagement:** CSOs should lead efforts to advocate for stronger regulations on digital campaigning, and should engage the public through media literacy programmes that teach how to identify misinformation and understand its impact on democracy.

→ **Research and Collaboration:** CSOs should engage in continuous research to understand the effects of online risks, such as polarisation, and should collaborate with electoral authorities and digital platforms to develop targeted interventions. These should include creating frameworks that can effectively address these challenges at the community level.

2. METHODOLOGY

In 2020, DRI developed the Digital Democracy Risk Assessment, an instrument for evaluating the susceptibility of elections to online threats. This initial assessment helps researchers map vulnerabilities in a country's elections. It helps organisations, therefore, to answer whether a country and its elections might be attractive targets for disinformation actors. Online manipulation threatens electoral integrity by impacting political participation, freedom of expression, the formation of opinions, and privacy and trust. DRI's conceptual framework[2] identifies four dimensions where countries and their elections become vulnerable to online manipulation: state, politics, media, and society. Each dimension is broken down into attributes, which have been chosen based on their proven relationship to online manipulation and other online risks.

After conducting an in-depth analysis and formulating preliminary observations, DRI hosted an online roundtable with 15 civil society representatives, part of the Digital Democracy Council of the Media & Democracy Project, to discuss the risks during the online campaign for the 2024 Brazilian municipal elections. DRI would like to thank the representatives of the diverse group of CSOs for providing their expertise, comments, and feedback on short- and long-term recommendations for the Brazilian government, civil society, and social media platforms operating in the country.

3. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE 2024 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

The 2024 municipal elections in Brazil, which will take place in October, present a complex and dynamic scenario, reflecting the peculiarities and challenges of Brazil's vast political landscape. Municipal elections are held every four years in 5,568 cities, with citizens casting their votes for mayor, deputy mayor, and councillors. This report analyses the municipal elections from three perspectives: the impact of national politics, specific local issues, and the role of technology and social media platforms.

From the point of view of national politics, the 2024 municipal elections are being influenced by the outcomes of the previous presidential and legislative elections. Political alliances formed or broken at the national level have repercussions at the municipal level, affecting both the composition of candidates and campaign strategies. In addition, issues such as the economy, public health, and education remain central themes, directly influencing the agendas of local candidates.

Each municipality has its own particular issues and dynamics at the local level. Municipal campaigns often prioritise problems such as urban infrastructure, public safety, waste management, and transport. In addition, each region's cultural identity and specific needs can define unique electoral agendas, making municipal elections directly reflect the demands and expectations of the local population.

Technology and social media will continue to play a crucial role in the 2024 municipal elections. The digitalisation of campaigns allows for more direct and personalised communication with the electorate. At the same time, it also brings challenges, such as the spread of disinformation and the need for proper regulation.

Although these are local elections, their monitoring is relevant, as the outcome varies considerably depending on the context; they could be perceived as a test for the current federal government, because they can strengthen or undermine the politics of the whole Brazilian administrative system.

▶ STATE

ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL LAW

Brazil operates under a mixed electoral system, incorporating majority and proportional representation elements. The country employs a two-round system for executive positions, such as the president, governors, and mayors. If no candidate achieves more than 50 per cent of all votes cast in the first round, the top two candidates face off in a second round. This rule applies specifically to municipalities with population exceeding 200,000, where the electoral competition tends to be more intense. For legislative positions, Brazil uses a proportional representation system.[3] Here, seats in legislative bodies are allocated to candidates on party lists, based on the proportion of votes each party receives. This system aims to reflect the diversity of political preferences among the electorate.

Brazilian elections have particular characteristics, such as, since 1996, the systematic use of electronic voting machines and electoral management by a court (rather than a dedicated commission or by government ministries, as is the case in many other countries). The main electoral institution in Brazil is the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), the highest structure within the system of electoral management and justice, which thus plays a fundamental role in the administration and defence of the democratic process.[4] The TSE's tasks include dealing with complaints about candidate registration and investigating electoral wrongdoing, which includes some oversight of social media platforms and the right to block accounts that share disinformation. Some have criticised this approach as an illegitimate limitation of free speech.[5]

LEGISLATION AROUND ONLINE CRIMES

The rule of law in Brazil is defined by the principle that all entities are accountable under justly applied laws. Established in the Brazilian Constitution, this mandates the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and fundamental rights, though adherence to these is inconsistent, due to corruption, political instability, and social inequalities. Criticisms of judicial independence and efficiency point to a sluggish, sometimes politicised legal system, complicating the enforcement of the current legislative framework to address online phenomena, such as hate speech and disinformation.[6]

3   Tribunal Regional Eleitoral, **"Eleições Majoritárias e Proporcionais"**.

4   Tribunal Superior Eleitoral. **"Superior Electoral Court."**

5   Géssica Brandino, **"Atuação Do TSE Contra Fake News Expõe Omissão Do Ministério Público E Esbarra Em Censura"**, *Folha De S.Paulo,* 18 November 2022.

6   Caio Castelliano and Tomás De Aquino Guimarães, **"Court Disposition Time in Brazil and in European Countries"** *Revista Direito GV,* 1 January 2023.

Currently, Law 12,965/2014, known as the *Marco Civil da Internet* (the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet), is the main legislation aimed at guiding the use of the internet in Brazil, being complemented by subsequent legislation, such as 13,709/2018, popularly called the "General Data Protection Law".[7]

The Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet defines guarantees, principles, rights and duties for internet use in the country, increasing the effectiveness of decisions involving information on the internet. In this sense, this legislation has already been classified by internet-related institutions in the country and outside of it as one of the first frameworks of the "Bill of Rights" for internet users.[8] Building on international precedents like Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act in the United States,[9] the Brazilian framework doesn't hold internet providers accountable for all third-party content, but only under specific conditions, including the unauthorised sharing of private content or copyright infringements, without the issuing of an explicit court order.

Article 19 of the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet, however, adds that internet application providers can be held responsible for circulating harmful content on their interfaces if they ignore any court order that determines the regulation of the content in question, such as its removal. The Brazilian approach to online content regulation has sparked debate, especially regarding the judicial ability to mandate content removal. This "policy by judicialisation"[10] allows courts to demand action against harmful online content without a definitive legislative framework, introducing an additional layer of public oversight, and has led to criticism of the courts for slow responses and their perceived inadequacies in addressing modern digital challenges.

In the 2024 Municipal Elections in Brazil, the TSE enacted strict rules to regulate the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in electoral campaigns, to safeguard against disinformation and to ensure fairness. The TSE prohibits the creation and dissemination via AI of false content, such as deepfakes, that could misrepresent people's actions or statements. Campaigns must disclose when AI has been used in creating electoral content, ensuring voters are informed about the nature of the information they receive. Additionally, digital platforms and internet providers are made responsible for rapidly removing content that violates electoral laws, including instances of hate speech and misinformation. These platforms face legal consequences if they fail to comply with these regulations, reflecting the TSE's commitment to maintaining the integrity of the electoral process.[11]

7   Tribunal De Justiça Do Distrito Federal E Dos Territórios, **"Marco Civil Da Internet"**.

8   Chris Riley, Chris. **"Marco Civil – A Groundbreaking, although Not Perfect, Victory for Brazilian Internet Users"**, Open Policy & Advocacy, 26 March 2014.

9   Valerie C. Brannon and Eric N. Holmes, **"Section 230: An Overview"**, Congressional Research Service, 4 January 2024.

10   Keller, Clara Iglesias Keller, **"Policy by Judicialisation: The Institutional Framework for Intermediary Liability in Brazil",** *International Review of Law Computers & Technology* 35, no. 3 (13 July 2020): 185–203.

11   Justiça Eleitoral. **"TSE Proíbe Uso De Inteligência Artificial Para Criar E Propagar Conteúdos Falsos Nas Eleições,"** n.d.

ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

Due to the absence of an efficient legislative framework addressing online discourse and digital platforms, the TSE tackled the agenda in the electoral context. Following allegations of the circulation of extensive disinformation during the 2018 presidential election campaign, the TSE has developed a series of initiatives to combat the spread of harmful content online.

In August 2019, the TSE created the Permanent Programme for Combating Disinformation,[12] in cooperation with 154 partners, including digital platforms and public and private entities. The Programme aims to monitor the spread of false information online, to combat disinformation, to expand the reach of accurate information, and to empower society to identify misinformation. In 2022, the Disinformation Alert System against Elections was launched, where voters can report false news to the TSE. In the context of the 2024 municipal elections, the Alert System has been expanded, giving citizens more options to report harmful content aimed at harming the election's integrity.[13]

In 2024, the TSE published a new resolution (23.610) on the use of AI and disinformation in online electoral advertisements.[14] The rules established by the resolution include the obligation to add disclaimers for AI-generated content, aiming to mitigate the risks of disinformation and anti-democratic and harmful content. The TSE's regulatory initiatives, such as this recent resolution, have been criticised by some stakeholders, while praised by others. On one hand, the resolution can be seen as an important and fair step to promote safe elections.[15] On the other, experts and human rights advocates have criticised potential conflicts with the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet, and a lack of accountability and proportionality that could favour censorship.[16] In this context, the court recently established the Integrated Centre for Confronting Disinformation and Defending Democracy (CIEDDE), and provided reports on the centre's effectiveness, the challenges it faces, and its impact on election integrity.[17]

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12   Justiça Eleitoral. **"Sistema De Alertas".**

13   *Ibid.*

14   Justiça Eleitoral. **"TSE Proíbe Uso De Inteligência Artificial Para Criar E Propagar Conteúdos Falsos Nas Eleições,"** 29 February 2024.

15   Constança Rezende, **"TSE Cria Regra Para Uso De Inteligência Artificial E Proíbe Deepfake Por Campanhas",** *Folha De S.Paulo,* 27 February 2024.

16   Coalizão Direitos Na Rede, **"Nota Pública: Novas Regras Do Tse Para Propaganda Eleitoral Na Internet Nas Eleições Podem Ter Consequências Graves Sobre O Debate Público"**, 21 March 2024.

17   Justiça Eleitoral, **"Presidente Do TSE Inaugura Centro Integrado De Enfrentamento À Desinformação E Defesa Da Democracia Nesta Terça (12)",** 12 March 2024.

TRUST IN THE GOVERNMENT

According to a 2022 national survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), trust in Brazilian public institutions has declined severely in recent years, reaching its lowest point after the COVID-19 pandemic.[18] Only a quarter of Brazilians expressed high trust in their federal government, with even lower trust in local government, the civil service, Congress, and political parties. Vulnerable groups, in particular, feel underrepresented, saying that the current system doesn't effectively serve their interests. These low levels of trust reflect broader concerns within Brazilian society about corruption, economic stability, and the efficacy of public institutions.

The TSE and most researchers agree that there were no indications of fraud in the 2022 presidential election.[19] There is evidence, however, that efforts by former President Jair Bolsonaro were aimed at leading the electorate to mistrust the integrity and security of the electoral process. These attempts to undermine the electorate's trust in Brazil's electoral institutions negatively impacted societal views on the integrity and safety of the electoral process.[20] Recent events indicate this negative trend; on 8 January 2023, a few days following the establishment of the government of newly elected President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, supporters of former-president Bolsonaro assaulted the Congress in Brasilia.

► POLITICS

THE ROLE OF POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties and candidates, particularly during electoral processes, regularly use online social networks to mobilise voters. Voters tend to reject any such content, however, perceiving it as false and corrupt, due to social radicalisation and discontent, and the fragility of the liberal model of democracy in Brazil.

As a result, various candidates position themselves as political "outsiders", and employ populist dynamics to distance themselves from mainstream politics. Politicians are capitalising on an overall distrust in politics, with polling showing the population's declining trust in political parties. This disenchantment not only intensifies public distrust in political parties, but also undermines the quality of democracy itself, as it allows authoritarian candidates to be elected based on this rejection, thereby amplifying and feeding into it.

18   OECD, *Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Brazil,* (Paris: OECD, 2023).

19   Dalson Figueiredo, **"From "Mythical" to Fraud: Brazilian Presidential Elections 2022"**, *Latinoamérica* 21, 13 December 2022.

20   Jack Nicas, Flávia Milhorance, and Ana Ionova. **"How Bolsonaro Built the Myth of Stolen Elections in Brazil"**, *The New York Times,* 28 October 2022.

As a result, politicians increasingly use social media to connect directly with citizens, to establish a political identity that is separate from party affiliations. By bypassing traditional party structures and media channels, today's politicians are able to personalise their messages for prospective voters and engage more intimately with them.

EMOTIVE AND DIVISIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE POLITICAL DEBATE

As online political discourse has developed, Brazilian politicians have capitalised on escalating polarisation by using divisive rhetoric to attract attention to their political campaigns and gain influence. Such rhetoric has often been at the expense of fair play among rivals. For example, Bolsanaro's campaign promoted imagery of da Silva's Worker's Party (PT) as a "cancer" on Brazilian society,[21] with Bolsonaro presented as the only one capable of saving the country. Similar narratives targeting political opponents directly were also common.[22]

Associations between an opponent and, for example, signs of corruption, have guided defamatory campaigns by playing on voters' emotions, most notably stoking fear.[23] Despite regulations[24] to avoid such exploitation, many politicians continue to use controversial disinformation narratives to attempt to sway voters. The most famous example of this is Bolsonaro's broad claims that the voting machines used in the 2022 presidential election produced fraudulent results. After his defeat, his supporters continue to be mobilised by this narrative.[25]

The tendency to utilise a divisive tone and arguments is particularly evident when it happens on social media, which today constitutes one of the most important political stages for debate. When discussing candidates' use of social media, studies identify[26] parties representing the federal government and the opposition – Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and Partido Livre (PL), respectively – and tend to stand out. While the former is usually one of the leaders in terms of the volume of posts, signalling an effort to engage in various debates, the latter tends to lead in average engagement, indicating that the loyalty of its base is also reflected in online networks.

21 Mariana De Carvalho Mendes, **"Haha , Grr E Amei : A Construção De Uma Narrativa Política Emocional Nas Redes Sociais"**, 20 February 2019.

22 Esra Akgemci, **"Authoritarian Populism as a Response to Crisis: The Case of Brazil."** Uluslararası İlişkiler/ International Relations 19, no. 74 (2022): 37–51.

23 Francisco Brandao, **"Stabbed Democracy: How Social Media and Home Videos Made a Populist President in Brazil"**, in *Electoral Campaigns, Media, and the New World of Digital Politics,* ed. David Taras and Richard Davis, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022) 179–99.

24 Justiça Eleitoral, **"Eleições 2024: Saiba Mais Sobre Regras Para Pesquisa Eleitoral"**, 22 December 2023.

25 Marco Aurelio Ruediger, **"Online Disinformation and Questioning of Election Results"**, Democracia Digital, 14 February 2022.

26 FGV DAPP, **"Primeiro Turno Marca Diminuição Na Hegemonia De Bolsonaro Nas Redes Sociais E Disputa Acirrada Com Lula"**, 6 October 2022.

▶ MEDIA

MEDIA PLURALITY AND ELECTORAL IMPACT

The information system in Brazil is characterised by an excessive concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few economic groups. The fragility of the public and independent media sectors aggravates this situation. A survey by Reporters without Borders, in partnership with Intervozes, a Brazilian CSO, concluded that the four largest networks captured 70 per cent of the national audience,[27] which would constitute, according to these organisations, an oligopoly in communications, which is prohibited by Section 5 of Article 220 of the Brazilian Constitution.

These networks are classified as part of the traditional media, linked to large companies that obtain space on television, radio, digital platforms, newspapers and magazines.[28] With a large structure of channels and platforms, these economic groups are able, through traditional media, to influence the circulation of information.[29] In the online environment, which allows the spread of more alternative sources, traditional media still plays a vital role, attracting large volumes of engagement and interactions.

Regional and local media, however, are also extremely significant in Brazil, as they contribute to the construction of community and local identities.[30] In Brazil, these outlets operate mainly through digital platforms and messaging applications, focusing on covering issues of interest to the local population, such as security and education. A 2023 study by Brazil's FGV School of Communication found that local media outlets widely used Facebook to cover violence, with a strong emphasis on political violence.

Alternative media outlets are also very much present in Brazil. These encompass outlets that are not associated with large companies and corporations, and that are often involved in hyper-partisanship. Hyper-partisan media are explicitly linked to particular political-ideological positions, being activated in favour of specific political agendas and actors, both on the left and right. Hyper-partisan outlets often participate in spreading informational chaos, by contributing to the proliferation and circulation

27   Reporters without Borders, **"Oligopólios De Mídia Controlados Por Poucas Famílias. A Repórteres Sem Fronteiras E O Intervozes Lançam O Monitoramento Da Propriedade Da Mídia No Brasil,"** 4 November 2024.

28   Nina Santos, **"Fontes De Informação Nas Redes Pró E Contra O Discurso De Bolsonaro Sobre O Coronavírus."** E- Compós 24, 29 October 2021.

29   Denis De Moraes, Ignacio Ramonet, and Pascual Serrano, *Mídia, Poder E Contrapoder: Da Concentração Monopólica à Democratização da Comunicação,* (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2015).

30   Sonia Virginia Moreira and Jacqueline Da Silva Deolindo, **"Media, City and 'Inner'",** Contemporanea 1, no. 21 (2013).

of misinformation. Several studies by the FGV School of Communication[31] have found that these outlets, and especially right-wing examples,[32] engage particularly in online discussions in messaging groups, where their strong presence often helps perpetuate the link-sharing of less reputable content on the platform.[33]

TRUST IN MEDIA AND CONSUMPTION

A survey by the Reuters Institute pointed to an increase in distrust of the media among Brazilians in 2023; 54 per cent of those consulted said they avoided consuming news and journalistic content in general.[34] Another survey, by The News website, showed that international media outlets operating in Brazil, such as the BBC and CNN, were the most trusted by Brazilians.[35] In contrast, Brazilian media outlets such as Rede Globo, Estadão, and Folha de São Paulo had the lowest levels of trust. The preference for the aforementioned international outlets can be explained by an alleged "bias" towards national political issues. According to the same Reuters poll, more Brazilians said they trusted Google (57 per cent) and WhatsApp (53 per cent) for news than the traditional press (46 per cent).

This lack of trust helps explain news consumption habits online. A 2023 Reuters study examining where people look to be informed in Brazil found that 79 per cent of those interviewed said they find information online (including on social media platforms).[36] Today, newspapers and magazines are the priority choice of only 12 per cent of respondents – a figure that has remained stable over the last two years. According to the Digital Media Consumption in Brazil survey, the digital platforms most accessed by Brazilians daily are WhatsApp (81 per cent) and Google (70 per cent), followed by YouTube (45 per cent), Instagram (36 per cent), and Facebook (27 per cent).[37]

ONLINE POLITICAL CONTENT

Social media and digital platforms are crucial to Brazilians and impact public perceptions enormously. Initiatives to combat disinformation by these platforms focused on

31 FGV ECMI. **"Dez Dias Após o Início Do Conflito, Direita Brasileira Segue Associando Lula Ao Hamas",** 16 October 2023.

32 FVG ECMI. **"Dados Sobre Crimes Ambientais Viram Arma Política Em Disputa Sobre Desmatamento",** 13 July 2023.

33 FVG ECMI. **"Posicionamento Do Telegram Reacende Discussão Sobre Censura Nos Apps Móveis e Direita Responsabiliza o Judiciário"**, 17 May 2023.

34 Rodrigo Carro, **"Brazil"**, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 14 June 2023.

35 Grassi, Amaro, and Marco Aurelio Ruediger. **"Digital Media Consumption in Brazil: A Mapping of Information Intake and the Use of Digital Platforms in the National Context"**, FGV ECMI, 2023.

36 Carro, Rodrigo. **"Brazil."** Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, June 14, 2023.

37 Grassi and Ruediger, **"Digital Media Consumption in Brazil"**, *op. cit.,* note 35.

the Brazilian electoral scenario are generally encouraged and monitored by the TSE. Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Google, Instagram, YouTube and Kwai have introduced measures in this direction, many of which are linked to the TSE's Permanent Programme on Countering Disinformation.

In April 2024, Meta published a document listing several measures to "to protect the 2024 municipal elections in Brazil".[38] Among these are collaboration with electoral authorities and work to combat disinformation on their platforms; ensuring the responsible use and mitigating the risks of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence; limiting forwarding by default on WhatsApp, to curb the viralisation of messages; and the prohibition of the use of the WhatsApp Business Platform (API) by political candidates and campaigns. The mere announcement of these initiatives, however, does not contribute to determining their degree of success. More in-depth reporting is needed to detail the results of the platforms' efforts to combat electoral disinformation.

▶ SOCIETY

POLARISATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Due to its history, Brazil considers itself a highly polarised society for several reasons. For one, the vast economic inequalities between regions,[39] with incomes being much lower in the northeast and rural areas, where there is limited access to higher education and services compared to that in the wealthier south and southeast regions. Secondly, there are significant disparities between social classes, with a small, small, powerful elite and a majority of the population that faces a lack of social mobility, which creates fertile ground for resentment.[40] Discrimination against vulnerable groups and minorities (detailed in *Hate Speech*) and the historical rivalry between progressives and conservatives also contribute to a high degree of polarisation, and continue to be reflected in current politics.

While political and economic matters are central, it is important to note that political polarisation in Brazil also manifests itself in disagreements over moral, cultural, and environmental issues. Recently, experts[41] have noted a shift in which polarisation has moved from being associated with political parties (known as *"polarização partidária"*) to becoming more affective and identity-based *("polarização afetiva")*. The division no

38   Meta, **"Nosso Trabalho Para Proteger as Eleições Municipais De 2024 No Brasil."** 2 April 2024.

39   Matthew L. Layton, Amy Erica Smith, Mason W. Moseley, and Mollie J. Cohen. **"Demographic Polarization and the Rise of the Far Right: Brazil's 2018 Presidential Election"**, Research & Politics 8, no. 1 (28 January 2021)

40   Maria Rita Kehl, *Ressentimento*, (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2020).

41   CNN Brasil, **"Polarização No Brasil Não É Mais Partidária, Mas Afetiva, Diz Especialista | WW,"** YouTube, 11 December 2023.

longer concerns only particular moments, such as elections, but characterises society in general. Group affiliation extends beyond political ideology and concerns people's identities, their values, traditions, and beliefs. In this scenario, voters are more inclined to be motivated to vote against the opposing candidate than in favour of their representative.[42]

EDUCATION AND DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY

A 2023 survey by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) shows that important improvements have occurred in Brazil's education system, with an increase in rates of completion of basic education and a sizable reduction in illiteracy.[43] Access to education is generally uneven, however, and subject to race and social class variables. While, for example, 60.7 per cent of whites aged 25 or older have completed basic education, only 47 per cent of non-whites have reached the same level.

The perception of online disinformation as a concrete threat to democracy is also relevant, with most voters recognising its potential impact on elections. Younger people are more likely to perceive this threat, while older demographics are less concerned. Despite efforts such as government and civil society initiatives to combat disinformation, there is still a significant challenge in identifying and addressing false news, exacerbated by political polarisation and filter bubbles in digital media.

Although there is still no systematic and broad programme aimed at media literacy in Brazil, the government has shown clear interest in the subject by creating the department for Rights on the Internet and Media Literacy in January 2023.

Civil society in Brazil also plays a crucial role in this area,[44] with initiatives like the Redes Cordiais project aiming to educate the population about media literacy through open discussions with artists and digital influencers. These efforts have the potential to make a meaningful impact on society, whether through schools, communities, or digital platforms.

42   CNN, **"Polarização Política: 41% Dos Brasileiros Mudariam De País Se Pudessem, Diz Quaest"**, CNN Brasil, 30 September 2023.

43   2023 survey by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)

44   Monica Pegurer-Caprino and Juan-Francisco Martínez-Cerdá. **"Media Literacy in Brazil: Experiences and Models in Non-formal Education."** Comunicar Digital/Comunicar 24, no. 49 (1 October 2016): 39–48.

4. EXPECTED ONLINE RISKS

▶ HATE SPEECH

Online hate speech in Brazil is manifested through various channels, predominantly on digital platforms, where anonymity and wide reach can embolden users to disseminate harmful and derogatory content. According to recent research,[45] X has been the platform with a major volume of harmful content targeting women. At the same time, Facebook stood out for the highest level of engagement, considering the range of reactions available to the user.

Safernet, one of the main Brazilian CSOs active in monitoring online crime, has flagged a concerning increase[46] in hate speech and harmful content in the country's digital infosystem. Studies show that 2022 was the third consecutive year in which complaints against hate content online increased (by 39.3 per cent) in Brazil. Complaints include those of xenophobia, with an increase of 874 per cent compared to the previous year, followed by religious intolerance (456 per cent) and misogyny (+251 per cent).[47]

Elections are particularly sensitive times when it comes to risk factors for the escalation of violence across the nation. The risk of real-time consequences is higher, especially in the local context. A report by MonitorA, an observatory of online political gender violence in elections, provides examples of online and offline hate speech against women during elections. The study reveals that, in 2018, 53 per cent of Brazilian women mayors said they had suffered harassment or political violence because of their gender. The political violence also happens online, as the study shows that, in the first round of the 2020 municipal elections alone, women candidates were the targets on average of 40 insults a day on X.[48]

Hate speech and harmful content have increasingly infiltrated political communication in Brazil, often used by some actors to mobilise support by targeting vulnerable communities and deepening societal divisions. This strategy polarises the electorate and undermines democratic discourse, challenging the norms of respectful and constructive political engagement. Instances of transphobia, for example, are sometimes

45 Viktor Chagas, Letícia Sabbatini, Vinicius Miguel, Gabriela Ribeiro Pereira, and Sabrina Dray, **"Mapa Da Violência Política De Gênero Em Plataformas Digitais,"** 2023.

46 SaferNet Brasil, **"Denúncias De Crimes De Discurso De Ódio E De Imagens De Abuso Sexual Infantil Na Internet Têm Crescimento Em 2022"**, 2024.

47 *Ibid.*

48 InternetLab, **"Mulheres Na Política: Guia Para O Enfrentamento Da Violência Política De Gênero"**, 2022.

justified as protecting "traditional" Christian Brazilian values.[49] Some politicians use misogyny as a rationale to protect Brazilians from the alleged harms of "gender ideology". Experts also argue that hate speech online in the country is due to the strengthening of right-wing actors, who are the purveyors of much more divisive and violent language, including in the political sphere.[50]

Potential risks ahead of the 2024 municipal elections include:

⟶ **Hate speech coordinated efforts targeting specific groups, especially women, LGBTQIA+ people, BIPOC people, and minorities:** Online hate speech, including controversial statements by politicians, often targets minorities and vulnerable groups.[51] This is expected to happen in the context of the next municipal elections. Furthermore, hate speech changes, depending on the platform under consideration.

⟶ **Real-life consequences derived from online hate speech:** Hate speech is highly multidimensional, due to its ability to impact at different levels, and especially the offline environment. This direct relationship between online hate and real-life violent events is explained as if digital violence were an extension of offline violence, and vice versa. We will probably observe an escalation of online hate speech to incite political violence during the 2024 municipal elections.

⟶ **The local nature of the elections impacts the distribution and moderation of hate speech campaigns on local and alternative media channels:** Brazil's Superior Electoral Court invests in programmes to combat false news, disinformation, and hate speech in municipal elections, such as the recent creation of a specialised monitoring centre. False news and disinformation, however, tend to receive much more media coverage than hate speech. Likewise, many regional and national initiatives by traditional and alternative media outlets are dedicated to fact-checking. It is likely, therefore, that online hate speech will not generate the appropriate level of moderation, due to the lack of attention this matter receives.

49   Victor Giusti, Beatriz Almeida Saab, and Ligia Fabris. **"Misinformation, Conservatism, and Transphobic Narratives Guided Brazilian Anti-trans Bills Between 2019 and 2023"**, Democracy Reporting International, FGV ECMI, June 2023.

50   Nataly Queiroz, **"A Política Do Ódio E A Resistência Do Povo Nas Ruas E Nas Redes"**, *Diplomatique*, 11 April 2023.

51   Beatriz Almeida Saab and Duncan Allen, **"The Battle Over Education: An Analysis of the Term 'Indoctrination' in Brazil's Newest Parliamentary Front", Democracy Reporting International, FGV ECMI**, 20 October 2023.

> → **Hate speech campaigns relying on specific narratives:** Far-right politicians, in particular, promote the dissemination of implicit hate speech by embedding it into matters of public safety, health, and education, and by playing on fear and moral panic. For example, the debate on sexual education and diversity in schools is often used to portray LGBTQIA+ people as potential sex abusers, reinforcing existing negative attitudes towards members of this community.[52] Regular mentions of the role of Cuban doctors in the country's public health system in discourse about healthcare, in another example, often evokes xenophobic discourse. In contrast, attacks suffered by police officers are used to endorse ideas such as imposing the death penalty and lowering the age of criminal responsibility, which have the potential to affect poorer and non-white people more directly.

▶ DISINFORMATION

Disinformation online has a particularly large impact on Brazilian elections.[53] Since 2018, Brazil has seen the development of a complex disinformation ecosystem, characterised by powerful actors, mass messaging, and the production and dissemination of false and inauthentic content. This disinformation ecosystem has been – and continues to be – responsible for an avalanche of false information that confuses the population and adversely impacts institutions. For example, during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, 110 million Brazilians (out of a population of 200 million) received false information about the pandemic, with six out of ten internet users receiving this news through WhatsApp.[54] Disinformation has many harmful consequences, and one of the most serious is the loss of confidence in democratic institutions, as, for example, only 40 per cent of Brazilians trust the security of the electronic voting machines.[55]

In recent years, however, there has been a considerable increase in voter awareness of the potential impact of disinformation on elections.[56] A 2022 survey by the public

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52 *Ibid.*

53 Beatriz Almeida Saab, Jan Nicola Beyer, and Lena-Maria Böswald, **"Beyond the Radar: Emerging Threats, Emerging Solutions"**, Democracy Reporting International, December 2022.

54 Avaaz. **"O Brasil Está Sofrendo Uma Infodemia De Covid-19,"** May 4, 2020.

55 Juliana Castro, **"Pesquisa Aponta Que 40% Dos Brasileiros Confiam Muito Nas Urnas Eletrônicas."** JOTA Info, 11 May 2022.

56 G1, **"Ipec: 85% Dos Brasileiros Acreditam Que Fake News Podem Influenciar as Eleições Deste Ano"**, 6 September 2022.

opinion research agency IPEC , for example, found that 85 per cent of the voters consulted recognised that the spread of false news could directly affect the election. In the Brazilian scenario, age is a relevant component, since this belief is higher among younger people (91 per cent), and declines as the age of interviewees rises (75 per cent, in the case of people over 60).[57]

Nevertheless, the increased awareness around disinformation might not reflect Brazilians' ability to identify false content online. A 2019 survey by the Brazilian Federal Senate reveals a divided scenario regarding people's ability to identify disinformation; while 50 per cent of respondents claimed that identifying false news on social media would be easy, 47 per cent argued that this would be a difficult task.[58] Overall, 83 per cent of those surveyed said they had identified some false news on social media, suggesting broad dissemination of misinformation in digital media, regardless of individuals' ability to identify such content.

Although surveys like the one above indicate that a significant portion of the Brazilian population believes they can distinguish between false and accurate news, it is undeniable that the strengthening of filter bubbles on social media tends to hinder critical perception.[59] For example, studies show that Brazilians tend to believe political content from trusted senders (especially family members and coworkers) without questioning or checking its accuracy. [60] Moreover, many users admit to knowingly sharing messages with false content, rationalising it as a means to promote their political beliefs or interests, regardless of the voracity of the message.[61]

The main disinformation narrative before and after the 2022 Brazilian elections concerned the procedural integrity of the vote. Similar to such narratives in the United States, actors raised unsubstantiated doubts among the public about the voting process. False information concerning the safety of electronic voting machines mobilised political debate on social media. The incumbent, Bolsonaro, and his supporters were central to spreading this narrative, claiming that the electronic voting machines used across Brazil are susceptible to fraud, without substantiating these claims.[62]

57   *Ibid.*

58   Pesquisa DataSenado, **"Redes Sociais, Notícias Falsas E Privacidade De Dados Na Internet,"** November 2019.

59   A Ross Arguedas, C Robertson, R Fletcher, and R Nielsen, ***Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review,*** (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2022).

60   Ester Borges, **"Em Ambiente De Receio, Confiança Individual No Emissor E No Retransmissor É Central No Consumo De Informações Políticas, Aponta Nova Pesquisa"**, InternetLab, 31 October 2023.

61   *Ibid.*

62   Juliana Gragnani and Jake Horton, **"Brazil Election: Do Voting Machines Lead to Fraud?"**, BBC, 3 October 2022.

Other key disinformation narratives identified in the research by our Media and Democracy Project include debates on the environmental crisis in Brazil, with politicians denying the negative effects of human activities on global temperature changes;[63] on discussions of gender issues, such as trans rights, with criticism of "gender ideology" in Brazil as causing harm to children;[64] and on the effectiveness of vaccines, suggesting they are ineffective against several viruses, such as COVID-19.[65] Overall, such key disinformation narratives at the local level are likely to continue.

Additionally, the potential use of AI in political campaigns is a pressing concern for the Brazilian electoral authorities. AI can enhance the personalisation of campaign messaging, enabling highly targeted communication that resonates with specific demographics and individual voters based on their behaviour and preferences. Additionally, AI technologies such as deepfakes or automated content generation can be used to create misleading or entirely fabricated audiovisual content, posing serious challenges to the veracity of information.

Potential risks ahead of the 2024 municipal elections include:

→ **Disinformation about electoral integrity:** Disinformation campaigns targeting the integrity of the Brazilian electoral process are likely to continue, particularly concerning electronic voting machines. Despite numerous audits and verifications affirming the machines' security and reliability, these campaigns often propagate false claims that they are susceptible to fraud and manipulation. This disinformation typically spreads through social media platforms, conspiracy theory networks, and political figures aiming to undermine public trust in electoral outcomes. The false narratives create doubts about the legitimacy of elections and threaten to destabilise democratic processes by fostering distrust among the electorate. Such efforts challenge the robustness of Brazil's electoral system, which has been lauded for its efficiency and transparency, complicating the broader goal of strengthening democracy.

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63   FGV ECMI, **"Extreme Events, Political Party Disputes, and Disinformation Characterize the Debate on Climate Change on Social Media,"** 26 September 2023.

64   Victor Giusti, Beatriz Almeida Saab, and Ligia Fabris. **"Groups With Far-right Ideological Profile Led the Debate About Transgender People on Facebook Between 2019 and 2023 in Brazil",** Democracy Reporting International, FGV ECMI, 24 May 2023.

65   FGV ECMI, **"Vaccine Debate Mobilizes Misinformation and Lula Is Being Called 'Genocidal'"**, 13 September 2023.

→ **Disinformation about environmental issues:** Disinformation campaigns concerning environmental issues are likely to intensify conflicts around the climate crisis, the protection of native lands, and conservation efforts. Misleading narratives often downplay the severity of deforestation in the Amazon, misrepresent the impacts of agribusiness on biodiversity, and spread falsehoods about indigenous land rights and environmental regulations.

→ **Disinformation about public health:** Disinformation campaigns about health issues in Brazil, especially those that proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, have continued to influence public perceptions and behaviours. This contributed to a climate of disinformation where false claims – such as the virus being a tool of political manipulation – gained traction. Social media and messaging services such as WhatsApp are likely to continue to be primary conduits for disinformation.

→ **Disinformation about rights to freedom:** Disinformation campaigns frequently exploit narratives that claim various freedoms – such as freedoms of speech, choice, and privacy – are under threat. These campaigns are strategically designed to evoke strong emotional responses from the public, leveraging fears of government overreach and suppression of individual rights. By framing issues around the alleged erosion of these freedoms, purveyors of disinformation aim to undermine trust in institutions and mobilise political support against perceived adversaries.

→ **Use of artificial intelligence for disinformation campaigns:** There is likely to be an increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) during the 2024 municipal elections in Brazil. This presents significant risks, particularly in amplifying disinformation and manipulating public opinion. AI-driven tools can create and spread deepfakes and other sophisticated forms of misleading content about candidates and other public figures that are difficult to detect and debunk.

> → **Disinformation as a political strategy for some actors:** In Brazil, disinformation campaigns have become a tactical component of political strategies, particularly evident during elections. Politicians and their affiliates have deployed misleading narratives and false information to manipulate public opinion, discredit opponents, and sway electoral outcomes. This strategy exploits social media platforms and messaging apps like WhatsApp, where information can rapidly spread without stringent checks. The risk to elections is significant; such campaigns can undermine the integrity of the electoral process, decrease public trust in democratic institutions, and polarise society. This scenario becomes even more complex in the context of the 2024 Municipal Elections, as a greater range of media conduits is used for local communication, including radio stations, small television channels, and local events.

▶ PAID POLITICAL ADS

Electoral legislation in Brazil strictly regulates election advertising, including political ads on social media platforms during elections.[66] The laws guarantee fairness and transparency in the electoral process, while limiting economic power and media abuse. Brazilian legislation allows election ads from a specific period before the date of the elections. During this period, candidates and parties can use paid ads on social networks to reach voters, but they must follow strict rules. For example, ads must include the identity of the company or individual who paid for them and their national identification number. In addition, any political advertisement must be clearly labelled, to avoid confusion with organic media content.

During elections, false news and misleading information circulate that can affect the integrity of the electoral process. In response, the TSE has implemented measures, such as creating reporting channels to combat the spread of false content and collaborating with social media platforms, to identify and remove content that violates electoral norms.[67]

The TSE also published a new resolution to safeguard against the use of AI in political advertising. According to Resolution 23.732/2024,[68] political candidates must follow a

66   Justiça Eleitoral, **"Resolução No 23.671, De 14 De Dezembro De 2021"**, 14 December 2021.

67   Saab, Beyer, and Böswald, **"Beyond the Radar: Emerging Threats, Emerging Solutions"**, op. cit., note 53.

68   Justiça Eleitoral, **"Resolução No 23.732, De 27 De Fevereiro De 2024"**, 27 February 2024

series of strictures; deepfakes are prohibited, and anyone using AI in electoral advertising must declare this explicitly. Additionally, chatbots facilitating contact with voters must not simulate dialogue with a candidate or any other person. Any digitally fabricated or manipulated content must not spread false news with the potential to affect the balance of the election or the integrity of the electoral process.

Specifically, one article of the resolution prohibits using fabricated or manipulated content in political ads to disseminate demonstrably false or out-of-context information that could potentially affect the balance of the election or the integrity of the electoral process. Such an act may constitute abuse of political power and improper use of media, leading to the revocation of registration or mandate.

Potential risks ahead of the 2024 municipal elections include:

→ **Political ads used to disseminate disinformation and manipulate information:** Political advertisements on social media have become a potent vehicle for disseminating disinformation and manipulating information in Brazil.[69] Social networks' open and potentially viral nature allows political ads to reach vast audiences quickly, making them a strategic tool for those aiming to influence public opinion through harmful narratives. Political ads can exploit the emotional engagement of users with content that appears credible, yet is often designed to mislead, distort facts, or omit critical information, thereby skewing public perception and debate.

→ **Unequal access to partisan funds:** Unequal access to partisan funds significantly impacts a candidate's ability to boost their content online, which can influence the overall effectiveness of their electoral campaign. Candidates with greater financial resources can invest more in digital strategies, such as paid advertisements and content boosting on platforms such as Facebook, the most utilised service in the 2018 Brazilian elections. This financial capability allows these candidates to reach a wider audience, enhance their visibility, and potentially sway voters' opinions more effectively than counterparts with lesser funds. Conversely, candidates with limited funds might struggle to compete on this digital battleground, as they cannot afford the same level of presence in the crowded digital advertising space.

69   O Globo, **"Plataforma De Anúncios Do Google Falha Em Barrar Desinformação E Discurso De Ódio, Aponta Estudo"**, 5 April 2024.

⟶ **Media channels become challenging to control:** In the debate around the municipal elections, it is worth highlighting the emergence of alternative media channels in various platforms that influence the political debate in Brazil. These channels often declare themselves "non-partisan", but produce videos with a political bias, using the ads tool on social networks. One example is the Brasil Paralelo channel, which produces videos with an extreme right-wing and conservative bias, and which has ads on YouTube. The relationship between the production of this type of content and the agendas of certain politicians is indisputable. The funding dynamics, content production, and advertising dissemination between networks are still unclear, however.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KEY ACTORS

▶ HATE SPEECH

⟳ SHORT-TERM

Electoral authorities from local and regional units of the TSE should undergo specialised training modules, focused on using the new electoral legislation (resolution 23.732/2024) related to combating hate speech in the 2024 municipal elections. Effective collaboration with civil society and private sector companies should be considered to guarantee the successful implementation of training modules, ensuring the efficient application of the new guidelines within municipal elections and their future improvement in specific regulatory frameworks.

Legal authorities must guarantee qualified access to the means to hold candidates accountable and protect them from online hate speech, thus ensuring the free exercise of rights to demonstrate and to participate in politics.

Digital platforms should enhance content moderation and employ a combination of sophisticated AI-driven tools and human reviewers who understand the local contexts to more accurately identify and remove hate speech.

Civil society organisations should establish partnerships with online platforms to streamline the process of reporting hate speech. This could include setting up dedicated hotlines or online portals that facilitate quick and effective communication between users and platform moderators.

⟳ LONG-TERM

Legal authorities should work to constantly to ensure that the legal definition of hate speech, given the difficulty of drawing its legal boundaries, reflects its continuous evolution as a phenomenon in the digital environment.

Digital platforms and regional organisations should collaborate to build a context-specific response framework to identify online hate speech effectively.

Digital platforms should adjust algorithms to deprioritise or limit the spread of borderline content that may not explicitly violate guidelines, but could still lead to hate speech proliferation, and to promote diverse viewpoints and reputable news sources to counteract "echo chambers".

Digital platforms should enforce restrictions against legally punishable hate speech and revise their guidelines to curb the amplification of politically aggressive messages that could incite further hate speech.

Civil society organisations, and especially those focused on media literacy, should launch digital literacy campaigns to educate the public on recognising hate speech and understanding its consequences. They should promote critical thinking skills among internet users that can reduce the spread and impact of harmful content.

▶ DISINFORMATION

⟳ SHORT-TERM

Electoral authorities should act as enabling agents to strengthen local organisations and agents engaged in effectively countering disinformation. Media outlets, CSOs, and community leaders, in addition to fact-checkers, can become disseminators of verified information.

Electoral authorities should monitor the impact of all their initiatives created to combat disinformation and provide reports on their effectiveness and impact on electoral integrity, and on challenges faced.

Digital platforms should consider disinformation in their content moderation practices. They should implement advanced AI tools and human oversight to detect and flag disinformation related to elections. They must establish easy-to-use reporting features users can use to flag suspicious content, which specialised teams should review promptly.

Fact-checking organisations should continue monitoring disinformation trends in real-time during elections. This enables rapid response fact-checking that can immediately correct misleading information before it spreads widely. They should also adapt content to be understandable and relevant across different regions and communities, addressing local dialects and socio-cultural contexts.

LONG-TERM

Electoral authorities should provide specialised training for election officials on the front lines to identify and counter disinformation tactics at the local level. This training should also include methods to educate the electorate they interact with.

Digital platforms must increase transparency about how content is moderated, including the criteria for flagging and removing disinformation. They should publicly share details about the number and type of posts taken down and the rationale for these actions.

Online platforms must modify algorithms to deprioritise content flagged as false or misleading by fact-checkers, reducing its spread. They should refine these algorithms to better distinguish between misleading content and legitimate discourse.

Civil society organisations must sustain advocacy efforts to influence media, technology, and elections policymaking. This includes pushing for stricter regulations on digital campaigning and transparency from social media platforms, and long-term education initiatives focusing on critical media literacy from an early age.

▶ POLITICAL ADS

SHORT-TERM

Electoral authorities must ensure the effective implementation of the current resolution targeting political ads for the 2024 Municipal Elections. They must implement regulations requiring all political ads to disclose funding sources, targeting criteria, and reach, to ensure transparency. Additionally, there should be improved enforcement of laws restricting the boosting of political propaganda on social media to pages associated with candidates, their parties, or their political coalitions, as well as for better identification of such content and other unofficial pages that may play a role in this ecosystem.

Electoral authorities should also enact legislation to prevent the misuse of personal data in political advertising, including strict guidelines on microtargeting and data privacy.

Digital platforms must guarantee political ad transparency. They must ensure all political ads are marked with visible disclaimers, to inform users of the ad's political nature and origin, and publish transparency reports, to ensure audience segmentation and fairness in managing ads.

Online platforms should implement stricter pre-approval protocols for all ads, especially political or issue-based ones. This should include manual reviews by trained staff who can assess the content for misinformation, hate speech, and other problematic elements.

Digital platforms must deploy real-time monitoring technologies to detect and suspend ads that violate platform guidelines or local election laws, improving content moderation policies for political ads.

LONG-TERM

Legislative authorities should consider comprehensive reforms to electoral laws, to address the funding disparities between political parties and candidates, and to ensure more equitable access to funds for advertising on platforms.

Digital platforms must increase transparency about the algorithms that govern ad distribution, particularly those that involve microtargeting, to mitigate the risk of manipulation. They must also create a publicly accessible archive of all political ads on the platform, including detailed information on ad spend, reach, and targeted demographics.

Civil society organisations, especially those focused on media literacy, should focus on educational initiatives, including developing ongoing user education programmes about the nature and impact of political ads and the importance of data privacy.

ELECTION INTEGRITY
IN THE DIGITAL AGE:

ONLINE RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE BRAZILIAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS