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Electorate, Especially Youth, Disengaged Ahead of Brazilian Presidential Election

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One year after Brazilians took to the streets in historic protests, the political ramifications of such a public outcry against government corruption is becoming clear ahead of the October general elections for president and state offices. In particular, the country’s newest potential voters, those aged 16 and 17, have chosen not to register to vote in record numbers. Only 26% of eligible voters in that age range have applied for a voter-registration card, according to data cross-registered between the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (TSE) and the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), compared with 43% in the previous two presidential elections. For Brazilians aged 18-70, there is no question of whether to go to the polls, as voting is mandatory.

Both political scientists and activists have pointed to the relative disillusion with the country’s political system as a direct outcome of last year’s popular uprising. The issues in health care, education, security, and transportation that were highlighted by protesters persist despite government promises, creating a sense that voting will not solve Brazil’s problems.

Such an attitude has expanded to the segment of the population that is required to vote. The youngest age range required to vote, 18-24, is polling with a higher rate than normal of intention to submit blank votes, whereby the voter turns in a blank ballot, fulfilling the legal obligation to vote but without supporting any candidates. That approach is favored by 17% of respondents to a July poll by the Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística (IBOPE), above the 10% mark in July 2010 ahead of that year’s presidential election. Recent polling data has also shown a major decline in voter identification with specific political parties. In turn, more than half of Brazilian voters would prefer that voting be optional, and, if that were the case, a majority of eligible voters would stay home on election day.

Protests foment disenchantment with Brazilian political system

The voter registration deadline passed in May, with TSE data indicating that 760,000 Brazilians aged 16 and 17 declined to register for the October elections. This figure is almost double the 440,000 teenagers who likewise declined ahead of the 2010 election. Political scientists see a direct correlation between this phenomenon and the June 2013 protests that foregrounded citizens’ complaints against the government and political system (NotiSur, July 12, 2013, and Nov. 8, 2013).

"All the distortions in Brazilian politics appeared strongly in the protests," said José Álvaro Moisés, professor of political science at the Universidade de São Paulo. As a result, interest in political issues created by the protest movement has not translated into interest in the political system as it is currently structured, at least among youth. Research by the IBOPE in June 2013 during the protests indicated that 89% of respondents considered themselves "interested in politics" (61% said "very interested" and 28% said "somewhat interested"). These numbers were exceptionally high according to political scientists contacted by the Correio Popular in Campinas, home to one of Brazil’s leading universities. In nonelection years, general political interest typically hovers around 20%.
For youth in particular who are now choosing not to register to vote or are intending to cast a blank ballot, they view a disconnect between the issues they agitated for in the street and actual progress from their political representatives. On July 11, 2013, at a public hearing convened by the Brazilian Senate’s Committee for Human Rights and Legislative Participation, Nicolas Powidayko, president of the Diretório Central Estudantil, explained, "Progress is arriving and the youth are asking that promises be kept. They want to go to college, have a decent place to live, transportation, quality health care, education."

In response to these "voices from the street," President Dilma Rousseff made five pacts with the Brazilian public on political reform, fiscal responsibility, health care, education, and urban mobility. One year later, her government has only completed one of its pacts, on health care, through the Mais Médicos program (NotiSur, Aug. 23, 2013).

Consequently, activists have pushed the notion that voting in elections is not the best path toward reform. Mariana Toledo, a 28-year-old representative of the Movimento Passe Livre that sparked last year’s protests, recently told the media, "Politics isn’t something that gets done in just one day, every two or four years. For us, it’s important to convince young people that they should actively mobilize for their rights instead of conceding that quest to a government representative who will do it for them."

Polling agencies have yet to target this demographic for a precise analysis of the motivation that led the number of 16- to 17-year-old voters to fall from 2.3 million in 2010 to 1.6 million this year. However, anecdotal investigation highlights disillusionment among other typical concerns for young people such as the vestibular, the university entrance exam, and a sense that at that age they are not yet mature enough to vote for candidates.

RBS TV interviewed students in a random classroom in Rio Grande do Sul state, where the number of under-18-year-old voters dropped by half from 2010 to 2014. In the 21-person class, 13 did not register, such as 17-year-old Thiago Canani, who justified his decision as follows: "You have to analyze the candidates’ proposals. And this year is the vestibular year, I need to focus on my studies."

However, while three-quarters of eligible 16- to 17-year-olds did not register, one-quarter did. Ben-Hur Francisco Cardoso explained, "Because of the protest period [in 2013], people were saying that the biggest protest is when you vote. It’s the moment when you can really change something. With that I was motivated to register so that I could change the situation in the country that, sometimes, does not meet my expectations."

In aging electorate, political disinterest also high

While the 16-17 age range has received much attention because of the choice to vote or not, it represents only 1.1% of the electorate. The largest age range, 45-69 years old, just before the cut off where voting becomes optional once again, includes 33.7 million voters that will account for 23.66% of the total electorate. That percentage is a slight increase over 2010, when 45- to 69-year-olds were 30.7 million people and 22.65% of the electorate. Meanwhile, the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds has dropped from 24.15% in 2010 to 23.29% for this year’s election.

In all, 142,822,046 will dutifully go to the polls in October or risk penalties such as fines and the inability to receive a passport. Article 14 of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 requires the adult
population to vote. However, polling in May by Datafolha indicated that 61% of voters would prefer that the civic right be optional. If that were the case, 57% of eligible voters said they would not cast a ballot on Oct. 5.

Data on voter interest goes back to 1989, and this is the first time in which more than half of respondents said they would not vote. Political scientist Humberto Dantas at the Instituto de Ensino e Pesquisa (Insper) in São Paulo put the figures into context. "There is a tendency toward disenchantment that’s not happening just in Brazil. In Europe this is also strong, especially after the 2009 crisis," he said.

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