

WHAT WILL THE MUNICIPAL ELECTION BE LIKE? Crisis, Covid-19 and the voter

COMO SERÁ A ELEIÇÃO MUNICIPAL? Crises, Covid-19 e o eleitor

¿CÓMO SERÁN LAS ELECCIONES MUNICIPALES? Crisis, Covid-19 y el votante

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ABSTRACT:

The possible characteristics of the forthcoming municipal election will be presented in this article. Using the explanation by mechanisms and construction of scenarios, we provide clarity to the coming dispute. Three variables are considered for construction of scenarios: **1)** Polarization / Nationalization; **2)** Political and economic crisis; **3)** Covid-19. The possible effects on the voter of these three causal variables are presented. This article reveals the importance of using the conjuncture analysis, the construction of scenarios and the prospective analysis to explain the voter's behavior.

KEYWORDS: **1)** Municipal election; **2)** Voter behavior; **3)** Prospective analysis

Introduction

In 2016, the dispute for the mayor office took place under the impact of the economic and political crisis, as well as of the June of 2013 demonstrations. "Operation Car Wash" ("Operação Lava Jato" in Portuguese) was one of the variables that caused such political crisis (OLIVEIRA, 2019). Before the last local elections, there was an expectation that changes would occur in voter behavior.

A new voter would emerge. Electoral abstention would increase due to voters' disappointment in politics and traditional parties would lose space in the voter's choice. Oliveira (2017) reveals that despite the crises and the demonstrations, there was no change in the voter's behavior.

This year, local elections will take place again. As in the last dispute, the political and economic crises remain. Operation Car Wash is not acting intensely. However, in the coming election, the health crisis will be present. Since March 2020, the New Coronavirus outbreak has hit Brazil causing social isolation, economic recession and overloading the health system.

The scenarios for Brazil point to a sharp drop in GDP and an economic recession. The unemployment rate can reach 20%. States and municipalities, despite the help from the Federal Government, will lose revenues, and consequently, investment capacity. Small and medium-sized businesses may be closed.

The President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, chose to defend, first of all, the economy. Most of the governors opted for the policy of social isolation to face Covid-19. Due to the different positions, there is a conflict between governors and the Chief of the Federal Executive. Two Ministers of Health were dismissed in the course of the health crisis.

In April 2020, President Bolsonaro dismissed Minister of Justice Sérgio Moro. As result, he is now under investigation by the Federal Supreme Court (STF). The Executive and Legislative relationship remains troubled. Although the President of the Republic offered positions to the parties that are part of the so-called "*Centrão*"¹

Predictions shows that Brazil may have a considerable number of infected and deceased by Covid-19. States such as São Paulo, Maranhão, Pernambuco, Ceará, Rio de Janeiro and Amazonas have reinforced social isolation measures. There is no prospect of sanitary normality as seen before the new coronavirus. The projection is that without a vaccine to immunize people, Covid-19 will remain as threaten and new quarantines may be enacted.

What will be the characteristics of the 2020 municipal elections? This article, using the analysis by mechanisms and the construction of scenarios, will answer the question raised. I will show the possible characteristics of the election, and the reasons why they exist. I present the hypothesis that polarization (adepts of bolsonarism versus non-followers of bolsonarism), Covid-19 and the political and economic crises (independent variables) will build similar and major electoral conjunctures (dependent variable), that is, they can be observed in various corners of Brazil.

Explanation by mechanisms means that variables produce successive effects or not (PEARL; MACKENZIE; 2018). At the juncture, there are the effects produced by the variables. Scenarios are possibilities, hypotheses. They are constructed considering the effects produced by observable variables. Therefore, the scenarios are representations / probable conjunctures of effects (OLIVEIRA; MARQUES; 2014; TALEB, 2014.).

This article will have two sections. At first, I present several hypotheses regarding voter behavior in the forthcoming municipal election and their reasons or causes. Then,

¹ The parties that form the Centrão are: PTB, PP, Solidariedade, PSB, PSD e MDB, PR, Podemos, PROS e Avante.

I present the conclusion, where I exhibit the scenarios that may occur. This paper regards that it is necessary that studies on voter behavior be predictive, prospective and incorporate the analysis of the situation and the construction of scenarios.

Crises and the black swan Covid-19

Political crisis and polarization / nationalization

President Bolsonaro relegated coalition presidentialism. He chose not to distribute positions to the various party associations. Due to the choice of president, parliamentarization emerged. The National Congress, in particular, the Chamber of Deputies, gained prominence and began to define the Bolsonaro government's agenda and to conduct it.

The Bolsonaro government has been marked since its inception by several political crisis. In 500 days of government, done on 5/15/2020, a crisis was counted every 50 days. On 2/02/2019, the first crisis occurred. The President dismissed Gustavo Bebianno from the General Secretariat of the Presidency. That same month, the Minister of Tourism, Marcelo Álvaro, was accused of a scheme of orange candidacies in Minas Gerais (MAGALHÃES, 2020).

Political crises continued in the following months: Conflicts with the Federal Police; fires in the Amazon; investigations of the Marielle Case; defense of the AI-5; political rupture with the PSL; Nazi allusion speech from the Secretary of Culture. Finally, we had Sérgio Moro's exit from the Ministry of Justice due to an alleged attempt by President Bolsonaro to interfere with the Federal Police and the dismissal of two Ministers of health. In addition to these events: demonstrations pro-Bolsonaro took place on the streets and on social networks lately, alongside with virulent criticism by the president's supporters to the political institutions, in particular, the Federal Supreme Court (STF) and the National Congress (IDEM, 2020).

Threatened by several requests for impeachment based whether on charges of responsibility crimes or on investigations by the Supreme Court due to the denunciations by former Minister of Justice Sérgio Moro, President Bolsonaro chooses to make room for Centrão and build a party coalition in March 2020.

In the face of so many turbulences, which characterize the political crisis, it is important to check the popularity of President Bolsonaro before the arrival in Brazil of Covid-19. In December 2018, 65% of voters had the expectation that President Bolsonaro would make an excellent/good government. After 3 months in office, the Bolsonaro government was approved by 32% (Great/Good) of electorate, and

disapproved by 30% (Bad/Very Bad). In December 2019, the approval of the President of the Republic was of 30% of the electorate and 36% of rejection.²

Despite the political crisis in December 2019, President Bolsonaro's disapproval was stable. There are two reasons for the permanence of this stability: 1) Political crises do not interfere with the voter's assessment of the government; 2) The polarization observed in the 2018 presidential election remains. Because of it, and despite the political crisis, the president's popularity remains stable.³

The polarization manifested in the last presidential election will remain in the municipal election. It creates the nationalization of the municipal dispute. On one hand, President Bolsonaro's convinced voters. On the other, voters who reject the president, but are not necessarily Lulistas. My hypothesis is that supporters of Jair Bolsonaro will choose candidates for the Mayor Office who are political allies/defenders of the President of the Republic. On the other hand, these competitors will have the rejection of voters who oppose to Jair Bolsonaro.

The size of the president's popularity will suggest the strength and effects of polarization / nationalization on the electorate. If, by any chance, the president is very unpopular during the municipal election period, polarization tends to weaken the strength of Jair Bolsonaro. If it is the other way around, it gains strength. The polarization / nationalization effects for opposition candidates to the Mayor Office will be strongly observed in the Northeast Region. This hypothesis is built motivated by the following aspects:

- 1) The Northeast region has nine states. Of this total, six are commanded by governors who supported Fernando Haddad (PT) for president of the Republic in the last national elections;
- 2) Candidate Fernando Haddad (PT), in the 2018's national elections obtained in the Northeast Region during the 2nd round, 69.7% of the valid votes against the 30.3% of Jair Bolsonaro, now president;
- 3) The governors of the Northeast Region created in July 2019 the Northeast Consortium. This Consortium aims to create joint policies for the region, but, it also represented and represents the political position of the Northeastern governors related to the Bolsonaro government. I emphasize that the relationship between President Bolsonaro and governors in the Northeast Region is characterized by conflict;
- 4) In December 2019, the disapproval of President Bolsonaro was of 50% (Bad / Terrible) in the Northeast region.⁴

² Datafolha Research, 12/06/2019.

³ Oliveira (2019) shows that polarization manifests due to the strong influence of Operation Lava Jato.

⁴ Datafolha Research, 12/06/2019

Will the nationalization of the municipal dispute take place in other regions? Fifteen governors supported the election of candidate Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. However, today, in May 2020, the President of the Republic has the support of four governors - Antonio Denarium (PSL-Rondônia), Marcos Rocha (PSL-Roraima), Mauro Mendes (DEM-Mato Grosso) and Ratinho Júnior (PSD-Paraná).

João Dória and Wilson Witzel, respectively, governors of the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, were elected in an informal alliance with the candidate Jair Bolsonaro. However, in 2019 they broke with the president. They are chiefs of the two main states in the Southeast Region. São Paulo has 22.4% of voters in Brazil and Rio de Janeiro, 8.5%. Unlike the Northeast, there is no Consortium of governors in other regions.

Looking at the performance of Jair Bolsonaro and Fernando Haddad in the past presidential election, I notice that in the Northeast Region, candidates that opposite to President Bolsonaro can be benefited - See Table 1 -. However, in other regions, President Bolsonaro's allies may be benefited. Nevertheless, there are two points that weaken this last statement: President Bolsonaro does not have the majority of support from the governors of the other regions. Such a fact may weaken the performance of "Bolsonaristas" candidates in the dispute for the municipal executive in this year's election.⁵

Table 1 Performance of Fernando Haddad and Jair Bolsonaro in the 2nd Round of the 2018's presidential elections

Region	Haddad	Bolsonaro
North	48,1%	51,9%
Northeast	69,7%	30,3%
South	31,7%	68,3%
Southeast	34,6%	65,4%
Central-West	33,5%	66,5%

Source: TSE.

Taking as reference the variables (1) polarization of the past presidential election and (2) support from governors, I consider that the polarization / nationalization of the municipal election tends to occur in several states from the federation. Most governors

⁵ "The political control of the government-state machines is a major factor in municipal elections" (DANTAS, 2020).

will support candidates in opposition to President Bolsonaro in several cities. Polarization between bolsonaristas versus opponents of the president will also be present.

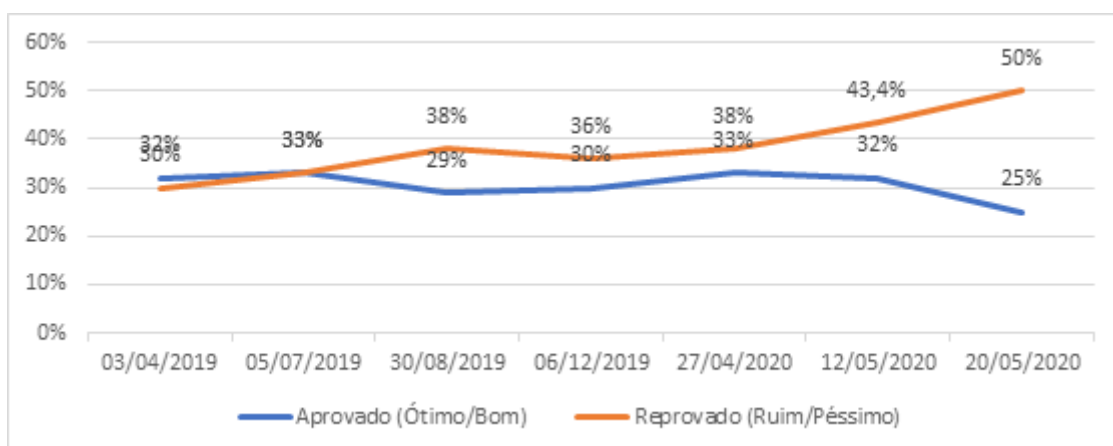
The effects of Covid-19

On February 26, 2020, the first case of coronavirus in Brazil is confirmed in the city of São Paulo. A 61-year-old man who traveled to Italy. Health Minister Henrique Mandetta gains prominence by leading the Bolsonaro government's actions against Covid-19. Social isolation is its flag. On 3/24/2020, President Bolsonaro makes a statement calling for a return to normality. On 3/25/2020, 25 governors spoke out in favor of social isolation. The governors of Rodônia and Roraima did not speak out.

On 4/16/2020, President Bolsonaro dismisses Health Minister Henrique Mandetta. On that same day, the Executive's mandatary announces Nelson Teich as Mandetta's replacement. Before completing a month in office, Teich resigns - 5/15/2020. Mandetta left the government because of his role in fighting Covid-19 and for defending social isolation. Teich resigned for not agreeing with President Bolsonaro regarding the use of chloroquine in the treatment protocol of coronavirus victims.

On 4/03/2020, 76% supported social isolation. On 4/17/2020, this support was 68%, and on 4/27/2020, 67%⁶ Graph 1 shows that the arrival of the new coronavirus in Brazil in addition to the conflict of narratives with governors influenced President Bolsonaro's performance among voters. The failure rate has increased.

Graph 1 Evaluation of the Bolsonaro's Government



⁶ Datafolha Research, 4/27/2020.

Source: Datafolha Research in 4/27/2020 (27/04/2020); from CNT/MDA in 5/12/2020 (12/05/2020); and from XP/IPESPE in 5/20/2020 (20/05/2020).

Effects of social isolation on voters, death toll and economic performance. These three variables need to be analyzed and monitored for their repercussions on the voter. A Datafolha Research in early April revealed that João Dória (PSDB), governor of São Paulo, had a 51% approval rating (Great / Good), meanwhile President Bolsonaro had a 28% approval rating. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, the President of the Republic had 34% approval against 55% of the governor Wilson Witzel (PSC).⁷

João Dória and Wilson Witzel are in favor of social isolation and in April had greater popularity than that of President Bolsonaro. Therefore, data from early April suggests that social isolation maintains or brings popularity to governors in the southeastern states.

A CNT / MDA survey in early May revealed that 41.3% (Great / Good) approved the governors. In January, without the presence of Covid-19, approval was of 30.5%. It is plausible to consider that the increase in the approval of the heads of subnational states resulted from actions to confront Covid-19.

Two precious data: In May, 51.7% of voters approved the Bolsonaro government's action in the face of the pandemic. And 42.3% disapprove. Governors' actions against the pandemic are approved by 69.2% and disapproved by 26.8%. These data show us that the voter approves social isolation, a measure taken by governors. The approval of social isolation causes voters to support governors. However, the majority approval by voters of the Bolsonaro government's actions against the coronavirus, despite the 42.3% disapproval, suggests that the president's narrative, defense of the economy, is supported by part by the electorate.⁸

Due to the data above, three causal hypotheses arise:

- Social isolation loses voter support if it lasts for a long time. As such, governors' popularity will decline. As a result, President Bolsonaro's popularity remains stable or increases;
- Social isolation loses support in a significant portion of voters, and governors, regardless of other aspects, decide to loosen social isolation. Governors do not lose popularity. President Jair Bolsonaro remains popular or loses popularity;
- Social isolation, regardless of its duration, will not lose popularity. Governors too. Unlike the President of the Republic who may lose popularity given that he is against social isolation.

⁷ Datafolha Research, 4/03/2020.

⁸ CNT / MDA Research, May 10, 2020.

The three hypotheses presented show asymmetries. If the popularity of governors remains stable or increases, it causes the popularity of the President to decline or stabilize. The increase in the popularity of the President of the Republic provides stability or a decline in the popularity of governors. The variable that motivates the two mechanisms presented is social isolation. Specifically, its permanence or absence.

Another important variable that can influence voters is the number of deaths by Covid-19. On 5/20/2020, Brazil registered 17,983 thousand deaths. São Paulo is the state that led the number of deaths: 5,147. Followed by Rio de Janeiro, 3,080; Ceará, 1,856; Pernambuco, 1,745; and Amazonas, 1,491. The responsibility for the number of deaths will be attributed to whom: governors or president of the Republic? The former defends social isolation. The president does not.

Once again, I present hypotheses:

- Majority of voters blame the president for the number of deaths. Its popularity declines. Governors gain or maintain popularity;
- Majority of voters do not hold the President of the Republic responsible for the number of deaths. Its popularity remains stable or grows. Governors remain stable in popularity.

Social isolation has made it possible to close the trade and a serious economic crisis is expected. The comprehension of the social isolation effects' on voters must also consider the economic effects. Two hypotheses arise:

- The economic crisis is attributed to the governors, because they were the ones who decreed social isolation. The heads of subnational states are losing popularity. The President of the Republic gains popularity or maintains it.
- The economic crisis is not attributed to governors and social isolation. Governors maintain high popularity. Most voters attribute to President Bolsonaro the responsibility for the great economic crisis. The president's popularity declines.

I emphasize that the number of deaths may not affect the voter's choice. As well as social isolation. That is, they are not variables that will guide the voter's behavior in the municipal election. They will be neutral variables and not active. In this case, it influences the choice of the suffragist.

Finally, two hypotheses:

- The Covid-19 crisis has called for mayors responses against it. The voter will evaluate the mayor based on his performance in confronting the new coronavirus.
- The issue of public health will be intense among voters due to the actions of mayors against Covid-19.

Conclusion

After the hypotheses presented, I show three possible scenarios for the 2020 municipal election. Scenarios are possibilities, hypotheses. They serve to guide the actors' decision-making. Scenario building is not an act of divination, but the construction of reasonable futures based on hypotheses built through possible causal relationships (MINOIS, 2016).

In the first scenario, polarization and nationalization occurs: bolsonaristas *versus* opposition candidates of the president. The behavior of the President of the Republic against Covid-19 in addition to the political and economic crises negatively affect the popularity of Jair Bolsonaro. With the popularity of the president reduced, polarization/nationalization benefits candidates who oppose to Bolsonarism. Governors who defend social isolation maintain high popularity and exert a positive influence on voters. Public health is a relevant topic for voters in the municipal dispute. Mayors who acted efficiently during the Covid-19 crisis are gaining popularity.

In the second scenario, polarization/ nationalization is present. The economic discourse of the President of the Republic prevails over the discourse of social isolation defended by governors. The Bolsonaro government's popularity is relative or stable. Popularity growth may occur. Polarization/ nationalization benefits candidates' pro-Bolsonaro. Governors are held responsible for the economic crisis due to isolation and lose popularity. They have a negative influence on voters. Public health is a relevant topic for voters in the electoral election. Municipal managers who have effectively faced Covid-19 acquire popularity.

The third scenario is characterized by the neutrality of the variables presented. Polarization / nationalization is not present. Most voters are not aware of the effects of Covid-19 on the economy. The debate about social isolation versus the economy has no influence on the majority of voters. The popularity of governors and the president, regardless of how big it is, has no effect on the expressive universe of voters. Local themes of the city will be the voter's agenda, among which, health, public safety, sanitation. The local election is strongly dependent on the mayor's performance in his term.

The hypotheses presented, which bring causal relations, have the power to enable the construction of other scenarios. However, I choose to present the basic scenarios. Note that the scenario building is based on three variables: 1) Polarization / nationalization; 2) Political and economic crises; 3) Covid-19 and its effects - social isolation and economic crisis. These three variables can influence the voter in the local dispute. Strong, relative or weak influence and, of course, no influence.

I bring another variable, which was not addressed during the text: impeachment of President Bolsonaro. Such a scenario should not be ruled out for the STF is investigating the President of the Republic, the political crisis exists, and the Bolsonaro government's popularity may decline sharply. Therefore, in addition to the scenarios presented, I do not disregard the possibility that municipal elections will be disputed with the representative of the Republic responding to an impeachment or a crime of responsibility.

The effects of the variables presented, or their absence, suggest what the election will look like for the position of mayor. The identification of these variables, their possible effects on the voter, and the electoral scenarios arising from it, is the contribution of this article to the understanding of the future municipal dispute.

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RESUMO:

As possíveis características da eleição municipal vindoura serão apresentadas neste artigo. Utilizando da explicação por mecanismos e da construção de cenários, a futura disputa municipal adquire clareza. Três variáveis são consideradas para a construção dos cenários: **1)** Polarização/nacionalização; **2)** Crises política e econômica; **3)** Covid-19. Os possíveis efeitos no eleitor destas três variáveis causais são apresentados. Este artigo revela a importância de utilizar a análise de conjuntura, a construção de cenários e a análise prospectiva para explicar o comportamento do votante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: **1)** Eleição municipal; **2)** Comportamento do eleitor; **3)** Análise prospectiva.

RESUMEN:

Las posibles características de la próxima elección municipal se presentarán en este artículo. Utilizando la explicación por mecanismos y la construcción de escenarios, la futura disputa municipal adquire claridad. Se consideran tres variables para la construcción de los escenarios: **1)** polarización / nacionalización; **2)** crisis políticas y económicas; **3)** Covid-19. Se presentan los posibles efectos sobre el votante de estas tres variables causales. Este artículo revela la importancia de utilizar el análisis de coyuntura, la construcción de escenarios y el análisis prospectivo para explicar el comportamiento del votante.

PALABRAS-CLAVES: **1)** Elección municipal; **2)** Comportamiento del votante; **3)** Análisis prospectivo.