

## A difficult



## Study shows rising ignorance about the democratic system

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**D**uring Brazil's most recent elections, held on October 26, 2014, more than 100 million Brazilians flocked to the polls to choose their representatives. Days later, a team of researchers from several universities went into the field to investigate the relationship between voters and the representative political system. Since 2002, this study—which has ties to the University of Michigan through an international agreement—has been conducted after the results of each election cycle have been determi-

ned. “We want to analyze to what extent democracy is viewed as a system that satisfies citizens,” says political scientist Rachel Meneguello, a professor with the Department of Political Science at the University of Campinas (Unicamp), a researcher with Unicamp’s Center for Studies on Public Opinion (Cesop), and the study’s coordinator.

One of the key aspects of this research project is the Brazilian Electoral Study (ESEB), a nationwide survey last conducted between November 1 and 18, 2014, when 3,136 interviewees were

asked questions concerning their support to democracy (and its definition), voter memory, party preference, and political representation. In 2002, the year in which Workers’ Party (PT) candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was elected to his first term as president, approximately 59.1% of Brazilians preferred democracy as a political system, 15.6% were open to the possibility of a dictatorship, 15.2% replied “either,” and 9.9% did not know how to answer. In 2010, during the transition from President Lula to Dilma Rousseff, adhesion to democracy

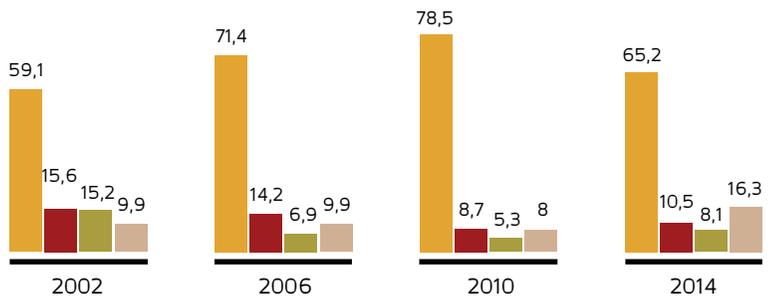
# relationship



## VOTER PREFERENCES

Nationwide survey of 3,136 voters shows decline in support to democracy in 2014 (%)

■ Democracy ■ Dictatorship ■ Either ■ Don't know/No answer



SOURCES: ESEB-CSES COLLECTION, 2002-2014. CESOP/UNICAMP DATABASE

skyrocketed to 78.5%, while 8.7% did not oppose a return to an authoritarian regime. In 2014, however, the preference for democracy fell back to 65.2%.

“A comparison must be made with other data from this research,” Meneguello says. “The portion who thinks a dictatorship is preferable to democracy in some situations went up [from 8.7% to 10.5%], but it’s still low. At the same time, the percentage of those who don’t know how to define a democratic regime climbed substantially, from 25.1% in 2010 to 47.8% in 2014.” These results, in addition to the

fact that fewer than half of those surveyed (40.7%) said they were satisfied with how democracy was working, signal discontent with Brazil's current regime. "Preferring democracy does not mean being happy with it," Meneguello notes.

"Moreover, we received different responses about the definition of democracy," says Valeriano Mendes Ferreira Costa, a member of the research team at Unicamp. "Is it about rights and duties? About justice? Kinds of freedom? This is a time of diminished belief in democracy, which is understandable given the current conjuncture, political polarization, weakened identification with parties (including PT), general political fallout, and the economic crisis. There have been a series of fluctuations to take into account but no steady downward trend in support for democracy," adds Ferreira Costa.

The preference for democracy had been increasing continuously until 2010, while a drop was detected only between 2010 and 2014. From the perspective of political scientists, this reversal reveals a paradox, which is now the main question to be explored. In other words, following a period during which policies meant to foster inclusion, expand rights, and reduce inequality were broadly disseminated as the basic elements of democratic construction in Brazil, the benchmarks associated with strengthening democracy grew more nebulous, increasing the portion of the public that does not know how to define a democratic system.

Meneguello observes that fluctuations in voter perceptions of democracy have to do with the current administration's cornerstone policy. During the two terms of office of former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazilian Social-Democratic Party, or PSDB), economic stability was one of the most widely recognized values associated with the democratization of Brazil, along with direct elections. Under the more recent PT administrations, social policies moved to the forefront. While support for democracy did not change among voters polled in 2014, results still showed less adherence to the prevailing form of government and a decline in public understanding of democracy. "If we analyze the jump from 2002 to 2010 [when support for democracy increased from 59.1% to 78.5%], we have to remember that we were in a time of acquiring rights and

greater socioeconomic inclusion. The data for 2014 suggest that during this period, the public lost sight of what constitutes the benchmarks of democracy," Meneguello says.

Meneguello is wary of drawing any links between the results of the study and the protests and political crisis of 2015. "The data from 2014 cannot be analyzed from the perspective of what happened afterwards. However, the survey did indicate discontent," she says. In her opinion, one telling sign was that the percentage of interviewees who considered themselves represented by a political party fell by half from 2010 to 2014, that is, from 57.9% to 26.4%.

#### MISTRUST

A primary focus of the study is on the representative capacity of the electoral system. "We have a tradition of presidentialism in Brazil. The voter remembers his vote for the Executive office but very often forgets the candidate he chose for the legislature not long after the elections," Meneguello adds. According to Meneguello, data from the study indicate mistrust of the very workings of representative institutions: in 2010, 25.6% of citizens gave Congress a positive evaluation, but in 2014 this figure dropped to 16.8%. In her assessment, "this means the relationship between the citizen and the political system is bad." However, there is no major crisis regarding the

## Fluctuations in perceptions of democracy are related to the current administration's cornerstone policy

value of voter participation and choice: in 2014, 79.1% of citizens believed their vote held the power to bring about change; in 2010, this number was 71%.

In addition to the analyses made possible by Eseb data, the project encompasses other lines of research and involves political scientists from a number of universities: Meneguello, Ferreira, and Oswaldo Estanislau do Amaral from Unicamp; Maria Teresa Miceli Kerbauy from São Paulo State University (Unesp); Pedro Floriano Ribeiro and Maria do Socorro Sousa Braga from the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), and Bruno Wilhelm Speck from the University of São Paulo (USP).

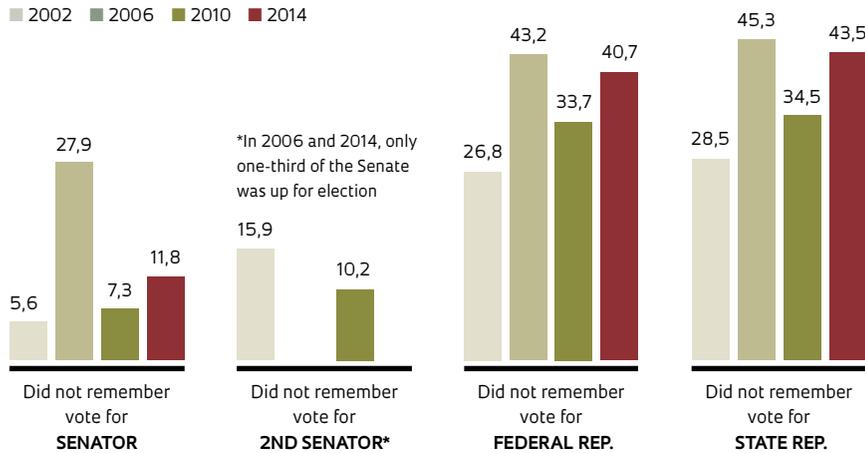
A second project was dedicated to a first-of-its-kind Brazilian study about the internal workings of political organizations, evaluating the role of political party activism and party membership in the state of São Paulo, where Brazil's 32 active parties maintain a presence. A total of 445 voters belonging to São Paulo's 10 largest parties were surveyed. One study indicator showed that party activists are quite participative: 92.1% of PT members were involved in at least one party event during 2013 and this high rate was echoed by PSDB (90.2%), the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB; 82.8%), and the Democratic Labor Party (PDT; 82.4%), among others.

There are a variety of theories that attempt to explain voter behavior around



## VOTER MEMORY

In 2014, over 40% of those surveyed did not remember the candidate they had chosen for state and federal representative just weeks after the election



## A GAMUT OF ANSWERS

Regime preference according to definitions of democracy (2010-2014)

| Definitions of democracy   | Democracy is always better than any other form of government |       | In some situations, a dictatorship is better than a democracy |       | Either/ Neither of the two is better |       | Don't know |       |
|--|--|-------|---|-------|--------------------------------------|-------|------------|-------|
|  | 2010   | 2014  | 2010  | 2014  | 2010                                 | 2014  | 2010       | 2014  |
|  | Rights and duties/<br>Social rights/<br>Citizenship          | 86,8% | 90,6%   | 5%    | 7,1%                                 | 3,8%  | 2,4%       | 4,4%  |
| Form of government/<br>Procedures<br>for governing               | 82,4%  | 88%   | 9,3%  | 8,9%  | 5,6%                                 | 0,6%  | 2,8%       | 2,5%  |
| Freedom to come and go   | 87,1%  | 82,7% | 8,9%  | 11,55 | 2%                                   | 5,8%  | 2%         | 0%    |
| Freedom of expression<br>and opinion                             | 84,6%  | 81,9% | 8,9%  | 11,5% | 4%                                   | 5,3%  | 2,5%       | 1,2%  |
| Right to vote  | 78,6%  | 79,8% | 10,3%   | 12,5% | 6,9%                                 | 5,8%  | 4,1%       | 1,9%  |
| Unity of the population/<br>A victory of the people/<br>Struggle | 94,3%  | 81,8% | 2,9%  | 9,1%  | 2,9%                                 | 4,5%  | 0%         | 4,5%  |
| Freedom of choice/<br>Right to choose                            | 86,3%  | 84%   | 6,1%  | 11,2% | 6,1%                                 | 3,6%  | 1,5%       | 1,2%  |
| Freedom in general   | 90%  | 87,5% | 6%  | 10%   | 0%                                   | 2,5%  | 4%         | 0%    |
| Justice/ Equality/ Respect                                       | 74,3%  | 74,6% | 14,3%   | 18,3% | 0%                                   | 5,6%  | 14,3%      | 1,4%  |
| Responses critical of<br>democracy in Brazil                     | 45,5%  | 58,3% | 36,4%   | 20,8% | 0%                                   | 12,5% | 18,2%      | 8,3%  |
| Other answers  | 84,2%  | 74,4% | 7,9%  | 16,3% | 5,3%                                 | 9,3%  | 2,6%       | 0%    |
| Don't know   | 60,9%  | 47,8% | 8,2%  | 8,8%  | 8%                                   | 11%   | 23%        | 32,3% |

SOURCES: ISEB-CSES COLLECTION, 2002-2014; CESOP / UNICAMP DATABASE

the world. One contends that the economy is the determining factor in elections. Researchers affiliated with the Unicamp-led project take other contextual variables into consideration, such as socioeconomic structures. Although they do not ignore the weight of the economy and the role of institutions, they also consider approaches that recognize the impact of different levels of social reality on individual political behavior.

“Generally speaking, the economy is an extremely important factor behind voter behavior, but in itself it cannot account for the different choices voters make,” says Bruno Bolognesi, a researcher with both the Research Group on Brazilian Political Sociology, of the Federal University of Paraná (Nusp/UFPR), and the Research Group on Latin American Political Parties (Nepla/UFSCar). “Various factors have to be investigated.” Meneguello calls attention to another issue: “We’re working with individual data, with people’s perceptions. If voters feel the economy is doing well, they vote for government leader X. If the economy is doing poorly, they think: ‘I’m going to lose my job; I don’t have any economic prospects’, and they vote for candidate Y. However, it’s not just that. People have political ideologies, beliefs, and values.”

According to Valeriano Ferreira Costa, this observation is particularly true because the last elections came at a time of political polarization. “The economy matters, but so do ideological and party identification. In 2014, for example, why did so many people vote for Aécio Neves [who received 48.35% of the votes], if the economy was apparently doing well then under [President] Dilma [Rousseff]? In 2006, given the ‘mensalão’ vote-buying scandal, why did so many people re-elect Lula?” the researcher asks. “After all, the vote expresses the voter’s opinion. For a long time, in the 1970s, democratic studies only looked at socioeconomic indicators— which explain a lot but not everything. In the end, our public opinion research highlights this dimension: opinion matters.” ■

### Project

The organization and functioning of representative politics in the State of São Paulo between 1994 and 2014 (No. 2012/19330-8); Grant Mechanism Thematic grant; Principal Investigator Rachel Meneguello (Cesop-Unicamp); Investment R\$854,931.60 (FAPESP).