The Brazilian 2014 Presidential Elections:
A Country Fractured by Class Struggle?

by Lucio Rennó | Universidade de Brasília | luciorenno@unb.br

Drama was the defining trait of the 2014 Brazilian presidential election, one of the most eventful in the country's modern history. A series of unpredictable events, one of them tragic, marked the campaign, yet the final result was much as expected: a close victory of the Workers' Party (PT) over the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) in the second round. Given the backdrop of the election—high levels of dissatisfaction with the economy and the government's performance; rising inflation; slow growth; and a strong and charismatic PSDB candidate, Aécio Neves—the small margin of victory was unsurprising.

If the outcome of the election was predictable, the process that took us there was one of a kind. The oscillation in vote intention during the campaign was impressive: for a few weeks in August and September, and for the first time since 2002, the Worker's Party (PT) candidate did not sit atop the polls alone. The dynamic of the campaign was drastically altered by a specific event: the tragic death of Eduardo Campos, the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) candidate, in a plane crash on the coast of São Paulo State. Marina Silva, his vice presidential running mate and successor, vaulted immediately to the top of the polls, moving into a statistical dead heat with incumbent Dilma Rousseff of the PT. Polls also showed Marina victorious in a possible runoff with Dilma. This turn of events came in mid-August, just as candidates took to the airwaves for their free radio and television time, which is traditionally when the campaign kicks into high gear.

The story of the election can be summarized by the effective negative campaigning by the PT, first against Marina Silva in the first round and then against Aécio Neves in the October runoff. The 2014 campaign will be remembered for the spectacular evaporation of Marina Silva as a direct consequence of her inability to react efficiently to PT attacks. A second important aspect was the impressive turnaround of Aécio Neves in the final days, even the final hours, of the first round. After Marina replaced Campos in mid-August, the presidential election had apparently become a two-woman race, and Aécio looked set to finish a distant third (some allies even urged him to drop out of the presidential race altogether). This would have been a bitter outcome for Aécio and his PSDB, which had finished first or second in every presidential election since 1994. Against all odds, however, Aécio managed to perform very well in televised debates, especially the final one on Rede Globo some 72 hours prior to the first round. Helped by the rapid meltdown of Marina Silva, his debate performance spurred a wave of support from undecided voters and some last-minute defections from the Marina camp.

In this article I explore some possible consequences of this harsh, tortuous, and competitive election. One aspect of the 2014 election has caught the attention of political scientists and pundits alike: a possible class divide in which poor people voted for the PT presidential candidate and the upper classes (the "traditional" middle class in particular) backed the PSDB candidate. Is there really a class divide in Brazil, reflected by local-level electoral outcomes, as some analyses have suggested? If so, how deep is this chasm? Does the harsh rhetoric of the campaign, which spilled over to party and candidate activists—especially on social media such as Facebook, viral messages and videos, and vitriolic Internet chatrooms—truly reflect an unfolding class struggle in Brazil?

The analysis below uses the 2014 Brazilian Electoral Panel Study (BEPS), a seven-wave nationally representative public opinion panel study conducted with a sample of the Brazilian electorate over the course of the election.[1] The first wave was conducted in May-June 2014, with 3,000 face-to-face interviews of Brazilian citizens over 18 years of age in 22 states in all five regions, including both urban and rural areas. Subsequent waves were conducted over the telephone, from randomly sampled respondents that participated in wave one and for whom we had valid phone numbers. Each wave followed important campaign events, such the onset of free airtime and the televised debates. Hence the design of the study captures the effect of important campaign events on vote intentions. A wave with 1,207 respondents was concluded in mid-October, after the first round, and the final wave of the BEPS went to the field in early November, with 1,001 interviews conducted immediately after the runoff election. The remaining four waves had approximately 600 interviews each and were scattered between July and early October, for a total of 7,805 interviews over the course of the campaign. Response patterns varied by respondent, but approximately 40 percent of the entire sample participated in at least five different waves, providing us with abundant within-subject variation over time. The BEPS dataset allows us to map the trajectory of vote intentions and vote choice during the campaign.

Deconstructing Marina (and Aécio)

As noted above, the 2014 campaign featured a large dose of negative campaigning, especially by the PT. This tactic proved extremely efficient against Marina, who had difficulty in responding to accusations of inconsistencies in her government program, especially with regard to her proposal for an independent

Figure 1: Vote intentions by wave in the panel study in the Brazilian 2014 elections.
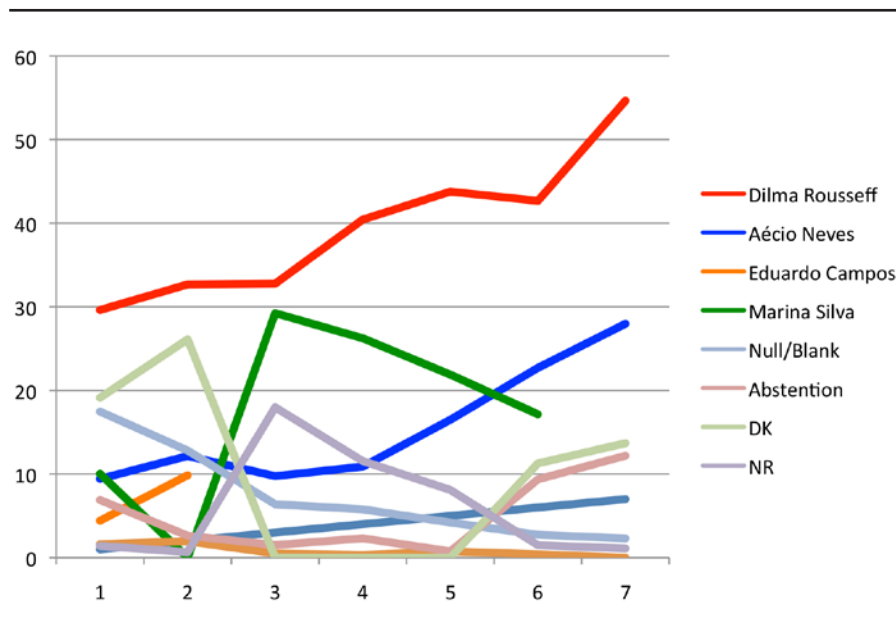
Source: 2014 Brazilian Electoral Panel Study (BEPS)

Central Bank. She also failed to neutralize suggestions that her campaign was backed by banks and by elites, as one of her closest campaign advisors was an heir to a large and powerful financial institution in Brazil. As a consequence, the campaign from late August onward was defined by a consistent decline in vote intentions for Marina, as figure 1 illustrates.

As is clearly shown, in wave 3, which went to the field between August 28 and September 1, just after the death of Eduardo Campos and the beginning of free TV time, there was an upsurge in support for Marina. The shock of the Campos tragedy clearly created a one-off sympathy effect, which was enhanced by the novelty of Marina's appearance on the scene and her claim to represent a break from the traditional PT-PSDB duopoly in presidential elections. From then on, due to the very sophisticated and efficient PT-led campaign against her, she began to shed votes on an almost daily basis. Meanwhile,

the Aécio campaign maintained a low profile during most of the first round, avoiding confrontation with Marina, but clearly waiting in the wings in the hope of emerging as the more "authentic" alternative to the PT. His campaign started picking up steam in the days immediately prior to the first round of voting on October 5. Our wave 5, conducted from September 29 to October 4, right before the first round, shows Aécio already overtaking Marina, and the final result of the first round (captured by wave 6) confirms the comfortable lead he had over Marina when the polls were closed.

The runoff in October saw a similar negative campaign strategy by the PT, but now directed against Aécio. This also proved effective, but not as much as against Marina. Our final wave data underrepresented the actual vote Aécio received in the second round, showing a more timid growth than he actually enjoyed. Aécio actually picked up 13

percent of the vote between the first and second rounds of the election. Dilma, on the other hand, picked up 12 percent of the vote between both rounds. Our survey overestimated her final performance. Still, both candidates had similar acceleration in vote intention in the final leg of the campaign, something our data do capture well. In sum, Aécio fared better in fending off the PT attacks and came much closer to defeating the PT than did his PSDB predecessors in 2010, 2006, and 2002.

Class Voting in the Presidential Elections

Was Aécio able to capitalize electorally on some specific social group? Did Dilma fare better in other groups? This is essential to understand if there is, in fact, a class bias in the distribution of vote choice across the country. To some, such as José Agripino Maia (DEM-Rio Grande do Norte), an important opposition leader, the answer was clear: "Uma coisa ficou muito clara: na maioria dos Estados do Sudeste, no Centro-Oeste, ou seja, no Brasil moderno, no Brasil que produz, a vitória de Aécio Neves foi acachapante."[2] For the opposition, the geographical divide of the country reflects class lines: the wealthy and prosperous supported the PSDB whereas the poor and social welfare dependent supported the PT.

However, opposition politicians were not alone in espousing this view. Lula da Silva often used the "us-against-them" rhetoric in order to situate his political project, and that of the PT, on the side of the poor and the opposition's project on the side of the elites. As he claimed: "A elite brasileira está conseguindo fazer o que nós nunca conseguimos: despertar o ódio de classes." In the same speech, he declared that the campaign was not Dilma's struggle alone: "Não é uma briga dela [Dilma], mas é a

briga de um projeto. É um projeto de inclusão social contra um projeto de marginalização social."[3]

Do the data support this apparent consensus among the two main adversaries in current Brazilian politics? The answer is: in part. We examined all possible patterns of relationship between social class and vote choice as well as introduced an indicator of social mobility, in the hope that the combination of class and mobility might be important to understand Brazilian electoral cleavages. We also analyzed the determinants of vote choice in the first and second rounds using a multiple regression model. What we find is that only one specific group differentiated itself from the vote patterns of others, all of which tended predominantly to support Dilma. Aécio received massive support from the "traditional" middle classes and, in particular, those that perceived upward mobility in the past decade.[4] Aécio harvested his support not from the economically vulnerable, but from the established middle classes.

Figure 2 depicts this reality very clearly: the vote for Aécio tends to be concentrated within a specific group. He won among the middle class and among those with (subjective) upward mobility. In similar graphs, which we omit for space reasons, we can easily see that the vote for Dilma is drawn from all social sectors, although she fares much better among the lower and lower-middle classes.[5]
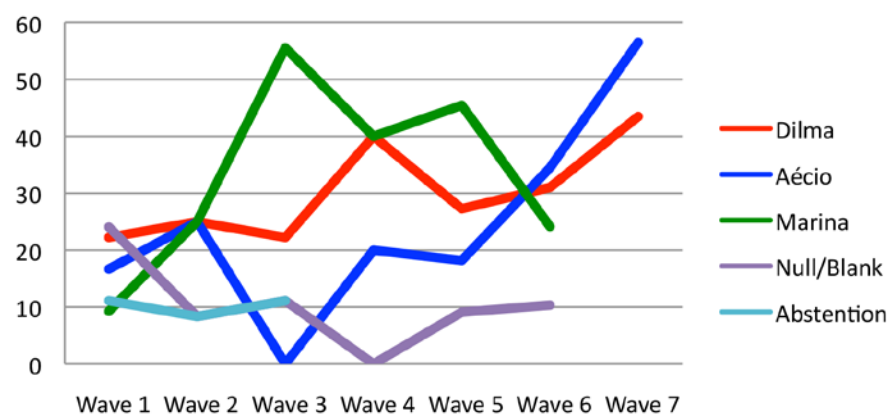
Based on these data, we come to a conclusion that raises doubts about the apparent class divide in Brazil. Only the traditional middle class with upward social mobility appears to behave differently from the others in its predominant support for Aécio and particular dislike of Dilma and the PT. All other groups generally gravitated toward Dilma. The pattern, then, does not seem to be one of social class. Our ongoing multivariate analyses of the BEPS data show that the determinants of vote choice are government evaluation (i.e., assessment of Dilma's performance in office), partisanship, views on social policies, and, to a lesser extent, ideology. Class and social mobility take a back seat here. In other words, the oversimplifying "class cleavage" story tends to obscure underlying currents of electoral behavior that are much more complex and interesting.

Notes

[1] The 2010 BEPS is available at http://www. iadb.org/en/research-and-data/publication-details,3169.html?pub_id=IDB-DB-105. We expect the 2014 dataset to be made public by the end of 2015, respecting a normal embargo period.

[2] "One thing is very clear: in the majority of the states in the Southeast, in the Center-west, that is, in the modern Brazil, in the productive Brazil, Aécio's victory was overwhelming." http://noticias.bol.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/eleicoes/2014/10/27/brasil-moderno-deu-vitoria-a-aecio-neves-diz-chefe-de-campanha-do-tucano.htm. Translation by the author.

[3] "The Brazilian elite is being able to do what we were never able to accomplish: awaken class hatred." "It's not her (Dilma's) fight, but a fight of a political project. It's a project of social inclusion against one of social marginalization." See http://www.folhapolitica.org/2014/06/ao-comentar-ataques-dilma-lula-fala-em.html. Translations by the author.

[4] Both of these variables were measured based on self-classifications on social class scales (low, low-middle, middle, middle-high, and high). The indicator of social mobility was based on the differentiation between perceptions of current and past social class.

[5] All results available upon request from the author: luciorenno@unb.br. ∎

Figure 2: Vote of the middle class with upward mobility in the 2014 Presidential Elections.

Source: 2014 Brazilian Electoral Panel Study.