

Brazil Case Study: Political Polarization and Its Effects on a Democratic Youth

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This study examines the impact of political polarization on youth engagement in Brazil, focusing on the intersection of historical legacies, cultural dynamics, and modern political influences. Tracing the evolution of polarization from the military dictatorship era to contemporary politics under Jair Bolsonaro, the study explores how polarized rhetoric, misinformation, and digital media have reshaped the political landscape for young Brazilians. Data for the study were collected through a survey of 159 college students aged 18-25 from public and private institutions across Brazil, complemented by 10 interviews with youth activists and party leaders from the Workers' Party (PT) and the Liberal Party (PL). These methods aimed to evaluate how polarization affects young people's beliefs, political identities, behaviors, engagement levels, and ability to participate in constructive political discourse. The findings reveal that while polarization fosters hostility and deepens ideological divides, it also inspires youth activism by creating a sense of identity and belonging. Education, digital information channels, and the lack of representation in leadership roles emerge as key factors shaping youth engagement. Despite challenges, the research underscores hope: young Brazilians display resilience, critical awareness, and a shared desire for accountability and inclusivity. This study highlights the potential of youth to bridge divides and lead Brazil toward a more collaborative and democratic future.

Keywords: Youth Engagement, Political Polarization, Brazilian Democracy, Ideological Identity, Civic Participation, Generational Resilience

Introduction

Political polarization has emerged as a defining feature of Brazil's modern political landscape, shaping the country's democratic processes and societal dynamics. Deeply rooted in historical legacies such as the military dictatorship and socio-political upheavals, polarization has evolved into a pervasive force influencing public discourse and political behavior. In recent decades, this divide has intensified, driven by global trends in populism, the proliferation of misinformation, and the rise of divisive rhetoric under leaders like Jair Bolsonaro.

This study focuses on how political polarization affects youth engagement, a critical demographic whose participation will shape the future of Brazilian democracy. Brazilian youth have historically played pivotal roles in key democratic movements, from opposing the military dictatorship in the 1960s to advocating for economic reform during the impeachment protests of the 1990s. However, today's youth face a political environment markedly different from previous generations. With the influence of digital media, polarized rhetoric, and misinformation, their ability to navigate and contribute to democratic discourse is both challenged and redefined.

The purpose of this research is to understand how political polarization influences young Brazilians' beliefs, political identities, and engagement with democratic institutions. By investigating these dynamics, the study seeks to reveal the ways in which polarization shapes their perceptions and actions, while also identifying ways to foster more inclusive and productive political discourse. This research is particularly significant as it highlights the intersection of historical legacies, cultural factors, and modern influences, providing valuable insights into the evolving role of youth in a polarized democracy.

Historical Background of Brazilian Politics and Youth Engagement

Historically, Ribeiro (1995) discusses Brazil's rich tapestry of cultural, ethnic, and social diversity, which has contributed to an inherently fragmented society since colonization. This diversity, while a source of cultural richness, also fostered competition and tension between different groups from early on. In many ways, the polarization we see today is an extension of these deep-rooted divisions. Over the decades, as economic and political power became concentrated in the hands of certain elites, other groups (especially the working class and rural populations) felt marginalized. These divisions became key in Brazil's modern political conflicts, particularly as populist rhetoric began to pit "the people" against "the elites".

The beginning of political polarization in Brazil can be dated to the military coup of 1964, as explained by Codato (2005), it can be seen as a major turning point in the country's political landscape. The coup was deeply influenced by Cold War politics, particularly the fear of communism that swept across Latin America. The United States, under its policy of containment, supported anti-communist regimes in the region encouraging Brazil's military leaders to frame their actions as a necessary defense against leftist threats. This justification for authoritarianism laid the groundwork for future polarization by creating a stark divide between those who supported the regime (usually wealthier elites) and those who opposed it (typically the working class and leftist activists).

The dictatorship that followed was characterized by severe repression, particularly targeting left-wing groups and youth activists. Martins Filho (2002) emphasizes that the military justified its brutal suppression as a way of protecting democracy from the global West notion of "communist menace". In practice, this meant cracking down on any form of opposition, often through violent means. This repression helped solidify the divide between the political right (who supported the regime's authoritarian measures) and the left (who saw the military as oppressors of democratic freedoms).

This period had deep importance to youth engagement in politics as student movements became a central force in opposing the dictatorship. Santos (2009) details how youth-led protests in the 1960s were crucial in challenging the regime, often at great personal risk. These protests were driven not only by opposition to domestic policies but also by a sense of solidarity with international movements, such as protests against the Vietnam War and U.S. imperialism (Mische, 1997). Youth activism during this period was a potent symbol of resistance, and the regime's violent crackdown on these movements—most notably through arrests, torture, and assassination of leaders like Alexandre Vanucchi Leme (youth leader)—further deepened societal divides.

As repression intensified, some student activists turned to armed resistance, inspired by revolutionary movements in Cuba and China. Do Valle (1999) explains that this radicalization of the student movement reflected a growing sense of frustration with peaceful protest, as it seemed unable to bring about meaningful change. These movements became increasingly clandestine, and their participation in armed struggles against the

regime highlighted the profound ideological split between authoritarianism and revolutionary socialism reflecting an extreme rejection to Western values (Codato, 2005).

With societal pressures for direct elections and the end of the military regime, the dictatorship ended in 1985, lasting for 21 years. However, the end did not resolve Brazil's ideological divides, instead these divisions were reconstituted within the framework of a fragile democracy (Codato, 2005). Perissinotto and Veiga (2017) argue that while democratic institutions were rebuilt, the political elite remained deeply divided along the same ideological lines that had defined the dictatorship era. This led to a form of democratic polarization, where both sides continued to view each other with suspicion, each side claiming to be the true protectors of Brazil's democratic values.

Mische (1997) explains that with the transition to democracy, Brazil entered a new political era, with the election of Jos é Sarney and a term later Fernando Collor who left power through an impeachment process. This act in 1992, triggered by widespread corruption allegations, marked another major moment in Brazil's political history highlighting how youth again took center stage, this time under the banner of the "Caras Pintadas" movement. These protests, while having a focus on corruption, also reflected a broader disillusionment with the political class. The movement represented a new form of youth activism, one that was less focused on ideological battles and more concerned with holding the government accountable for its actions.

Within this same time-frame, in the 1990s, with the rise of the Workers' Party (PT) and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), Brazil's political landscape became increasingly polarized. Alkmim and Terron (2022) illustrates that while both parties operated within a left-leaning ideological framework, their approaches to governance were fundamentally different. The PT, led by figures like Lula da Silva, embraced a populist rhetoric that championed the working class and social welfare programs. The PSDB, on the other hand, positioned itself as more technocratic, favoring market-oriented reforms and appealing to Brazil's urban elite.

The electoral competition between these two parties further entrenched polarization. Perissinotto and Veiga (2017) argue that this period saw a "professionalization of politics", where political decisions and campaigns became more centralized, orchestrated by party elites rather than grassroots movements. Brazil's political landscape was driven by the involvement of everyday citizens, especially through movements such as labor unions, student organizations, and social movements, which had been instrumental in pushing for democratic change during and after the military dictatorship. However, as the PT and PSDB entrenched their dominance, political leadership became more detached from these grassroots movements.

This professionalization of politics meant that the parties became more focused on maintaining their electoral power and political control rather than fostering genuine participation from the wider public. Political campaigns were run by professionals (pollsters, strategists, and media consultants) who prioritized electoral success over broad democratic engagement. As a result, many Brazilians, particularly the youth who had historically played key roles in political mobilization, began to feel increasingly alienated from the political process. The PT and PSDB, despite their ideological differences, both contributed to a political system where decisions were made by party elites and where meaningful citizen participation was limited to voting during elections, rather than active involvement in shaping policies (Perissinotto & Veiga, 2017).

This alienation was particularly pronounced among younger Brazilians, who saw their concerns and issues (such as economic inequality, public services, and corruption) ignored by political elites. The disconnect between the parties' professionalized leadership and the everyday experiences of the Brazilian people helped fuel growing dissatisfaction with the political system (Perissinotto & Veiga, 2017).

With the Workers' Party in power since 2003 voted through a democratic setting, this dissatisfaction with politics led mainly by a corruption scheme behind the party led to the protests that swept across Brazil in 2013 that were a major turning point in the country's political polarization. Daly (2020) argues that these protests, which began as a reaction to rising public transportation costs, quickly morphed into a nationwide expression of frustration with the political establishment. Youth, who were at the forefront of the protests, demanded systemic change and greater government accountability.

This period marked the beginning of a shift away from the PT-PSDB duopoly. As Lavinias and Gonçalves (2018) describe, the protests exposed deep public anger at corruption within the PT, which had been in power for over a decade. This anger gave rise to "antipetismo" (anti-PT sentiment), which became a powerful force in Brazilian politics, meaning a rejection of the Workers' Party politics. The protests also reflected a growing sense of disillusionment with traditional politics, as many Brazilians began to turn to more extreme, anti-establishment figures. The protests ended in 2016 with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (PT).

This dissatisfaction set the stage for future crises of legitimacy as disillusioned citizens completely rejected the left politics in place from 2003-2016. With the new elections in 2018, as a result of the social, economic, and political scenario, Jair Bolsonaro was elected, representing the culmination of years of political polarization. Cardoso Jr. (2018) explains how Bolsonaro successfully tapped into the widespread disillusionment with the political establishment by positioning himself as the ultimate outsider. His campaign rhetoric, which invoked the authoritarian values of the military dictatorship, appealed to voters who were frustrated with the corruption and inefficiency of the PT and the left-wing.

Bolsonaro's rise also reflects broader global trends of authoritarian populism, as Daly (2020) notes. His campaign was marked by divisive rhetoric that sought to deepen the ideological divide between the right and the left, painting leftists as enemies of traditional Brazilian values. His administration has continued this strategy, using polarization as a political tool to consolidate power and marginalize opposition.

Lavinias and Gonçalves (2018) argue that the rise of "antipetismo" was central to Bolsonaro's success. This sentiment, which had been building since the 2013 protests, framed the PT as the source of all of Brazil's problems, from corruption to economic mismanagement. Bolsonaro capitalized on this narrative, presenting himself as the only candidate who could rid Brazil of the corrupt influence of the left.

Bolsonaro's presidency (2018-2022) has also been marked by what Daly (2020) refers to as "democratic decay", where the erosion of democratic norms and institutions occurs rather than a sudden collapse of democracy (like a coup or violent overthrow), it is a slower process where the mechanisms of democracy remain intact on the surface, but their true functions are destroyed from the inside. In the case of Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, Daly (2020) describes how this democratic decay occurred through what is termed "autocratic legalism". Autocratic legalism is a process where leaders use legal and constitutional means to undermine democratic institutions and establish their own power. Bolsonaro's administration used this practice to weaken the judiciary (publicly criticizing judges who make decisions against his policies or allies, and attempting to pack the courts with judges sympathetic to his administration); manipulate laws and institutions (supported laws that give more power to the executive branch, undermining the checks and balances that are crucial for a functioning democracy); attack on the press and free speech (waged a consistent campaign against the media and journalists who criticize his administration); undermine civil liberties (responded harshly to protests against his government, using the law to justify crackdowns); and favor military influence (appointing numerous military figures to high-ranking positions in his administration).

Another mark of his government, as described in Singer (2021) was Bolsonaro's strategy of deepening polarization through hate-based politics, often framing political debates as battles between good and evil, with Bolsonaro and his supporters positioned as defenders of Brazil's Christian, family-oriented values against the corrupt left. This form of politics has further polarized Brazilian society, making it difficult to bridge ideological divides.

Bolsonaro's approach to politics, particularly his framing of it as a moral battle between good and evil, has strongly resonated with many young people who see him as a defender of traditional values. In the study's responses, young right-wing individuals often praise Bolsonaro for embodying what they perceive as genuine Brazilian values, such as Christianity, patriotism, and the protection of the family unit. For these youth, his administration marks a clear departure from previous governments, which they believe failed to sufficiently uphold conservative principles. Bolsonaro's ability to gather support stems from casting himself as a leader against corruption and the progressive ideologies that many of his supporters associate with the political left. This narrative has positioned him as a significant figure for young conservatives, reinforcing their view that he represents the "true" right in Brazil.

Bolsonaro's Government Through Youth Lens

One youth leader from the Liberal Party (PL), Bolsonaro's former political party, during the interview conducted for this study emphasized this point, stating, "Before Bolsonaro, right-wing politics didn't exist in Brazil; it was all theater. He was the one who showed Brazil what true right-wing policy was." This perspective highlights how deeply the polarized political environment and media influence have shaped young people's understanding of what constitutes "right" and "left" policies. Five of the college students surveyed directly associated left-wing politics with former president Lula and right-wing politics with Bolsonaro. Some of them provided more nuanced explanations, linking left-wing policies with social welfare programs and right-wing policies with economic liberalism. However, others simplified the division by using Lula and Bolsonaro as synonyms for their respective ideologies. This pattern reflects a broader trend in the responses: students with center-left or centrist views tended to provide more detailed explanations of political ideologies, while those with right-wing views were more divided, often reducing the discussion to a binary of Bolsonaro as good and Lula as evil.

In contrast, only one youth leader from the Workers' Party (PT), Lula's political party, made a direct connection between Bolsonaro and the right-wing. This leader distinguished Bolsonaro's brand of politics as an "explosive right", stating that it goes beyond traditional right-wing policies and veers into "fascism" or "extreme-right" territory. They described Lula as representing the "center-left", though they noted that his ability to fully embody leftist politics has been constrained by Brazil's extreme political polarization. These activists pointed to the sharp division between left and right as a primary driver of polarization in the country, viewing it as a battle between irreconcilable ideologies fueled by hatred. One activist interviewed observed that "right-wing politics are supposed to offer contrasting views that can be discussed in dialogue, but Bolsonaro's policies eliminate any possibility of conversation." This reflects what Singer (2021) calls "hate-based politics", with youth activists interviewed stating that "Bolsonaro not only seeks to deny people their rights but also denies the very existence of some." For these young leftists, dialogue with Bolsonaro supporters is impossible because they feel that his policies, particularly on LGBTQ+, racial, and gender issues, personally attack their identities, as one activist interviewed noted: "These ideas suggest that LGBT people should not exist, black people should stay silent, and women should have no rights."

Dibai (2019) argues that Bolsonaro brought elements of a radical right to the Brazilian political scene, standing out for his nationalism, xenophobia, racism, defense of a strong State, and anti-democratic speeches. This coincides with the perceptions of some young people interviewed, who associate the right with the figure of Bolsonaro and the values he promoted, such as patriotism and liberal economics, in addition to a clear defense of conservative values. The college students in the survey highlighted social conservatism, support for neoliberal economic policies, and direct identification with Bolsonarism, which reflects the structure described in Dibai (2019) of a new Brazilian right that found in Bolsonaro's leadership an authentic representation of its ideals.

However, a point that both political activists of PL and PT agree is that, as quoted by a PT youth activist interviewed, looking at the history of right-wing politics in Brazil: the PSDB party, former president FHC (Fernando Henrique Cardoso), former president Aécio Neves, Collor, and the ex-congressmen Paulo Maluf were all right-wing but did not defend the extreme things defended by Bolsonaro (closing of Congress, Supreme Federal Court, shooting of the president when he was a congressman). This explores the historical differences of right-wing politics in the past and now.

This argument can be better analyzed as in Santos (2022) where the right-wing presidents who preceded Bolsonaro, such as Fernando Collor de Mello and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, had more moderate positions and adopted policies that, despite being conservative in economic terms, followed a discourse more aligned with the center when it came to customs and social issues. These leaders avoided open confrontations and extreme polarizations, preferring to maintain a certain consensus around the political and social agenda. Fernando Henrique Cardoso himself, for example, was a defender of liberal policies in the economic field, but avoided controversial issues in the field of customs. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, brought a completely different approach, which is described as the "erosion of the left-wing consensus". He broke with moderation by adopting an openly conservative, populist, and polarizing stance. His government stood out for its extreme nationalism, open defense of civilian armament, combating "ideological indoctrination" in schools, and direct opposition to progressive agendas such as the defense of LGBTQIA+ rights and the fight against climate change. In addition, he brought to the fore the so-called culture war, amplifying the debate around religious, moral, and conservative issues, which had been marginalized in national politics since the redemocratization. Unlike previous presidents, who tried to balance market demands with democratic governance, Bolsonaro adopted a confrontational stance, exacerbating political polarization and presenting himself as the defender of a "true right", which for many young people, was the first time that the right was represented so explicitly in Brazil.

Youth activists from the Workers' Party interviewed highlighted that "what contributed to the high level of polarization we see today was the coup d'état of president Dilma that led to the recent alliance of Lula and Alckmin." Martuscelli (2020) explains that this process was marked by deep controversies that led the spark for our current political scenario. While supporters of the impeachment claimed that Dilma committed crimes of responsibility, such as "fiscal pedaladas" (a budget manipulation practice where the government delayed payments to public banks to artificially improve the budget), her opponents saw the impeachment as a political maneuver, labeling it a disguised "coup d'état". The accusation that the process was strategically used to remove the Workers' Party (PT) from power helped solidify a division between those who supported the government and those who wanted her ousted. This period of political crisis resulted in a deeply divided environment, with one side believing that the impeachment was legitimate and necessary to combat corruption, while the other viewed the removal as a violation of democracy. This increased resentment and created fertile ground for the emergence of a political figure like Jair Bolsonaro (Martuscelli, 2020).

Following Dilma's impeachment and the crisis of confidence in traditional political parties, Jair Bolsonaro emerged in 2018 as a figure able to capitalize on the growing discontent with the established political system. Bolsonaro intensified the conflict by transforming political issues into ideological battles. Instead of seeking dialogue, his strategy was to use the discourse of polarization, presenting his candidacy as the only one capable of saving Brazil from communism and corruption. This further widened the political divide in Brazil, with his supporters viewing themselves as patriots fighting against what they believed was a corrupt system dominated by the left (Alencastro, 2022).

2022 Election Process Through Youth Lens

Following Bolsonaro's government, polarization in 2022 reached a new level with the alliance between two former political rivals: Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, from the Workers' Party (PT), and Geraldo Alckmin, former governor of São Paulo and a traditional figure of the center-right. The union between the two was an attempt to form a broad coalition to counter the radicalization promoted by Bolsonaro. This alliance was a pragmatic response to the transformations in liberal democracies, where broad coalitions have been formed to combat the rise of the far-right. The Lula-Alckmin union was an attempt to rebuild the political center and offer a viable alternative in an extremely polarized Brazil. The goal of this alliance was to attract both progressive sectors and moderate conservatives who did not align with Bolsonaro's extremism. However, this coalition also revealed the depth of polarization in Brazil. Many voters on both sides remained skeptical: some of Lula's supporters viewed Alckmin with suspicion, and some right-wing voters who supported Alckmin were dissatisfied with his union with Lula. However, this union was a key factor to combat polarization with two different ideologies that raised Lula once again to the presidency (Alencastro, 2022).

With the recent election, a point that arose was the mistrust of the election process with the victory of Lula. Youth activists from the Liberal Party (PL) interviewed when asked if the last election was free and fair some said they "had never seen a president win without the public" and that "Bolsonaro has more public". However, they feel they cannot express their opinions clearly about the fairness of today's election as "with this government (Lula) we don't have free speech anymore, I question myself if this is really a democracy". According to Gomes and Lechenakoski (2023), the Brazilian electoral system is considered one of the most advanced and secure in the world, particularly due to its electronic voting system. However, recent political polarization has led to growing skepticism among certain segments of the population, particularly among right-wing voters who support figures like Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro and his supporters have cast doubt on the reliability of electronic voting, often claiming, without evidence, that the system could be manipulated. Bolsonaro's accusations gained significant traction in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2022 elections, where he claimed, again without proof, that fraud might occur or had occurred. This narrative was amplified through social media and other platforms, leading to a significant portion of his voter base questioning the legitimacy of the elections. However, it is important to note that these allegations of fraud have never been substantiated. Multiple audits, reviews by independent bodies, and electoral oversight authorities have repeatedly confirmed the integrity of the system (Gomes & Lechenakoski, 2023).

The key reason the youth activists from PL feel they don't have free speech stems from their distrust in traditional political institutions and media. Over the years, political corruption scandals, especially involving the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, deepened this sense of betrayal. They believe their conservative values (such

as family, patriotism, and security) are ignored or mocked by elites, media, and institutions. When they express doubts about election legitimacy, they are often dismissed or legally challenged, reinforcing their feeling of being silenced in the democratic process (Almeida, 2020). Wanting to change the current system one of the PL activists said “the party is preparing to completely overthrow all current leftist leaderships by 2030”, further exemplifying the idea of complete good and evil sides described in Singer (2021).

An important aspect of the growing mistrust in Brazil’s electoral process is the role of disinformation, spread by media outlets, political figures, and even former president Bolsonaro. A key piece of misinformation used by youth activists from PL to support claims of election fraud was a statement from a hacker allegedly hired by Bolsonaro, who claimed he could manipulate the voting system. This narrative gained traction but was later debunked by the Superior Electoral Court, which confirmed that the voting system remained secure and free from tampering (Menezes, 2023).

With the immense realm of information provided by current outlets, online misinformation and fake news can exacerbate ideological polarization by reinforcing existing biases and creating “echo chambers”—online spaces where people only encounter information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, which amplifies ideological extremes. As users are repeatedly exposed to one-sided information, their views become more entrenched, leading to a further divide between opposing political factions (Au, Ho, & Chiu, 2021).

Right vs. Left Policies Through Youth Lens

A point that was exacerbated with the interviews with the youth activists from the PL (Liberal Party) and the PT (Workers’ Party) was their different visions on aspects related to economy, diplomacy, and public policies. For instance, youth activists from the PL consume content that states Bolsonaro was a complete good and Lula a complete evil related to these three quoted areas, while PT supporters are exposed the complete opposite. These conflicting narratives, supported by misinformation and selective media consumption, deepen the ideological divide, making it difficult for individuals to see beyond their own perspective (Au et al., 2021).

The economy during Bolsonaro’s government praised by the youth leaders of PL and despised by youth leaders of PT followed a neoliberal economic approach, which involved reducing the role of the government in the economy. This included policies like pension reform, which aimed to control public spending by increasing the retirement age and limiting benefits, and privatizations, where state-owned companies were sold to private investors to reduce state intervention and promote market competition. These policies aligned with the beliefs of youth activists from the Liberal Party (PL), who favored free-market reforms and saw Bolsonaro’s actions as necessary to stimulate economic growth. However, the impact of these policies was limited. While they theoretically promoted fiscal responsibility, Brazil’s economy under Bolsonaro suffered from low GDP growth, averaging just 1.4% throughout his term. Additionally, inflation remained high, reaching an average of 6.15%, which increased the cost of living for many Brazilians. The government’s fiscal austerity—tight controls on public spending—limited its ability to respond to economic challenges, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Araujo, 2023).

On the flip side, the economy during the current Lula’s government is characterized by significant economic growth, largely driven by external demand and internal social policies. His administration focuses on social welfare programs that combined with public investment in infrastructure and state-owned enterprises, fueled

economic growth without triggering inflation or destabilizing the macroeconomic framework that had been in place since the 1990s (Corsi, 2024).

For youth activists from the Workers' Party (PT), these economic strategies are viewed positively. Lula is seen as a leader who managed to lift millions out of poverty while maintaining fiscal responsibility. His government's focus on reducing inequality, creating jobs, and raising the minimum wage garnered support from the PT youth, who believe that these policies strengthened Brazil's social and economic fabric.

However, as quoted in Corsi (2024), the success of Lula's economic model was also constrained by neoliberal policies. Although the government made substantial progress in social and economic spheres, it remained tethered to fiscal austerity measures and foreign capital dependencies. This created limits on how much further the government could advance in areas like industrial policy or diversifying the economy beyond commodities.

This economic distinction of what is right and wrong based on the ideology of different political youth comes from the idea of what they believe to be part of their own set of ideas. The contrasting views among youth activists from the PL (Liberal Party) and the PT (Workers' Party) are further supported by the survey results of college students, which reveal a distinct division in how each group perceives political ideologies, particularly in terms of economic and social policies. As shown in the graphic below, keywords like "Conservative", "Market", and "Capitalism" were frequently associated with right-wing politics, reflecting the neoliberal policies championed by Bolsonaro's administration and supported by PL youth activists. On the other hand, words like "Social", "Equality", and "Rights" dominated the left-wing narrative, emphasizing Lula's focus on social welfare and reducing inequality—values that resonate with PT supporters.

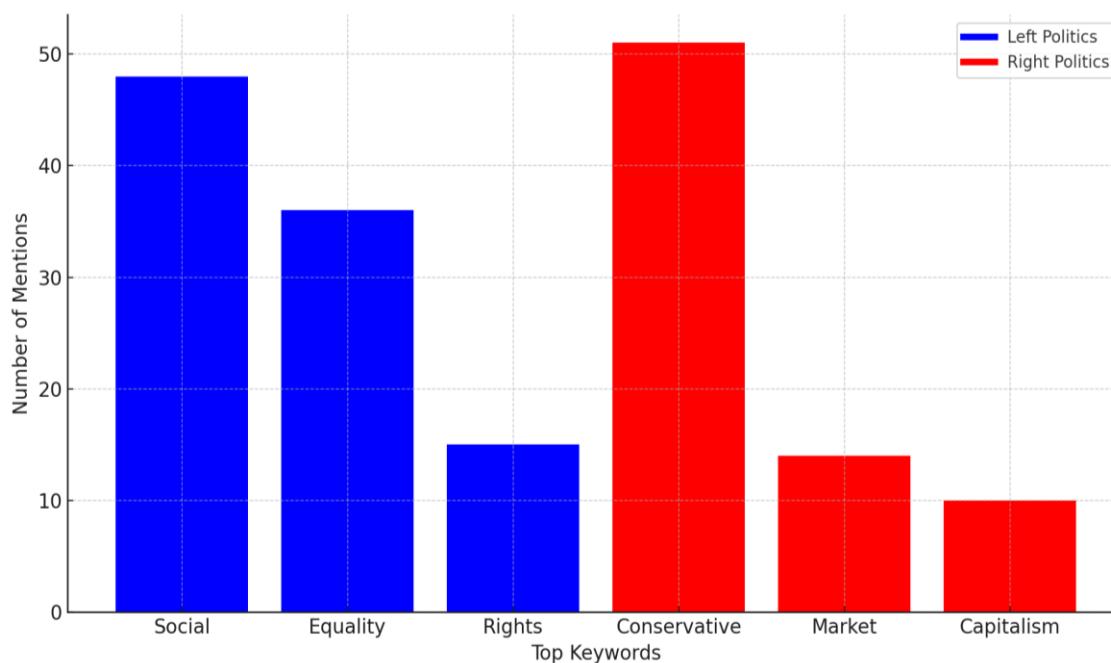


Figure 1. Comparison of top keywords in left and right politics responses.

Among the students surveyed who identified with right-wing politics, common themes included a focus on individual freedoms, economic liberalism, and a preference for smaller government intervention. One student explicitly stated that they saw right-wing politics as "necessary for promoting economic competition and reducing

government dependence.” This aligns with the broader neoliberal ideals endorsed by youth activists from the PL (Liberal Party), who supported Bolsonaro’s privatization efforts and austerity measures despite their limited economic success. These students emphasized that maintaining market-driven reforms is essential for long-term economic growth and stability.

On the other hand, students identifying with left-wing politics consistently highlighted the importance of social equity and government intervention to correct economic disparities. They voiced strong support for Lula’s approach, focusing on social welfare programs as essential tools for reducing poverty and fostering economic growth. As one left-leaning student mentioned in the survey that “economic policies must ensure that no one is left behind, and the government must play an active role in redistributing wealth and opportunities.” This reflects the broader values of PT (Workers’ Party) youth activists, who champion Lula’s social programs, praising their ability to lift millions out of poverty while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

As mentioned both by youth activists and college students, social welfare programs are not the main focus of the right-wing politics that in the survey was mainly characterized by the government of Bolsonaro that actively dismantled several public policies, particularly in areas related to social welfare, housing, and sanitation. For example, the “Moradia Digna” housing program, which aimed to provide affordable housing, saw its budget significantly reduced, and its targets for housing construction were halved compared to previous administrations. Similarly, the government’s investment in sanitation infrastructure was cut, limiting progress in improving basic services for rural and underserved communities. These cuts were part of a broader effort to reduce the state’s role in social policy, which critics argue weakened Brazil’s ability to address pressing social issues (Couto & Rech, 2023).

However, one of the main highlights of public policies related to social welfare during Bolsonaro’s government quoted by PL’s youth activists was the “Auxílio Brasil” which provided financial relief to vulnerable populations affected by the economic downturn. Auxílio Brasil was introduced as a temporary measure to support informal workers, unemployed individuals, and low-income families who were severely impacted by the pandemic. At its peak, it reached over 67 million people, providing critical assistance during the height of the crisis. During his government Auxílio Brasil replaced the long-standing “Bolsa Família” program, which had been a cornerstone of Brazil’s social welfare system since the first Lula’s government in 2003. While Bolsa Família focused on conditional cash transfers tied to education and health requirements, Auxílio Brasil aimed to expand coverage and include more families. However, unlike Bolsa Família, which was praised for its role in reducing poverty and hunger through an integrated social protection network, Auxílio Brasil has been criticized for emphasizing “individual effort” and focusing less on structural poverty alleviation. The shift in focus reflects a broader conservative shift in Brazil’s social policies under Bolsonaro’s administration (Sordi, 2023). Today, with the third Lula’s administration, the investment previously dismantled by Bolsonaro with the Bolsa Família program is now a priority (Governo Federal, 2023). The shift from Bolsa Família to Auxílio Brasil and now to Bolsa Família once again deepened political polarization by symbolizing the ideological divide between left and right that polarized public opinion on the role of government not only in the economic realm, where most critiques were made, but now in social welfare.

The acceptance of Bolsonaro’s government to the students from the research was rejected as 91 of the 159 students strongly opposed the idea that his government was good for the country. However, the acceptance of Lula’s government, despite receiving more acceptance than the previous one from the youth, was not high having most students (47) without a proper opinion about it.

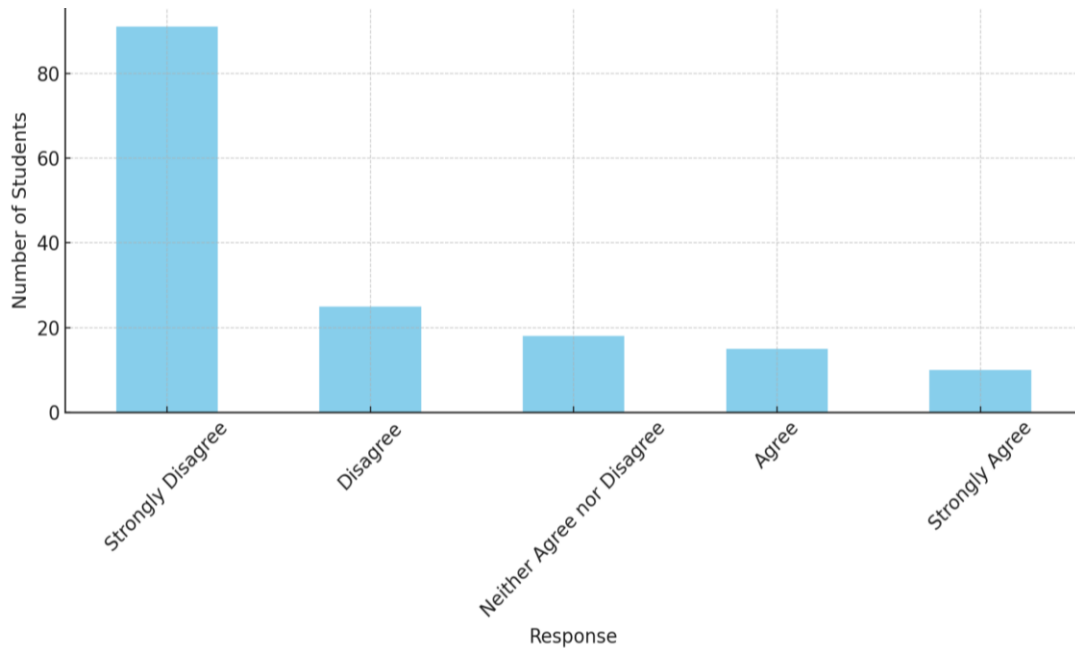


Figure 2. Student agreement with statement: “Bolsonaro’s government was good for the country.”

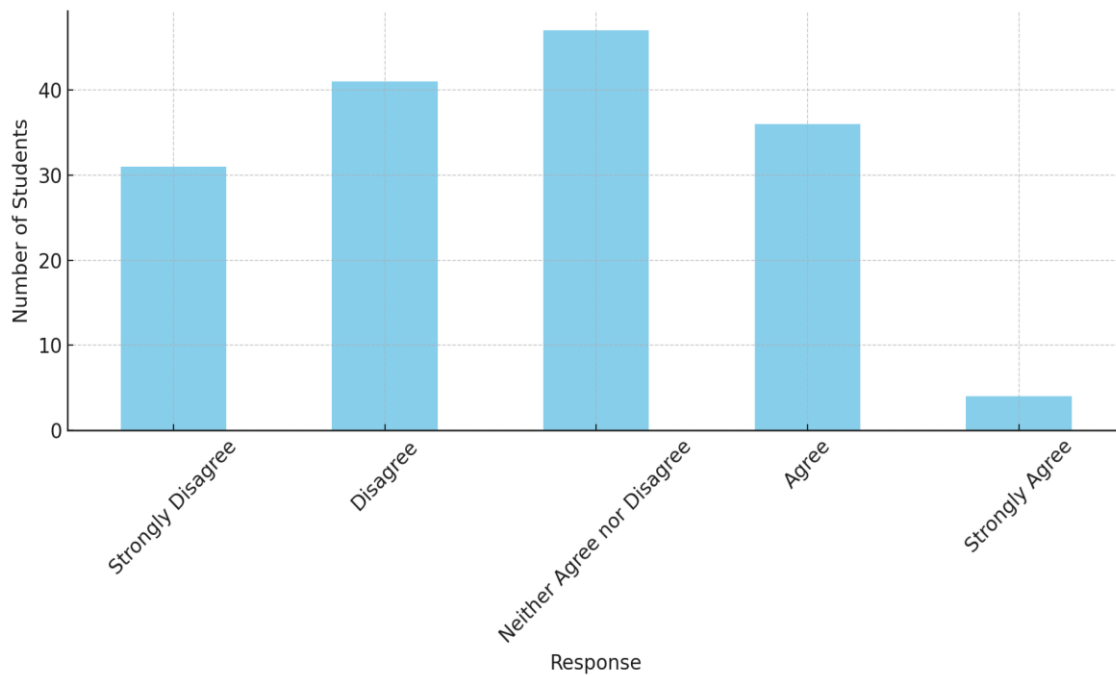


Figure 3. Student agreement with statement: “Lula’s government is good for the country.”

The statistics show that the majority of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed that Bolsonaro’s government was beneficial for the country identified as “center-left”. However, there were also responses from those who identified as “center-right” and “right”. Conversely, most students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that Lula’s government is good for the country were primarily identified as “center”, followed by “center-left” and even a few from the “extreme-left”.

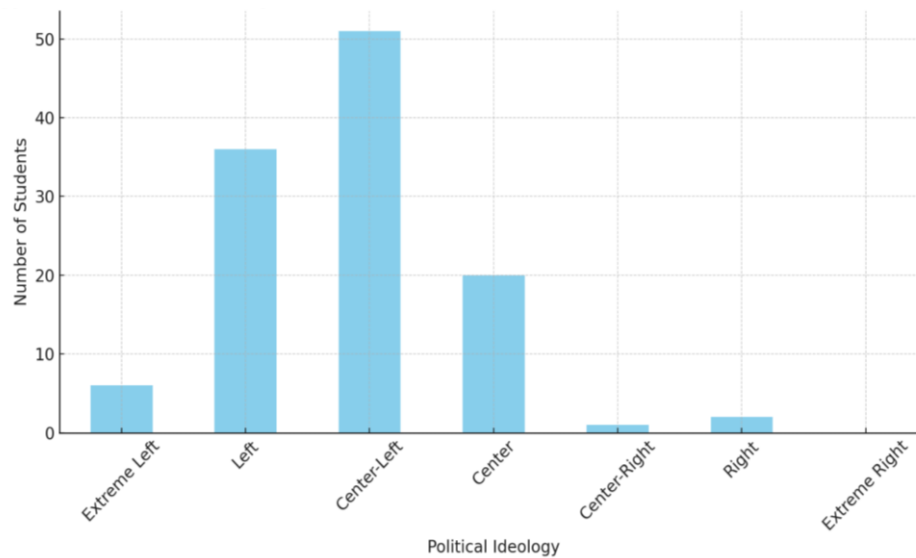


Figure 4. Ideology of students who disagreed with statement: “Bolsonaro’s government was good for the country.”

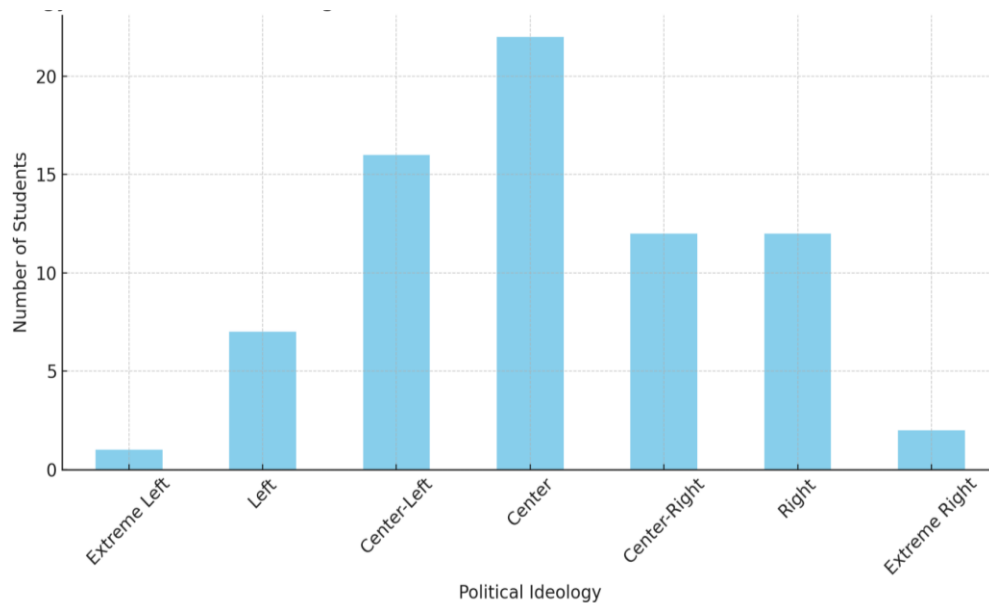


Figure 5. Ideology of students who disagreed with statement: “Lula’s government is good for the country.”

This trend suggests that young people, particularly those leaning left, are inclined to hold the government accountable, regardless of whether the leadership aligns with left- or right-wing ideals. As one youth activist from PT interviewed explained, “there is a growing emphasis on maintaining accountability for elected officials, irrespective of who holds power, while also seeking to prevent policy extremes that could contribute to inequality and social exclusion.”

Youth Political Division

Currently, the youth differentiate themselves in seven political ideologies: extreme left; left; center-left; center; center-right; right; and extreme right. In the survey, most students described themselves as “center-left” followed by “left”.

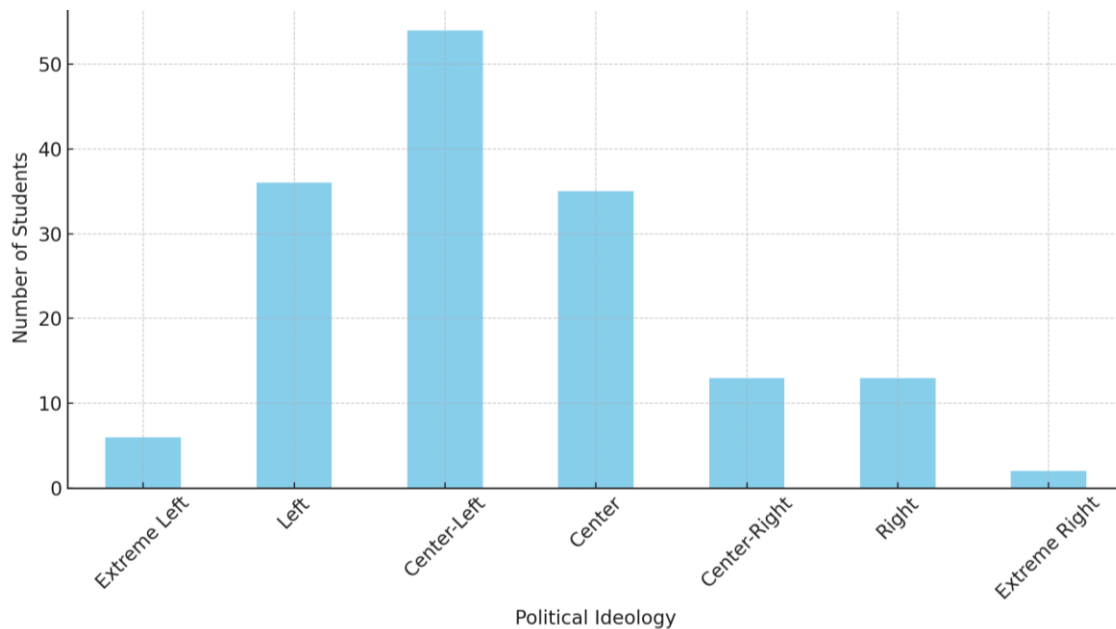


Figure 6. Number of students per political ideology.

This tendency to the left wing can be explained as 69.2% of the students who participate study in a public university. Federal universities in Brazil often serve as spaces for critical thinking and social awareness, shaped by educational philosophies and pedagogies that emphasize social justice and inclusivity. This environment aligns with leftist values, influenced by educators like Paulo Freire, who championed critical pedagogy, which encourages students to question and challenge societal inequalities. Overall, Brazilian federal institutions have historically been spaces where progressive ideologies resonate due to policies and curriculums focused on critical and social education. This creates an academic culture that attracts and fosters left-leaning ideologies, reinforcing students' identification with center-left or left-wing stances (Kamphorst & Castanha, 2018).

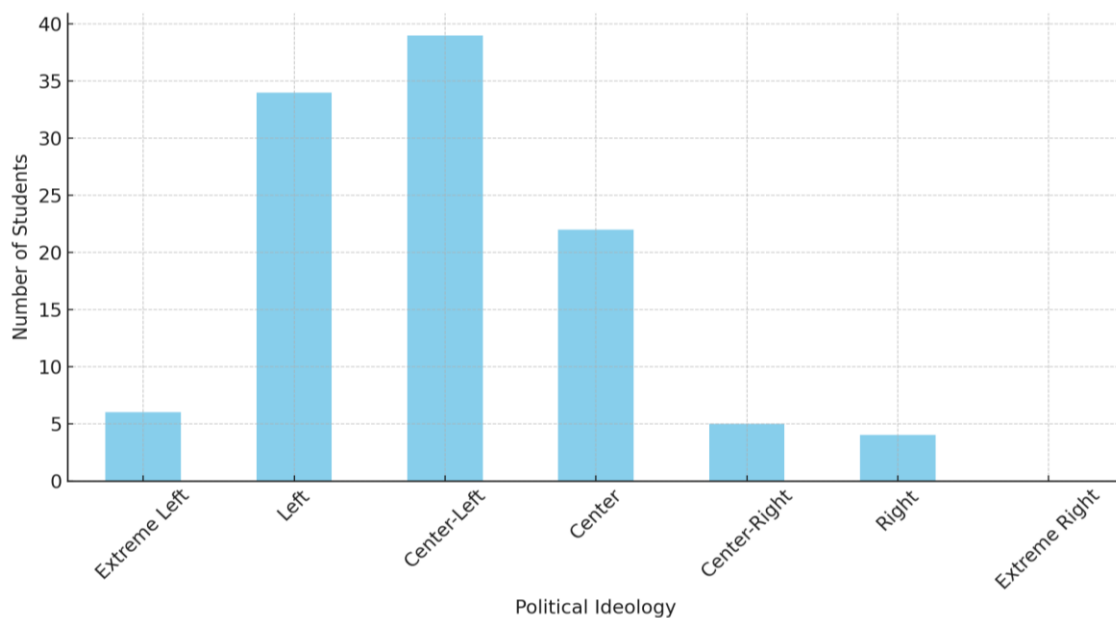


Figure 7. Student ideology in public institutions.

Youth leaders from PL shared that students with conservative views often face significant challenges in higher education, particularly within federal universities, which are among Brazil's top institutions. They feel that their perspectives are frequently overlooked in an environment they perceive as dominated by left-wing ideologies. This experience of exclusion from academic discourse fosters a sense of alienation from educational spaces, deepening their opposition to left-leaning policies and intensifying feelings of marginalization and polarization among the youth in this environment.

The division between extremes for left or right can be seen as a minority within the higher education students with 6% identifying as extreme left and 2% extreme right. This can be explained by the education that builds this type of extreme ideas as youth who support conservative values but believe in democratic principles, such as freedom of expression and a balanced government role in society tend to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and are more likely to attend top higher education institutions, being out of extremes and willing to engage with societal issues within a conservative framework. However, youth outside higher level institutions who hold more traditional and strict views are less likely to engage in progressive social movements and are more commonly found in lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The authoritarian right-wing youth tend to value discipline and may support policies that are more restrictive (Kluppel, 2020).

This difference between "extreme-right" and "right" or "center-right" ideologies represents an important dividing line in youth polarization. Measuring the comfort or discomfort of debating politics with individuals holding opposing ideologies is challenging, especially as political tensions rise. According to a youth leader from PT, this tension often goes beyond mere disagreement, extending to a sense of personal rejection: "they don't just hate my ideas; they hate the idea of my existence."

However, as reflected in both the survey of college students and interviews with youth activists, there remains hope. Many respondents expressed a willingness to learn from opposing perspectives, provided these discussions are conducted with respect. PT youth leaders, for example, emphasized the importance of respecting diverse viewpoints and felt comfortable discussing politics with individuals of differing ideologies, as long as the conversation avoided anti-democratic themes or disrespect toward social and economic minorities. Similarly, PL youth leaders echoed this sentiment, expressing a commitment to free speech: while they may strongly disagree with opposing views, they believe in defending the right to express them, opposing ideas rather than individuals.

Among college students, a notable portion (especially those identifying with the "center-left") reported feeling comfortable debating with others of differing ideologies. However, students with left-leaning views showed some discomfort engaging in political discussions with ideologically opposite peers. This discomfort often stems from concerns around "hate politics", the growth of authoritarian-leaning youth groups, and a perceived threat to free expression.

Youth Representativity

Both PL and PT youth leaders frequently emphasize the urgent need for youth role models to inspire young people to engage in politics, whether they lean left or right. Currently, only 2% of city hall leadership positions in state capitals are held by individuals under 30. This lack of youthful representation discourages many young people from participating in the political process, as they feel overlooked and disconnected from decision-making. Despite Brazil's status as one of the countries with the largest youth populations globally, young Brazilians remain underrepresented in this democratic landscape (Caseff, 2024).

In the survey with college students, 75% don't feel represented by the current policy makers. This feeling comes from different ideologies including students from the far-left to the far-right. Both youth activists from PT and PL expressed concern related to the misrepresentation of young people in the political realm.

PT youth leaders expressed disappointment, highlighting that policies addressing youth concerns are often neglected at both local and national levels. They pointed to the many obstacles young people face when aspiring to political office, including a power structure dominated by long-standing leaders who resist change and hold onto their positions for years. This entrenched system often favors established political families, allowing limited entry for youth but typically only for those from elite backgrounds, leaving young people from poorer communities marginalized. Additionally, PT leaders emphasized the specific challenges that female, LGBTQIA+, and low-income youth encounter due to societal norms and a lack of financial and political support. Despite these obstacles, they voiced pride in their party's efforts to overcome these challenges despite many challenges and create spaces where young people can be meaningfully represented in positions of power.

PL youth leaders share the frustration of feeling underrepresented in politics but find hope in the rise of young right-wing politicians to positions of influence. They acknowledge that while young people are still underrepresented in policymaking, notable successes, like that of 28-year-old congressman Nikolas Ferreira, inspire optimism. Nikolas in 2022 at 26 years old was elected with the most votes in the year (1.47 million of votes) and his influence extends deeply into Brazil's conservative youth movement. His success exemplifies the increasing political mobilization of young conservatives, who view his rise as a sign of hope amidst what they perceive as a broader lack of youth representation in government. Ferreira's strong ties to moral and religious conservatism resonate with young voters who identify with his stance on issues such as family values and traditional societal roles. These youth see him not only as a representative but as a symbol of their aspirations within Brazil's shifting political landscape and the possibility of young people being a part of this movement (Rodello, 2023).

PL youth activists say they are motivated by these role models and feel that their party truly amplifies their voices. Through initiatives to promote youth politicians who are also digital influencers, the Liberal Party has effectively reached a broader youth audience. For example, Nikolas Ferreira, with 12 million Instagram followers, regularly shares content that spreads conservative views, attracting even politically disengaged youth and drawing them towards right-wing ideologies. One youth activist shared that he initially felt unheard and disconnected from politics, but after watching a social media video by Ferreira, he became interested in learning more about the Liberal Party and its "new right-wing ideology". During interviews with these activists, local elections were underway, and many predicted that the rise in conservative-minded youth would lead to their increased presence in city halls. This prediction was confirmed in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, where 26-year-old PL youth leader Lucas Pavanato received the most votes—161,000—pledging to uphold conservative values (CNN Brasil, 2024).

Youth Political Knowledge

Youth engagement has increased in the past years due to the easy access to social media. Currently, youth are more informed about what is happening in the political realm as the access of this kind of information is easier meaning that someone does not need to be a youth activist or leader to advocate for their beliefs and be informed. This shift toward digital engagement reflects deeper transformations in how young people experience their identities and roles in society. Unlike previous generations, today's youth navigate social and economic pressures

through a more autonomous and flexible approach to activism, shaped by personal values and social causes rather than long-standing political affiliations. This digital activism empowers young people to act as critical, independent voices within the public sphere, taking ownership of their engagement and adapting it to issues they find personally meaningful. Digital platforms, therefore, allow youth to address current societal challenges in ways that align with their own perspectives and experiences, making online activism a distinct and influential aspect of modern youth engagement (Sposito, De Souza Tarábola, & Ginzel, 2021).

This increase is visible through the survey with college students as a majority (59.75%) said to understand the electoral system of Brazil from the far-left to the far-right. This is partly because of the significant role of digital electoral propaganda that increased in the past years due to the high levels of polarization, which shapes perceptions of political information. Online platforms and social media have enabled widespread and immediate access to political messaging, blurring the lines between reliable information and manipulated content, as unverified news, often unchecked, spreads rapidly, influencing students' views on the electoral system. Since students frequently encounter political information online, they may develop a sense of familiarity with electoral mechanisms, yet potentially shaped by biased or incomplete sources (Versola, 2020).

The sense of understanding that students express regarding the electoral system appears to extend to their knowledge of political roles, legislative processes, and public policies. In fact, 45.91% report that they understand or fully understand the responsibilities of various political officials, 43.40% feel the same about the legislative process, and 43.39% accompany the approval and implementation of public policies. As discussed, it is likely that much of this information comes from online sources. Given the prevalence of misinformation used as a political strategy, often presented as fact across various platforms, there is a risk that these students are consuming distorted or false information (Hissa, 2022). Nonetheless, the fact that they actively seek out information, even if driven by existing beliefs or ideological alignment, reflects a notable interest in understanding political systems, ideologies, or engaging more broadly in civic matters.

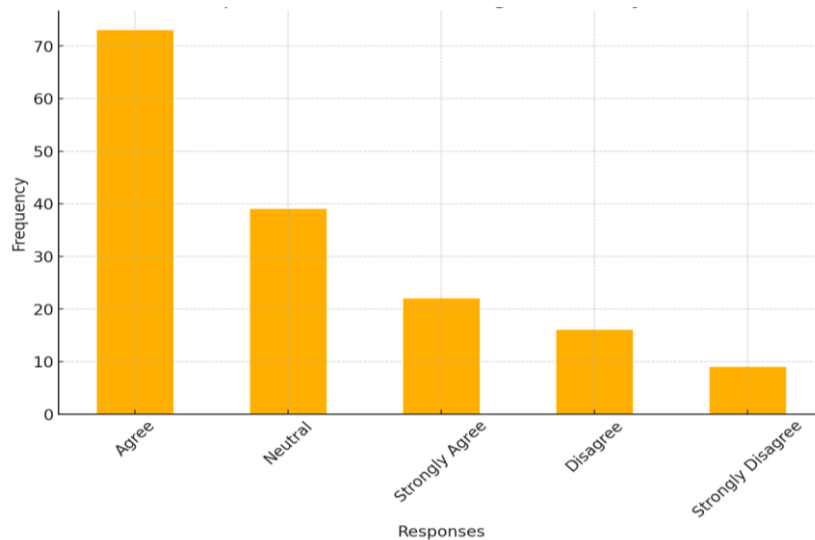


Figure 8. Responses for understanding electoral system.

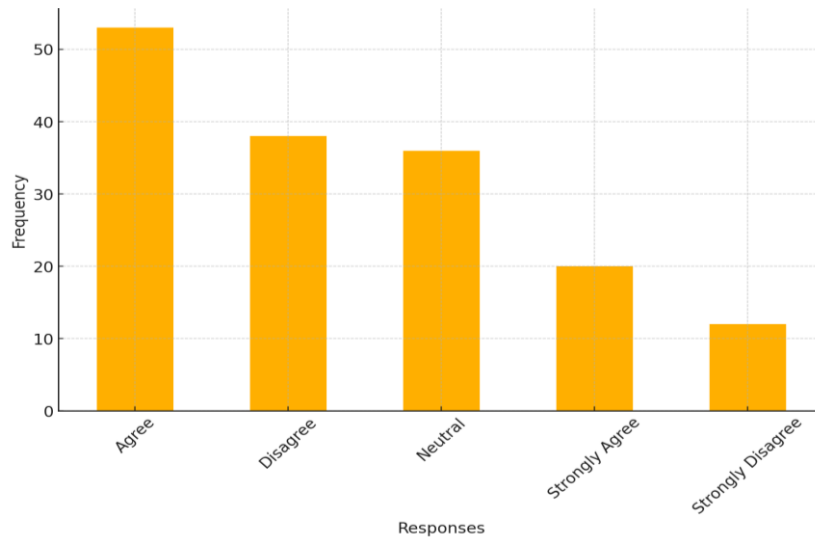


Figure 9. Responses for understanding political posts.

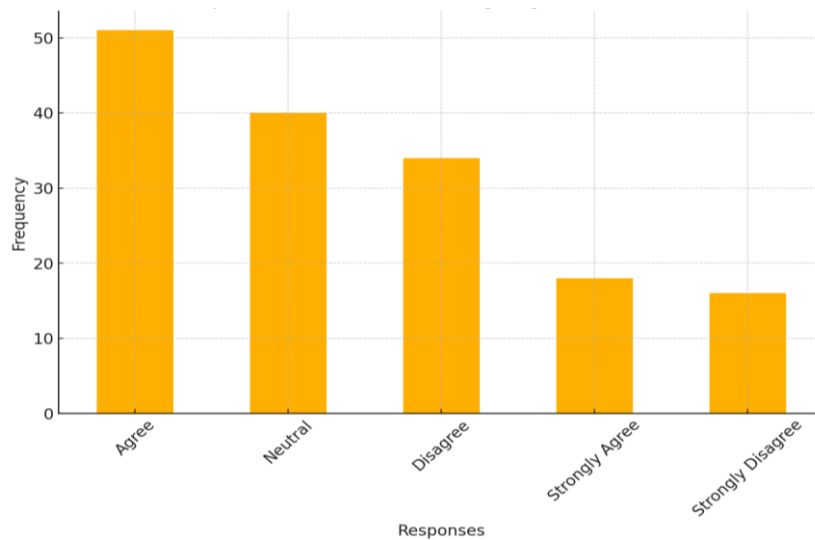


Figure 10. Responses for understanding legislative process.

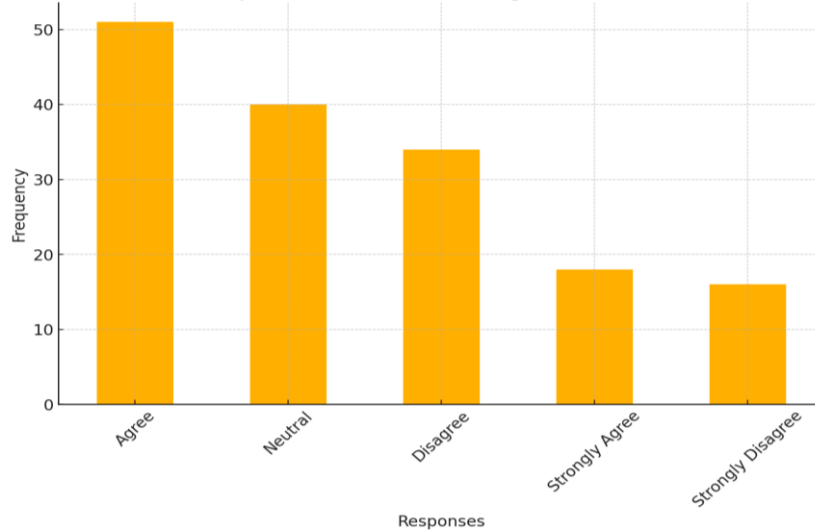


Figure 11. Responses for understanding public policies.

Youth Political Interest

With the previous survey data on political knowledge, it leads to the question of interest. Following the curiosity of the political system, young people in universities seem to care and take an interest in the future of the nation, as a majority of 85.53% of them said to have followed the 2022 presidential elections and 87.42% voted in the same election. This engagement among young people is not isolated; rather, it reflects a broader trend of youth civic awareness that has been growing due to both online and offline channels of political engagement. Young voters' participation rates are often influenced by their online engagement, which serves to reduce traditional barriers to voting, such as lack of information or resources. The digital space provides them with accessible tools to learn about political issues, participate in discussions, and feel more connected to the political landscape. The digital influence not only informs but empowers these young people, making them feel their involvement is impactful. In the polarized context of the 2022 elections, with campaigns addressing critical social issues and urging youth participation, many young voters saw their vote as a way to impact issues they care deeply about, from environmental policies to economic stability (Rocha, Faeti, & Ribeiro, 2023).

However, this interest is lost when the topic is local elections as a majority of 53.45% surveyed said to not be following the local elections happening in 2024 across the country. While young people may show strong interest in certain forms of political participation, particularly those that are issue-based or personally relevant, they may exhibit less interest in formal or traditional political structures like local elections. This aligns with the idea that young people often seek to engage in ways that resonate with their identities and immediate social contexts. Therefore, many young people are finding new, informal ways to express their political views—such as through cause-oriented actions, social media, and community involvement—rather than traditional channels like voting in local elections, which may seem less impactful to them (Tsekoura, 2016).

According to the youth leaders from PT, the 2022 elections were the most important elections in history marked by the peak of polarization. When voting they urged to replace the old government that was seen as bad for the workers, minorities, education, and health system. With the Workers' Party back to represent the Brazilian people, voting for Lula (PT) was the best option for them to reconstruct the country after Bolsonaro's government that, according to them, focused on the dismantling of public policies to assist the lower income citizens. However, the youth leaders of PL had a completely different position, they urged Bolsonaro (PL) in power to spread their ideology sensed as good for the future of the country such as Christians values and abortion ban. Their main expressed concern was if Bolsonaro left power the indoctrination in public schools and universities would worsen as they believe that left-wing parties such as the Workers' Party have their professors trained to pursue a leftists ideology indoctrination in places of learning that, for PL youth activists, should not have an ideological doctrine and welcome different types of thoughts.

When observing the activists' arguments that led to their vote and influenced others' votes we can see that it is deeply focused on their ideology and what they believe is right or wrong. Due to the polarization scenario on the 2022 elections we could see the vote was determined by an "us vs. them" thought that is easier to get people involved due to its ideological focus, meaning if you identify yourself and your lifestyle to the ideas disseminated by PT you would more likely vote for Lula but if you identify with those from PL, you would give your vote to Bolsonaro. With this ideological division many young people felt personally attacked as youth leaders for PT did when saying that Bolsonaro and the Liberal Party directly opposed their lives and not their ideas. This ideological battle led young people to the pools and polarization made it harder to find a winner in

the election with Lula (PT) winning with 50.90% of the votes while Bolsonaro (PL) had 49.1% votes (Statista, 2022).

When it comes to the local elections that happened in 2024, the expectations of the youth leaders somewhat shifted from these ideological divides previously represented in the 2022 presidential election. Their responses expressed their ideologies, with the leaders of PT advocating for minorities and the leaders of PL for Christian values. However, when expressing their hopes for the local elections it was in a way similar to both PL and PT leaders such as “a government who would think about the future of the cities and their population”, “hoping the electoral knows the importance of their vote”, “a calm election without polarization”, “a government that would think about education”. Young people, as previously mentioned, tend to care more about elections when their own ideology is in the game but with local elections being less about ideologies and more about political plans for the future of the cities, young people have little interest.

The survey with college students and interviews with youth activists show hope for the future of youth engagement as interest in the political scenario is high as many of them seem to understand their role as an active and democratic citizen. This is highlighted as the importance of the youth vote was also something mentioned by both PL and PT youth leaders. As for students, they reinforced the importance of voting as 81.76% of them agreed or completely agreed that their vote makes a difference in the political sphere, 56.06% said to have interest in Brazilian politics, and 99.37% have electoral registration cards. However, a minority of 6.91% of the students wishes to possess a political position and 20.12% pursue political activism.

Conclusion

While the study focuses on Brazil, its implications extend beyond national borders, offering insights into the dynamics of polarization and youth engagement in other democracies facing similar challenges. The findings of the study provide a better understanding of the interplay between political polarization and youth engagement.

The deep-rooted polarization in Brazil, shaped by historical legacies of colonialism and military dictatorship, has been exacerbated in recent decades by misinformation, hate-driven politics, and the professionalization of political campaigns. This has created a polarized landscape where ideological divides seem invincible, influencing how young people engage with politics and perceive their roles in society. By examining the perspectives of young Brazilians across the ideological spectrum, the study underscores how polarization has shaped not only their political behaviors but also their sense of identity and belonging within the democratic process.

Despite the intensity of polarization the study offers a sense of hope. Brazilian youth, while navigating a divided political environment, remain highly engaged and committed to shaping the nation's future. Their active participation in national elections, their understanding of key political issues, and their growing interest in democratic processes demonstrate their potential as agents of change. Many young people, across ideological lines, express a willingness to engage in respectful dialogue and emphasize the importance of shared values, providing an entry point for bridging divides.

The study reveals that polarization operates both as a barrier and a catalyst for youth engagement. On one hand it deepens ideological divides fostering hostility and reducing the space for constructive dialogue. Misinformation and hate-driven politics amplify these divisions, leaving many young people feeling alienated from traditional political structures. On the other hand, polarization has also increased youth activism, as ideological divisions increasingly infiltrate in their daily lives, compelling many to assert their identities and

express their beliefs. This dynamic creates a sense of belonging within their ideological communities, motivating young people to take an active role in advocating for their values and pushing for systemic change.

To address these intertwined challenges, efforts are required. Educational initiatives that promote critical media literacy and civic engagement are essential to combat misinformation and encourage informed participation. Creating inclusive platforms for dialogue (where young people can engage across ideological lines without fear of personal attacks) is crucial for fostering mutual understanding. Political institutions must prioritize youth representation, ensuring diverse voices and perspectives are included in decision-making processes and creating significant role models for young people across the country to take as a reference to involve the youth in politics.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of polarization on youth political behavior, focusing on strategies to mitigate its effects and identifying significant differences of youth across different timelines. Studies could also examine how grassroots movements and localized activism serve as tools for fostering unity in divided societies. Additionally, investigating successful models of youth-led initiatives that transcend ideological divides could provide actionable insights for bridging gaps and fostering a more collaborative political environment.

Ultimately, while polarization presents significant obstacles, this study reveals that Brazil's youth are not defined by division alone. Their resilience, awareness, and desire for progress highlight their potential to transform the political landscape. However, the study does not undermine the power of polarization in creating a hostile environment moved by the hate politics that affects everyone in society—including the youth. Individuals who identify themselves on the “right” or “left” wing of the political spectrum have different ideas of what is best for the country and there is a fear within the youth to discuss politics with people with different ideas. However, both students and activists were willing to express their ideas in a respectful manner to reach a common ground as they wish to understand others' perspectives. Most importantly, the youth seeks what is best for the country with their own (despite different) ideas respecting democracy and free speech assuring order and progress for all. Therefore, platforms should be given to the youth to amplify their voices to address systematic barriers and foster spaces for collaboration leading the way toward a more cohesive and democratic future. This dual acknowledgment of challenges and hope serves as a call to action for educators, policymakers, and civil society to invest in the transformative power of Brazil's next generation that is eager to promote change.

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