



Brazilian Elections and the Pandemic of Covid-19

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Abstract

In view of the dramatic situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, this article aims to analyze its political impacts in the Brazilian municipal elections of 2020. To do so, it outlines a brief chronology of events related to the disease, as well as contextualizing the Brazilian situation prior to the arrival of the coronavirus in the national territory. From there, it presents scenarios and observations of the local electoral disputes that elected new mayors or reappointed current mayors to positions in the country's cities. The article emphasizes the federative issue at a particular time when municipalities, states and unions are requested by the population to provide coordinated responses to the pandemic rather than reinforcing the national split situation that has occurred since the 2018 presidential elections.

Introduction

The pandemic of the new coronavirus has made evident a principle that, although it is obvious or precisely for that reason, is in frequent risk of falling into oblivion: however well designed or ingrained in a society, State institutions are not immune to the actions of momentary politics. There is always a tension between a permanent vocation of state institutions and the political will of the present, often determined by the mere pursuit of power or by external contexts that impose themselves. This is what we can see having before us a unique health challenge, in at least a century of history, with serious socioeconomic consequences estimated in the middle of the count of infected people and lives lost due to Covid-19. The Brazilian state, notably its federative system, he was confronted at its most vulnerable points by for this pandemic that seriously threatened the minimal functioning of public health services. Both the services and equipment under tripartite responsibility and those that are managed only by states or municipalities, in the most immediate service to the population, were shaken [1].

Faced with a notorious public calamity, governors and mayors, as well as members of the Legislative and Judiciary Powers, used their political arsenal with different targets and interests, more or less republican and federative. In a positive

perspective, all of them, without exception, found themselves in an urgent need to make administrative, legal and judicial decisions to build new cooperation mechanisms in order to face the disease that affected all families in Brazil. From a critical point of view, the search for federative cooperation at the subnational level he was imposed on mayors and governors, above all, to fill the gaps left by a wrong, unstable and sometimes chaotic federal government management.

With this dramatic picture in mind, this article analyzes the political impacts of the pandemic in the Brazilian municipal elections of 2020. Therefore, it is essential to rescue a chronology of events related to the disease, as well as a contextualization of the Brazilian situation prior to the arrival of the coronavirus national territory. All current mayors, without exception, live under the socioeconomic and political effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, whose contamination horizon remains undetermined, but which will certainly have a strong impact on the next four years of municipal governments.

Polarization and Party Fragmentation

In 2020, the year of the Brazilian municipal elections, another political party there was the expectation to emerge, in an ecosystem already constituted by 33 associations

registered by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) and with another 78 in formation. However, it was not just any acronym, but an association planned by the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, and his group of allies, in the midst of conflicts and disputes involving family tensions and mismatches between leaders. Since the chief executive broke with the legend for which he was elected in 2018, the PSL (Social Liberal Party), the intention to create a party under his command has been made public. The question that arose in the potential launch of the new acronym, Aliança pelo Brasil, in November 2019, is whether there would be enough time to obtain registration with the Electoral Court, within the legal deadline, to be able to participate in the election and present candidates for mayor and the council member still in this dispute.

The unusual idea, never before seen in democratic periods in the country, of the President of the Republic leaving the acronym by which he was elected to create another, was a measure only consummated in the Estado Novo (1937-1945) and in the military authoritarian regime (1964-1985). This project may reveal the essence, or characteristic mark, of the way Jair Bolsonaro has been practicing politics in his term. In response to the various tensions typical of Brazilian presidentialism, whether with other powers or with subnational governments, the president chose to repeatedly attack opponents or, at the limit, to sever ties with allies whom he considers ungrateful or traitors in the heat of daily events. This was the case, for example, with the governors of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel (PSC), and São Paulo, João Doria (PSDB), who supported him during the 2018 campaign in their respective states.

In the perspective of the current Brazilian president, the confrontation with the checks and balances of the democratic regime must be done through the demonstration of popular support identified, mainly, by his followers on social networks. Hence the self-definition of Aliança by Brazil as a “movement that will forever mark national politics, based on truth, transparency, ethics and under the leadership of Jair Bolsonaro”. However, what does “forever” mean, the most attentive would ask immediately? In its statute, the forming party intends to require all affiliates to adhere to the president’s own convictions, including the defense of life and the right to self-defense, including by guaranteeing access to weapons and fighting crime, impunity and attempts to legalize illicit drugs. Mixing ethical flags and proposals that go against the Declaration of Human Rights, the association foresees its political and partisan practice guided by affiliation with pre-established beliefs and principles [2].

Jair Bolsonaro is the first president of the current democratic period to not be affiliated with a party with candidates able to run for municipal elections, on the other

hand, the use of his power to define the agenda of the national debate allows us to suppose that candidates for mayor and councilor, country, they seek an association with the ideological flags defended by the federal representative. Most likely, these candidates will run based on different acronyms of the spectrum closest to conservatism or the so-called center-right. This hypothesis reinforces the approach of the President of the Republic with legends from the bloc called “centrão”, in this second year of term, formed by parliamentarians with electoral strongholds generally well defined and interested in guaranteeing the transfer of funds to allied mayors, through parliamentary amendments occupation of positions in the administrative machine. The modus operandi of the “centrão” according to the dynamics of the barter of electoral support as opposed to positions and funds is part of the populist culture founded on unconsciousness and political inconsequence.

The two parties that elected the most mayors in 2016 arrived shaken in 2020. Worn out by the implications of Operação Lava Jato, the same one that investigated deviations in Petrobrás shook the PT’s political strength and culminated in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the reduction of the party, in municipal administrations, to the levels of the mid-1990s. An operation that reached Greeks and Trojans, leading to the unpopularity of the Michel Temer government, also the target of investigations for suspected corruption, even though the PT of Dilma treated him as a “coup”. Let us also remember that, four years ago, the MDB elected 1.034 mayors in the first round and nine others, in large cities, in the second round, being the only acronym with more than a thousand municipalities under its administration. The PSDB, on the other hand, although it won the dispute in almost 800 cities, less than the party from which it originated, conquered important capitals, such as São Paulo, Porto Alegre and Manaus, and many other large cities, adding the largest contingent of voters under their local governments.

The PT seeks ways to recover part of the political capital lost in 2016, both due to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, consummated in August of that year, and the reduction of more than 20% of the city halls that were governed by the party until then. Two years ago, the legend remained the main reference of its ideological spectrum, but saw the advance of acronyms such as PSOL and PDT in the conduct of opposition actions at the federal level.

The challenge for these and other parties, such as PC do B, PSB and Rede, is to gain greater political leadership and to sow a discourse capable of overcoming the current polarization and going beyond the traditional alliances of the left. For now, actions originating in the center-right towards the center-left have predominated, mainly in movements that define themselves as political renewal. In new party

organizations, the party Novo sought to place itself as a paradigm of this movement that finds great echo in the Brazilian middle classes, but for now, it is insufficient to spread across a country as diverse and extensive as Brazil.

It is also worth noting that the municipal dispute of four years ago also reinforced the high fragmentation of the Brazilian party system. According to the TSE, 31 acronyms had at least one mayor elected in October 2016. In percentage of governed municipalities, only the MDB and PSDB accounted for more than 10% of the total, followed by PSD and PP, respectively, with 9.7% and 9% of Brazilian cities under its management. Such fragmentation is also reproduced in the Chamber of Deputies, since the Brazilian system suggests that there is a permanent correlation between the election of mayors and that of federal and state deputies.

This whole political-party context made this year's municipal elections a highly complex phenomenon, with several possibilities for readings, analyzes and research for the humanities field, amplified by the practically unique characteristics of Brazilian federalism. The arrival of the new coronavirus in the national territory and its health consequences, with social, economic and political repercussions, make the observation of the conjuncture even more arduous, but also more relevant for both agents and spectators.

Arrival of Pandemic in Brazil and its Territories

On February 26, the Ministry of Health reported that it confirmed the first positive Covid-19 case in Brazil. The patient was a 61-year-old man who had arrived in São Paulo from a trip from Italy, the first European country to face exponential growth of the disease caused by the new coronavirus. Two weeks later, on March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the occurrence of a pandemic caused by Sars-CoV-2, the scientific name of the virus, when 114 countries registered cases, including 4,291 provoked deaths by the new disease.

In Brazil, the first death officially registered because of Covid-19 occurred on March 17, also in São Paulo. Like the pioneering case of the disease in the country, the victim had been seen at a private health unit. However, since the first official bulletins from the health authorities, it he was known that it was a matter of time for the public network to be put to the test when the epidemiological curve spread across the national territory. Although the majority of people infected with the coronavirus are asymptomatic, it is estimated that one in five patients needed hospital care for breathing difficulties and approximately 5% may require support for the treatment of respiratory failure, requiring hospitalization in beds equipped with respirators and others medium and

high complexity equipment.

Before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brazil had 41.311 adult and pediatric beds in intensive care units registered in DataSUS, the official data platform of the Unified Health System (SUS), divided almost in half between the public network (51.4%) and the private system (48.6%). Like other structures dedicated to serving the population, the distribution of this equipment showed significant inequalities for facing the health demand by subnational governments, responsible for the operation of SUS. A mapping showed that 73% of the 558 administrative micro-regions in Brazil, in which more than half of Brazilians live, they did not offer at least one intensive care bed for every 100 thousand inhabitants, an index recommended by the WHO.

Given this scenario, preparing the hospital network to be able to care for these patients has become the order of the day for health authorities. To this end, state and municipal governments initiated emergency actions that can be summarized in two general lines: 1) increase in the offer of intensive care beds, through the creation of field hospitals, contracting and agreements for the use of private equipment; and 2) determination of distance and social isolation measures, with permission to operate only for activities considered essential.

Both measures were taken by the subnational government's own initiatives, without a coordinated national strategy, partly due to the difficulties and complexities of facing a pandemic disease little known to science, partly due to the cyclical tensions of Brazilian politics. In this second causality, the public opposition and the resistance of the President of the Republic to respect the measures taken by governors and mayors and, even more serious and surprising, the Ministry of Health's guidelines, which underwent two changes of title, stand out in less than 30 days [3].

Two facts made explicit the complexities and the consequences of the difficulties of federative coordination in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil. In relation to the measures of distance and social isolation and disputes between the federal and subnational governments, it was up to the Federal Supreme Court to arbitrate the issue and reaffirm the competing competence determined by the Federal Constitution in public health policies. On April 15, it he was decided by the plenary of the Court, in a unanimous decision, that the Federal District, the states and the municipalities can both follow presidential decrees and determine specific norms and administrative actions to face the pandemic. Thus, one of the federation's essential characteristics he was reinforced, namely, the fundamental premise that the system presupposes the construction of pacts for a more harmonious functioning and with more

results that are effective.

The other notable fact refers to the creation of the Federative Program for Confronting Coronavirus, whose objective is to provide financial assistance by the Union of 125 billion reais to states, the Federal District and municipalities, among direct transfers to subnational governments, associated with the suspension of payments and obligations for a specified period. The formality of the proposal caused political clashes between federal deputies, who had the initiative to propose the measure, and senators, who adopted a legislative strategy to take the lead in the discussion and give the final wording of the text, approved on May 6, 2020.

There was a need to recompose the lost revenue due to the drop in the collection of state and municipal taxes. The President of the Republic approved the bill to help states and municipalities only on the last day of the legal deadline. Without a clear indication of when the first of the four transfers of federal funds would take effect. The gesture was also seen as a way for the president to show discontent with this type of policy and with the restrictive measures adopted by subnational governments.

This position left the reality known and daily experienced by local managers in the background. To paraphrase the former governor of São Paulo, André Franco Montoro, people live in the municipalities, and the mayors are the first to be questioned about the demands of citizens. It is necessary to practice the well-known principle of subsidiarity that guides the oldest federations, with the country promoting an effective and efficient decentralization of public policies.

It is true that Brazil has taken an important step towards decentralized federative cooperation with the creation of the Unified Health System, which has been tested like never before in the face of this pandemic. Together with SUS, the creation of inter-municipal health consortia can be observed in several states, especially in Minas Gerais. In the context of the pandemic, inter-municipal consortia have been one of the possible institutional solutions for carrying out emergency assistance programs, for the purchase of medicines, etc.

In any case, whether through a purposeful agenda of regional initiatives or through the federative confrontation, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of the political and administrative pact between the three spheres of government. The municipal units, being closer to the citizens, seem to be functioning more effectively as sounding boards for the communities' priority needs. Mayors and secretaries are discovering that by acting in search of unity at the regional level, it is easier to find more appropriate solutions to common problems. It is even possible to resist or negotiate the solutions that, traditionally, come "from top to bottom" in

a federative system where verticality tends to prevail over horizontality when it comes to intergovernmental relations.

The epidemic reached Brazil and touched differently each of the country's territories. A topic that received special attention from electoral analysts in the last municipal election was the importance given to cooperation between municipalities among the flags that will be raised by candidates and candidates for mayors, motivated by the solidarity environment caused by Covid-19.

Elections and the Pandemic

Faced with the scenario of uncertainties motivated by the pandemic, coinciding with a year of municipal elections, politicians of different party and ideological nuances debated the feasibility of holding the election on the scheduled date, in October. In the name of stability and predictability of the process, until the end of May, the month in which it changed command, the Superior Electoral Court did not take any official initiative for a possible postponement of the vote and, just as importantly, for an evaluation on the impact of this change in relation to the current mayors' mandate.

Upon being sworn in as president of the Superior Electoral Court, Minister Luis Roberto Barroso made clear the zeal and prudence in dealing with the issue, while recognizing that the problem, eventually, will have to be faced. In a speech, the magistrate stated that the "extension of mandates, even for a limited period, should be avoided to the limit" and that a possible postponement of the elections would only occur if it is not possible to hold them without risk to public health.

Diverse interests were expressed in the debate with a view to extending the current mandates, not only long enough to hold the election, but for a possible coincidence with the general elections of 2022. A change in this sense, as well as in the calendar of 2020 municipal voting and any extension of the current mayors' mandate depends on a constitutional amendment approved by the National Congress. With this, the National Confederation of Municipalities, an entity that stands in defense of small and medium-sized prefectures, presented a letter to the Brazilian legislature in defense of the coincidence of the elections in 2022.

In ten months since the first confirmed case of the disease in Brazil, on February 26, Covid-19 took the lives of about 180.000 people in all 27 federative units, in a total of 3.218 municipalities until December 13, 2020. In all, 3.880 municipalities, in which more than 90% of Brazilians live, registered at least one case of the disease. The responses given by the local managers, combined with the actions taken by the state and federal governments, to face the pandemic

were an unprecedented and determining variable for the result of the last municipal elections.

Conclusion

In this article, we focus on the theme of municipal elections and the political situation before and after the arrival of the coronavirus in Brazil. A deeply disturbing and unpredictable scenario due to the situation of political polarization that the country has been experiencing since the 2018 electoral process. We find that the Brazilian political scenario is quite complex and impacted by the removal of the President of the Republic from his party of origin. The creation of the new party aims to gather support forces in a government with great difficulties in finding a stable base for its political proposals in the National Congress.

The problems arising from the polarization and fragmentation of the Brazilian party system are added to the demands for greater decentralization and capillarity in the federal system, which is still marked by tensions between the president, governors and mayors instead of cooperation. The arrival of Covid-19 demanded immediate responses from the health system to this pandemic, which also deepened the divisions. In this scenario, the conflicts of the Presidency of the Republic with the governors of the most important states of the country stand out, for the opposition to the isolation measures and for the perspectives of future political-electoral conflicts, and the changes in the command of the Ministry of Health during the health emergency.

The pandemic arrived in Brazil in early 2020 and immediately put the municipal electoral process started in April in check. Uncertainty was imposed on normality in relation to the July party conventions and the beginning of the pre-election period. The campaigns that would take place in September and the elections in October were extended to the months of October and November. The behavior of the mayors, governors and president, when facing Covid-19, was the main agenda in the debates. However, the seriousness of the situation, which exposed the weaknesses of the federal system and public administrations at the three levels of government, put structural issues on the agenda, such as political, tax reforms, and the modernization of Brazilian public management. We hope that the emotional dejection that has been falling on the entire population, putting pressure on political leaders in particular, can be an opportunity for overcoming and maturing republican and federative democracy.

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