

The Impact of Influencers on Electoral Competition in Brazil¹

El impacto de los influenciadores en las competencias electorales en Brasil

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of digital influencers in Brazil's 2024 local elections. The central hypothesis is that both the number of followers and the use of paid promotion on social media platforms conferred electoral advantages to a group of influencer-candidates, ultimately contributing to their success at the polls. To test this hypothesis, we first analysed the political, partisan, and ideological profiles of these candidates based on their biographies and digital content in view of their background, considering the contemporary balance of political forces. We then conducted linear regression analyses. The results indicate a positive correlation between the number of social media followers and vote share. Furthermore, we find that paid promotion significantly enhances candidates' capacity to attract voter support.

KEYWORDS: *digital influencers, social media platforms, municipal elections, Brazil.*

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el impacto de los influenciadores digitales en las elecciones locales de Brasil en 2024. La hipótesis central sostiene que tanto el número de seguidores como el uso de promociones pagadas en plataformas de redes sociales otorgaron ventajas electorales a un grupo de candidatos-influenciadores, contribuyendo así a su éxito en las urnas. Para poner a prueba esta hipótesis, se analizaron primero los perfiles políticos, partidarios e ideológicos de estos candidatos a partir de sus biografías y del contenido difundido en redes digitales. Luego se realizaron análisis de regresión lineal. Los resultados indican una correlación positiva entre el número de seguidores en redes sociales y el desempeño electoral. Además, se observa que el uso de promoción paga incrementa significativamente la capacidad de atraer apoyo electoral.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *influenciadores digitales, plataformas de redes sociales, elecciones locales, Brasil.*

Introduction

It has become increasingly evident—especially following Brazil's 2024 municipal elections—that the entry of so-called digital influencers into electoral races has reshaped the country's political landscape. As a result, political scientists are now compelled to investigate the political effects of these actors, who accumulate social and economic capital grounded in their mastery of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In this context, this article aims to provide a preliminary answer to whether the number of followers of a selected group of digital influencers translates into votes in the 2024 municipal elections. We also test whether spending on paid promotion via social media by these same actors had a positive effect.

These questions are relevant for analysing the performance of competitive dynamics in a representative democracy from at least two perspectives. First, new forms of persuasion, engagement, and opinion formation in the contemporary public sphere are introducing a new grammar to electoral campaigns. They are also pushing “analogue” politicians to adopt similar strategies—especially given the two-way dynamic in which digital influencers move from commercial-oriented platforms to become formal political actors. As a consequence, the boundary between political representation and algorithmic performance has become increasingly blurred. At the same time, the role of political parties as channels for structuring electoral preferences is being pushed into the background.

Second, social media has also become ubiquitous in political competition. Individuals and companies extensively utilise the internet to communicate and connect, with few remaining untouched by its pervasive presence (Lin et al., 2018, pp. 431–434). The term “social,” as applied to these platforms, is not accidental. It reflects the emergence of connectivity as a social value, as the internet has developed into a functional ecosystem in which individuals carry out part of their daily activities with the aid of services that are applied and personalised to their needs through algorithmic mediation (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 4–11).

This context has been favourable to the emergence of so-called influencers—digital content creators with a follower base with whom they share perspectives on personal life, politics, and a wide range of offerings, including products, business ventures, personal opinions, and the promotion of other public figures (De Veirman et al., 2017, pp. 801–802). The presence of influencers in contemporary processes of consumer relations and political engagement is considerable. When the influencer’s endorsement aligns with the attitudes and viewpoints expressed in the digital environment, there is a high probability of follower conversion into consumer, especially in marketing contexts (Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1272–1275).

As we will demonstrate, these digital transformations have generated significant turbulence in the political public sphere, as a segment of influencers has begun to operate within the political environment, promoting values, attitudes, and ideologies, and engaging institutionally through candidacies (Arnesson, 2023, pp. 529–530). Celebrities—who have historically played roles in politics characterised more by emotional and spiritual leadership than by rational decision-making, although in some cases becoming actual politicians through electoral participation—have started directing their efforts toward political conflict (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016, pp. 144–147; Partzsch, 2015, pp. 182–189).

At the same time, it is important to highlight, according to several scholars of this phenomenon, that the ideological antagonism between conservatism and progressivism has extended beyond the political sphere into the cultural realm, generating conflict and tension not only in the domain of public sym-

bols but also within institutions (Hunter, 2006, pp. 11–14; Hunter & Wolfe, 2006). This constitutes the context of the cultural wars that have dominated the political landscape in parts of liberal democracies, including Brazil (Avelar, 2021; Maciel-Baqueteiro & Santos, 2023). The mobilisation of this metapolitical conflict is present on social media. According to Arnesson (2023) and Maly (2020), influencers identified with both the left and the right actively participate in the struggle for cultural hegemony through the creation of profiles on social networks, websites, and channels with their rhetoric, leading followers to become agents who replicate their opinions.

Drawing from the political context of Brazil's reality, this study aims to assess the impact of these new actors on electoral competitions. Methodologically, we examine how leadership figures affiliated with right-wing parties converted social capital, measured by their number of followers, into political capital—that is, an increased potential for votes at the polls. To this end, we selected 27 candidacies with a strong presence on social media platforms. The selection criterion was reaching at least 20,000 followers on one or more platforms. We collected follower counts from profiles on Instagram, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok. Spending on paid promotion was obtained using tools provided by Google and Meta (Facebook and Instagram).

We have organised this analysis, in addition to the introduction, into three main sections, followed by the concluding remarks. The next section presents a discussion of the literature that seeks to define the figure of the digital influencer. The third section outlines the methodology applied. The fourth section discusses the results of the tests conducted with the collected data. The fifth section provides the final considerations.

The Arrival of Digital Influencers in Politics and the Brazilian Context

The specialised literature attributes the origin of this phenomenon to changes in communication brought about by the internet, especially the increased use of social media and the widespread availability of broadband services. These developments created an economic environment conducive to the emergence of individuals capable of producing content outside traditional mass media channels and of leveraging their image, transforming it into a form of commodity. These characteristics successfully aligned with the economic and social changes occurring at the turn of the 20th to the 21st century, a period during which the production and provision of consumer goods and services became increasingly dependent on the digital world and high-speed internet tools (Karhawi, 2017; Larissa et al., 2024).

In the Brazilian experience, the concept of digital influencer came into effective use starting in 2015, the year when there was a greater availability of applications for video production and dissemination, previously limited to

sharing via YouTube. This shift rendered the term “blogger” insufficient to describe an agent operating across multiple platforms with the power to influence purchases, habits, tastes, and decision-making of others—now referred to as followers. This capacity is linked to the legitimacy of both the influencers’ image and discourse, whose credibility originates from accumulated social and cultural capital (Karhawi, 2017; Larissa et al., 2024; Pereira Melo & De Oliveira Pozobon, 2024).

The beginning of more systematic international analyses of the influencer phenomenon dates back to the first half of the 20th century, stemming from findings in the sociological school of electoral behaviour. At that time, the focus was more specifically on Lazarsfeld’s (1940) concept of the opinion leader, developed during field research in Erie, Ohio, aimed at understanding the factors influencing voting decisions in U.S. presidential elections. An opinion leader is described as an individual within a social group who is engaged with or well-informed about a particular topic. This position leads other group members to seek them out for information and advice. Opinion leaders emerge within social groups characterized by proximity, reciprocity, and trust among members. Lazarsfeld’s findings remain useful for explaining how the opinion leader concept can be extended to digital influencers, whose spheres of influence have been amplified by social media and instant communication mechanisms. As a negative consequence, the advantages offered by new communication forms also foster the spread of false information - so-called fake news - and polarisation among groups that do not share the same beliefs and ideologies. Trust and credibility in the content disseminated by leaders/influencers shape narratives and influence followers’ perceptions, who seek authentic and meaningful interactions (Martino, 2023).

Upon entering the political-electoral arena, influencers brought with them a set of techno-discursive techniques aimed at engaging the public and promoting their agendas. This grammar is characterised by an aggressive and emotionally charged repertoire designed to secure voter loyalty and adherence. Techniques such as *flamebait* (provocative content intended to spark reactions), *discursive pivoting* (shifting narratives to maintain audience engagement), *affective rhetoric* (emotionally appealing content), *amalgamation* (the blending of different styles and formats), and *community-building* (the creation of bonds with followers) have become integral to the competition for votes. These strategies have forced candidates rooted in the analogue world to adapt to this new digital logic (Pereira Melo & De Oliveira Pozobon, 2024).

It is, for instance, precisely this nature of practice exhibited by many of the influencers under scrutiny in this research regarding issues such as legal abortion, religious conflict, sexuality, or topics that may invoke moral panic. Through affective polarisation, followers are summoned and mobilised to establish clearly delineated lines of battle. They call for invasions of museum exhibitions under the pretext of denouncing the sexualisation of childhood; they promote boycotts against companies and artists; and they engage their

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audiences precisely through the use of the aforementioned techniques, which invariably begin with *flamebait*, ultimately aimed at community-building purposes (Balieiro, 2022; De Paula & Domingues, 2020; Gracino Junior et al., 2021; Maciel-Baqueiro et al., 2025).

The minimalist theory of democracy of Schumpeter (2013, pp. 269–281) argues that there is a rationale in aligning the logic of the market with the logic of politics. As a result, it is natural for a figure analogous to the consumer-oriented digital influencer to emerge within the electoral sphere. In this sense, the political influencer can be defined as an agent widely recognised on social media who, much like they turn brands into personal expressions, produces and distributes political content that reaches and influences a broad, diffuse audience (Bause, 2021, p. 296). What is particularly impactful in the case of the political influencers is that these actors often appear endowed with a special charisma, in which their followers believe, thereby amplifying the reach and resonance of their message (Weber, 1999, pp. 737–738).

In this context, social media has become fertile ground for the rise of the far right. This is largely due to the very dynamics of digital communication. Without the mediated relationship between a content gatekeeper—who selects messages deemed appropriate for public consumption—and the information receiver, the boundaries of what is acceptable to disseminate become significantly expanded. This opens the door to misleading information and, not infrequently, to content that promotes racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and the normalisation of violence as a legitimate form of intellectual expression (M. A. F. dos Santos & Maciel-Baqueiro, 2023, pp. 173–185; Winter, 2019, pp. 51–55).

The digital political influencer, by using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, tends to promote content with high connectivity and algorithmic amplification potential, encouraging followers to engage with content and personalities they had not previously encountered (Gammarano et al., 2025). A new frontier—one that departs from the tolerance norms of liberal democracy—is opened through radicalised content that prompts similarly radical responses from followers. This dynamic is enabled by informational tools that facilitate the production of highly ideological content, which is softened by the use of coded language employed by far-right influencers (Åkerlund, 2021; Rothut et al., 2024; Van Der Vegt et al., 2021).

In analysing this scenario in Brazil, we conducted an exploratory study within the context of the transformations that have taken place in Brazilian democracy over the past two decades, particularly through the political mobilisation of social media and its effects both in the streets and, more specifically, within the electoral process. In this regard, we first observed the emergence of new social movements. The accumulated social demand for political reform and the fight against corruption—intensified by the widespread allegations involving nearly all major political parties during Operation Car Wash²,

² In portuguese, *Operação Lava-Jato*.

launched in March 2014—alongside the waning of the protest waves from the June 2013 demonstrations, gave rise to a myriad of political and religious movements. These groups, by strategically employing social media, fostered a new dynamic between the political sphere and the electorate.

In the initial phase, the most prominent political actor in action was the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), aligned with the radical right. The movement implemented strategies of mobilisation, algorithmic engagement, and the personalisation of a conservative message centred on the dissemination of clips, memes, and short, easily digestible and entertaining texts. To sustain this communication strategy, political influencers who served as the public face of the organisation—such as Kim Katagiri, Arthur Moledo do Val, and Fernando Holiday (M. B. P. D. Santos et al., 2023)—played a crucial role. Through their videos, posts, and blog appearances—shared on both their pages and the MBL's official channels on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram—they recurrently focused on undermining the public image of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), Brazil's largest left-wing party and the one with the most extensive history in the presidency (2003–2006; 2007–2010; 2011–2014; 2015–2016³; and 2023–2026).

This radicalized right-wing repertoire, with a clearly defined target aiming at courting a reactionary electorate, fuelled follower reactions that included references to, for example, the situation in Venezuela—framed as a “socialist dictatorship”—the fight against an alleged leftist ideological domination in public universities, represented by so-called “cultural Marxism”, and the association of socialism with corruption (Yamamoto & De Moura, 2018). These groups exercised deliberate care in mobilising a conservative electorate, fostering loyalty and encouraging a shift toward a reactionary sentiment—not only away from the left, but also from the political center. They promoted a perceived loss of symbolic capital and prestige, whether in economic or cultural terms (Bourdieu, 2016; Ostiguy, 2020).

Other movements, following a similar strategy of crafting easily consumable messages designed to go viral among voters through political influencers, reached comparable levels of prominence. This was the case with Revoltados Online, Endireita Brasil, and Vem Pra Rua, which demonstrated a broader capacity for mobilisation than their left-wing counterparts. Their leadership promoted an agenda that sought to associate the Workers' Party (PT) with corruption, while also defending a set of cultural values centered on the heterosexual, patriarchal family, opposing the secular character of the state, and advocating for the election of openly right-wing politicians to both legislative and executive offices (Baron, 2019; Delcourt, 2016).

Driven by the momentum of these movements, a new model of communication emerged—one without direct intermediaries between sender and re-

³ The Workers' Party's (PT) fourth term in the national executive was cut short due to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. For further details, see Braga (2018).

ceiver. This shift became a hallmark of the Brazilian *nouvelle droite*, especially when former army captain and federal congressman Jair Bolsonaro, in crafting his 2018 presidential campaign, embraced direct communication through the internet, particularly via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and viral video clips on YouTube. Similar strategies were observed in the political trajectories of figures such as Beppe Grillo in Italy, Donald Trump in the United States, Marine Le Pen in France, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary (Aggio, 2020; Cesarino, 2019; da Empoli, 2019; Ostiguy, 2017).

This communication style was adopted as a central strategy by numerous political and religious influencers who either ran in Brazil's 2018 general elections or campaigned for candidates within their political sphere, shaping the actions of the Brazilian *nouvelle droite* both before and during the election, as well as in the exercise of elected office (Aragão, 2023; R. M. Santos et al., 2020). The result was the election of the first far-right representative to the presidency and a significant increase in far-right representation in the National Congress. In the subsequent general elections, although the far-right candidate seeking presidential re-election was defeated by the Workers' Party candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva⁴, he still garnered substantial votes in the second round and contributed to expanding far-right strength in the legislature.

As we will discuss further, several influencers identified with the far right were elected or re-elected to state and national legislative offices, employing the same political communication model. According to Maciel-Baqueiro (2024) and Maciel-Baqueiro & Santos (2023), this communication style characteristic of these new political actors can be defined as "digital populism." This discourse is marked by an inseparable relationship between the politician and the internet, to the point where it becomes an obligation for the emerging *nouvelle droite* politician to become an influencer. Without this, it would be impossible to give favourable meaning to one's discourse while rejecting that of the opponent—especially in the exercise of political antagonism as a precursor to a final struggle aimed at conquering the state and demoralising any opposing political force (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005, 2018; Schmitt, 1991).

In the Brazilian context, the far right has turned social media into a tool for disseminating its agenda, targeting parties and figures identified with the left. This characteristic has been combined with the promotion of a religious identity—particularly the neo-Pentecostal movement linked to prosperity theology—the affiliation of figures originating from civil and military public security forces, and the involvement of young people whose discourse adopts

⁴ For the first time in Brazil's history since the constitutional amendment permitting re-election to executive offices, a sitting president was not re-elected. This outcome had not occurred with previous incumbents such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1998), Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2006), and Dilma Rousseff (2014).

a strongly conservative tone in attacks against progressive social movements and social protection policies. These policies include affirmative action programs (such as quota systems), feminist groups, and LGBTQIAPN+ communities. Digital platforms have amplified an anti-system discourse that highlights the existence of a corrupt political elite, defends values associated with the traditional family, and calls for a re-evaluation of the authoritarian past (Borges & Vidigal, 2023).

Within the campaign strategy of this *nouvelle droite*, social media functions as both an opposition to traditional media and a mechanism for building a direct channel with the population. It creates a form of engagement through virtual communities of potential voters who organically disseminate the radicalised rhetoric of party and movement leaders, as well as the names selected for electoral contests. Influencers play a central role in this environment, as they expand the audience and lend credibility to the rhetoric spread on social media, thereby tipping the political-party competition in their favour.

Finally, it is important to highlight that influencers adopt a repertoire that resonates with the idiosyncratic and subjective realities of their followers, gaining the ability to attract those who hold a negative view of politics and identify with an individualistic logic, recognizing entrepreneurship as a way forward amid a labor market characterized by low wages, subcontracting, and limited prospects (Borges, 2024; Riedl et al., 2021). In other words, this reflects a continuous search for validation and symbolic consecration through alternative means—such as economic and symbolic capital—achieved through the construction of multiple positions via political agency (Boltanski, 1973; Bourdieu, 1981; Francelin et al., 2025). This constitutes a form of political entrepreneurship of the self, aimed either at winning over the electorate or at becoming the very subject—the voter—leveraging notoriety as a form of capital within the attention economy.

But what were the effects of influencers in Brazil's 2024 local elections? These elections took place two years after the far-right presidential candidate's narrow defeat, despite the movement increasing its representation in both state and national legislatures. Given this performance, the expectation is that this political force expanded its reach at the local level by electing more city councillors and mayors across the country—even though the party hosting the Bolsonaro movement, the Liberal Party (PL), has traditionally been smaller. We argue, however, that this growth is largely due to the strong engagement and mobilisation generated by a new structure centred on influencers and the strategic use of social media developed by Bolsonaro's movement in recent years. In this election cycle, Brazil's 25 political parties fielded 15,573 candidates competing for 5,567 municipal executive positions and approximately 431,000 candidates vying for one of the 58,208 local legislative seats distributed across 27 states. This is what we will investigate in the following two sections.

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Method and Selected Cases

To test the relationship between accumulated social media capital (followers) and electoral success (number of votes), we applied a linear regression model, using the number of votes received by the selected cases as the dependent variable and the sum of followers across five platforms—Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook—as the independent variable. The same technique was applied to examine the relationship between the volume of resources allocated to paid social media promotion during campaigns and the votes obtained.

Case selection, involving a small-N study, was conducted non-randomly. Platform selection was based on a minimum threshold of 20,000 followers on at least one platform. Applying this criterion, we identified 27 candidates distributed across 12 parties: Liberal Party (PL) (7 cases); União Brasil (5); Progressive Party (PP) (4 cases); Social Democratic Party (PSD) (3); Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) (1); Novo (1); Brazilian Women's Party (PMB) (1); Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) (1); Podemos (1); Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) (1); Brazilian Labor Renewal Party (PRTB) (1); and Republicans (1).

As this is an exploratory study, we analysed trends based on the following variables (Table 1): office sought, party affiliation, votes received, spending on paid promotions, and number of followers on Instagram, X (Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook combined. Segmenting by social network is especially important given the distinct user profiles of each platform in terms of average age, social class, and position within the field of symbolic capital (Lugo-Ocando, 2020; Miller et al., 2016). Based on these factors, future studies may further explore these distinctions. After collecting data directly from each candidate's social media profiles and electoral information provided by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), it was possible to test how social media influenced municipal executive and legislative elections in Brazil.

Collected Data for Case Selection

Name	Office sought	Party	Votes	Spending on paid promotions	Total followers across social media platforms
Pablo Marçal	Mayor	PRTB	1.719.274	R\$ 2.749.012,91	22.565.900
Rubinho Nunes	Councillor	União	101.549	R\$ 1.200.331,23	2.371.100
Lucas Pavanato	Councillor	PL	161.386	R\$ 572.021,27	5.015.200

Table 1.
Information on selected cases

Ana Carolina	Councillor	Podemos	129.563	R\$ 540.000,00	2.095.159
Dr. Murilo	Councillor	PL	113.820	R\$ 486.051,84	291.573
Zoe Martinez	Councillor	PL	60.272	R\$ 301.500,00	3.447.496
Thammy Miranda	Councillor	PSD	50.234	R\$ 250.327,81	6.177.600
Carlos Bolsonaro	Councillor	PL	130.480	R\$ 210.500,00	8.366.900
Amanda Vettorazzo	Councillor	União	40.144	R\$ 203.000,00	1.580.000
Guilherme Kiiter	Councillor	Novo	16.664	R\$ 141.998,00	442.466
Sargento Nantes	Councillor	PP	112.484	R\$ 79.566,61	1.399.824
Bruno Secco	Councillor	PMB	11.436	R\$ 66.900,00	160.769
Felipe Michel	Councillor	PP	31.773	R\$ 62.931,60	152.162
Sargento Salazar	Councillor	PL	22.594	R\$ 60.000,00	2.554.000
Coronel Urzeda	Councillor	PL	5.602	R\$ 53.966,00	134.610
Delegada Tathiana	Councillor	União	12.515	R\$ 43.000,00	145.520
Olímpio Júnior	Councillor	PL	7.732	R\$ 36.470,48	19.417.770
Da Costa Piá	Councillor	União	15.014	R\$ 33.473,00	1.169.953
Joyce Trindade	Councillor	PSD	30.466	R\$ 30.000,00	96.623
Bebeto	Councillor	PSD	8.125	R\$ 29.704,00	1.457.800
Leniel Borel	Councillor	PP	34.359	R\$ 26.000,00	1.080.190
Vitor Magnoni	Councillor	PSB	1.732	R\$ 25.375,00	30.638
João Bettega	Councillor	União	12.346	R\$ 25.000,00	1.552.100
Leo Aquila	Councillor	MDB	15.958	R\$ 2.523,00	3.292.000
Delegado Lessa	Councillor	Republicanos	3.745	R\$ 1.500,00	155.993
Jorge Araújo	Councillor	PP	36.065	R\$ 0,00	952.100
Alexandre Tchaca	Councillor	PSDB	5.103	R\$ 0,00	232.700

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Table 1.
continued

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) Data Repository.

Analysis of the Results

The first important finding from the data in Table 1 is that the use of influencers as candidates in Brazilian elections is not exclusive to the far right. In the election analysed, 12 political parties from different ideological spectrums employed this strategy: far-right (PL), traditional right (União Brasil, Progressistas, PRTB, Novo, Podemos, Republicanos), center-right (MDB, PSDB), and center-left (PSB). In general, the analysis of these candidates' profiles, based on their biographies and the content they published on social media, reveals a discursive pattern centered on conservatism, support for business and agribusiness sectors, the defense of Christian religious values, and attacks on the LGBTQIAPN+ community. There is also a strong presence of so-called "public security influencers" — police officers and military personnel known for posting viral content related to security operations. This group includes figures such as Ana Carolina Oliveira, the most-voted woman for the city council in São Paulo. She built her follower base by advocating for family values and the protection of children, drawing on the symbolic capital of a personal tragedy — the murder of her daughter in a crime that deeply moved Brazilian society in 2008.

It is important to highlight the influence of the groups that took to the streets to demand the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff between 2015 and 2016. Among the selected cases, we identified two individuals associated with the Free Brazil Movement (Movimento Brasil Livre – MBL): Lucas Pavanato (PL) and Amanda Vettorazzo (União Brasil). Another noteworthy case is that of businessman Pablo Marçal, a mayoral candidate from the small PRTB party. A digital influencer and self-help coach, Marçal ran on a pro-business agenda, adopted a strong anti-establishment discourse, and employed aggressive rhetoric in both debates and on social media. In his first major electoral bid—and conducting a campaign largely independent of his political party—he placed third, receiving 1,7 million votes (28,14% of the valid votes), missing the runoff election by only 56,8 thousand votes behind the second-place candidate, socialist congressman Guilherme Boulos (PSOL).

The electoral competition in the municipality of São Paulo—the country's largest economic and demographic capital—was significantly impacted by the presence of digital influencers, whose party affiliations served primarily as a means to secure candidacy, given that party membership is mandatory to run for both proportional and majoritarian offices in Brazil. Traditional party structures, for instance, saw their previously secure votes undermined by the candidacy of influencers in the mayoral race. Similarly, traditional politicians appeared to be threatened in the race for city council seats, as digital influencers won 10,9% of the positions in contention (in São Paulo, 55 seats were up for election). In the following tests, we examine the effects associated with the number of followers and the total amount spent on social media promotion on the electoral outcomes of these candidates.

Variable	Estimate (B)	Standard error	T-value	P-value
Intercept	-26.140	52400	-0.499	0.622
Number of followers	0.04165	0.008317	5.008	p < 0.001
Adjusted R-squared	0.4809			p < 0.001
F-statistics (df1, df2)	25.08			
N (observations)	27			

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the data from Table 1.

Variable	Estimate	Standard error	T-value	P-value
Intercept	-35.840	27760	-1.291	0.208
Expenditure on paid promotion	0.5335	0.04529	11.780	p < 0.001
Adjusted R-squared	0.8412			p < 0.001
F-statistics(df1, df2)	138.8			
N (observations)	27			

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the data from Table 1.

In both tests, we identified a positive effect related to both the number of followers and spending on paid promotion. In the first case, each new social media follower generated approximately 0,04165 votes. In other words, for every 100 new followers, candidates received around 4,17 votes. In the second case, each R\$ 1 invested in promotion resulted in 0,5335 votes. A candidate who increased their paid promotion budget by R\$ 1.000 obtained approximately 533,5 votes. We may therefore deduce that, although the number of followers of digital influencers is significant, paid promotion has a greater effect on vote attraction potential, influencing the outcome of political contests. It is important to note that simple linear regression indicates association, not causality. Other factors—such as party affiliation, public funding received, and endorsements by established politicians, among other variables—may also be associated with the electoral performance of these political actors.

Final Considerations

Although limited by the small sample size and the non-random selection of cases, this article has demonstrated a positive relationship between the number of social media followers and candidates' vote potential. It was also possible to identify that paid promotion of campaigns on social media—an expenditure that already occupies a prominent place in candidates' financial disclosures—

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Table 2.
Linear Regression – Votes vs.
Followers

Table 3.
Linear Regression – Votes vs.
Paid Promotion

increases their capacity to attract voter preference. In future work, we aim to advance this research agenda by either expanding the universe of cases or conducting a comparative model involving candidates with low levels of engagement on digital platforms.

We may conclude, therefore, that the digital influencer, upon entering the political arena, can mobilize significant electoral support and, as a result, may become both a strategic target for other political parties in future campaigns and a potential threat to the very continuity of the party as an organizational structure responsible for shaping electoral choices in a democracy. This latter consequence raises important concerns about the traditional form of political competition mediated by party actors, potentially undermining one of the pillars of liberal democracy. In this sense, the article sought to contribute to the academic debate by highlighting the initial effects that this new digital environment imposes on the survival of political parties, understood as channels of expression and connection between society and the state. Despite the limitations noted, our argument has proven viable by demonstrating the impact of these new digital actors in local-level electoral contests.

It is important to highlight that current Brazilian electoral legislation, by allowing political competition to take place both online and offline, plays a significant role in the issues discussed here. More recently, the law has sought to regulate this new environment more effectively, introducing measures such as the prohibition of virtual campaign events (digital *showmícios*⁵) and banning the dissemination of paid political advertising on platforms not explicitly authorised (Law No. 13.488/2017).

The increasing use of new communication technologies in Brazilian party politics follows a broader trend observed in other global contexts. Although still preliminary, the data suggest a predominance of candidates affiliated with center-right, traditional right, and far-right parties among the most recognised, followed, and voted for by the electorate. Inferring the causes of the growing presence of digital influencers and their political consequences for the upcoming 2026 general elections will require further research on the relationship between followers and votes, engagement and votes, and paid promotion and votes. Finally, this initial step may encourage other researchers—both within and beyond Brazil—to situate these dynamics within the current context of digital sociability and the declining credibility of party actors. Doing so may allow for comparative analyses of the effects on the survival of political parties, which were originally established to fulfil the function of political representation within a liberal democratic institutional system.

⁵ A “showmício” is a portmanteau in Brazilian Portuguese combining “show” (concert) and “comício” (rally), referring to political campaign events featuring live musical performances aimed at attracting large audiences. Although once common in Brazilian elections, *showmícios* have been banned since 2006 due to concerns over unequal campaign conditions and undue influence on voters. The term “digital showmício” refers to attempts to replicate this strategy in online formats, also now prohibited.

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