

**'SUSPICIOUS' TWEETS: HOW OPINION LEADERS DIFFER FROM POLITICIANS WHEN DISTRUSTING POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS**

**TWEETS 'SUSPEITOS': COMO FORMADORES DE OPINIÃO DIFEREM DE POLÍTICOS QUANDO DESCONFIAM DAS INSTITUIÇÕES POLÍTICAS**

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**Vanessa Horácio Lira**<sup>1</sup>

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciência Política  
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco  
Recife – Pernambuco - Brasil

**José Francelino Galdino Neto**<sup>2</sup>

Departamento de Relações Internacionais  
Universidade Estadual da Paraíba  
João Pessoa - Paraíba - Brasil

**Fábio Marques de Souza**<sup>3</sup>

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Formação de Professores  
Universidade Estadual da Paraíba  
Campina Grande - Paraíba – Brasil

**Abstract:** Political distrust is a crucial element for democracy survival. While it represents a citizens' right to challenge some irregularities, it can also represent citizens' perception that democracy has failed, cutting their ties with political agents and processes. Recent data show that Brazilians trust less and less political institutions, like the National Congress. This attitude might be influenced not only by politicians, but also by what the authors consider here as 'opinion leaders' - which includes: celebrities, youtubers, and journalists. However, both groups have different motivations to talk about politics. This article aims to answer if opinion leaders express more political distrust on Twitter than politicians. According to the revised literature, citizens express political distrust based on the evaluation of technical incompetence, ethical issues and perceptions of interests that are incompatible with the political system or its agents. The authors propose to measure distrust through text (tweet), as an index based on the frequency of negative, moral-emotional, and laughter-related words. Scores vary from 0 to 3. The authors compare both groups. Contrary to their expectations, results show that

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<sup>1</sup> [vanessa.lira@servidor.uepb.edu.br](mailto:vanessa.lira@servidor.uepb.edu.br)  
Orcid: 0000-0002-8667-3411

<sup>2</sup> [netogaldino@servidor.uepb.edu.br](mailto:netogaldino@servidor.uepb.edu.br)  
Orcid: 0000-0002-1115-0827

<sup>3</sup> [fabiohispanista@servidor.uepb.edu.br](mailto:fabiohispanista@servidor.uepb.edu.br)  
Orcid: 0000-0003-4538-3204

politicians post more tweets about institutions and distrust more compared to opinion leaders. A finding is surprising: it is not the ideological extremes that most produce distrustful tweets.

**Key-words:** Political distrust. Opinion leaders. Twitter. Text as data.

**Resumo:** A desconfiança política é um elemento crucial para a sobrevivência da democracia. Embora represente um direito dos cidadãos de contestar algumas irregularidades, também pode representar a percepção dos cidadãos de que a democracia falhou, cortando os seus laços com agentes e processos políticos. Dados recentes mostram que os brasileiros confiam cada vez menos nas instituições políticas, como o Congresso Nacional. Esta atitude pode ser influenciada não só pelos políticos, mas também por aquilo aqui considerado como “líderes de opinião” – o que inclui: celebridades, *youtubers* e jornalistas. No entanto, ambos os grupos têm motivações diferentes para falar sobre política. Este artigo pretende responder se os líderes de opinião expressam mais desconfiança política no *Twitter* do que os políticos. Segundo a literatura estudada, os cidadãos expressam desconfiança política com base na avaliação de incompetência técnica, questões éticas e percepções de interesses incompatíveis com o sistema político ou com os seus agentes. Propõe-se, aqui, medir a desconfiança, por meio do texto (*tweet*), como um índice baseado na frequência de palavras negativas, moral-emocionais e relacionadas ao riso. As pontuações variam de 0 a 3. Compararam-se os dois grupos. Contrariamente às expectativas dos autores, os resultados mostram que os políticos publicam mais *tweets* sobre as instituições e desconfiam mais do que os líderes de opinião. Um achado é interessante: não são os extremos ideológicos que mais produzem *tweets* desconfiados.

**Palavras-chave:** Desconfiança política. Líderes de opinião. *Twitter*. Texto como dado.

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## **Introduction**

When people retain negative evaluations about the political system, they start to create the expectation of being harmed. Citizens become more suspicious, withdrawn, with elements of aggression that motivate their actions and feelings of fear, anxiety, resentment, and despair. Although political distrust can be understood as a crucial element for democracy survival, as it is a representation of citizens' right to challenge some irregularities, it also represents citizens' perception that democracy has failed. When governments do not act effectively, they provoke distrust in individuals who, in turn, cut ties with political agents and processes (Bertsou, 2019a).

The consequences related to it can be diverse. High levels of distrust can open doors to consumption/endorsement of misinformation, like conspiracy theories. When people feel that the system is corrupted, and the groups responsible to run the public sphere are acting in their own benefits, they reduce their levels of external efficacy (Miller et al., 2016).

In other words, they feel powerless and skeptics in their ability to provide political changes, which contradicts essential democratic principles. Distrust can be also associated with preference for regime change (Li, 2021), be used as an instrument by political campaigns to manipulate public opinion (Reiter & Matthes, 2021); and help to explain the rise of new political leaders within traditional parties in established democracies (Dyck et al., 2018).

In Brazil, levels of trust in political institutions like parties, Congress, and local government have dropped over the years (Ibope Inteligência, 2019). This indicates the fragility of political institutions on individuals' perceptions about democracy. As language is a channel for individuals to express their complaints to representatives (Grimmer et al., 2022), text data can be a useful tool to help us understand public opinion behaviour. By trying to capture a snapshot of how political elites are debating politics, this paper aims to identify levels of distrust through text that are shared on social media by political elites.

The groups that compose Brazilian political elites have been changing. Social media boosted the rise of new political actors. In the 2018 elections at least seven digital influencers (hereafter referred to as opinion leaders) were elected. Some became the most voted congressmen on state and on federal level. What they have in common is not just the lack of experience in politics, but the use of social networks, like Twitter<sup>4</sup> and YouTube, to expose their ideas and gain followers.

To gain visibility and popularity, opinion leaders develop an intimacy with the public (Duffy, 2016; Marwick, 2015), interacting directly and constantly with their followers, giving the impression of transparency of their personal lives and the content creation process. But although they usually show some criticism of traditional media, they

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<sup>4</sup>Twitter has been renamed to "X". However, at the time the data was collected and analysed, the platform still had its original name. The name change is not a consensus among users. Most users still call the platform by its original name. Due to all of this, the authors chose to remain using the name Twitter.

place themselves as an alternative to the latter. Some even adopt a reactionary policy, sharing criticisms of progressive social justice movements such as feminism, LGBTQ, and Black Lives Matter (Lewis, 2019).

Therefore, opinion leaders play a relevant role in the online debate, as they have access to a large audience. Unlike traditional political elites (hereafter consider the politicians), journalists, celebrities, and youtubers could influence the masses by convincing their followers to change their opinion, attitude and/or behavior (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014).

However, politicians and opinion leaders have different incentives to express their opinion online.

This paper aims to answer the following question: do opinion leaders express more distrust of political institutions than traditional political elites on Twitter? The authors expect that opinion leaders will show higher levels of distrust than politicians (*hypothesis 1*) and that opinion leaders and politicians from ideological far-left and far-right post more tweets about political institutions (*hypothesis 2*).

The authors propose to measure political distrust through text (tweet). The dependent variable is distrust in political institutions and is measured as an index composed by the presence of 1) negative words; 2) moral-emotional words (Brady et al., 2017); and 3) informal expressions of laughter. After data was collected, tweets were filtered by those mentioning government, local government, some political parties, and Congress. These are the political institutions often used in surveys (Schneider, 2017). The authors created a dictionary based on related words. The independent variables are type of elite and ideological position.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature by shedding light to a phenomenon that lacks theoretical and empirical advances. Especially because studies are focused on trust, the authors emphasises that still lack some evidence on how trust/distrust can be different concepts and have different implications. Also, as most of the evidence approaches the outcome through survey instrument questions, the authors propose a different way to measure distrust: through text. As an important part of the research investigation process in social sciences, measurement connects concepts to data (Grimmer et al., 2022). They believe that this type of measurement could offer the opportunity to

refine the concept of political distrust, because it can identify the presence of elements defined by literature.

This paper is organised as follows: first, the authors present a brief discussion on the concept of political distrust, how it is usually measured, and what consequences are related to it. In the next section, they argue about the motivations traditional political elites and opinion leaders can have when expressing their ideas publicly online. Following, they show how data was collected and measured. After presenting descriptive results, they discuss some potential implications and limitations.

### **1. Distrust on political institutions**

Political distrust can be defined as attitudes with suspicions towards the political system (Bertsou, 2019a). It is an individual activity associated with the characteristics of political actors, government institutions, and/or political systems. The mere presence of the perception of distrust is enough to establish this negative relationship between the individual and political actors. Political distrust has three main pillars: a) perception of technical incompetence; b) perception that the conduct of the political actor is not compatible with the shared values of right and wrong within that society, and c) perception that the conduct of political actors is in accordance with the national interests and those of their citizens (Bertsou, 2019a).

Distrust can function as heuristics, a cognitive shortcut to simplify the complex political reality. In political conflict scenarios, where there are high levels of perceived dirty campaigning - those characterised by impolite, disrespectful, and defamatory forms of communication - citizens may use distrust in politicians to make negative evaluations (Reiter & Matthes, 2021).

It can also help explain the rise of new political leaders within traditional parties in established democracies. According to Dyck et al. (2018), the desire for a change and a distrust in the old leaders - associated with the status quo maintenance - led both parties (Democrats and Republicans) to converge for outsider running candidates in 2016 U.S. presidential elections. The idea behind was that change should be made by new leaders.

Although it is important to define the concept of distrust for political science, scholars constantly associate distrust with a simple lack of trust, not distinguishing both

concepts. Besides this discussion, recent literature has been studying distrust in politicians (Bøggild et al., 2021; Reiter & Matthes, 2021), government (Li, 2021), and elections (Jones, 2021). Studies usually measure political distrust through survey questions. In general, questions ask respondents how much they trust each political institution listed. Moral discourse is part of this language used by politicians to communicate.

Regardless of ideology, over time, Republicans and Democrats adapt their speech whether they are opposition or government. On Twitter, Democrats used more moral language after Trump's victory in 2016. In Congress, between 1981 and 2017, moral language was used more when politicians were in the opposition or were in the minority party (Wang and Inbar, 2021).

Evidence shows that when people do not trust much on politics, the ruling party can be harmed electorally in presidential and Congress elections (Jones, 2021). Trust is closely related to the party in charge. In the United States, while the use of social networks increased during the period of a Democratic government, Democrats reported greater trust. The opposite occurs in a Republican government (Klein & Robison, 2020). Hence, when supporters of a party on social media encounter information contrary to their own, they end up reaffirming their party alliances (Bail et al., 2018).

Brazil is one of the countries in Latin America that least trusts in the National Congress and in the government (Latinobarómetro, 2018). In the last decade, politicians started to use Twitter as a tool for closer communication to the public (Marques et al., 2014). Although most politicians by that time did not use social media, currently most of them have active profiles. The importance of this platform enables investigation about a crucial object for political scientists: the agenda-setting process conducted by legislators.

Through tweets research has shown that legislators tend to follow, rather than lead, discussions on public issues. That is, politicians are more responsive to questions posed by the public, especially their supporters (Barberá et al., 2019). Like agenda-setting, traditional elites are responsible for other important concerns. Political distrust of politicians, government or political institutions are not exclusive to the masses. Social media boosted the rise of new political actors that seem to play a relevant role in public debate.

## **2. Traditional elites and opinion leaders on Twitter**

In general, opinion leaders differ by those who share information without a clear ideological or personal bias, and those who would like to be opinion makers, persuading followers to change their opinion and even votes, by sharing information with a clear ideological bias and standing for social divides. In this regard, the authors can assume which users would have more motivation to distrust political institutions on Twitter, based on their intent (to inform vs. persuade), their ideology, and their relationship with the government currently in power (situation vs. opposition). Therefore, based on opinion leaders characteristics, considered here as: celebrities, youtubers, and journalists, the authors expect that opinion leaders show higher levels of distrust than political elites (*hypothesis 1*).

Traditional political elites (politicians) and opinion leaders have different motivations to publicly express their ideas. While politicians aim to persuade voters (Spirling, 2016) and to be effective in electoral campaigns (Tetlock, 1981; Conway III et al., 2012), opinion leaders (here considered as: celebrities, journalists, and youtubers) target popularity (Zilinsky et al., 2020; Duffy, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Lewis, 2019).

Politicians recur to a strategic use of a simplified language to communicate with the public. The simplification of the language provided by Twitter becomes a fundamental strategy for elite communication with the public, especially to individuals with low education or interest in politics. Although not very informative, due to the limitation of size, a message on Twitter can be persuasive, especially in maintaining supporters who already sympathise with the politician's ideology (Amsalem, 2019).

Recent studies show that users who demonstrate clear ideology, initiative in discussing sensitive topics, and have a political career are those with the highest level of influence (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2022). Twitter users with more extreme ideological positions share disproportionately more content than moderate users (Barberá & Rivero, 2015; Preoțiuc-Pietro et al., 2017).

There is a fundamental imbalance in information sharing on Twitter, because while most users post links to ideologically moderate news sources, a small group of users share ideologically extreme content and may account for most tweets posted about policy (Shore

et al., 2018). Hence, the authors expect that opinion leaders and politicians from ideological far-left and far-right post more tweets about political institutions (*hypothesis 2*).

Opinion leaders not only reach many individuals, but they also provide access to political discussions to those who would not otherwise have this access. This is the case, for example, of celebrities who, as argued by Zilinsky et al. (2020), can drive political content to their followers. But, what do celebrities benefit from posting political content? After all, they are usually artists. Evidence shows that when celebrities engage politically on Twitter, their followers react negatively. However, political tweets end up becoming, in some cases, more popular than the everyday content (Zilinsky et al., 2020).

In Brazil, the presence of celebrities in politics can be illustrated in the government of the former president Jair Bolsonaro. During presidential campaigns a famous actress, Regina Duarte, showed strong support for Jair Bolsonaro on social media and, by 2020, she became officially Special Secretary of Culture. For 2022 presidential elections, the main television presenter, Luciano Huck, was considered running for president. Huck was presented as an outside alternative to voters. However, his candidacy never left the realm of ideas.

Similar patterns are observed on youtubers and opinion leaders in general, as they usually adopt micro-celebrities' tactics to gain visibility and popularity. They develop an intimacy with the public (Duffy, 2016; Marwick, 2015), interacting directly and constantly with their followers, giving the impression of transparency of their personal lives and the content creation process (Lewis, 2019). Increasingly, they have been participating more in politics.

In the 2018 elections, at least seven digital influencers were elected. Some became the most voted deputies on state and on federal level. What they have in common is not just the lack of experience in politics, but mainly the use of social networks, like Twitter and YouTube, to expose their ideas and gain followers. But, although they usually show some criticism of traditional media, they place themselves as an alternative to the latter. Some influencers adopt a reactionary policy, sharing criticisms of progressive social justice movements, for instance feminism, LGBTQ, and Black Lives Matter (Lewis, 2019).

Social media demanded traditional media to change. News is shared online, ordinary individuals can react publicly to the published content, journalists need to be



more relevant. The public expects from them not only insights, brief explanations, and instant news updates. They want to see the human behind, meaning exposure to their personal life, dramas, dilemmas, and funny moments. To become all of these, journalists started to look like digital influencers. This change implies more engagement and influence on Twitter. However, it does not translate into more trust in the media. The increased use of social networks as a source of information has generated more distrust of media around the world (Park et al., 2020).

While journalists are becoming digital influencers, therefore, opinion leaders, the contrary also seems to happen. In Brazil, the media standard is to officially adopt a neutral political and ideological position. Although uncommon, on Twitter journalists have the possibility to express their political personal preferences. But, usually, they take a neutral stand even online. The problem is when opinion leaders try to manipulate their followers through narratives fabricated in the name of neutrality (Blevins et al., 2021). They consider opinion as fact (Park et al., 2020) and use uncivilised language (Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020). All of this generates more engagement, making them more popular online than professional journalists. Therefore, it is essential not to confuse popularity with information quality.

### **3. Methodology**

Our sample consists of a list of the main politicians (group 1) and opinion leaders (group 2) in Brazil. The former group includes some congressmen and senators, usually called by the literature as traditional political elite. The last group includes journalists, artists, and youtubers. These lists were based in the Ideological GPS created by Folha de São Paulo. The authors have only considered individual profiles. Therefore, media, political parties, justice, and others are not included. The sample includes 298.615 political tweets from 621 users profiles (both opinion leaders and politicians) in total.

Tweets from opinion leaders represent 24% of the sample, while politicians' tweets represent 76%. The lack of proportion between the two groups in the sample does not make our analysis impossible, as there is an expectation that opinion leaders post more than politicians, considering that it is part of those individuals' work to publish content on

digital platforms such as Twitter. However, it is important to consider this characteristic of our sample when critically reflecting on the results found.

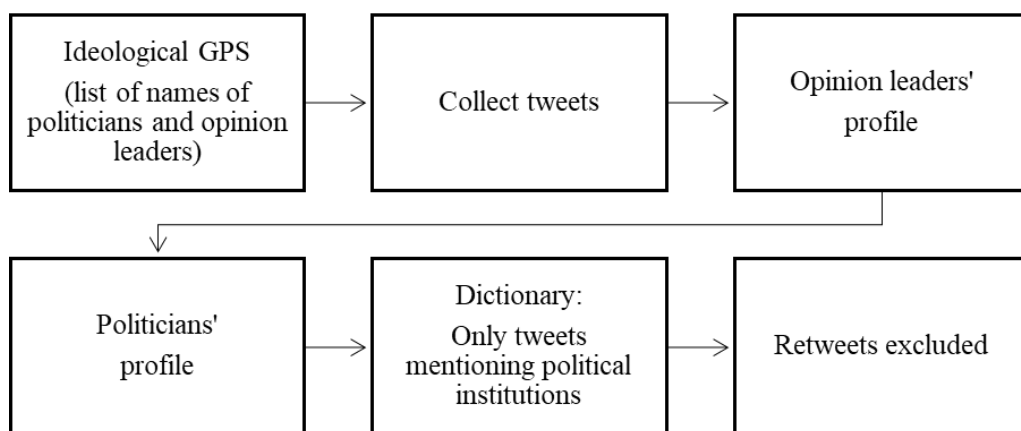
The first step was to collect tweets on the individuals' profiles from both groups. Twitter was chosen due to the availability of data that this platform offers. Through Twitter API, the authors collected the most recent tweets from each of these users. Data were collected in 2019 and 2022. However, it is important to consider that each user data is limited to 3.200 tweets. This is the maximum number of tweets that we can collect from each user. Our second step was to filter only the tweets about politics.

Therefore, the authors chose to select only tweets mentioning the following political institutions: government, local government, some political parties, and Congress. These are the political institutions often used in surveys to measure trust (Schneider, 2017).

The words include: município, prefeitura, municipal, prefeito, prefeita, prefeitos, vereador, vereadora, vereadores, executivo, presidente, presidência, governo, ministério, câmara, deputada, deputado, deputadas, deputados, senador, senadora, senadores, senado, congresso, MDB, PT, DEM, PCdoB, PSB, PSDB, PSL, PSOL, e PSD.

To perform this filter, the authors created a dictionary with words related to these institutions. Finally, retweets were excluded. Figure 1 illustrates the data collection process.

**Figure 1:** Data collection process.



Source: elaborated by the authors.

The dependent variable is distrust in political institutions. The independent variables are type of elite (politicians or opinion leaders) and ideological position. The authors measure distrust in political institutions through an index. This index is composed of three items: the presence or absence of 1) negative words; 2) moral-emotional words, and 3) informal expressions of laughter. Each tweet is analysed based on the presence or absence of these items. Each item equals one point. Therefore, the text (tweet) can have a score that varies between 0 (absence of all items) and 3 (presence of all items).

Those elements were selected based on literature. According to Bertou (2019a), citizens express political distrust based on the evaluation of technical incompetence, ethical issues, and perceptions of interests that are incompatible with the political system or its agents. Often, perceptions of distrust occur from one of these factors or a combination of all. These assessments do not cause suspicion. They are formed from the use of new information by citizens, their previous experiences, and their prior knowledge about the characteristics of political actors (Bertou, 2019a).

In the first type, individuals judge the government's ability to fulfill its tasks. Given the technical skills necessary for the functioning of the public sphere, once citizens perceive failures in performance and, therefore, incapacity, the individual sees the impact of the political issue negatively (Bertou, 2019a). For this reason, the authors believe it is relevant to measure distrust through (1) the use of negative words in tweets about political institutions. They believe that the use of these words reflects a level of distrust.

The above-mentioned negative Words include the following, in Portuguese language: *aborrecente, anacrónico, besta, bizarro, bobo, burro, cansativo, chato, chocante, chulo, clichê, confuso, decepcionante, defeituoso, deplorável, depressivo, deprimente, desagradável, desconexo, desgastante, desinteressante, desnecessário, desprezível, difícil, dispensável, doentio, egoísta, enfadonho, enjoado, enjoativo, entediante, esdrúxulo, estereotipado, estranho, falso, fraco, frio, frustrante, fútil, horrível, horrorosa, idiota, idiotice, imaturo, impaciente, incompreensível, inconsistente, ingênuo, injustificável, insuportável, interminável, inútil, irritante, lamentável, maçante, machista, mal, manjado, mau, mediano, médio, meloso, mero, modinha, monótono, morno, negativo, normal, obsessivo, óbvio, oco, opressivo, paranoico, patético, pesaroso, péssimo, piegas,*

*piorar, plana, pobre, pomposo, preguiçoso, previsível, puritano, raso, razoável, reacionário, repetitivo, repulsivo, revoltante, ridículo, ruim, simplista, sofrível, superficial, surreal, tédio, tedioso, tenda, tosco, triste, vazio, violento, volúvel, abandonar, aborrecer, arrepender, assustar, aterrorizar, atormentar, atrapalhar, cansar, chocar, complicar, decepcionar, deprimir, desanimar, desgastar, desistir, desmerecer, destorcer, detestar, dificultar, distorcer, empacar, enfraquecer, enganar, engolir, errar, estragar, estressar, exagerar, faltar, frustrar, incomodar, irritar, largar, limitar, odiar, pecar, perder, prolongar, revoltar.*

Close to this perception is the ethical judgment that citizens make when they perceive wrong, unfair, and unethical conduct in the political system. In the asymmetry of power that exists between rulers and ruled, when normative values shared by the political community are broken, citizens feel betrayed and therefore express a moral judgment (Bertsou, 2019a).

In this sense, the authors believe that (2) the use of moral-emotional words illustrates this ethical judgment made by individuals when they are distrustful. By moral emotional words, the authors mean what Brady et al. (2017) conceptualise it as the sense of right and wrong that can affect the daily interactions of individuals.

The authors find, for example, that tweets that include “moral emotional” words on three politically polarised issues make these messages significantly more likely to be shared on the platform. They used the dictionary made by Brady et al. (2017) in which they translated into Portuguese to identify the use of these words.

The above-mentioned negative Words include the following, in Portuguese language: *ilegal, imoral, imparcial, injusta, justifi, mate, llega, líder, legal, sensual, mentiroso, fiel, moral, mãe, pai, assassinato, nação, obedecer, ofender, ofensiva, ordem, patriota, paz, elogio, preconceito, princípio, prisão, profan, proteger, punir, puro, rebelde, vingança, justo, tumulto, ruína, sagrado, seguro, santo, vergonha, doente, pecador, mancha, status, roubar, sofra, contaminação, manchar, terroris, tradição, traidor, traição, imundo, desigual, injusto, unir, injusto, valor, vítima, virtude, saudável, puta, ferida, errado, intolerante, brutal, enganação, igreja, limpo, coletivo, comuna, comunis, compaixão, cumprir contágio, cruel, danificar, droga, desafiar, desertor, destruir, diabo, sujeira, discrimina, doenc, desleal, desproporcionar, dissidência, inveja, igual, ética, mal,*

*justo, fé, pai, culpa, companheiro, luta, sujeira, estrangeiro, ganância, bruto, prejuízo, céu, inferno, herege, heroi, hierarquia, pátria, honesto, honra, doeu* (Brady et al. 2017, our translation).

The authors included an additional element: (3) informal expressions of laughter (including ‘*kkk*’, ‘*haha*’, ‘*hehe*’, ‘*kaka*’, and ‘*rsrs*’) in an exploratory sense to capture some expression of mockery. They believe that tweets that contain expressions of laughter might be likely to be critical or suspicious of political institutions.

Finally, political distrust also reflects the individual's perception that their interests run counter to those of the political system, government, or rulers. This factor is usually present, for example, in politically polarised societies (Bertsou, 2019a). Previous research has found evidence that those who support the opposition tend to be more suspicious of the government (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Or, as explained by Klein and Robison (2020), those individuals who see ideological allies in occupying public office are more trusting in the government, compared to those who do not. With this, the authors believe that the ideological position of the individual (user) may be related to the expression of distrust in institutions. They analyse the ideological position of each influencer, ranging from extreme left to extreme right.

The influencer's ideological position variable was manually classified from the infographic made by Folha de São Paulo (Ideological GPS). Thus, the influencers are arranged in a line that varies from “most to the left” to “most to the right”. They authors chose to divide this spectrum into seven categories: far-left, left, center left, center, center right, right and far-right. Each position was delimited by an important politician who they believe reasonably demarcates ideological positions. They are, respectively: Guilherme Boulos, Fernando Haddad, Dilma Rousseff, Marina Silva, José Serra, João Amoêdo, Jair Bolsonaro and Sargento Fatur. So, for example, if an opinion leader, like Rafinha Bastos, is located between Marina and Serra, he is considered in the center of the spectrum. The influencer type variable is categorical.

Below, the authors present some examples of tweets classified according to their level of distrust proposed here, for instance: High level (Figure 2), some level (Figures 3 and 4), and no distrust (Figure 5). In the following section, they analyse the data descriptively from text analysis.

**Figure 2.** Example of a tweet with high level of distrust.

O mais divertido é ver essa burguesada mimada e egoísta até os dentes se dizendo "de esquerda" (querendo dizer solidária, consciente e contra o mal rsrs). Os democratas de Instagram votaram no partido q assaltou o povo porque tinham fé q na Venezuela do PT ia ter curralzinho vip.

[Translate Tweet](#)

7:45 PM · Jan 18, 2020 · Twitter Web App

1,948 Retweets 37 Quote Tweets 10.2K Likes

**Figure 3.** Example of a tweet with level of distrust

Vai pegar mt mal soltar lula pq aí vai virar presidente a pessoa que a maioria da população quer que vire, vai dar a impressão que estamos numa democracia imagina q vergonhaaaaaa

[Translate Tweet](#)

1:11 PM · Jul 8, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

17.6K Retweets 971 Quote Tweets 47.3K Likes

**Figure 4.** Example of a tweet with some level of distrust

Muitos projetos que os novos deputados anunciam que vão apresentar como novidade já tramitam na Câmara Federal há anos. Quase todos têm um destino: serão apensados. Servem apenas para selfie.

[Translate Tweet](#)

9:10 AM · Feb 4, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

1 Retweet 3 Likes



**Figure 5.** Tweet with no distrust

O presidente Macron vai receber o presidente do Brasil.

O presidente Lula.

[Translate Tweet](#)

8:37 PM · Nov 16, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

594 Retweets 13 Quote Tweets 7,316 Likes



Source: Twitter (different dates)

#### 4. Results

Data analysis provides some important observations for the research. In Graph 1, the authors observe that when they compare opinion leaders to politicians, politicians post more tweets about political institutions and distrust much more compared to the former. In the case of opinion leaders, there is a higher frequency of tweets that do not contain any indication of distrust than the opposite.

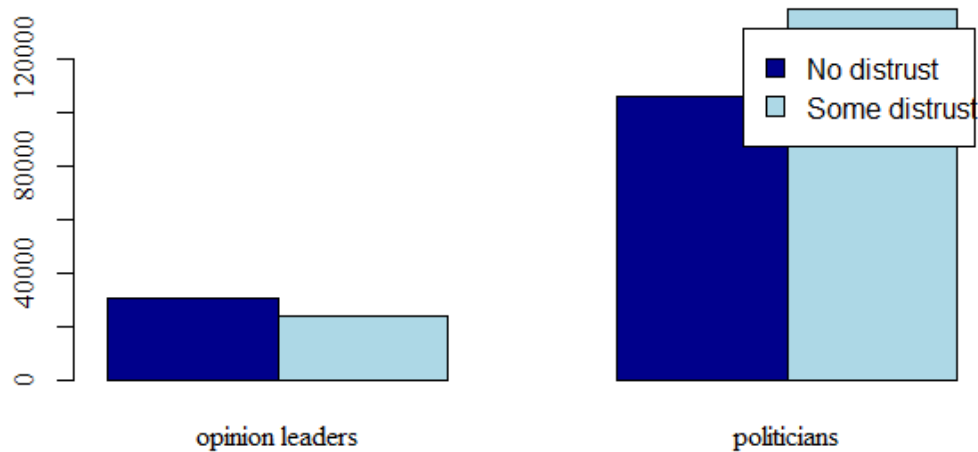
This result contradicts our expectations for our first hypothesis. They expect that opinion leaders show higher levels of distrust than political elites (*hypothesis 1*). However, the sample of tweets shows that politicians post much more about institutions than opinion leaders.

Therefore, the authors think there is a misperception regarding the involvement of these non-political actors in Brazilian politics on digital platforms, such as Twitter. Due to political polarisation, many individuals working in different internet sectors have started to share content about politics. However, this does not imply that such content is the primary focus of these profiles.

Ideologically, Folha's GPS can define an ideological position for opinion leaders based on the people who follow these profiles. Nevertheless, the sample makes it clear that a significant portion of the content from these non-political actors is not about politics. In the case of politicians, the scenario is different. These actors are inherently political, and their profiles on digital platforms primarily serve to discuss politics and promote their actions to the electorate—a new way of achieving electoral accountability.

Therefore, the focus on politicians' profiles will be on institutions, justifying the higher volume of publications on this topic. The authors understand that even the most polarised opinion leaders cannot compete with the professionalism of traditional politicians. Hence, based on the sample, the authors argue that there is a misperception about the level of posting by non-political actors, such as opinion leaders, in Brazil.

**Graph 1:** Distrust Index by Groups.



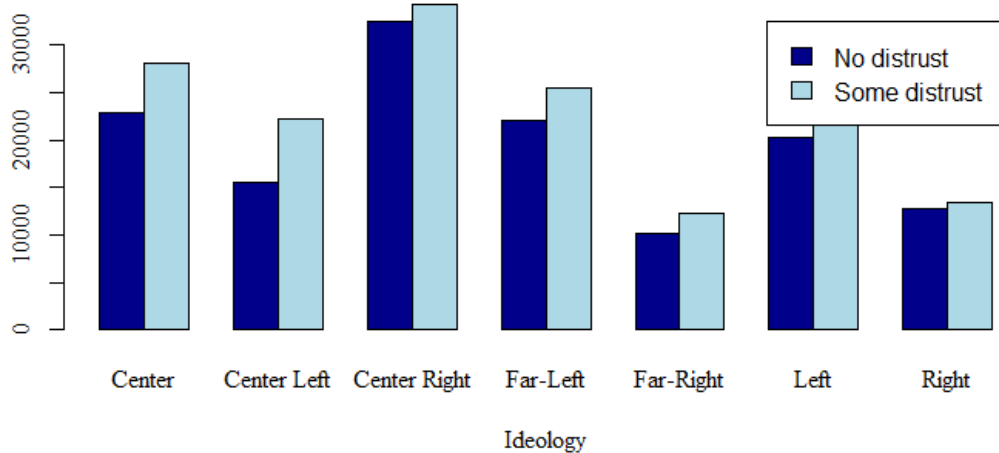
Source: elaborated by the authors.

Graphic 2 also provides important information about the second hypothesis. The authors expect that opinion leaders and politicians from ideological far-left and far-right will post more tweets about political institutions (*hypothesis 2*). This expectation is based on the literature that the more ideologically polarised a group is, the more this group would post content with some level of distrust. Specifically, the higher frequency of tweets with distrust would be at the ideological extremes (left and right). However, results seem to point that hypothesis 2 is also false, as the ideological groups that most publish tweets with distrust in institutions are at the ideological centre, followed by the centre-left and the left.

How can these results be justified? An alternative explanation is associated with the logic of political opposition. At the time of data collection the government in power was considered ideologically as right-wing or far right. In this sense one can expect that the centre and the left have more distrust in relation to these institutions. The extreme left is also more suspicious, but to a lesser extent.

**Graph 2:** Distrust Index by Ideology.

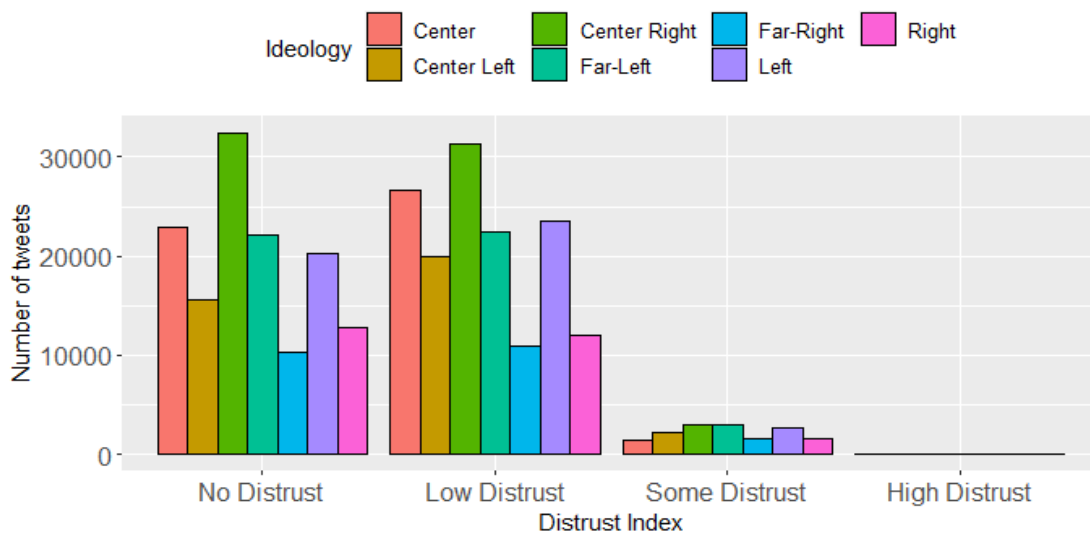




Source: elaborated by the authors.

Graph 3 shows that in all ideological positions it predominates some distrust about political institutions, although this incidence is low, which makes sense since the period under study corresponds to an administration that is closer to the political right.

**Graph 3: Distrust Index by Ideology**



Source: elaborated by the authors.

Comparing levels in absence of distrust, it is important to observe that the profiles more inclined to the centre of the ideological spectrum do not show, through text, that they are suspicious about political institutions. At the same time, far-left tweets also show similar patterns, contrary to common sense that predicts higher levels of distrust in supporters

from the losing side in past elections. In Graph 3, the authors interpret two important characteristics of the sample.

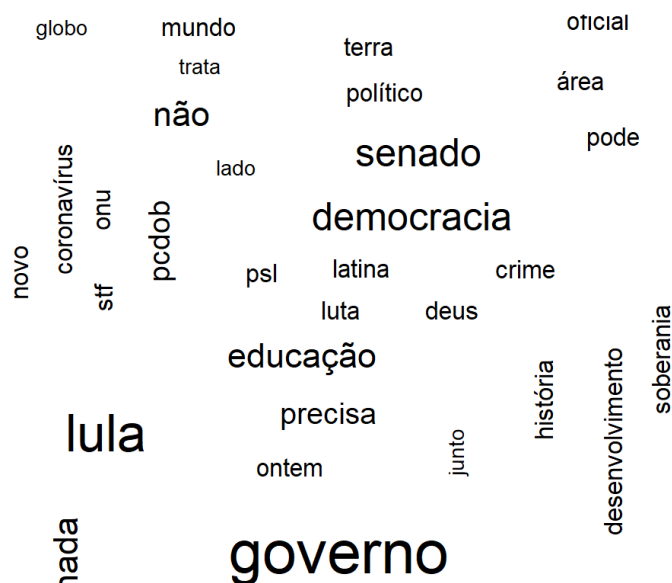
Firstly, no ideological group has high levels of political distrust. There was an expectation in Brazilian society that Bolsonaro's administration could cause short and long-term damage to national political institutions. As much as the sample focuses on political participation through a digital platform, it is an important finding that, regardless of the group (opinion leaders and politicians) and/ideology (left or right), there are no high levels of distrust surrounding Brazilian institutions in this period.

Secondly, ideology still plays an important role in critically reflecting the results. On the one hand, all ideologies present some form of distrust, including those on the right of the ideological spectrum. While it is expected that these actors would be more satisfied with the institutions after Jair Bolsonaro's victory, however, these groups are unable to fully trust institutions. The authors can explain this phenomenon in two ways: the scarcity of a total consensus and/or it is part of the political communication of *Bolsonarism* to encourage some level of distrust around democracy and its institutions.

On the other hand, one expectation was found: opinion leaders and politicians from the left-wing spectrum were those who most distrust institutions at all levels of distrust. What does this suggest to the authors? There was in fact a sort of fear on the left that Bolsonaro's administration would manage to corrode Brazilian institutions from within, following the model of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, a symbol of the right at a global level. Therefore, it is understandable that left-wing opinion leaders and politicians were more suspicious of institutions during this period.

Finally, the authors explore if when taking a sample of tweets concerning political institutions, it is possible would observe indeed that the most common words would be related to the subject.

**Figure 5:** Word Cloud with a sample of tweets about political institutions



Source: elaborated by the authors.

Figure 5 illustrates this intent. When one looks at Figure 5, it is possible to see that among tweets about institutions, as expected, most of the words are political-related, such as ‘democracy’, ‘government’, ‘senate’, ‘Lula’, and so on. But curiously, there is also a presence of non-political words, for example ‘God’ and ‘crime’.

This intriguing observation leads the authors to take a closer look at the content of those tweets that have been posted by political elites, as they seem to indicate some sort of moral content. The use of religious terms seems to be a key factor in the construction of the political communication strategy of right-wing groups in Brazil. Former President Bolsonaro himself used the term 'god' within his campaign motto and as a symbol of national unity within the government. Bolsonaro's idea was to awaken Christian nationalism and associate these characteristics with the definition of a Brazilian citizen.

It seems to be the *modus operandi* of many leaders with authoritarian inclinations, as is the case of Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, who in his version tries to create Hindu nationalism in that country. In Modi's view, being Indian means being Hindu. In turn, Bolsonaro says that being Brazilian means being Christian. In sum, it makes sense that the term 'god' appears in our word cloud.

## **Conclusion**

The authors have seen that in Brazil levels of trust in some political institutions are the lowest. Would a drop in trust mean an increase in distrust? Literature shows how the concepts, despite being similar, are different. For researchers concerned with the democratic stability argument, it is essential to understand how the phenomenon has manifested itself, especially at a time when established democracies are undergoing processes that include the rise of more populist and conversational parties.

In the scenario of reappearance of well-known phenomena, new political actors gain prominence in the debate, due to their reach with the public. Opinion leaders are part of individuals' daily life, and politics is also part of their agenda. They share news, comment on real cases, and propagate opinions. But, how do they express distrust in political institutions?

The literature shows that distrust is related to feelings of negativity, moral issues, or the contrast of interests between the individual and the government (Bertsou, 2019a). Therefore, the authors propose a measurement of distrust through text, as an index based on the frequency of negative, moral-emotional, and laughter-related words. The data suggest that these users do seem to express much distrust of political institutions. Political influencers, in contrast, not only produce most of the content on Twitter about institutions, but also have more related messages.

As expected, users located in the political opposition are more suspicious. Two issues are surprising: firstly, it is not the ideological extremes that most produce distrustful tweets; secondly, opinion leaders publish an insignificant amount of content when compared to the politicians. However, it is worth questioning the extent to which these types of influencers no longer could influence. That is, even if they publish little, when they publish this content, it may influence more people.

The article contains several limitations. Starting with the filters proposed to capture messages only referring to the topic. It is necessary to validate the data collection process to verify that it captures the tweets of interest. An alternative to this validation would be a qualitative analysis, for example. However, to believe that the article is the outline of a

more in-depth research on how to use text analysis produced on social networks to obtain data that may reflect the political behaviour of individuals.

The description of the data presented indicates that perhaps the debate on political institutions remains concentrated around traditional political elites, given the discrepancy in the messages on the subject produced by the politicians themselves. Another important concern is the absence of another time period to better compare the behaviour of the same political actors in relation to another government.

Still, the authors believe that the article seeks to contribute to the literature on political distrust, mainly by proposing another way of measuring the concept, that is, through text analysis, as an alternative or complement to the use of surveys. There is lack of studies on political distrust, as the authors usually find empirical evidence on individuals' levels of trust. Besides the intended theoretical contribution, the authors attempted to propose a different methodological approach to study the phenomenon. Political distrust is usually measured through survey methodology.

This paper presents a complementary (Salganik, 2019) way of measuring distrust using dictionaries and automated text analysis. Computational social sciences offer a diversity of alternatives to analyse textual data. Social media, as an arena of interaction of political and social actors, offers the opportunity to collect instant individuals' expressions that would otherwise not be available or be captured by surveys. Despite the exploratory character of our research, the authors hope to inspire next studies to develop new measurement possibilities.

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