

# The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014<sup>1</sup>

## *A indecisão consciente: análise qualitativa da indecisão eleitoral no pleito estadual de 2014*

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### ABSTRACT

This is a study on specific characteristics of the undecided voter in relation to the Goiás governor poll, in 2014 elections. The opinion of these electors makes up an important reference to understand the formation process of electoral public opinion, mainly for its remarkable growth in recent years. This paper is based on data collected directly from undecided voters, in the context of a qualitative survey of television reception, developed through family mediation of public electoral propaganda of governor elections in 2014. From the data obtained, it was possible to understand that the process involving vote indecision is more complex and complete than it has been supposed, allowing the notion of “critical undecided voters” and specific arrangements that seek to describe the characteristics of the electoral indecision process.

**Keywords:** Undecided vote, public electoral propaganda, elections, 2014, Brazil Goiás

### RESUMO

Trata-se este trabalho de um estudo sobre as características específicas do eleitor indeciso em relação ao cargo de governador do estado de Goiás no pleito de 2014. A opinião deste tipo de eleitor compõe uma importante referência para a compreensão dos processos de formação da opinião pública eleitoral, principalmente por seu grande crescimento nos últimos anos. Este trabalho surgiu a partir dos dados colhidos diretamente de eleitores indecisos, no contexto de pesquisa qualitativa de recepção de televisão por mediação familiar, feita com o horário gratuito de propaganda eleitoral das campanhas para governador em 2014. A partir dos dados obtidos foi possível perceber que o processo que envolve a indecisão do voto é mais complexo e completo do que tem sido suposto, possibilitando a noção do “indeciso crítico” e de modalidades específicas que buscam descrever as características do processo de indecisão eleitoral.

**Palavras-chave:** Voto indeciso, HGPE, eleições, Goiás, Brasil 2014

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**T**HIS ARTICLE REPORTS on a study about the specific characteristics of the undecided voter and the theoretical consequences that changes in indecision profiles may have in the so-called electoral decision theories, taking as a basis the qualitative research carried out in the 2014 electoral process in the State of Goiás (Brazil).

It is also a work situated in the field of communication studies, in its interface with politics. In this sense, the question of indecision is investigated here as a specific symbolic situation, as a phenomenon of electoral opinion, in the face of images constructed by the television electoral programs (HGPE).

The subject of electoral indecision has been little studied in the field of political communication and, in its link with the communicational processes, it is intuitive that it appears as a symptom of disinformation, depoliticization or lack of political communicability. This study raises qualitative empirical data that allow us to question these assumptions, insofar as it forwards what can be interpreted as a recognition of the complexity of this type of voter, the undecided voter.

In order to answer this question, a quick theoretical effort was made regarding the studies about indecision in Brazil and part of the international literature, and then expose the methodology and the results of the qualitative empirical research carried out in the context of the 2014 State elections held in the state of Goiás and, thus, allow some theoretical conclusions to be made.

## THE PROCESS OF INDECISION IN BRAZILIAN ELECTIONS

Indecision is a psychological phenomenon of great complexity. Several scholars in the field of behavioral psychology have studied it as a phenomenon in which even cultural compounds can interfere (Swami et al., 2008; Ng; Hynie, 2015).

Voting indecision<sup>2</sup> seems to be a growing phenomenon in contemporary democracies and, therefore, the time-of-voting decision has gained an increasing importance for the understanding of voting behavior, which is why there has been increasing attention from scholars of electoral processes to the motivations of the undecided voter.

The phenomenon of electoral indecision has assumed an increasing relevance in contemporary democracies. The greater distance between voters and parties, the reduction of traditional cleavages on voter behavior, and, in parallel, the increase in the importance of short-term factors, are elements that have made this segment of voters increasingly central. (Lisi, 2010: 29-30)

<sup>2</sup> Noble (2017) performs a disjunction between indecision and abstention by including in the former category blank and null votes, and in the latter those who do not show up to vote. Since this study is based on research done during the electoral process, it was not possible nor would it be useful to separate these two concepts, which is why we consider as undecided voter anyone who does not express any preference for the candidates on offer.

The phenomenon seems to be generalized in today's world, reaching not only the developed countries, but also those where the democratic process coexists with instability. For Lisi, therefore,

This trend affects not only the consolidated democracies but also the more recent regimes characterized by high volatility and alternation in the governance of the main moderate parties. (Lisi, 2010: 55)

Authors generally relate the phenomenon of indecision directly to the decision-making voting processes, giving it a sense that indecision is simply the negative aspect of decision. In this sense, the categories that are eventually adopted in the analysis are the different *ethos* of evaluation and image interfering in the electoral preferences. An interesting exception is Noble (2017), who directly criticizes this view, arguing that the devaluation of abstention and null vote in the elections, as it considers as "participation" only the behavior of those who have a preference for one of the alternatives on the offered electoral menu, ends up precluding studies that consider the limits of the democratic system.

In Noble's line (2017), one must admit that this strategy ends up missing indecision as an object or, at least, perceives it as an oblique object, which is not described in its own terms, but from what it is not. Thus, the retrospection and anticipation elements of evaluation of parties and candidates, the dimensions of image – integrity, reliability and competence – that voters use to evaluate candidates, the different ethos of political discourse (Charaudeau, 2006), if they can set modes of voting by traditional voters, they are not immediately apparent or illuminating to understand indecision processes, while they remain as such.

Lisi suggests a direction in this sense when he states that the undecided voter does not behave in the same way as the traditional voter. Or, textually, "traditional paradigms designed to explain voter behavior do not apply equally to the undecided electorate" (Lisi, 2010: 55).

In general, the undecided voter is described in a negative way, as a little-educated, poor citizen, with little information, little political commitment and little disposition for political participation.

The variation of interest accompanies the levels of political conceptualization. [...] The same relation occurs with the degree of party preference. The lower the level of conceptualization, the lower the degree of preference for a political party, and the greater the level of indecision. (Radmann, 2001: 67)



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

Or else:

The popular mass, the vast majority of the electorate, is uninformed about party and candidate proposals, has no opinion to give on important issues in the political debate, tends to ascribe to their candidates qualities that they like the most and the opinions they might have regarding various issues, and has a low degree of ideological consistency. (Castro, 1994: 180)

This apprehension derives from the Greek heritage of our democracy, for which one who abstains in the political process was the “idiot” – someone uninterested in public affairs, self-absorbed in one’s own affairs and unconcerned with the common good (Noble, 2017).

More recent literature, however, begins to challenge some of these apparent truisms. Lourenço (2007), in an extensive doctoral dissertation on the issue of electoral indecision, makes several more detailed considerations about the profile and behavior of this type of voter. In this sense, he finds a voter who values politics, but does not engage with it; who recognizes the lack of public interest and participation in public affairs, but has no idea as to how to assert his dissatisfaction and demands; and who, in short, does not have high-level information, but considers, within the electoral processes, that there is time to decide and, on the eve of the election, effectively does, from a plethora of sources ranging from HGPE to media actions and campaigns.

What, after all, defines the undecided voter? The perspective of political campaigns tends to be only one: that of opportunity. Or, according to Palmeira (1992), “the undecided voter is the potential voter ‘in availability.’” For Lisi, the main characteristic of the undecided voter is unpredictability. However, according to him, there is still no consensual description of such profile.

Individuals who make their decisions during the campaign have a different [from the traditional] logic, essentially characterized by greater randomness and unpredictability. The lack of party anchoring and a certain ideological indefiniteness are the main features in common, but beyond these characteristics there is no paradigm that can unambiguously describe the profile of this type of voters for the various countries and elections. (Lisi, 2010: 55)

In this sense, the notion of “undecidability” (Allen; Brown, 2016) is considered by several international authors, always in the perspective of some theory of electoral decision, whether seen as a product of cultural issues (NG; Hynie, 2016); as a multidimensional conflict derived from low esteem (Bacanly, 2006);

as a mere lack of interest in politics (Forrest; Marks, 1999) or electoral discontent (Kang, 2004); as a product of the lack of previous beliefs (Galdi et al., 2012); or as a derivative of uncertainties generated by ideological ambiguities in the electoral context (Karp; Garland, 2007; Li; Massuda; Jiang, 2016). For Cautres and Jadot (2007), academic studies on indecision generally focus on three aspects: demographic and socioeconomic profiles, when they correlate inequality and electoral decision; levels of politicization and long-term positions in a space with important ideological and partisan formation; informational environment of the campaigns (Maakaroun, 2010); and short-term political attitudes, which link indecision behaviors to the changing circumstances of electoral offers. Of all sorts, indecision is always defined as some kind of hesitation (Cautres; Jadot, 2007; Muxel, 2006).

Apparently, the poor involvement in the political field and the urgency caused by the proximity of the election, where decision is sometimes delayed to the maximum, makes the undecided voter more likely to believe in the speeches of persuasion conveyed in the mainstream media by the candidates. However, this does not mean that this voter has no education or does not possess a certain “sophistication” of thought, neither that the media “command” thought and decision to vote, but rather that the undecided voter is freer and less predictable.

Traditionally, studies on this segment of the electorate in advanced democracies have underlined their relatively unsophisticated character. According to this interpretation, these voters seek informative shortcuts that can guide their options, especially during election campaigns. In this sense, as one would expect, the factors that most affect this segment of the electorate depend on the circumstances and context, i.e., exposure to the media and information they receive on campaign themes and key leaders. (Lisi, 2010: 31)

There are authors who also tend to consider that the more polarized an election, the lower the likelihood of indecision. It is as if the dichotomization of polarized frames is a strong inducer of decision making. This is what Radmann says, according to whom

the political polarization in electoral indexes between candidates affects the decrease of undecided voters. It was perceived that with the proximity of the election and the increased political dispute between candidates, a part of the voters of low political sophistication tend to take a stand towards a candidate and to reproduce the elements of the candidate’s discourse. Voters introject the information present



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

in the discourse, image and campaign as a whole. And they use these elements to justify their stand and counter the vote of the electors to opposite candidates. (Radmann, 2001: 212)

In 2014 Brazil, however, this maxim seems not to have worked. The levels of indecision, even those manifested in the election itself by the null and blank votes, turned out to be important.

It is therefore a question of getting to know better the mood and the production of meaning of this type of voter. This was the motto of the analysis made for this work. In it, we sought to understand the perspectives and discourses constructed by a type of voter who is not able to reveal his preferences for candidates, but establishes a discourse on politics, the content of which may be revealing of the very process of electoral indecision.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ELECTION IN GOIÁS 1**

Before starting to speak specifically about the research that gave rise to this work, it is important to clearly characterize the context in which the investigation took place, the gubernatorial election in Goiás in 2014.

The state of Goiás is still a recent inheritance of colonelism, a period in which the exercise of power was marked by the domination of rich and traditional landowning families, established in an economy founded basically on agriculture and livestock, and which prevailed from the colonial period until the mid-twentieth century. A power demarcated by patronage and violence.

To think of violence as a background for the maintenance of backwardness is crucial to understand the type of preponderant domination in Goiás. It is perceived that the colonel is the emblematic figure that holds the power of command, either by the political arrangement, or most often through violence or charisma exercised among his clientele. [...] I also think that there are other factors that corroborate this maintenance of power, such as the paternalistic and patronizing assistance adopted by local bosses sponsored by the administrative machine, that is, public money. In the case of Goiás, these factors are added by the maintenance of backwardness as a way to remain in power. Therefore, one can notice that even though we speak of the colonel, his actions differed throughout the national territory. (Rodrigues, 2015: 4-5)

Colonelism continued in Goiás from 1889 to 1930, the year Getúlio Vargas ascended to the presidency of the country after the so-called 1930 Revolution.

Getulio appointed Pedro Ludovico Teixeira as federal intervener in the state of Goiás, ending the colonels' sovereignty, but largely preserving the ways of doing politics, although it must be considered that his appointment contributed to some "modernization breakouts."

Among the major works of Pedro Ludovico, we highlight the construction of Goiania and the shift of the state capital from the city of Goiás, the old Vila Boa, to the newly built city. The relocation of the capital was part of the so-called "March to the West."

The last governor of Goiás elected before the military dictatorship was Mauro Borges, son of Ludovico, who governed from 1960 to 1964, when he was deposed by the military. From then on the state was commanded by 11 governors, all appointed by the federal government.

After the dictatorship, in 1983, the first governor-elect was Iris Rezende, a political leader who had emerged in the 1960s during the Borges administration. Elected councilman at the time, he was the most voted one of the capital, and soon after was elected mayor of Goiania, also with a historical vote. Revoked by the regime, he became a kind of mythical figure, linked to the MDB, the opposition party to the regime.

Elected in 1983, Iris from the outset manifested his well-known populist verve and, governor-elect twice, from 1983 to 1986, and from 1991 to 1994, he became the main political leader of the state, until 1998. Over the years, besides being governor of Goiás, Iris was also Minister of Agriculture for the Sarney government (1983-1986) and later Minister of Justice during the first term of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1997-1998).

In 1998, Iris left the Ministry of Justice to run for governor in Goiás, starting the dispute as the great favorite. Against him, oppositions to the PMDB were unified around the name of a young federal deputy, Marconi Perillo. In a historic and surprising turn, Marconi Perillo, who was not even the second in voting intentions, after a popularly successful political campaign broadcast on television, won the election in the second round. At the age of 35, he was the youngest governor-elected in Brazilian history, and since then, in the next four elections, he has won all the elections against Iris's PMDB (twice, in 1998 and 2014), and Maguito Vilela's (twice, in 2002 and 2006, the latter against Marconi's candidate, Alcides Rodrigues).

Marconi Perillo's victory marked the end of the PMDB era in the state and started a new one, the PSDB era. In 2014, he won a historic victory, being the only politician who was four times elected governor of Goiás.

One of the main characteristics of this period in Goiás political history was undoubtedly the picture of intense polarization between two names



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

– Marconi Perillo and Íris Rezende, with interregnums for Maguito Vilela (who had been vice of Iris in his administrations) – who always proceeded to second rounds in all of the elections. Polarization also showed in the election results every time the election had a second round (only in 2002, against Maguito, Marconi was re-elected in the first round, with 51.2% of the valid votes).

Another feature, which drew attention during the qualitative research from which the data for this study were extracted, was the persistence of the indecision process, even in the face of the information load generated by electoral television programs. Later on, we will discuss this subject.

The gubernatorial election 2014 in Goiás was contested by seven candidates in the first round, in alphabetical order: Alexandre Magalhães (PSDC), Antônio Gomide (PT), Iris Rezende (PMDB), Marconi Perillo (PSDB), Marta Jane (PCB), Vanderlan Cardoso (PSB) and Professor Weslei (PSOL).

- a. Alexandre Magalhães was the candidate of the Christian Social Democratic Party (PSDC). He is 48 years old, married and has a law degree. It was the first time he ran for the position of Governor of the State of Goiás (TSE, 2014). He was the least voted of the election, receiving only 5,105 votes (0.16% of the total valid votes).
- b. Antônio Gomide was the candidate of the Workers' Party (PT). He is 54 years old, married and has a dentistry degree. He was mayor of the city of Anápolis and resigned in the second term to run for the state government. It was the first time he ran for the position of Governor of the State of Goiás (TSE, 2014). He was the fourth most voted, with 319,233 votes (10.09% of the valid votes).
- c. Iris Rezende was the candidate of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB). He is 81 years old, married and has a law degree. He was Governor of the State twice. It was the seventh time he ran for governor of Goiás (TSE, 2014). He polarized with Marconi Perillo the whole campaign and proceeded with him to the second round. In the first round, he obtained 898,645 votes (28.4% of the valid votes), and in the second, 1,297,592 votes (42.56% of the valid votes).
- d. Marconi Perillo was the candidate of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB). He is 51 years old, married and has a law degree. He

was Governor of Goiás three times. It was the fourth time he ran for Governor of the State of Goiás (TSE, 2014). He won the election in both the first round, with 1,451,330 votes (45.86% of valid votes) and the second round, with 1,750,977 votes (57.44% of valid votes).

- e. Marta Jane was the candidate of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). She is 43 years old, single, and a university professor. It was the second time she ran for governor of the State of Goiás (TSE, 2014). She finished in the penultimate place in the election, obtaining 5,786 votes (0.18% of the valid votes).
- f. Vanderlan Cardoso was the candidate of the Brazilian Socialist Party. He is 52 years old, married and an entrepreneur. He was mayor of the city of Senador Canedo. It was the second time he ran for the position of governor of the State of Goiás (TSE, 2014). He finished in third place, with 474,090 votes (14.98% of the valid votes).
- g. Professor Weslei was the candidate of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). He is 31 years old, married and an elementary school teacher. It was the first time he ran for the position of governor of the State of Goiás (TSE, 2014). He was the third least voted candidate, obtaining 10,522 votes (0.33% of the valid votes).

As can be observed, the political scene in Goiás is polarized and contested by strong names already anchored in a certain tradition. Marconi Perillo and Iris Rezende have been the two main leaders of the state since the country's democratization period and have polarized all elections, since 1998.

Despite this, the picture of indecision within the election was remarkable. From the quantitative point of view, the identification was made by two of the main research institutes of Goiás, Serpes and Grupom. By Grupom figures, one week before the election, 42% of the voters were still undecided. Serpes figures are even more alarming, as the survey conducted from September 22 to 26, 2014 revealed 62.5% of the voters still undefined in relation to the vote.

By the end of the 2014 election in Goiás, the indecision indexes suggested by surveys had declined, with the finding that, at least in part, the indecision became an option for one of the candidacies presented, configuring a decision *stricto sensu*, i.e., that which, in fact, proves to be provisional, sensitive to the electoral persuasion processes, and thus can be treated as such within the electoral



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

decision spectrum. Poll results showed 18.83% abstention, 3.80% blank votes and 11.65% null votes, totaling 34.28% the proportion of voters who, for some reason, did not participate in the electoral decision. This means that at least one in three voters did not decide (either because they could not, did not want to or did not know) their vote.

The electoral reality in Goiás is neither isolated nor specific. The international political literature shows that, especially since the 1970s, electoral abstention rates have increased considerably (Braconnier; Dormagen, 2007). These data indicate the specific importance of knowing the dynamics of opinion in the undecided voter, and for that, the qualitative data collected in the HGPE follow-up survey, carried out by the Signates Institute of Goiânia, was used for one of the electoral campaigns in contest<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The Signates Institute worked under a confidentiality agreement, which is why we cannot disclose here neither the contractor nor the specific results of image of specific candidates. Access to data is therefore restricted to the electoral indecision situation and the solely academic-scientific purpose of the study.

### METHODOLOGY

The data used for this study were taken from the database formed by the qualitative research of monitoring HGPE for governor in the State of Goiás, developed by the Signates Institute of Consultancy and Research, based in Goiânia.

The research method was developed by the Technical and Scientific Director of this Institute, prof. Luiz Signates, from an adaptation of the technique called “Family mediation,” applied by Maria Immacolatta Vassalo de Lopes (USP), Sílvia Borelli (PUC-SP) and Vera Resende (USP) and published in the book *Vivendo a telenovela* (Lopes; Borelli; Resende, 2002). The methodological adequacy was described in a national event promoted at USP and later published in a book by the promoters (Freitas, 2014).

Adapted, the method consists in the application of three combined research techniques within family households recruited according to statistically defined criteria: Family ethnography, non-participant observation of television program, and family discussion group.

In all, 18 electoral programs (all of the programs broadcast except the last one) were monitored, with a ratio of 9-10 families each, in at least three municipalities, each in the three regions of Goiás with the highest electoral density: the metropolitan region of Goiânia (in most cases, two municipalities, one of which obligatorily the state capital, Goiânia); surroundings of the Federal District, and South-Southeast Goiânia.

So, 177 households were visited throughout the survey, generating more than 700 pages of reports, which closely followed the behavior and opinions of Goiás citizens about the televised programs of the gubernatorial campaigns in the 2014 election.

For this article, we used data collected from 36 of these households in 13 cities of different regions of Goiás (Águas Lindas de Goiás, Anápolis, Aparecida de Goiânia, Caldas Novas, Catalão, Formosa, Goiânia, Jataí, Luziânia, Morrinhos, Novo Gama, Rio Verde and Trindade), selected according to the theme of electoral indecision, that is, of the total sample of 177 households, 36 were recognized as having individuals who overtly reported being undecided or manifested this electoral behavior. To identify research participants, we mention the degree of kinship in the family organization, followed by the number of the family to which he/she belongs, the municipality in which he/she lives, and the date of the field work.

## **RESULTS: THE EMERGENCE OF THE CRITICAL INDECISIVE VOTER**

Different qualitative results were obtained, in the search for the description of the electoral indecision process, in the research done.

In our study, we will draw attention to the four most intense types of undecided electoral behavior/opinion, which were, in order of intensity:

### **The persistence of undecided positioning**

The undecided voter, glimpsed at different moments of the research, resisted getting out of indecision, even in the face of information provided by the electoral program.

This resistance was manifested in different ways, the most apparent being what could be taken to be as no hurry to decide. This type of voter fits the description of some authors, who refer to citizens that “postpone their voting options” (Lisi, 2010: 55). The typical catch phrase was, “There’s plenty of time until election day.”

In other cases, for example, a woman said she did not define her vote before the final days of the campaign, always choosing the best positioned candidate in the polls. “I always vote for the majority. If there’s one with a greater chance, I will vote for him” (wife, family 13, Jataí, 09/05/2014).

However, there is as well the undecided voter who resists because of a general rejection of politics or of all the candidates on the electoral list. In these cases, a generalized negative perception and a high disbelief in politics or politicians is found, which leads to the avoidance of taking a stand, either by not believing that things can change, or by doubting the effectiveness of the campaign commitments displayed in electoral programs.



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

The lack of credibility appeared in the continuous, persistent distrust of the arguments presented by the campaign. Everything looks like lies, a set-up, misleading.

In general, according to Lourenço (2007), the ideological or programmatic aspects, constitutive of party ties, do not appear in the undecided voter talk. Indecision is based, above all, on the pragmatic perception of the inefficiency of politicians or on corruption seen as insurmountable evil or an inherent condition of doing politics.

During the broadcast of one of Marconi Perillo election programs, in a situation of dialogue between an undecided voter and an Iris voter, denials of information passed by the program in question emerged: “This school stuff shown there, the boys all cute, neat, this is a lie, because in my school, for instance, chairs are lacking, it’s not like that. We lack school lunch, we lack a lot. It’s just a fairy tale” (daughter, family 5, Goiânia, 09/03/2014). “That’s really true, because I’ve seen it in other towns; and once again it must be show on TV what they fail to fulfill” (daughter-in-law, family 5, Goiânia, 09/03/2014).

The general feeling of disbelief in politics and politicians was manifested somewhat regularly and frequently in order to oppose the promises made in the election campaign to the reality experienced by the citizens:

Boy, it’s like this: this time of politics, every politician does that, every politician is good. Every politician delivers, but it’s all talk. When it’s showtime, where have they gone? Got it? I asked the guy over there when he asked who I am going to vote for, boy, what’s the use of politics anyway, my brother? There is a lot that could be done, but they are just concerned with their own, and damn the rest. (husband, family 11, Luziânia, 09/03/2014)

Besides the disbelief in the fulfillment of promises by the political class, it was found that the electorate’s feeling of disbelief also applies to politicians appearing before the public opinion only in the electoral period, without any connection with their actions and presence in everyday life.

In addition to the widespread discredit of politicians, which links indecision to the well-known indifference to politics, this behavior translated into a tendency to discredit candidates who have been in power for a long time, even within a picture of recognition of the accomplishments in the exercise of their duties.

Undecided voters question the behavior of politicians, based on their time in public office, as can be seen in the following dialogue: “He keeps promising. Now he will even sell his mother” (father, family 7, Rio Verde, 09/09/2014). “If he’s been there for so long and did nothing, imagine now?”

Look at the health area, look at the situation of the teachers. They try to get a rise but do not succeed. He did nothing for Goiás” (mother, family 7, Rio Verde, 09/03/2014).

In a smaller and less intense level, the survey also detected typical cases of voters who remained undecided even in the face of information they thought convincing, coming from the electoral campaigns on television. Praise and recognition of achievements or good commitments, made by the candidates, did not remove, at least during the context of the research, voters’ doubt about which candidate would merit their vote. “About Marconi’s candidacy I’m undecided. There is a hospital that the others did not finish and he took it and did it. But the stadium is a poor quality work, poorly executed, he hired a disqualified company to save and take the money” (neighbor, family 36, Goiânia, 09/29/2014).

In addition to the typical case shown above, there were moments of dialogue where information was not enough for a decision. The indecision was based precisely on the persistent option of valuing the vote and relativizing the importance and the ease with which the candidates get votes. “My vote is not like that, you have to convince me” (neighbor 2, family 29, Goiânia, 09/09/2014). “These folks are like this, they come by our place once and think it’s ready” (daughter, family 29, Goiânia, 09/19/2014). “We work 30 days for a hard-won salary and the men stay here for half an hour and leave expecting to be already elected” (son, family 29, Goiania, 09/19/2014).

In another case, the high volume of knowledge about candidates is even included as a factor of indecision. Such a perception is related to hope for the new, which has no political force yet, as will be seen in another topic below. “This year is the most difficult year of all to choose. The more I know the candidates, the more afraid I become. I have no choice, and the ones I have are minorities. And if I vote, it will be useless” (husband, family 17, Jataí, 09/08/2014).

Of course, this persistence of indecision may culminate in the decision on the eve of the election or in abstention, blank or null vote. The research, however, did not follow these moves.

### **The false indecision**

We mention this modality for methodological reasons. At different moments of the research, during the recruitment procedures of the families to be surveyed, the undecided voters were screened for the desired profiles, evidently for strategic reasons of the campaign to which the research should serve.

# A

## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

From the outset, the researchers involved came across an unexpected difficulty, which, due to its repeated occurrence, ended up becoming predictable and included in the expected prospects of recruitment: many of the voters and family groups contacted, even without knowing which profiles were sought, declared themselves undecided and then, at the time of the research, showed some tendency or were even decided.

The notion of “false indecision,” defined as the profile of a citizen who either was not aware of his/her own preferences or preferred not to assume a definite electoral positioning, was thus set up in the initial approach. The latter case was much more common than the former.

The perception of this type of voter was only possible because of the applied method: the work collected not only opinions and reports, but also established data by non-participant observation of family behaviors regarding the themes and formats of the electoral programs. The cases of false indecision, in general, were perceived pragmatically.

One last note in this regard was the group’s conviction that false indecision was not the result of a rejection of research – even because the approached voters participated enthusiastically at different stages of the collection process – but of a sort of exercise of the right not to define or not to admit publicly or to the research their specific definitions. It would, perhaps, be a false indecision by choice. One of the cases of false indecision was noticed in the following dialogue, when the family, who initially declared themselves completely undecided, eventually revealed an old predilection by a candidate. “My father is so in love with him [Iris] that he even took a picture with him at my daughter’s graduation” (mother, family 7, Rio Verde, 09/03/2014). “The whole family is Iris, all because of my grandfather” (daughter 1, family 7, Rio Verde, 09/03/2014).

In the same way, with respect to another candidate, indecision keeps changing gradually. In the following dialogue, it is possible to perceive a mixture between the affirmation of indecision and the intention to vote. This case occurs when the affirmation of indecision appears linked to the intention to vote in a specific candidate. “If I had to choose, I would vote for Iris. I voted for him all my life. I do not know yet, but who knows” (father, family 19, Jataí, 09/08/2014).

In declaring himself undecided, a voter makes reference to a candidate and an interest in deciding so as to be able to influence other voters with his/her position as well. “Had Marconi made a good government, he wouldn’t need to ask for a vote in the first place. I haven’t made up my mind yet. When I do I am going to help people decide (husband, family 20, Águas Lindas de Goiás, 09/10/2014).

There was also the case where family members made up their minds during the survey, after watching the free electoral program, some in favor of Marconi, another in favor of Iris and another in favor of Gomide. The false indecision is recorded because the interviews showed that there was a certain intention to vote for one candidate. Observe the sequence below from a recorded family dialogue. “Now I think I’m for Marconi. I was already thinking about voting for him. The others are really no match for Marconi, he’s the best among those who came up. His proposals are the best among those shown” (daughter-in-law, family 22, Goiânia, 09/10/2014). “I was already deciding on Marconi indeed, now that I have seen, there is no way, it really has to be him” (granddaughter, family 22, Goiânia, 09/10/2014). “So far, it’s Iris indeed. I might even change, but for now it’s him. I always voted for him anyway. In Ceres, everyone votes for him only” (son-in-law 2, family 22, Goiânia, 09/10/2014). “For me, it’s really Gomide, because he’s the only one who’s working in the health area, and we need that” (son-in-law 1, family 22, Goiânia, 09/10/2014).

A compliment coming from a voter who did not admit at all that he had decided also revealed a process of false indecision. “I prefer Marconi. He’s going to win and he is smarter” (son-in-law, family 30, Formosa, 09/19/2014).

### **Indecision for lack of knowledge or disinformation**

This is the typical case brought by the literature. In this study, we distinguish between the indecisive uninformed voter and the depoliticized one. To consider depoliticization as disinformation is, first, to make a value judgment of the culture in which the voter lives, and, second, to prevent the understanding of other levels of information, some of which ground the very process of electoral indecision.

Thus, indecision is characterized by typical disinformation or by specific ignorance, related to the electoral or political conjuncture, rather than by the apparent degree of voter engagement. Also because, to be really undecided, the voter must almost necessarily be disengaged, except for very specific cases of indecision motivated by the appreciation of several candidates, already pointed out previously.

In a spontaneous way and due to the explanation given by the field researcher on how the research would be developed, the electoral program was considered as an important means of becoming aware of the candidates and their proposals. “I think it’s important because there you can draw a conclusion about who is the best” (neighbor, family 12, Águas Lindas de Goiás, 09/05/2014). “See what



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

the proposals are. You have to see what is the best proposal, which candidate is good for us and our children” (husband, family 12, Águas Lindas de Goiás, 09/05/2014).

Other interviewees also stated that they did not know the candidates and, again, they emphasized the timing of the electoral program and media information to overcome this lack of knowledge, suggesting an informative approach to the candidates’ backgrounds. “I think they should pass on the history so that we can know who we are voting for” (son 1, family 23, Anápolis, 09/10/2014).

Indecision for ignorance of candidates and candidatures was common, although these cases were related only to new or minority candidatures, the so-called “dwarfish.”<sup>4</sup> “I think they should show the history so that we can know who we are voting for” (son 1, family 23, Anápolis, 09/10/2014). “Indeed, there’s a lot of strangers to vote for” (grandchild 2, family 23, Anápolis, 09/10/2014).

Finally, there was uninformed indecision by absolute or radical disinterest for politics. The most frequent symptoms of this type of voter were poor attention to the electoral program, excessively concise talk, monosyllabic response, and so on. “I don’t know who to vote for yet. I don’t like politics, so I don’t know” (niece, family 28, Catalão, 09/17/2014).

Disbelief in politics and general ignorance come together in the recorded talks. “I really don’t know the candidates. Politicians only talk” (friend 2, family 35, Novo Gama, 09/26/2014). “Voting does not pay. My vote is null so far. Why voting anyway, they won’t change anything at all. What for? The same crap will go on” (friend 1, family 35, Novo Gama, 09/26/2014).

This type of voter, who shows disinterest in politics, is well described in the academic literature (Forrest; Marks, 1999) and is the voter more specifically influenced by electoral programs and debates (Lourenço, 2007). In the research in Goiás, it was mainly with this type of voter that the least resistance to decide or the preference was perceived, along the study period itself. Upon being informed, the voter with this profile would leave indecision and make his/her choice.

Information vehicles and communication strategies, together with the free electoral program, can figure as one of the central axes in the transition from indecision to decision, in its classic terms.

Indecision by ignorance or disinformation is solved, therefore, with classic tools, not covering the complexity of a process of indecision that involves the other profiles, such as the critical undecided and the persistent undecided .

These two types described, however, were those that turned out to be less intense in the survey. The most common and strongest undecided voter, to the

<sup>4</sup> Candidates dubbed “dwarfish” are those who do not show from the beginning, in voting intentions polls, any chance of being elected, creating the appearance that they are candidates for reasons other than being elected. In general they are unknown to a large part of the electorate and remain so over the election. There are very rare cases of amazing ascents of such candidatures during the election period, which may sometimes lead to their being elected. However, in local elections, it has not been rare that such candidates, unbelievers of their own chances, are co-opted or “bought” by one of the viable candidates in order to do the “dirty game,” i.e., criticizing the contractor’s opponent.

surprise of the researchers themselves, was a well informed and critical type, probably resulting from the political scenario of strong rejection of the two main politicians offered by the 2014 electoral menu in Goiás, mainly due to persistence of both in the struggle for power<sup>5</sup>.

### **The informed and critical aspect of the indecisive voter in general**

The strong emergence of the informed and critical indecisive voter may have been the main surprise of the findings of this research, performed under conditions of detailed and careful observation.

Lourenço (2007) had already pointed to this type of indecisive voter profile. In his doctoral dissertation, the author recognizes, in the midst of a copious display of quantitative and qualitative data, on the part of the voter, the recognition of problems of disinterest and lack of participation, and the picture of dissatisfaction, especially in relation to ethical issues of politics (mainly created from a private morality).

However, even this author still reveals an uninformed and influential indecisive voter, that is, someone whose situation of indecision still establishes strongly in the lack of information – the main reason for postponing the voting decision – and whose decision-making process depends on the media interference, in a proportion that increases as the election day approaches.

The research done in Goiás disclosed a somewhat more complex indecisive type. First, for not being strictly uninformed. Entire families of undecided voters discussed the effectiveness of public equipment in detail and criticized the contending candidates at times.

What constitutes this indecision in such cases? We highlight, in the analysis, different modalities of what we will call here “critical indecision”:

- a. Indecision due to partial or total rejection of politics and candidates. We talked about this in the previous item.

Even so, it is possible to point out typical talks, which show the undecided voter’s level of criticism when rejecting a candidate or his/her arguments shown in electoral program. This is the case of comments such as the following, which occurred after a program by Iris Rezende: “Iris only showed his family. I do not care if he’s a good father, I want to know if he’s a good governor. If his daughter will get richer and me poorer” (wife, family 1, Goiânia, 08/22/2014).

The interviewees described what an ideal politician would be like, denying this adjective to the candidates from whom they would have to choose in the

<sup>5</sup> Several qualitative references, not included in this article, which concerned the symbolic struggle of the campaign itself, showed a high level of rejection of the main candidatures: Iris Rezende’s, due to his old age, which appeared as obsolescence, and Marconi Perillo’s, due to the “material fatigue,” resulting from the long-lasting power (the then governor would run and win, in 2014, the fourth term of five consecutive election periods, in one of which he elected his successor).



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

election. It was not difficult to find in their talk an ironic tone about the candidates. “At this time so many good people show up (laughs)” (husband, family 11, Luziânia, 09/03/2014).

- b. Indecision for discredit in the political discourse promoted by the candidates.

The idea that politicians are loquacious but do not deliver what they promise, results in voter insecurity in relation to the proposals displayed in the electoral programs and grounds a persistent model of indecision.

While the electoral program showed the conclusion of works in the city of Aparecida de Goiânia, the critique of the “vote-getting” discourse was emphasized: “Now it’s really going ahead, the election is coming” (cousin, family 1, Goiânia, 08/22/2014).

In a particular family, the undecided voters generally doubted Marconi’s proposals. An indecisive young man approved of Marconi’s proposals, but argued that the candidate talks but does not act, and justified himself by reporting to successive elections. “As we see it now, Marconi Perillo’s proposals are good; but talks, talks, talks... if talk and act is good. But election after election it’s the same thing” (son 1, family 5, Goiânia, 09/03/2014).

Various accusations emerged while maintaining the atmosphere of disbelief.

The people already live unbelieving, indeed. He also spoke of this road connecting Brasília to Luziânia. If they did that, my friend, it would be a blessing. But we already live on the back foot. Say right away we don’t believe that one day it will happen. Too many promises, but when it comes to delivering, their word means nothing (husband, family 22, Luziânia, 09/10/2014).

The candidates’ discourse is, therefore, largely discredited. In the following dialogue, there is great skepticism about the candidates and putting them on equal footing (without distinction between them): “Everyone speaks the same thing. Nothing that benefits me in these proposals from them. Nothing that benefits everyone here” (son, family 22, Goiânia, 09/10/2014).

Doubt about politicians’ behavior and discourse clearly appears.

You trust one of them and then get disappointed. Health is really a chaos. Look, I want to vote null. I cannot say I’m going to vote for Iris or Marconi, but when the time comes I might not vote. I prefer not to say that I participated in putting

anybody there because if it goes wrong it was not me who did it. (daughter, family 24, Trindade, 09/12/2014)

Indecision, then, is linked to the impossibility of believing in the proposals shown and the impracticability of other means to such purpose.

c. Indecision for withdrawal of previous support.

Voter reaction to the image changes of the candidates on whom they relied on previous elections culminates in a position of indecision, which translates either into doubt or rejection.

Withdrawal of previous support is also seen as an initial reason for electoral indecision, as can be seen in the following dialogue where one begins to describe the reason for having voted for a candidate who is not supported anymore. “The other time I voted for Marconi” (father, family 16, Jataí, 09/08/2014). “I did not vote for him” (mother, family 16, Jataí, 09/08/2014). “My sister-in-law always votes for him just because he does not delay the teachers’ pay” (wife, family 16, Jataí, 09/08/2014).

d. Indecision due to appreciation of several candidates.

A less common case, but nevertheless found in the context of the research done. The voter is undecided because he/she hesitates among several candidates he/she recognizes as good and deserving of his vote. There have been rare occurrences in which, in the 2014 Goiás elections, both Marconi and Iris were honored by the meaning that distinguishes them as the major current leaders in Goiás. On a more restricted level, the candidatures of Gomide and Vanderlan, for having been successful mayors of their respective cities (Anápolis and Senador Canedo), there were cases of indecision for appreciation especially between former mayor Gomide and governor Marconi. “For us, the one who made the most was Marconi. Gomide is good, he’s qualified. Iris, I don’t know, but there are people who say it was very good. But I have no knowledge” (friend 3, family 15, Águas Lindas de Goiás, 09/08/2014).

The polarization between candidates Iris Rezende and Marconi Perillo was expressed several times in indecision due to approval of more than one candidate. At any rate, it is not a simple indecision based on the polarization of parties, but rather an indecision that is somewhat critical of the formation of “cliques,” a historical case known in Goiás elections. “They were in charge here in Goiás, right? When we moved to Goiás, it was Iris’s group. Then Marconi arrived and



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

took it away from the old man” (neighbor, family 25, Trindade, 09/12/2014). “The first time Marconi won here it was by criticizing the cliques. Previously it was Iris who ruled the state of Goiás. Marconi would come to undo this, he wasn’t even known. Now it’s the same thing. Marconi was peeling banana and saying he was going to put an end to Iris’s clique. Today he has his own” (neighbor, family 25, Trindade, 09/12/2014).

Although with a tendency to vote for Iris Rezende, the voter whose talks are transcribed below is undecided because this is the first time he participates in an election in the state. “But I do not know who to vote for, Iris, Marconi, and Alexandre, but I think it’s going to be for Iris. It is the first time I’m going to vote in Goiás. He has a more beautiful proposal than the others. Boy, about education and health” (neighbor 2, family 34, Caldas Novas, 09/26/2014).

- e. Indecision due to fatigue of material and lack of perspective of power of the new elements.

This was the typical case of the feeling of change that guided the 2014 elections in Goiás, but which culminated in a relatively easy re-election of the governor candidate. By polarizing with a more experienced and older politician than himself, Marconi ended up benefiting from being “rejuvenated” by Iris and, in the face of polarization, by weakening the possibilities of the candidates marked by the idea of the “new” (in the case of the 2014 election in Goiás, linked to both Antônio Gomide of PT and Pepper Vanderlan Cardoso of PP), who did not show a perspective of power. Marconi became the “possible or viable new’ given an old Iris and young candidates who did not show electoral stature to win.

The expectation for political novelty in Goiás, then, is general. But the lack of a viable novelty was clear at all times. “I already know the current ones and I don’t expect much. Let’s see the others that I don’t know, but there are already people talking about them” (father, family 26, Morrinhos, 09/12/2014).

Even when considered good, well-known candidates did not represent this novelty, a factor that prevailed in some moments of indecision. “I want something new, Marconi has been in power for long, Iris is good, can even push on with his age, but it’s an old thing, we need new ideas again” (husband, family 31, Goiânia, 09/19/2014).

None of these forms of indecision appeared in a picture of misunderstanding or ignorance of candidacies or electoral proposals and projects, or even less, of ignorance about the performance of governments. Indecision, not infrequently,

appeared in this research as an excess of criticism, to the point of culminating in mistrust, discredit or hopelessness in politics and politicians.

## CONCLUSION

The theoretical framework resulting from this research, and which is the core theme of this article, seems vigorous in the sense of allowing at least partial questioning of the inclusion of several categories of electoral indecision in the general framework of decision theories. As was observed in the theoretical foreshortening, authors in the area almost invariably consider the indecisive voter as a phenomenon of electoral “uncertainty,” that is, as someone who has not made up their mind, given the electorally offered options (Karp; Garland, 2007).

The resulting data and analyses make it clear that not all indecision (whether the one resulting in blank or null vote, or the one which determines electoral abstention) is a process of incomplete referral of the vote. Indecision is not, at least not necessarily, a consequence of lack of information or political indifference, not even of little education or perception of an elector unable to decide. From this point of view, Noble (2017) is correct: the undecided voters have to be considered from their own terms, although this article approaches the subject differently from this author’s, whose concern is to relativize the importance of valid votes, in the determination of the democratic rules of the elections.

The “negative” aspect of the concept of electoral indecision is exposed in different ways in the available literature and, in this case, it is a matter of turning its indicators into questions or, at least, reducing them to the condition of non-universalizable hypotheses related to social structuring, such as in Brancovier and Dormagen (2007), or to the belief in the principles or effectiveness of political processes (Ha et al., 2013; Kang, 2004), or to the culture and trust in the future (Li; Masuda; Jiang, 2016; Muxel, 2006), or even to disbelief or questioning of democracy itself (Pase; Silva; Santos, 2016). Even within this framework, authors like Noble (2017) argue that blank/null voters or abstentionists should have the power to annul electoral processes, if they were significant in number in relation to valid votes, in a positive view of that position, as an expression of dissatisfaction with the electoral offers proposed by the political system.

The concern of our study is, then, the hypothetical need for a “theory of indecision,” capable of deepening the knowledge of a type of electorate that historically comprises more than one third of the valid electorate, and, thus, to



## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

quit the reductionism implicit in the concept of the undecided voter as a “negative” of democracy (Noble, 2017). The findings allow us to state that there is an indecision born of a keen, though negative, critical perception of the political processes and, above all, of their results in terms of achievement of the democratic State directly in the daily life of citizens. This phenomenon must be better understood in order to achieve a clearer and more consistent understanding of how electoral opinion and political action is constructed nowadays. ■

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# A

## The conscious indecision: a qualitative analysis of electoral indecision at the state election in 2014

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