Which political reform does Brazilian journalism discuss? A study about the coverage of Folha de S. Paulo's website between 1994 and 2016

Que reforma política é discutida pelo Jornalismo? Um estudo acerca da cobertura do Portal da Folha de S. Paulo sobre o assunto entre 1994 e 2016

¿Qué reforma política debate el periodismo brasileño? Un estudio acerca de la cobertura del sitio de Folha de S. Paulo entre 1994 y 2016

CAMILA MONT'ALVERNE, Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, Brasil (camilambpp@ufpr.br)

VICTOR HAUSEN, Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, Brasil (hausen.victor@gmail.com)

PEDRO HENRIQUE LEITE, Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, Brasil (pedrohenri.leite@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the coverage of the Brazilian political reforms made by Folha de S. Paulo's website between 1994 and 2016 by merging the literature in Political Science on this subject and studies in Political Journalism. To do so, we conducted an automated content analysis of 6,038 texts. The results indicate that political reforms are constantly in the journalistic agenda; that some concerns remain during the period, such as discussions about proportional representation, rules related to the party system, and the norms that regulate electoral campaigns, and that although the information and opinion sections have similar agendas, the latter speculates about the party system and the systems of government.

RESUMO

O objetivo do trabalho é analisar o padrão de cobertura sobre reforma política no site da Folha de S. Paulo entre 1994 e 2016, unindo a literatura de Ciência Política acerca do assunto com estudos sobre jornalismo político. Realizou-se uma análise de conteúdo automatizada de 6038 textos. Os resultados apontam que: a reforma política, de maneira geral, é uma agenda perene; algumas preocupações permanecem na agenda ao longo do período: discussões sobre sistema proporcional, regras relacionadas ao sistema partidário e normas de campanhas eleitorais; embora a agenda da seção opinativa e informativa seja semelhante, a primeira especula mais frequentemente acerca do sistema partidário e de forma e sistemas de governo.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la cobertura sobre la reforma política brasileña hecha en el sitio de Folha de S. Paulo entre 1994 y 2016, uniendo la bibliografía de ciencia política sobre el tema y los estudios en periodismo político. Para ello, se realizó un análisis de contenido automatizado de 6038 textos. Los resultados señalan que la reforma política, en general, es una agenda constante; que algunas preocupaciones permanecen durante el periodo: discusiones acerca del sistema proporcional, reglas relativas al sistema partidista y normas de regulación de campañas electorales, y que aunque las agendas de las secciones informativas y de opinión sean similares, la última especula acerca del sistema partidista y los sistemas de gobierno.

Palavras-chave: jornalismo político; reforma política; agenda jornalística; folha de S. Paulo; análise de conteúdo.

Keywords: political journalism; political reform; journalistic agenda; portal da folha de S. Paulo; content analysis.

Palabras clave: periodismo político; reforma política; agenda periodística; folha de S. Paulo; análisis de contenido.

INTRODUCTION

Political reform is a remaining agenda for Brazilian Congress, although its priorities change based on the specific context (Avritzer & Anastasia, 2006; Nicolau, 2017). The topic is a recurring one for parliament and for the press, since there is an expectation that the changes produced by political reform could promote the transformation of civic culture among representatives and voters (Santos, 2006).

Despite the amount of political reforms discussed in the Brazilian context, there is no consensus regarding which changes should be adopted to improve Brazilian democracy and which are its most problematic issues. The resulting political configurations produced by those changes, in turn, are able to influence electoral results, conditions of governability, and the ways in which society elects its representatives. Therefore, political reform is an item of interest for the country, which turns it into an object of dispute between agents from different social fields.

Since most of the available information regarding what happens in Congress is transmitted to citizens through mass communications media (Arnold, 2004; Azevedo & Chaia, 2008; Cook, 2005), journalistic companies are essential in the prioritization of proposals, by characterizing them as most adequate or by strengthening a potential resistance against them. Thus, the configuration of an agenda of reforms – and its legitimacy – requires the consideration of the journalistic profession.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to analyze the pattern of news coverage regarding political reform on the website Folha of S. Paulo during a 23-year period, from 1994 until 2016, since the beginning of the publication of the online version of this newspaper until the time when the data was collected. Specifically, the object of the study will be the news coverage regarding topics and proposals that have garnered the most visibility, using automatized content analysis. Such a construction allows us to detect which proposals have remained in the news agenda throughout time and which ones are mentioned sporadically, both in the information and in the opinionated sections.

It is important to highlight the originality of this proposal, because, even though the topic is recurrent and important in Brazilian democracy, there is no research that takes into account the news agenda regarding the reforms, especially none that covers such an extensive period of study. Additionally, this work tests the possibility of automatizing the content analysis of journalistic material, a method already explored by other researchers (Burscher, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2016; Flaounas et al., 2013; Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Günther & Quandt, 2016; Hopkins & King, 2010; Pang & Lee, 2008; Sjøvaag & Stavelin, 2012; Sudhahar, Franzosi, & Cristianini, 2011).

This article is organized as follows: in the next section we will develop a brief discussion about political reform and the role of journalism in such debate. Next, we will present the methodological strategies, followed by the analysis of the results. The next step will be the discussion of the research findings. Finally, the article concludes by presenting its final considerations.

THE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT POLITICAL REFORM IN BRAZIL AND THE ROLE OF JOURNALISM

Since the democratization of the country[1] diverse deficits have been diagnosed in Brazilian democracy. They were attributed to different origins, such as the rules of the electoral system, the difficulty of balancing representativeness and governability, the risk of cyclical institutional crises, the types of campaign financing adopted, and the participation – and its limits – of society in the political system (Abranches, 1988; Ames, 2001; Avritzer, 2016; Bresser-Pereira, 2015; Nicolau, 2008; Nicolau & Power, 2007; Power & Zucco Jr., 2011; Rennó, 2008; Tavares, 1998). The diagnosis of the problems usually comes accompanied by diverse proposals to alter the system, frequently presented as a political reform.

The constant presence of the topic in the political agenda results in the argument, from Couto y Arantes (2006), that Brazil remained in some sort of constituent agenda. That being said, Avritzer y Anastasia (2006, p. 11) also argue that

> Political reform can be understood, in the strictest sense, as the reorganization of the rules for periodic electoral competitions, such as it has been the case in Brazil after democratization, or it can be understood, also, as a broader reorganization of the Brazilian political system.

This article refers to the idea expressed by Avritzer y Anastasia while using the term political reform.

The diagnostic of the problems does not, yet, generate a consensus about the need of reforms in the Brazilian political system. There is also no agreement regarding the aspects that should be changed or what the objectives of the reform are (Limongi, 2006;

Nicolau, 2017; Rennó, 2008). Even then, Nicolau (2017) argues that topics more directly linked to the configurations of the proportional system –such as the type of list, the division of parties, coalitions, and electoral threshold – have been in the agenda for more than 20 years. Almeida (2006) and Rennó (2006) agree in the urgency of reducing the number of candidates but disagree on whether that should be accomplished through the adoption of a closed list in proportional elections. Ames (2001), in turn, defends the adoption of the German model for the election of house representatives[2]. There are also broader proposals, such as the adoption of semi presidentialism (Amorim Neto, 2006), as a counterpoint to the perspective of Figueiredo y Limongi (2006), who argue that the Brazilian system is stable. For Soares and Rennó (2006), the center of the matter consists in finding a balance between governability and representativeness – which, according to the authors, could be achieved through a moderate multi-party approach, which limits the number of candidates, reduces the dependence of Congress on the Presidency, and imposes more obstacles to the practice of "slush fund"[3].

The disagreement exists not only among experts. Political parties also lack a defined proposal of political reform (Nicolau, 2017), while the parliamentarians – who would be responsible for implementing it– have a tendency to resist to alterations that could hinder their interests, thus increasing the unpredictability of the results of that process (Melo, 2006; Rennó, 2008).

Despite the role of agents of institutional politics regarding the reforms, actors from other areas may exercise influence in the development of reform. Specifically, Nicolau (2017, p. 136) highlights the importance of public opinion in the execution of political reform:

> It is acknowledged that the inertial force that prevails after a specific electoral system is adopted in a democracy. Such phenomenon is explained mostly by the fact that sudden changes to electoral systems are not common. Nevertheless, although unusual, reforms are implemented, especially in situations in which public opinion puts pressure on its implementation.

If mass communications possess the ability to "formulate public concerns" (Miguel, 2002, p. 171), its role should be taken into account on topics that greatly interest and impact the country, such as the topic addressed in this article. The diverse perspectives and voices presented in a news text, in that manner, influence the construction of the public agenda of debates. By highlighting the most relevant discussions and offering a way for society to face public matters (Cervi & Massuchin, 2013a; Entman, 2004; Maia, 2008; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), journalism companies play a political role –and its relevance varies according to the credibility of the publication.

The recurrence of the events presented by journalism also fulfils the role of indicating to the reader (and to the political agents) that those issues should receive their attention, which is why they are constantly in the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Sevenans, 2017; Weaver, McCombs, & Spellman, 2000). Depending on the convergence and the concentration of the coverage, there could be reactions from political agents (Gomes & Almada, 2014), who become aware of the value (and in some cases, the increased value) of the topic presented (Cook, 1989, 2005).

The prioritization of perspectives and proposals does not respond to a political (or ideological) preference of journalistic companies. The coverage –especially as it pertains to news– follows a series of production criteria (Correia, 2011; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Preston, 2015). Those rules are responsible for establishing the preference for certain notions –frequently in sync with the vision of powerful political agents, who have their authority legitimized (Cook, 2005; van Dalen, 2015). Regarding the opinion content, since it is not subject to the same constraints as the news content, it is possible to use it to anticipate agendas, thus bringing the interests of the journalism companies themselves (Eilders, 1999; Espinosa, 2003; Mont'Alverne & Marques, 2015).

Due to the different characteristics of sections, in this study we have chosen to analyze both the news and opinionated content. In addition to figuring out the political reform agenda in general, such decision allows us to examine if the newspaper anticipates some proposals, putting them in evidence as topics of their interest –and not just because of constraints belonging to the routines of journalistic production.

Given the goal of this article and the content that has been presented in this section, the study is guided by the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Taking into account that political reform is an agenda frequently brought up in the political field, the topic also remains on the agenda of the website of Folha of S. Paulo throughout the analyzed period.

- **H2:** Proposals of changes relative to the proportional system are the ones that remain on the agenda throughout the entire period.

- **H3:** Since it is through the opinionated coverage that columnists and the publication can make explicit their positions regarding the reform and anticipate agendas, such coverage deals with different agendas when compared to those presented in the news content.

- **H4:** Much of the content analyzed was published in the thematic section about politics of the website, due to the fact that it is related to discussions that belong to the political arena.

METHOD

The *corpus* of the article is composed by 6038 texts –from news, reports, columns, editorials, and letters from readers– published on the website of Folha, which belongs to the newspaper Folha of S. Paulo, and that include the keyword "political reform" in its content. The period in which the texts were published is between 1994 and 2016, thus including 23 years of coverage. Data collection begins in 1994 because it is the first year in which the content was available for online search, without having to recur to the archive. Data collection was performed on May 8, 2017 and it included content up to 2016 because that was the last full year available at the time of collection.

The inventory of the content that composes the *corpus* was performed automatically using codes developed by Python and R[4] languages. For the extraction of the data from the HTML pages from the website of Folha of S. Paulo we utilized the module Beautiful Soup[5]. The next step was the initial structuring of the data made using the Pandas[6] library. Both were designed for the Python language and the procedures adopted are similar to those employed by Sjøvaag y Stavelin (2012) in an investigation that also makes an analysis of online journalism.

Manual check of the files collected was also performed with the intention of eliminating duplicated texts or texts that were published by partner sites of the website of Folha, but that were linked to the search. The pieces produced by the site F5 (which has an entertainment focus) and the calls for the multimedia products of the site (such as podcasts and audiovisual materials, without written text) were not included because those do not fit within the scope

of our proposal. Lastly, checking the files also was intended to detect texts that made no reference to political reform in the Brazilian context, excluding those from the *corpus*[7].

Regarding the website chosen for the study, the rationale is that, besides being the website of one of the most prestigious Brazilian *quality-papers* (the newspaper Folha of S. Paulo), it represents the migration of a conventional newspaper towards a news portal (Tavares & Massuchin, 2017). By utilizing the materials on the website, it is possible to have access to factual content –also known as *hard news*, reporting the steps of the reforms and the daily discussions of the political field regarding the topic– as well as the opinion content, which has a higher chance of fulfilling a reflective and proactive role. The website allows access to material published in the print version of the newspaper –the main journalistic product of Grupo Folha for decades– and also published online, as well as access to content exclusively produced for the digital platform. In that sense, the study by Cervi and Massuchin (2013b) points out that Folha's website maintains a profile of audience and production similar to that of the print newspaper, with a tendency to prioritize *hard news*, specially about politics.

The methodological strategies are composed by four phases: a) the frequency of texts published each year was observed, with the objective of perceiving if there are significant alterations from one year to the next; b) the contents were separated between information and opinion, according to the section to which they belong[8]. Immediately, those were distributed according to their sections; c) analysis of the content with the intention of mapping the proposals of political reform mentioned in the articles; d) calculation of the moving averages of the proposal axes mapped in the coverage, with the objective of noting variations in the agenda of the website throughout the period analyzed. Next, the procedures applied to step c) will be detailed.

With the purpose of demarcating which would be the proposals of political reform to be considered, this article has been based on the terms presented in the chapters of Avritzer and Anastasia (2006) and in the glossary of Nicolau (2017), utilizing them as keywords to identify the proposals expressed in the text. After defining the proposals to be mapped (for example, campaign financing, electoral threshold, open list, district vote, etc.) their recurrence and distribution was done automatically, by using tools developed for the R language. The libraries dplyr[9] and tm[10] were used, with the objective of refining the materials and obtaining the quantification of the

Proposal Axes	Types of proposal of political reform by axis
Proportional system	Electoral threshold, coalitions, distribution of seats, alternate members, type of list, district vote
Institutional design	Cameralism, form and system of government, federalism
Campaigns	Campaign financing, polls, criminalization of "slush fund"
Parties and legal issues	Party system, party loyalty, parliamentary immunity
Participation	Popular participation, compulsory voting, project of popular initiative, referendum, plebiscite
Elections	Electoral system, reelection
Economic issues	Parliamentary amends, tax budget, autonomy of the Central Bank

Table 1. Axes of mapped proposals of political reform

Source: Own elaboration.

frequencies of the mapped terms. The automatized analysis of the content entails the manipulation of a larger quantity of text compared to an analysis made by human researchers, thus allowing for a global vision of the analyzed material (Flaounas et al., 2013).

It should be noted that the text was the unit of analysis used to measure the frequency of the terms, thus looking to avoid the artificial inflation of some of the proposals. Therefore, regardless of the quantity of times that the proposal appears in the same topic, such proposal is only counted once. The proposals were grouped in axes according to the type of reform they offered[11]. The same text could be grouped into more than one axis, depending on the proposals presented. Table 1 is the composition of each of the axis:

ANALYSIS

Figure 1 shows the frequency of texts that contain the term "political reform" in the analyzed material. In it, all texts are considered –those belonging to the information section as well as those from the opinion section. It is possible to identify the existence of coverage cycles about the topic. It is common that after intervals of decreasing quantity of texts mentioning the reform (which tends to happen especially in election years[12]), coverage on the topic increases again and then decreases in relation to the previous periods.

As time goes by, the material increases in a vertiginous way –not really because the debates became more long-lived or because more reforms were proposed, but due to the technological advances and

the alterations in the routines of online journalistic production. Some of the changes have to do with the possibility of constant updating, the higher speed of the production process, and the increase in the offer of news, reports, and opinion texts (Masip, 2005; Menke et al., 2018; Salaverría & Negredo, 2008), once the limitations imposed by paper ceased to exist.

Throughout the 1990s, the boom in coverage occurs in 1997 (150 texts), the year in which the amendment to the reelection of positions in the Executive was approved. Afterwards, the quantity of texts increases again in 2000 and in 2002 –the latter is the year in which the rule of the verticalization of coalitions was approved. After this period, we noted a strong increase in 2005 (450 texts), when the discussion of another political reform in National Congress was initiated. The following two years also present a higher quantity of texts that mention the topic in comparison to previous years, indicating that the reform remained present (417 texts in 2006 and 569 in 2007). 2008, 2009 and 2010 are the years of decrease in comparison to the previous ones, being followed by an increase in 2011 (363 texts), when commissions were implemented in the House of Representatives and in the Federal Senate to elaborate new reform proposals.

The higher frequency of texts registered in the overall period occurred in 2013, year in which the increase in the cost of the omnibus ticket in Sao Paulo, the largest city in Brazil, produced a series of street protests in different cities of the country and in which the population expressed generalized dissatisfaction with politicians and with access to public services.
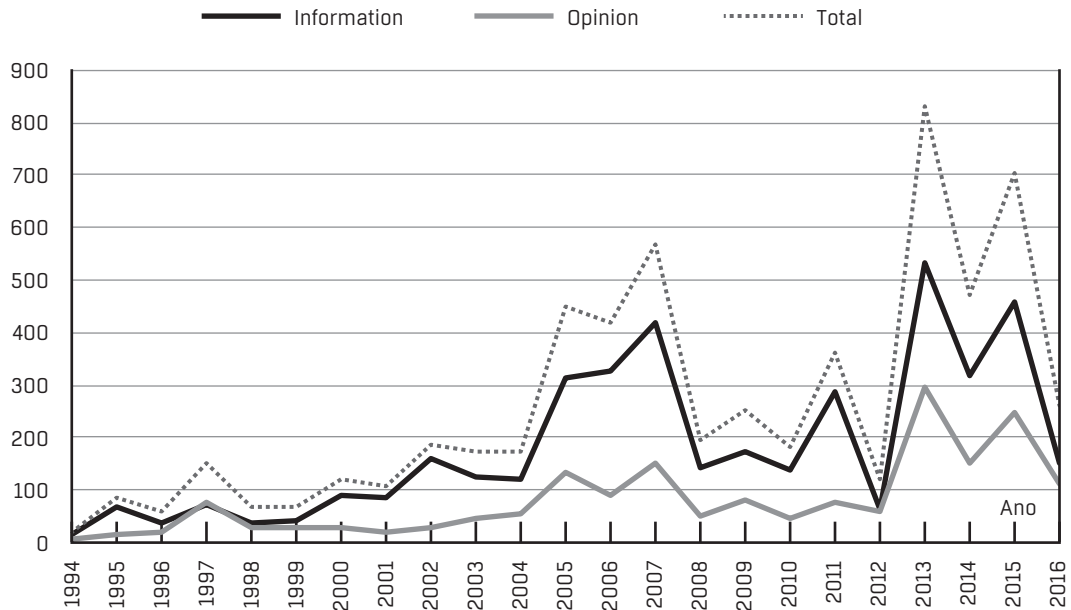
Figure 1. Frequency of texts that mention "political reform"

Source: Own elaboration.

Even though political reform was not a strong request made by the protesters, Dilma Rousseff, the president at that time, proposed the formation of a constituent assembly exclusively to address that issue –later, Dilma retracted on forming a constituent assembly, but kept the idea of carrying out political reforms. In that year, 829 texts were published that dealt with the reform, an average of more than two texts per day. There is a decrease in texts published in 2014 (472 texts), an electoral year. The frequency increases again in 2015 (703 texts), when the House of Representatives voted the so-called mini political reform, registering then a decrease in 2016.

Figure 1 also shows the frequency of the texts divided between information and opinion. The idea is to notice if there is a period in which the quantity of opinion texts exceeds that of information texts, which could indicate the attempt by the journalistic company to establish an agenda about the topic, anticipating itself to the discussions produced by the events in the political arena.

During the entire period analyzed, there is not a single year in which more opinion texts were published about the political reform in comparison to information texts. In reality, the curve of both sections follows the same pattern, showing that the opinion coverage behaves –at least in terms of its degree of visibility– in

a similar way to the information coverage. Even the cycles of increasing coverage about the topic behave in a similar way in both sections.

The following figures and tables present the data about the reform proposals that are more recurrent during the analyzed period. In total, 69 types of different proposals (and their variations such as the types of list, district vote, types of campaign financing, among others) were found in the analyzed material. To facilitate the visualization and since they belong to the same set of proposals, the data were grouped in axes, according to what is presented in the methodological section. Table 1 shows the frequency of such axes during the analyzed period[13].

The axis with the most presence in the texts is "Proportional system", with a 29.6% of presence. Following is "Campaigns", with a 19.4% of presence. "Parties and legal issues" is an axis mobilized in 16.5% of the cases. "Elections" and "Participation" have a very close quantity of frequencies, the former's being 14.3% and the latter's being 14.2%. Lastly, the discussion about "Institutional design" appears in 4.5% of the texts, while "Economic issues" has only a 1.4% of appearances. From this data, it is already possible to note that the discussions about the proportional system stand out in comparison to the others in terms of the visibility granted by the website. Such fact is not

Axes of Proposals	Information	Opinion	Total
Proportional system	1318	360	1678
Campaigns	845	256	1101
Parties and legal issues	661	274	935
Elections	576	238	814
Participation	540	267	807
Institutional design	154	103	257
Economic issues	54	28	82
Total	4148	1526	5674

Table 2. Frequency of each axis in the material analyzed[14]

Source: Own elaboration.

enough to affirm that the topic was present along the entire period, but the figures presented later contribute to that interpretation.

Table 2 also allows the analysis of the frequencies of mentions of the reform proposals divided between opinion texts and information texts. The intention is to notice if there is a different emphasis in both sections, which could put in evidence the construction of its own agenda by the journalistic company.

The data point to a difference in emphasis in regard to the axes in which opinion texts or information texts predominate. In reality, the data do not reveal a movement, by the opinion section, attempting the anticipation of a journalistic agenda since none of the axes present a higher percentage of opinion texts in comparison to information texts. The axis that presents the largest proportion of opinion texts is "Institutional design", which points to a broader freedom by the website and its columnists to speculate about the substantial alterations of the Brazilian political order, taking into consideration that the proposals of this axis deal with changes in the form and system of government.

It is to be noted the small proportion of opinion texts in axes such as "Proportional system" and "Campaigns". In these cases, the coverage seems to prioritize news and reports that are directly connected to the debated changes, offering little room for speculations about their unfolding.

Figure 2 relies on the moving averages of the axes analyzed throughout the period. It is possible to note,

beginning with the initial data, the variation of curves in the mentions of the proposals mapped in the text, from the average coverage throughout the years. In this case, the calculation is made until the year 2015, due to the fact that, in order to be able to calculate the moving averages of 2016, it would also be necessary to have the data from 2017, which had not yet ended[15].

The different behavior of the axes becomes apparent in this figure, pointing to a concentration of the discussion of some topics during specific periods. "Proportional system", for example, has peaks at the beginning of the 1990s, in some years of the 2000s (2002 and 2006, for example), and maintains a high average beginning in 2010 with the exception of 2012, when we can observe a decline in the coverage about the topic. This is explained by the fact that the measure is comparing an electoral year with a non-electoral year– 2011. In relation to "Proportional system", it is possible to note that there is interest in the debate of issues associated to it during the entire period despite the fluctuations in the quantity of texts related to the topic.

The "Campaigns" axis has reached some peaks between the years 2000 and 2010, but it seems to receive visibility more sporadically. Until 1999, the topic presents a low average of texts that discuss it. After that period, the coverage peaks occur closer to the electoral or pre-electoral years –which makes sense since most of the proposals of changes to campaigning rules are usually approved on the year prior to an election and the calculation of the moving average
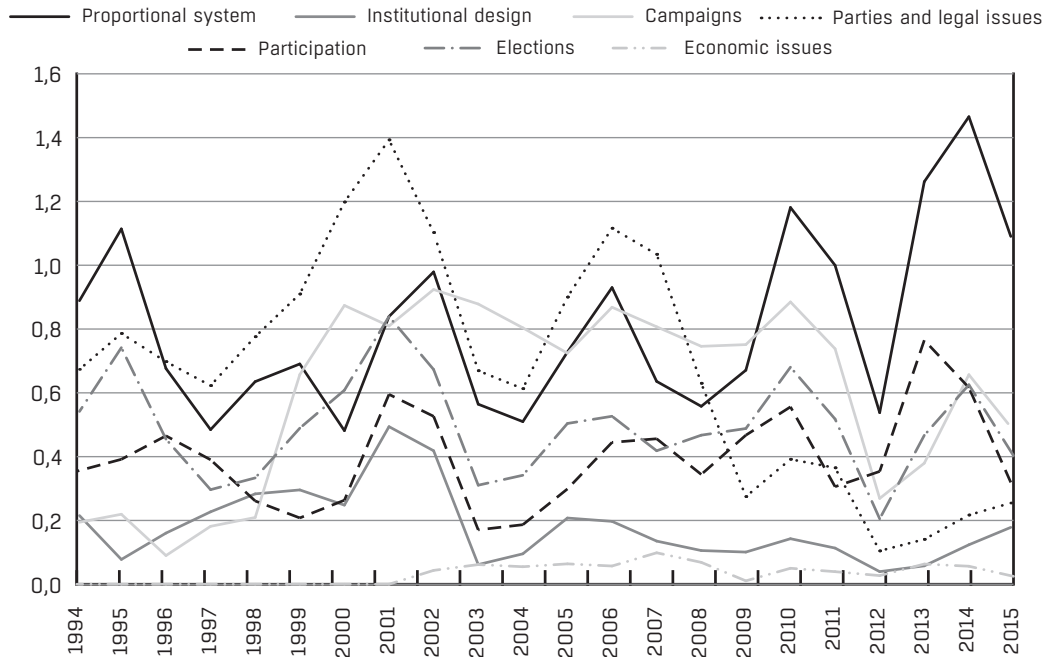
Figure 2. Moving averages of the axes throughout the period

Source: Own elaboration.

takes into consideration the quantity of texts from the previous year.

The "Parties and legal issues" axis presents peaks in 1995, 2001, and 2006. Despite the fact that in certain moments its average surpasses even that of the axis "Proportional system", it is not a topic that has received significant visibility in the last 10 years. The website gave more importance to the issues relative to this axis until the mid-2000s. Afterwards, we note a considerable decrease in the averages of the texts concerning this topic, despite a small increase after 2013.

The axis "Elections" registers diverse peaks throughout the period analyzed. The largest occurs in 2001, but there are others in 1995, 2010, and 2014. Despite the fact that the curve presents fluctuations in the average of the axis during the interval, "Elections" has visibility throughout the years, pointing out that it is an agenda that is addressed frequently. Taking into account that the diverse alterations to the electoral rules are discussed within the Brazilian context, it makes sense that the topic appears more frequently in the coverage of this website.

The "Participation" axis records its highest peak in 2013, year in which there were diverse demonstrations in Brazil, which made it so that political agents would try to present solutions to society. Despite it

being present in other moments, such as the curve of the axis demonstrates, the idea of increasing the availability of tools of participation (or of using them more frequently) was enacted as a way to attend to the demands of the protesters in 2013, hence contributing to the explanation of why there is a higher average that year.

The "Institutional design" axis remains with low average throughout the entire period, achieving its boom in 2001. Since it encompasses proposals of a broader magnitude, such as those that discuss the form and system of government, it is possible that proposals like these have less space in the coverage, because they demand a consensus that is more difficult to achieve in order for them to be implemented.

Finally, the average values of the "Economic issues" axis are only registered since 2002. They remain low throughout the entire period, with their peak registered in 2007, which points out that it is not an agenda of great importance when it comes to discussing political reform on the website.

If the ratios between the information content and the opinion content point to very few differences between them, the divergences become clearer when the moving averages of each section are taken into consideration. In the next figures it becomes clearer the
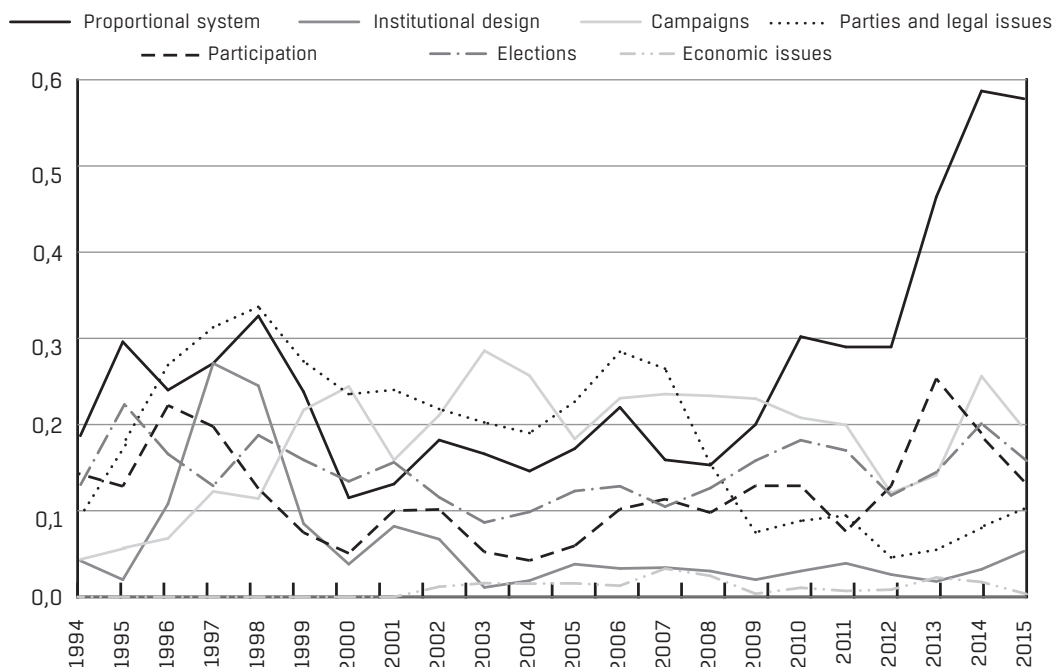
Figure 3. Moving averages of the axes in the information section

Source: Own elaboration.

existence of different emphases. Figure 3 presents the data relative to the information section, while Figure 4 shows the data for the opinionated section.

The most different curve between the two graphs is the one that refers to the averages of the "Parties and legal issues" axis. Until the mid-2000s the topic was addressed more in the opinionated section than in the information section. There are some peaks in the quantity of texts relative to the latter category. However, since it is probable that it was not present on the daily agenda throughout the entire period, it could not fulfill the newsworthiness criteria to make it into the news section. Since the same requirements are not applicable to the opinion section, there is more room to speculate about other agendas.

The "Proportional system" axis already presents a similar curve in the two sections, showing an increase in the same periods. Beginning in 2013, however, the information section has considerably larger averages than the opinion section. Since it is an axis that addresses issues that frequently return to the political agenda, for example the type of list for proportional elections, the topic tends to remain in the agenda of both sections.

Similar movement occurs with the curve of the "Campaigns" axis, which follows the same pattern in both sections. In the beginning of the 2000s, however, the average of the axis increased for the information

content but decreased for the opinion content. Such a fact indicates that the topic was present in the news agenda –and, probably, integrating the political agenda– but without presenting many speculations about it in the opinionated agenda. The "Elections" axis also maintains a similar behavior in both sections, similar to what happens with the content grouped within the "Participation" axis. The averages of the "Economic issues" axis also behave in a similar way.

Finally, there are differences registered in terms of the averages of the "Institutional design" axis. The tendency seems to be that news texts offer space to debate the topic when there are proposals of that nature in the agenda. In the case of the opinionated section, there is more room to speculate about them, for example what happens in years 1994, 2005, and 2006, when an increase is observed only in the opinion section. It is possible that this is a sign of resistance by the newspaper to certain alterations to the institutional design of Brazilian democracy, but without discussions in the political arena that justified addressing the topic in the texts of the information section.

Next, we will present the data regarding the distribution of texts by thematic section. For the sake of clarity, we have opted to present only 10 thematic sections encompassing more items. When adding all
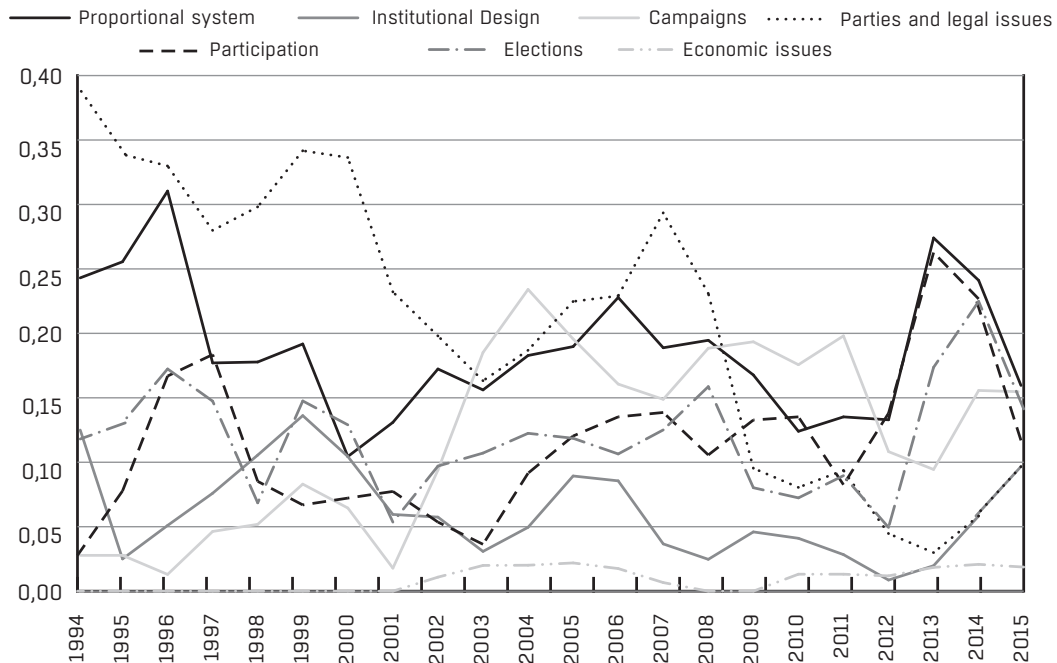
Figure 4. Moving averages of the axes of the opinion section

Source: Own elaboration.

the data, Brazil is the thematic section with the most texts (approximately 34% of the total). It is followed by Power, with 28%. Taking into account that both of those thematic sections are about politics (Power replaced Brazil), 62% of the texts were published there, which denotes its predominance among other thematic sections of the newspaper and the website. Opinion, which is composed by editorials and opinion articles, covers 18% of the texts, while Columns is responsible for 6% of them. 3% of the texts were found in Money, the website's economic thematic section, later replaced by Market. Finally, Reader's Panel has 2% of the texts and Market, Culture, and BBC add up to 1% of them[16].

Lastly, we will discuss the distribution of axes within the 10 most frequent thematic sections. It is noteworthy that the thematic section about politics dominates all the axes, when the results of Brazil and Power are added up. The axes "Proportional system", "Parties and legal issues," and "Campaigns" are responsible for more than 90% of the published texts in the thematic section about politics, indicating that they refer to debates relative to the political arena and its diverse proposals presented by its agents. However, some differences have been found when analyzing the other thematic areas.

"Institutional design" is the axis in which there is the least percentage of texts belonging to the thematic

sections about politics (approximately 70%). In it, as in "Economic issues" and in "Participation," there are nearly 10% of the texts that belong to Opinion, which indicates that the website really opened up space for speculations about such reforms when compared to other topics. The axes "Institutional design" and "Elections", at the same time, are the ones that appear the most in Reader's Panel, pointing out that there is an interest from the citizens (and the newspaper, which selects the contributions that will be published) in debating such topics.

DISCUSSION

The results presented in the section above allow us to affirm that hypothesis 1, which posits that political reform remains on the agenda of Folha of S. Paulo's website throughout the 23 years analyzed, is confirmed. It was observed that there has been discussion about some aspect of the topic during the entire period analyzed, even though there were moments in which the visibility increased compared to previous years.

In reality, the frequency graph underlines the cycles in the coverage about reform. When people begin discussing reform -or the topic is on the political

Thematic sections	Proportional system	Institutional design	Campaigns	Parties and legal issues	Participation	Elections	Economic issues	Total texts by thematic section[17]
Brazil	424	76	479	511	213	265	28	2056
Power	881	48	351	146	287	273	25	1700
Opinion	240	68	159	187	162	125	15	1062
Columns	28	17	35	24	59	48	6	337
Money	14	11	11	14	5	11	3	176
Reader's panel	8	11	9	8	9	34	0	119
Daily	8	0	4	0	16	1	0	83
Market	15	2	8	1	8	11	0	82
Culture	12	7	7	4	3	6	0	77
Bbc	8	3	7	9	7	12	0	67

Table 3. Quantity of texts by thematic section and distribution by thematic axis

Source: Own Elaboration.

agenda- the coverage increases in relation to previous years (for example, 1997, 2005, 2007). In 2013, the mere fact of presenting a proposal for a reform as a response to the protests was already enough to generate a peak in the quantity of texts that addressed the topic. Furthermore, the context must be considered, as the discussion is about a proposal generated by the Executive. In this way, even though it is the responsibility of the Legislative, the initiative of the Executive seemed to influence the volume of coverage, reinforcing the broader spotlight afforded to the actions of that branch, as it has already been discussed in the literature on political journalism (Azevedo, 2005; Azevedo & Chaia, 2008; Mont'Alverne, 2017; Noleto Filho, 2009).

The strength of the Executive to approve its proposals (Figueiredo & Limongi, 2001; Limongi, 2006) can also contribute to the increased coverage in that moment, since the reform proposed by the then president Dilma Rousseff could be perceived as the one that carried the largest chance to be implemented.

Furthermore, we also noted a larger volume of coverage in 2015, even more if it is compared to other reforms. It is necessary to take into account the

technological advances, which allow to increase the amount of available information and could be relevant in the increase in coverage registered, although the polemic nature of the reforms –and of the procedure by which they were implemented– could also be another factor to be considered[18].

Another aspect to consider in terms of the presence of the topic in the coverage is the importance of political reform in the political arena and for Brazilian society. It would not be reasonable for a company that follows the commercial model of Journalism – which implies, therefore, meeting the criteria of newsworthiness and the principles of objectivity and neutrality (Bucci, 2000; Tuchman, 1978)– to ignore the discussion about political reform, especially taking into consideration the possibility that it would have particular interests in its results.

Hypothesis 2, which advocates that the reform proposals linked to the proportional system are the ones which would remain on the agenda throughout the entire period analyzed, was partially confirmed. Despite the existing fluctuations, with peaks on specific periods, the axis "Proportional system" is consistently on the agenda of the website. Additionally,

it is the axis with the most total mentions. This matches the argument made by Nicolau (2017), that reform proposals relative to the proportional system appear on the political agenda of the last 20 years. In this sense, it is possible to speculate that the coverage about the topic is strongly linked to the discussions in the political arena. However, other axes such as "Parties and legal issues" and "Elections" appear in the coverage in a relatively constant manner throughout the period. Thus, the website does not concentrate visibility in terms of the agendas that refer to the "Proportional system".

Hypothesis 3, which states that there are significant differences between the agendas of the information content and the opinionated content, was partially confirmed. When we take into account the ratio between information content and opinionated content by axis, the agenda seems fairly similar. When taking into account the moving averages of the sections, however, we note different emphasis with respect to some of the axes. "Parties and legal issues" and "Institutional design" are more mobilized by the opinionated content, pointing to the fact that the website does address those topics, even if they are not included in the daily news agenda. However, other axes behave similarly between both sections.

The volume line of the coverage of opinion also behaves in a similar way to that of the information section, pointing to the fact that there does not seem to be anticipation of many agendas about political reform. This was something that could happen, taking into account the broader freedom of the opinion section to define its own content guidelines (Espinosa, 2003; Mont'Alverne & Marques, 2015). However, not even in periods without ongoing reforms is there more opinion content than information content.

More than a simple agenda of the publications and an attempt to influence the discussions, the opinionated section can also be a space to speculate about the proposals, present evaluations about them, and analyze their potential consequences. As far as the space for this type of text is reduced, it is possible that the coverage offered to readers will focus on immediate events, with superficial discussions about the proposals being discussed. The results even allow to point out that it is probable that changes of broader magnitude, such as those that refer to the means or system of government, will have more space within the opinionated section because of the obstacles of

debating them in institutional environments, thus remaining at a more speculative level.

Hypothesis 4, which states that the majority of the content analyzed was published in the website's thematic section about politics, was confirmed. The discussion concentrated in this thematic section places the political arena as responsible for the diverse proposals of reform. Additionally, it points to a tendency of the coverage to focus on *hard news*, without any significant speculations about the impact of the changes –especially in axes in which the coverage from this thematic section has a large presence, such as "Proportional system", "Parties and legal issues," and "Campaigns". Furthermore, the role of the Judiciary Power in the process seems to produce little debate, even though it is also responsible for the alteration of diverse reference standards, particularly concerning the electoral process (Salgado & Silva, 2017).

Beyond the answers to the hypotheses proposed by this study, the diagnostic of the coverage cycles can indicate the existence of waves of coverage about political reform, with periods in which the topic is clearly perceived as of great interest for the media agenda, for society, and for political agents, followed by a drop in such interest in the subsequent stages. Although, unlike what was done by Gomes and Almada (2014), the study is not concerned with mapping the formation of news waves, the pattern shown by the frequencies and moving averages indicates that there are periods of visible increment in the volume of coverage offered to political reform, followed by the cooling of such interest –a space which will eventually be occupied by other more urgent topics, taking into account that visibility is a scarce resource. The waves can be observed even in relation to the axes of specific proposals.

The results also highlight that political reform is an enduring agenda. An indicator of how perennial is the agenda is the fact that, only a few years after the re-democratization of the country, alterations to the political and electoral system were already been discussed. This becomes evident when we consider that, since the beginning of the analyzed period, there is a recurrence of mentions to political reform –despite the differences in priorities already explained throughout the text.

CONCLUSION

The data explored throughout the article allow us to achieve two types of conclusions. Those can

be established both in relation to the agenda about political reform in the website's coverage, as well as to what refers to the distribution of the frequencies of the proposals throughout time, allowing us to identify which ones remain and which ones are left out of the agenda.

In regard to the first, among the most recurrent axes of proposals for reform are "Proportional system", "Campaign", and "Parties and legal issues". It is interesting to also note the later appearance, along with somewhat of a lack of visibility, of the axis "Economic issues". The more frequent proposals indicate a specific agenda of priorities considered by the coverage of the website Folha of S. Paulo throughout time, although other sets of proposals are also important. There is sporadic visibility of some topics, for example of the axes "Participation" and "Institutional design".

The second type of conclusions complements what was presented above. A large portion of the proposal axes mapped remain in the coverage throughout the entire period. That indicates that some topics compose the agenda of the website –and, probably, of the political arena– during the entire interval. This does not mean, however, that the coverage behaves in a static manner, because there are variations on the emphases throughout time.

Thus, there is some space for the renovation of the journalistic agenda about political reform. However, it is likely that it will have a strong relationship with the contextual discussions about the topic in the political arena –especially, when we take into account that the emphasis of the analyzed material is constituted by *hard news*. The increase and cooling off of the different agendas dealing with political reform points to a change in the priorities throughout the period of analysis, despite a lasting concern with the proportional system, with tools relative to the party system, and with issues related to electoral campaigns. Additionally, the site's agenda seems to prioritize incremental reforms instead of those of broader magnitude, as it is shown by the low frequency of texts classified under the "Institutional design" axis.

It becomes necessary to point out that mentions about reform proposals do not mean that those constitute an agenda of direct interest for the website,

particularly as it relates to the information content. Appearing in the news is no indication that the topic is considered a priority by the publication, due to the diverse criteria that guides journalistic activity. It is possible that the topic appears due to the movements of the political arena, which placed them in the agenda. But that does not imply that the website necessarily considers the matter as if it was its own agenda. When there are considerable differences between the topics covered in the information section and those addressed in the opinion section, the evidence of the newspapers' own agenda becomes stronger, something that was not completely observed in the current study. Even so, it is necessary to consider that addressing certain topics frequently means to give them a certain degree of importance, even if they are not within the main concerns of the company.

The data and the operationalization of the analysis do not allow to address the framings mobilized by the website, nor does the company position itself in favor or against the diverse proposals of political reform. However, the study does achieve discoveries that are relevant to the studies on this field, since they allow to determine what was –and continues to be– in the journalistic agenda when the topic of political reform is addressed.

Lastly, we must say that this study acknowledges the need to refine the tools of automatized content analysis, with the aim of allowing more sophisticated investigations, thus enabling the estimation of evaluations regarding the proposals of political reform –applying the framing analysis to discover from which perspectives the topic is addressed, for example.

Additionally, it is important to adopt a comparative perspective, considering other journalistic products, with the objective of understanding if the topics addressed remain the same and if there are significant differences in the pattern of coverage depending on the kind of publication. The comparison of the discussion about political reform to other Latin American countries could also prove itself advantageous, since the region has experienced different moments of political instability, which generates a spectrum of diverse proposals regarding how to solve the deficits frequently attributed to those democracies.

FOOTNOTES

1. The redemocratization of Brazil came with the ending of the civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985). In 1988 the country issued its new Constitution, which remains in place until today.

2. The mixed electoral system, also known as the German model, combines the proportional electoral formula, with votes on a list of candidates, with the majority, in which votes choose specific candidates.

3. "Slush fund" is the practice of keeping financial resources off of registration forms to defraud a tax audit. In the case of elections, it could consist of receiving campaign donations and not including them in the financial report provided to the Department of Justice. This practice is classified as a crime in Art. 1 of Law N° 8.137 (from 1990) and in article 350 of the Brazilian Electoral Code (Law N° 4737, from 1965).

4. The authors express gratitude to Rayza Sarmento for making the code available, which was, later, adapted to the objectives of this study.

5. Available at <https://www.crummy.com/software/BeautifulSoup/bs4/doc/>. Accessed on April 18, 2017.

6. Available at <http://pandas.pydata.org/pandas-docs/version/0.18.0/pandas.pdf>. Accessed on April 18, 2017.

7. Approximately 400 texts were excluded from the initial collection after the manual check.

8. Folha's website informs in its web address which section the topics belong to. Starting from that information, it is possible to note if they belong to the information or opinion sections. For example: we know that the sections Power and World are information; similarly, Reader's Panel and Editorials are opinionated.

9. This library allows for the quick and consistent manipulation of data frames and analogous objects. Available at <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/dplyr/dplyr.pdf>. Accesed on April 18, 2017.

10. This packet was utilized for the extraction of the data that composes the *corpus*. Available at <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/tm/tm.pdf>. Accesed on April 18, 2017.

11. The list of keywords used to map each of the axis is available and can be accessed by sending an email to the authors of this study.

12. In Brazil, the elections for president, senators, state governors, and state and federal representatives take place on the same date. With a two-year difference, the elections for mayors and municipal councilors occur. In the period analyzed there were elections in 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016.

13. Even though the axis "Institutional design" is also composed by the term "Republic", such term was not considered when the data were grouped, because that could generate a distorsion in their interpretation. The procedure was adopted because there is a significant amount of appearances of "Republic" in the material, but those are associated to positions (such as President of the Republic, for example), and not to the discussion about proposals of political reform, so much so that the frequency of other terms in that axis is considerably lower, indicating that its emphasis is not on the debate about forms of government.

14. Since there are texts in which there was no mention specific to any of the axes, the sum of them is lower than the amount of texts in the *corpus*.

15. The exclusion of year 2016 does not harm the analysis of the data, because our interest is to notice the movements in the coverage throughout the period – which is achieved in the figures presented.

16. Since the same text can be categorized in more than one axis, the sum of them may exceed the total number of texts presented in Table 1.

17. The total refers to the sum of texts that belong to each thematic section. Such values do not match the totals of the axes, because it is possible that there are texts that address more than one axis and others that do not address any specific axis.

18. The political reform of 2015, also known as mini-reform, led by the then president of the House of Representatives Eduardo Cunha, created Law 13165, of 2015, which has changed aspects of the Electoral Code. The process was permeated by questions related to the procedure of the discussion and voting and by the controversies regarding the proposals defended by the Director's Table of the House. More information about the process is available at http://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2015-06/entenda-os-principais-pontos-da-reforma-politica> and at <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/noticias/2014/11/141103_reforma_politica_polemicas_jf_rm>. Accessed on August 31, 2018.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Camila Mont'Alverne, Ph.D. candidate in Political Science from the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), Brazil, and member of the Communication, Politics, and Technology Research Group (PONTE). Master's in Communication from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC). She holds a Capes scholarship and her research investigates topics related to political journalism, media, and elections and Internet and Politics. She has published recently about these topics in Journalism, Brazilian Political Science Review, Brazilian Journalism Research and The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies (Forthcoming).

Victor Hausen, Social Science student with emphasis in Political Science from the Universidad Federal de Paraná (UFPR), and programmer. His interests are in political behavior, and in how the application of network science, processing of natural language (NLP), computational vision (CV) and machine learning can help to understand social phenomena.

Pedro Henrique Leite, Social Science student with emphasis in Political Science from the Universidad Federal de Paraná. Member of the Communication, Politics, and Technology Research Group (PONTE). His research interests are in the area of politics, technology, political communication, and digital democracy.