



# OBSERVATÓRIO DAS DESIGUALDADES

**BULLETIN No. 10**

**Politics,  
participation,  
inequality, and  
what we can do  
about it**



# Politics, participation, inequality, and what can we do about it

## Introduction

We have stressed throughout our bulletins that social inequalities are not the result of chance nor a fatality about which we could do nothing. On the contrary, the trajectories of different countries and the same country – including Brazil – over time show that the intensity of inequalities, the ways in which they manifest themselves, and their behavior throughout history are a consequence of the collective choices that societies make. These choices express, on the one hand, the relations, distribution, and resources of power of different groups in society and, on the other hand, contribute to shaping, sedimenting, or modifying these same relations. And when we discuss power, influence, conflicts, and the collective choices that a society makes, we necessarily refer to the nuisance of the elephant in the room of debates about inequality and its tackling: politics.

It is within the scope of policy and political institutions that societies decide not only the rules and norms of conviviality but also objectives that citizens will share, what they deem desirable, undesirable, or unacceptable, and what should or should not be guaranteed to all citizens. And also how to organize the collective effort to produce well-being and material prosperity and how the fruits of this collective effort will be shared among citizens. This implies recognizing that, in an unequal society such as ours, it is necessary to politicize inequality, i.e., to make it a problem for the whole society, arguing that the so iniquitous appropriation of the results of the work of an entire collectivity is unfair and inefficient and, therefore, it is necessary to change how wealth, opportunities, and well-being are

produced and shared in this society.

It is this theme – the complex relations between inequality and politics – that this bulletin will address. Firstly, we will show here that political participation matters for inequality: the more extensive and widespread the social organization and participation of society – especially workers, the poor, and marginalized groups – in political mobilization and political and electoral processes, the lower the inequality in this country. However, on the other hand, we will also show that in very unequal societies such as the Brazilian, social inequality tends to also translate into political inequality, to the detriment of the ability of the most vulnerable to be present and to have a voice in political decisions. When this happens very intensely, we have a vicious cycle: social inequality turns into political inequality, which contributes to the reproduction of social inequality. Finally, we will show that there are instruments – rules, electoral systems – that can contribute to reducing or widening political inequality.

## Democracy and political equality

Political inequality only becomes a problem when we keep in mind that what is fair is political equality, i.e., when we consider that all those who will be subjected to the decisions – laws, norms, taxes, budgets, priorities – established by a collectivity should have the same right to participate in the process that leads to these decisions. This assumption is actually very recent in human history. In monarchical societies, for example, status differences – being noble or commoner – corresponded to an institutionalized political inequality: the nobility or royalty held the privileged or exclusive right to have a political voice, even in the decisions that would affect the commoners and to which they would have to submit. The same occurs in caste societies. Even in countries that adopted representative systems, the legal recognition of political equality, i.e., of the right of everyone to participate equally in collective decisions, is relatively recent: in slave societies, such as the United States and Brazil, until recently, enslaved people did not have any rights; in most countries, there was the census vote (only those people with income and property above a particular value had political rights) until the beginning of the twentieth century, and the recognition of the right of women to voice and vote only took place in the mid-twentieth century in most countries.

Therefore, addressing the topic of political (in)equality inevitably leads us to the debate on democracy. We may state that this is the possible institutional translation of the principle of political equality. This fact is unthinkable in dictatorial, aristocratic, or oligarchic regimes (DAHL, 1997). Thinking and claiming political equality is only possible in democracies, as they ensure the institutional conditions for a more significant number of individuals/citizens to organize and present their demands for incorporation into the governmental agenda, which is not provided for in other political systems or regimes (PEREIRA, 2014).

In general terms, in a democracy, taking as a reference the institutions proposed by Dahl (2012), there are, on the one hand, those that concern the attributes of the State and the formation of governments and power positions, such as periodic elections, elected persons with temporary mandates, and possibilities for those elected to represent the various social groups with more considerable reliability. On the other hand, there are the attributes of society, related to the freedom and organizational capacity of the various groups and social strata to be represented in State agencies and, thus, put their demands on the government agenda.

Thus, if democratic institutions move toward political equality, the opposite direction defines what inequality would be. From this point of view, political inequality may be defined both by elements internal to the state institutions and by limitations on the organization and political participation of specific groups, censorship, and limits to free information and the plural debate of individuals and social groups. And also by social elements related to socioeconomic inequalities, the marginalization of cultural expressions of specific social groups, racism, machismo, homophobia, and xenophobia, among others. Therefore, institutional and formal restrictions resulting from legislations that limit or bias the broad participation of individuals and social actors, combined with a society that favors some groups to the detriment of others, configure or define what may be called political inequality. In this sense, political inequality may be understood as unequal patterns of influence on the governance structures that define the public policy agenda in a particular territory (CORTES & DUBROW, 2013).

In the Brazilian case, Articles 5 and 14 of the Federal Constitution of 1988 guarantee a set of political rights that formally equalize individuals born here. The constitutional text guarantees, at the same time, the right of organization, demonstration, participation, and to vote and be voted to all Brazilians, excluding, in some of them, those under 16 years of age.

This is a significant and insufficient achievement since, historically, political rights were unequally distributed and left out, at times, those who did not have income and, later, the illiterate (CARVALHO, 2002). Despite this recent achievement, there is an accumulated liability of political inequality reflected in the representations of certain strata and social groups in the deliberative arenas of the country that affect the balance and stability of Brazilian democracy (ALENCAR et al., 2013; CAMPOS & MACHADO, 2015; ARAÚJO, 2016).

This scenario raises questions related to the topic that, despite being debated, remain open and still provoke discussions. These include the following: How does political inequality affect social inequality? How does political inequality manifest itself? How is it constituted, i.e., what are the mechanisms that generate political inequality? Is there a relationship between socioeconomic inequality and political inequality? What are its most visible effects? Is there a way to tackle it?

It is intended here to debate the problem of political inequality because democracy and redistributive public policies appear as antidotes to the concentrator and centralizing process of the market, which acts as an amplifier of socioeconomic inequalities. The market can create – and, under certain conditions, effectively does – efficiency; however, it is only within the scope of politics that justice may be sought and established. The questions proposed previously have provoked heated discussions on the representation of interests and different social groups in the deliberative spaces of the State, on participation and decision-making arenas, and, mainly, on democracy. However, this text is intended to provoke readers and show that this is an open topic, especially considering recent political events in the country.

## **Politics and participation make a difference**

A democratic society is not one in which there are no conflicts but one in which they are made explicit, processed, and decided peacefully within the context of political institutions and the rules of the game. Democracy is a system of government aimed at the peaceful resolution of conflicts, not at hiding them. In modern and heterogeneous societies, there is a considerable diversity of identities, values, goals, and worldviews that are associated with material and symbolic interests also very distinct and often contradictory. We use the term interest here not in the pejorative sense of individual, selfish, or petty interests. The interests that move the different groups or people may be altruistic, directed to the well-being of a specific group, to defend particular rights, reduce inequality, or protect the environment, etc. But they may also be material interests or the search for benefits for individuals, a group, or a corporation. Or, as in most cases, a mixture of interests of varied natures.

The fact is that, whether the interests are selfish or altruistic, material or not, the different groups, movements, or parties will develop strategies to render them viable. In any society in which there is freedom of expression, organization, and the minimum existence of democratic freedoms, the different groups will tend to organize themselves to assert their interests, often conflicting ones. Acknowledging the legitimacy of positions different from or even antagonistic to ours, as well as that of our interlocutors – or even opponents – is one of the foundations of democratic coexistence.

And then we return to the confrontational nature of democracy. Consensus is not always possible, and persuasion has to be combined with other strategies such as negotiation, pressure, alliances, or simply majority rule while respecting the rights of minorities. And this has implications for

us to start discussing public policy. For all public policy is eminently political. In other words, every social policy or project tends to change the social situation of those groups or regions it concerns. Therefore, it is very likely that any public policy will benefit specific groups and sectors more and harm others or benefit them less.

If public policies impact the distribution of goods and resources in society – thus altering the levels of social inequality – and if they originate from clashes in the political arena, inequality of political power will surely also affect social inequality. To illustrate this issue, we may use as an example the impact of the association of workers in unions for a more equitable distribution of compensation for labor. A study by Florence Jaumotte and Carolina Buitron (2015) analyzed the effect of unionization density on income inequality in several countries, controlling for other possible influencing factors.

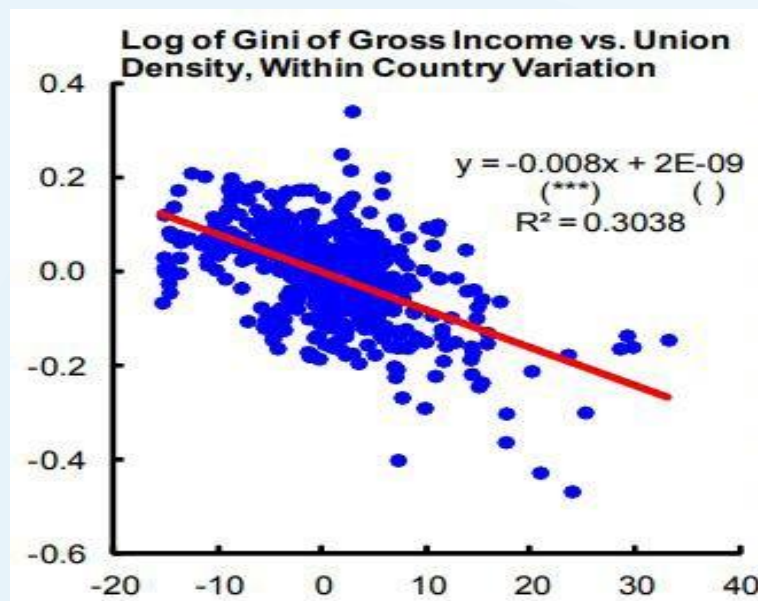
One of the results found may be visualized in Chart 1, the vertical axis of which contains the values of the Gini Index of the countries; the higher the Gini Index,

the greater the income inequality in that country. In turn, the horizontal axis represents union density. Thus, it is possible to observe that the higher the union density, the lower the Gini Index, i.e., the lower the income inequality of that country.

The authors pointed out that solid unions play an essential role in determining redistributive policies, as evidenced by their contributions to achieving fundamental social and labor rights. And they also influence workers' wage earnings and the wage differences between directors and workers in the manufacturing, commercial, and service sectors.

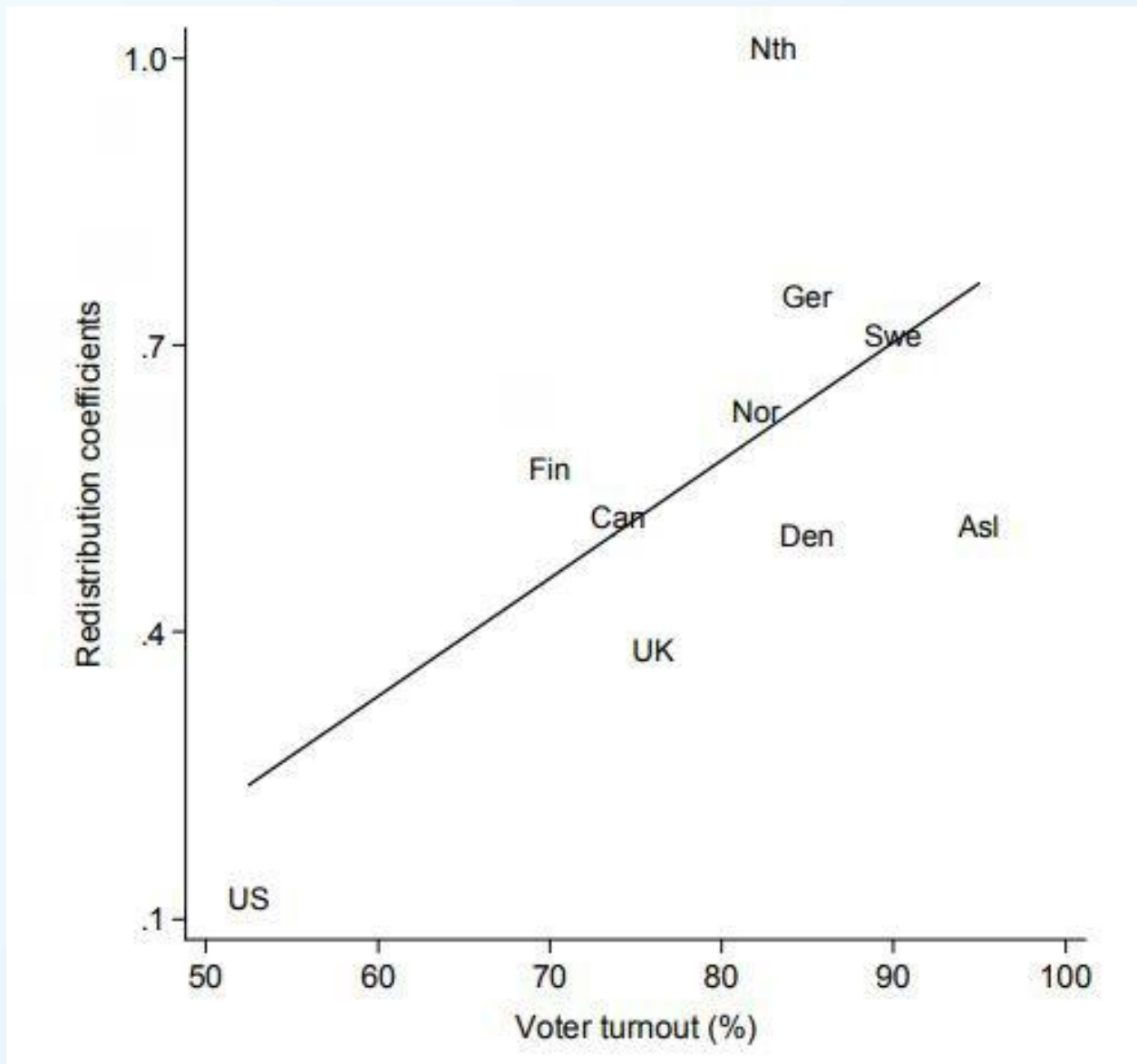
Similarly, more strictly political participation also strongly influences inequality. The more considerable the participation of citizens in political and electoral processes, the more weight the demands tend to have for public policies to function as a counterpoint to trends that concentrate income, wealth, and market opportunities. Chart 2, from a study by Lane Kenworthy and Jonas Pontusson, illustrates this point well.

**Chart 1: Gini Index × Trade union density in selected countries.**



**Source: JAUMOTTE and BUITRON**

**Chart 2: Level of redistribution of governments × proportion of voters**



**Source: KENWOORTHY and PONTUSSON (2005).**

It compares, for some advanced economies, the relationship between electoral turnout (i.e., the proportion of voters who actually turn up to vote) and the level of government redistribution (i.e., whether and how much governments proportionally tax the rich more and whether and how much their actions benefit the poor more).

The chart makes it clear that in those countries where citizens participate more in political and electoral processes, governments tend to be more redistributive.

Therefore, what is demonstrated is that inequalities in access to power resources significantly impact the levels of social inequality in a country. In other words, combating political inequality is very important for combating social inequality. In the next section, we will examine how political inequality manifests in Brazil.

## A portrait of Brazilian political inequality

So far, we have seen that politics is closely linked to the idea of "power", which, in turn, involves relations of domination and subordination among different groups of society, the conflicts of interest, and the possession of the means that allow wills to be exercised and specific goals to be achieved. We have also seen that, in a democracy, it is assumed that all citizens are equal in their rights and opportunities to participate in collective decisions. Such participation may occur through associations, unions, parties, demonstrations, and even individually, for example, through voting. Arriving at the main focus of this bulletin, we state that the political power of influence and decision-making is not distributed equally among citizens, which in turn generates impacts on social inequality. Before we understand the mechanisms that produce political inequality, we will examine two of its manifestations in Brazilian society: the first related to the occupation of elective offices and the second related to the forms of social participation in the political arena.

### 4.1. Inequality in elective offices

To demonstrate the inequality of representativeness of different social groups in elective offices, we will analyze the profile of candidates elected to the Legislative Branch in the federal scope, the state of Minas Gerais, and the city of Belo Horizonte from the records of race, gender, and income<sup>1</sup>. The following charts are based on

<sup>1</sup> *Studies on representation inequalities within the Brazilian Congress were carried out by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation in 2019. Among the various findings and confirmations of other case studies, it is worth highlighting the report on the presence of women and black people in the Brazilian parliament from 1982 until this last legislature. In this sense, the study stated: "Concerning the presence of women in Parliament, it should be noted that it has been increasing in recent decades, especially after the re-democratization process. In 1982, there were only five federal deputies out of a total of 479 seats (1% of the seats), rising to 45*

the results of the elections of 2016 (for the Belo Horizonte City Council) and 2018 (for the Brazilian Congress and the State Legislature of Minas Gerais). In the composition of the Federal Chamber of Deputies, 77 women were elected – 15% of the seats, which represents an advance, albeit timid, compared to the previous legislature, in which women represented 10% of the House. In the Senate, the women's caucus remained with 13 members of parliament, seven of whom were elected in 2018, and six serving the term that started in 2014 (Chart 3). In 20 states, no woman was elected senator, and, in three of them, there were no women candidates at all.

When examining at the cutout by race, in the Chamber, of the 513 federal deputies, 385 declared themselves white (75%), 104 brown (20.2%), 21 black (4.09%), 2 yellow (0.38%), and 1 indigenous (0.2%). In the Senate, the scenario was even more unequal: among the 81 senators, 67 were white (82.71%), 11 were brown (13.58%), and 3 were black (3.7%). Chart 4 shows the underrepresentation of black and brown people in Congress relative to the total population.

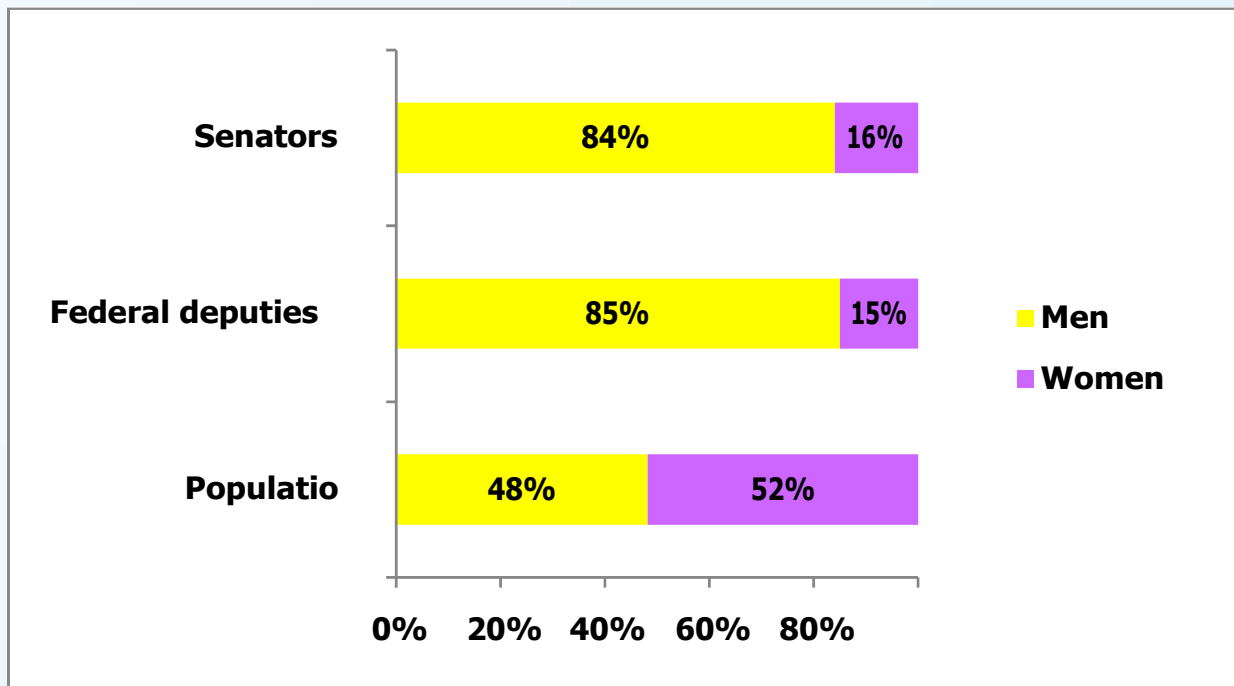
According to the income criterion, the average property declared by a member of congress to the Electoral Court System was R\$ 3.6 million. In the Chamber of Deputies, 47% of those elected were millionaires; in the Senate, almost 70% were at this level, placing them in the wealthiest 0.1% of the population (Chart 5).

The scenario of inequalities is repeated in the State Legislature of Minas Gerais and in the Belo Horizonte City Council in the last

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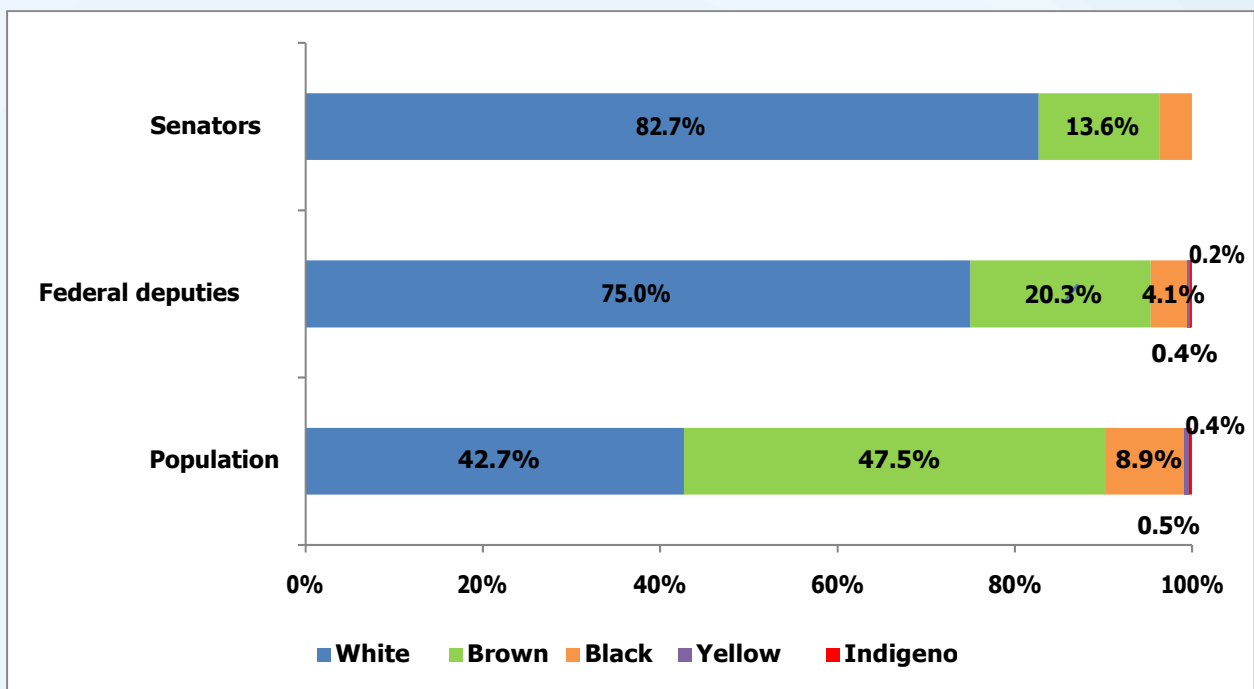
*female deputies in 513 seats (8.8%) in 2010, and reaching the historical record of 51 deputies in 2014, equivalent to 9.9% of female seats in the Chamber. In 2018, the peak of women's representation in politics was reached, with the election of 77 female federal deputies, totalizing 15% of seats in the Chamber. The cutout of race, however, shows that there is still an inequality that does not concern gender alone. In the current legislature, black women represent only 2.5% (13 elected) of the total elected, while white women are 12.28% (63 elected), black men are 22.02% (113 elected), and white men are 62.57% (321 elected)" (BARBIERE & RAMOS, 2019, p. 22).*

**Chart 3: Composition of the Brazilian Congress by gender from the 2018 election results.**



*Source: Data from the Superior Electoral Court and Pnad Contínua 2019.*

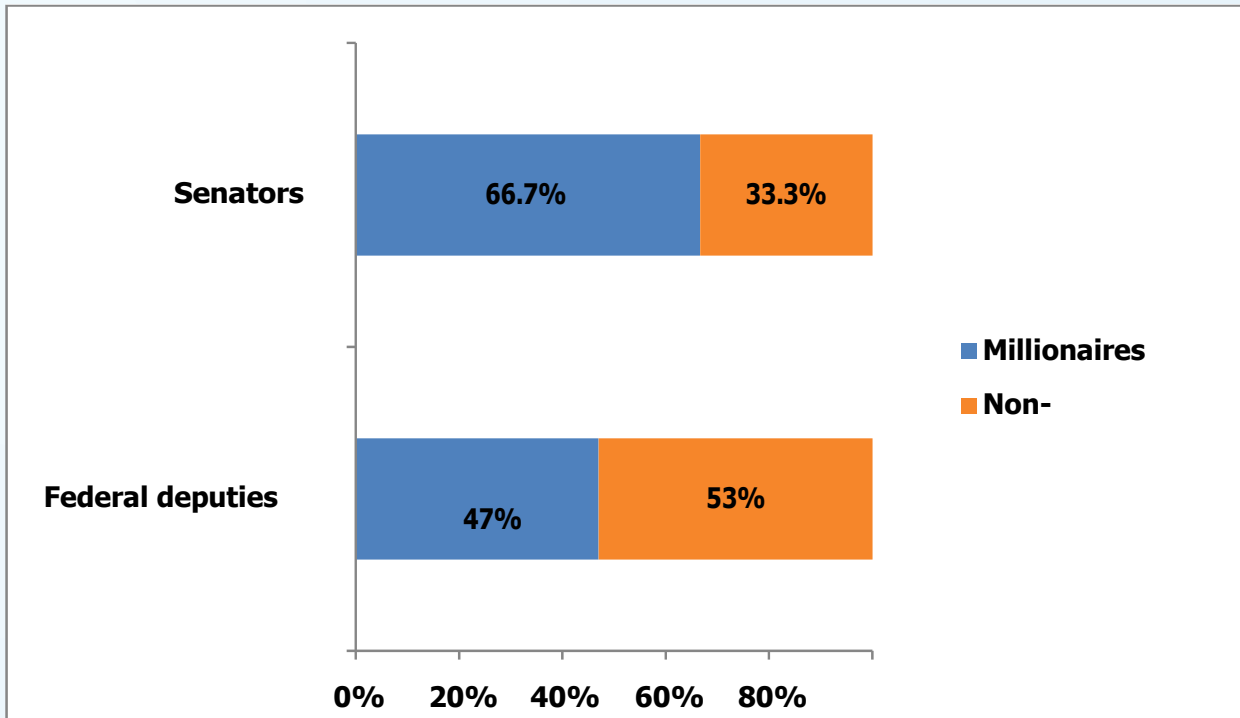
**Chart 4: Composition of the Brazilian Congress by race from the election results of 2018.**



*Source: Data from the Superior Electoral Court and Pnad*



**Chart 5: Composition of Congress by declared patrimony, from the result of the 2018 elections.**

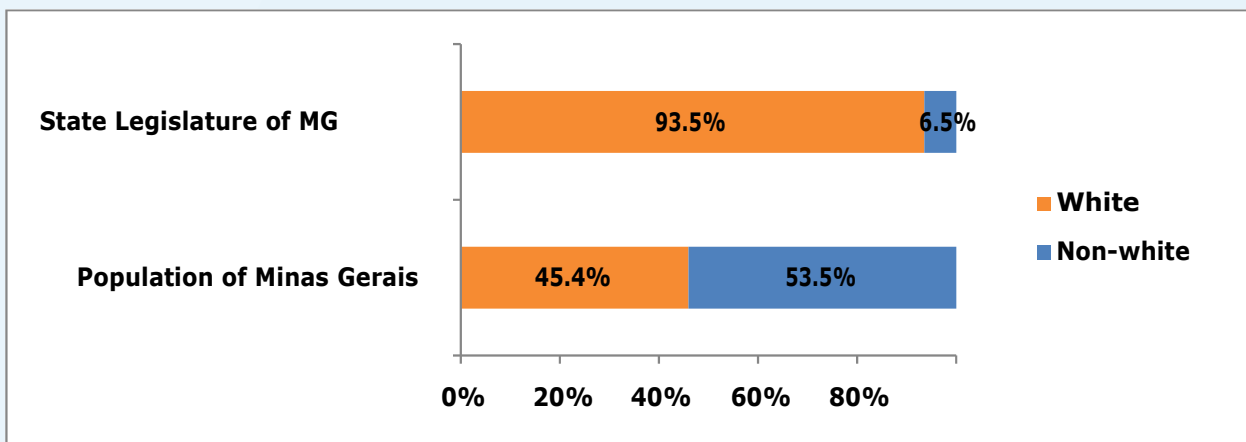


Source: Superior Electoral Court.

legislature. The data show that the presence of non-white people and women is almost residual. Basically, both houses are made up of white men. Chart 6 shows that, in the State Legislature, only 6.5% of those elected in 2018 were not white (the percentage in the Minas Gerais population was 53.5%), and Chart 7 shows that only 12.9% were women (which represented 50.9% of the Minas Gerais population).

At the municipal level, the inequality is even more significant, as per Charts 8 and 9: only 4.9% of the city councilors elected in 2016 were not white (52% in the Belo Horizonte population), and only 9.8% were women (53.2% in the Belo Horizonte population).

**Chart 6: Composition by skin color/race of the State Legislature of MG as of the 2018 elections and that of the population of Minas Gerais.**

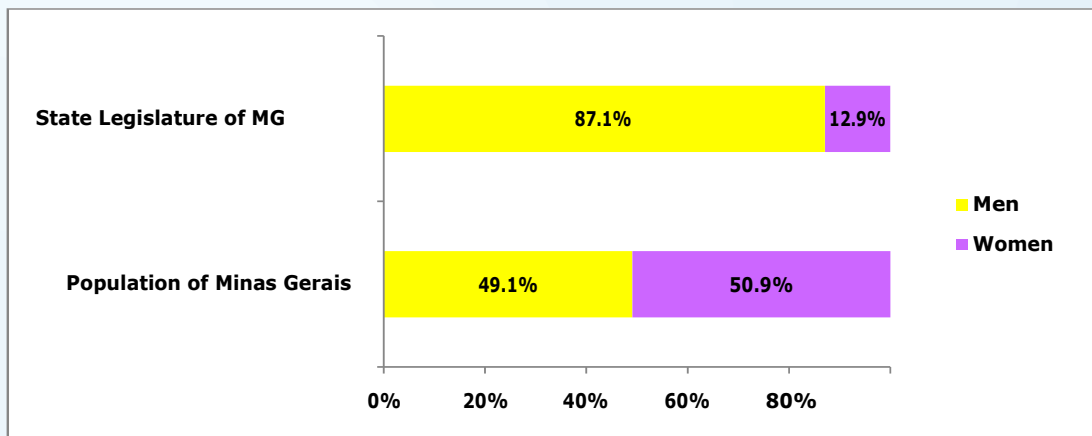


Source: IBGE – 2010 Census; TRE-MG – State Legislature of MG

Certainly, political participation is not restricted to elective offices; however, the analysis of the Legislative Branch in the three spheres – federal, state, and municipal – may serve as an indication of the size of the political inequality in Brazil, which is also repeated in other participatory spaces. One caveat is that the presence of a member of parliament or any other occupant of an elective office belonging to a particular social

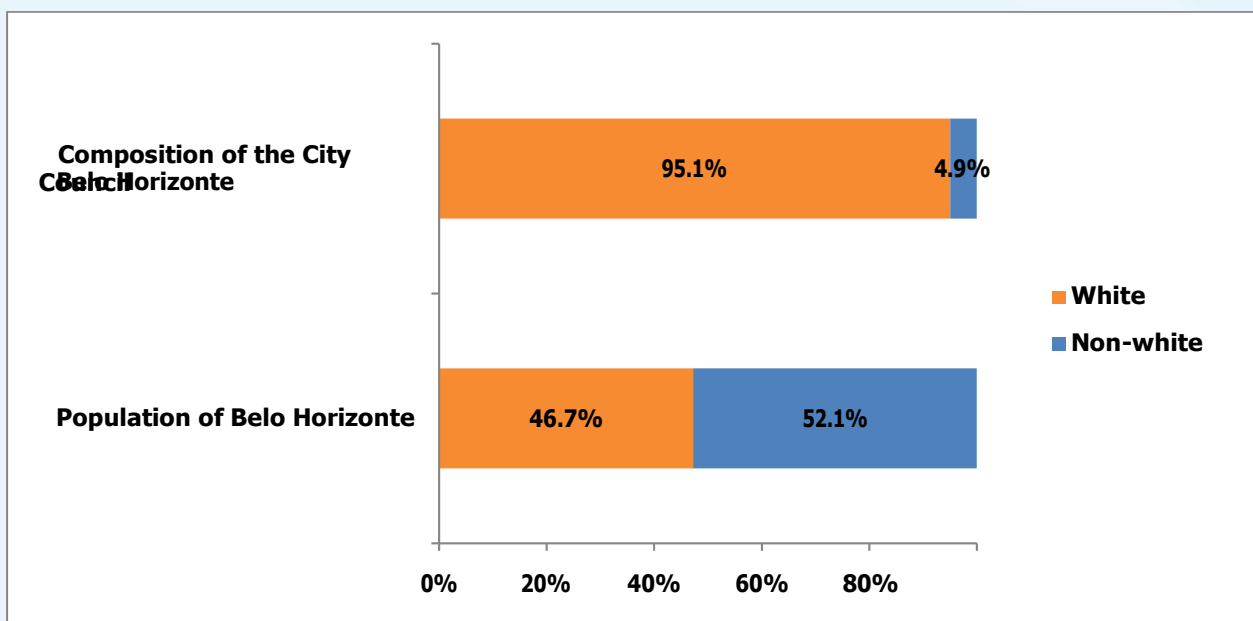
group – black people, women, youths – does not necessarily mean the defense of progressive agendas in favor of the social group to which they belong. Nor that this is an important dimension in the identity of those who assume elective offices, nor that their political activity is guided by this belonging. The historical and current composition of governments and representative bodies is prodigal in cases of heterosexuals who support

**Chart 7: Composition by gender of the State Legislature of MG as of the 2018 elections and that of the population of Minas Gerais.**



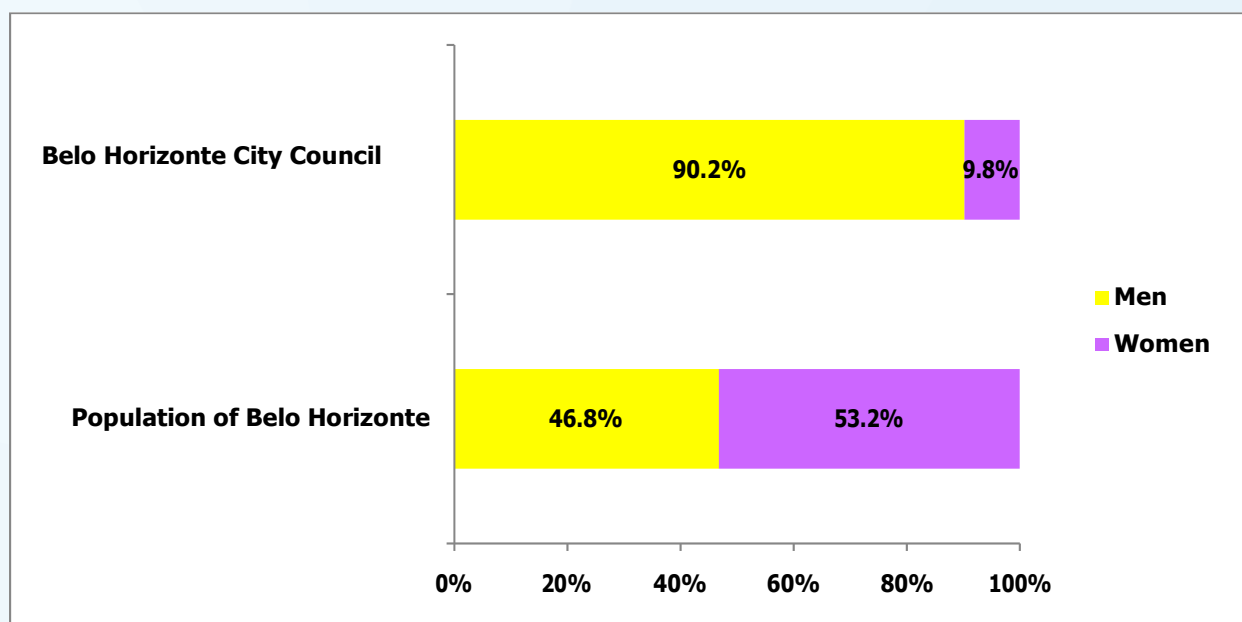
Source: IBGE – 2010 Census; TRE-MG – State Legislature of MG

**Chart 8: Composition by gender of the Belo Horizonte City Council as of the 2016 elections and the population of Minas Gerais.**



Source: IBGE – 2010 Census; TRE-MG – City Council of BH.

**Chart 9: Composition by gender of the Belo Horizonte City Council as of the 2016 elections and the population of Minas Gerais.**



**Source: IBGE – 2010 Census; TRE-MG – Belo Horizonte City Council.**

LGBTQ+ rights, for example, as well as any opposing cases, such as senior citizens who approve measures that weaken and restrict the protection of old age.

However, although there is no exact correlation between a specific social, economic, or demographic characteristic and the agendas that will be defended, the importance of representativeness cannot be overlooked. Studies show that the identity of those who govern has a significant effect on the type of public policies that are implemented. For example, there are studies<sup>2</sup> that indicate that women in positions of power generally make more considerable investments in public goods that benefit the female public and that female representatives invest proportionately more in education and health than male governing authorities. Another important point of representativeness is that leaders belonging to certain minorities, such as women and

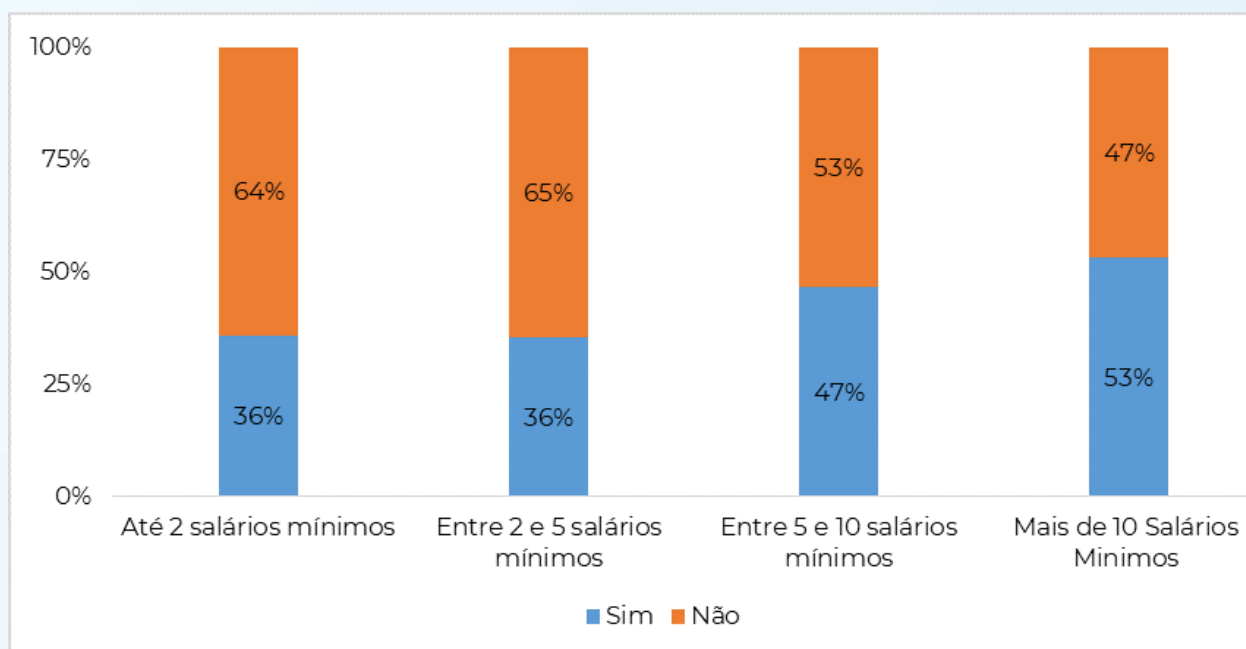
black people, impact the aspirations and choices of children and adolescents belonging to the same group, expanding the horizon of expectations of these youths (FERRAZ, 2018). In any case, regardless of the agendas defended and the debate on representation, these data demonstrate that, for certain groups, access to decision-making spaces is much more restricted, evidencing one of the mechanisms through which social inequality is transformed into political inequality.

#### **4.2. Inequality in social participation**

Political inequality also manifests in other forms of social participation, such as organizations and social movements – organized groups that mobilize actions aimed at a given political goal. In Brazil, the activity of such groups contributes to the advancement in the guarantee of minority rights, as well as in the struggle for housing, working conditions, and access to public services, among others. Chart 10 shows the participation in social organizations or movements by income groups, indicating the lowest participation among the poorest.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense: CHATTOPADHYAY, Raghendra; DUFLO, Esther. *Women as policy makers: evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India*. *Econometrica*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (September 2004). Available at: <https://economics.mit.edu/files/792>;

**Chart 10: Participation in social organization/movement by income (2018).**



Source: 2018 Brazilian Electoral Study. Our elaboration of the chart.

Among those who receive up to two times the minimum wage and those who receive from two to five times the minimum wage, 35% participated in some social organization/movement. In turn, among those who receive more than ten times the minimum wage, 53% participated in social organizations or movements.

The mechanisms that produce this inequality will be addressed in the next section. Here, we point out that the lower participation of these groups in social movements may also imply lower participation in public hearings, demonstrations, and votes held in legislative chambers and less possibility of exerting pressure on behalf of their interests.

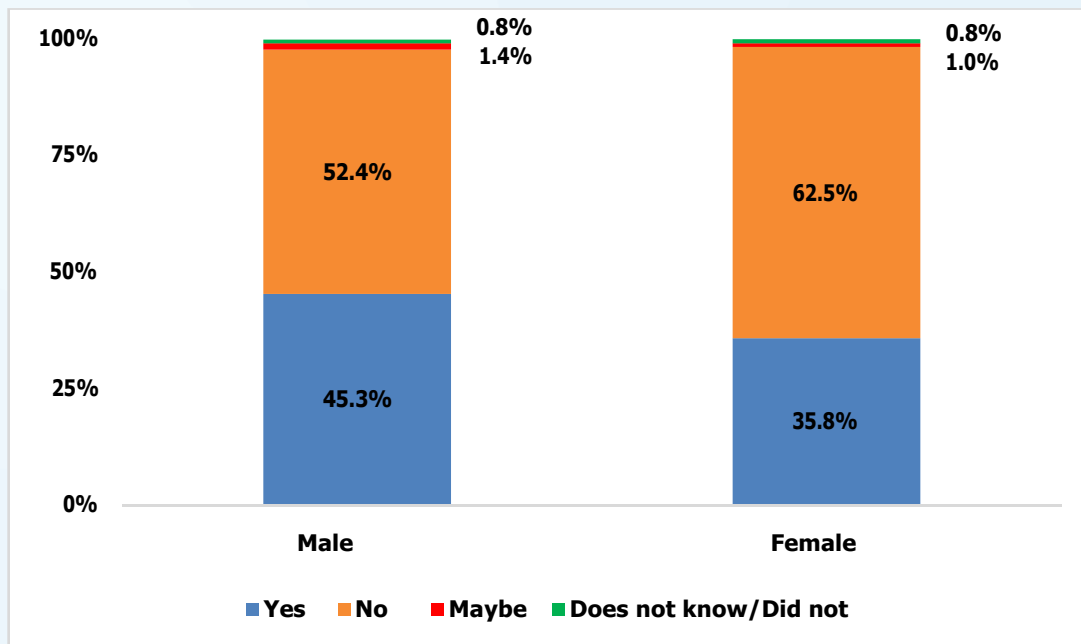
Another way to evaluate social participation is by the citizen's decision to vote or abstain from voting. Electoral participation is an important instrument so that the demands and needs of social actors are taken into account in decisions on public policies. Thus, unequal participation in elections also tends to lead to unequal consideration of the demands of each group by political representatives. A survey of international literature conducted by Gabriel

Casalecchi and Natália Aguiar (2016) showed the inequalities in the turnout rates of countries that adopt optional voting, primarily related to the education level, skin color, and income of voters: 10% difference between the most and least educated in Canada (HERRMANN DE OLIVEIRA, 1999); 18% between regular voters with undergraduate degrees and with at most a complete High School education in the United States (PewResearch Center, 2006); Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978 apud LIJPHART, 1997) demonstrated that turnout rates fell from 90%, with a low class bias, to variable rates from 66% to 87% among the least and most educated groups after the abolition of compulsory voting. Likewise, the proportional electoral turnout of black people is historically lower than that of white people in the United States (ARAÚJO, 2007; VERBA, SCHLOZMAN, & BRADY, 1995). In addition, there are important biases in voter turnout relative to voter income, as presented by Castillo (2009) for the highest and lowest income quintiles, with a difference in turnout of 25.9% in the United States, 23.2% in Finland, and 22.4% in Hungary.

Charts 11 and 12 address a possible scenario of non-mandatory voting in Brazil. Despite the proportion of negative responses being high in the

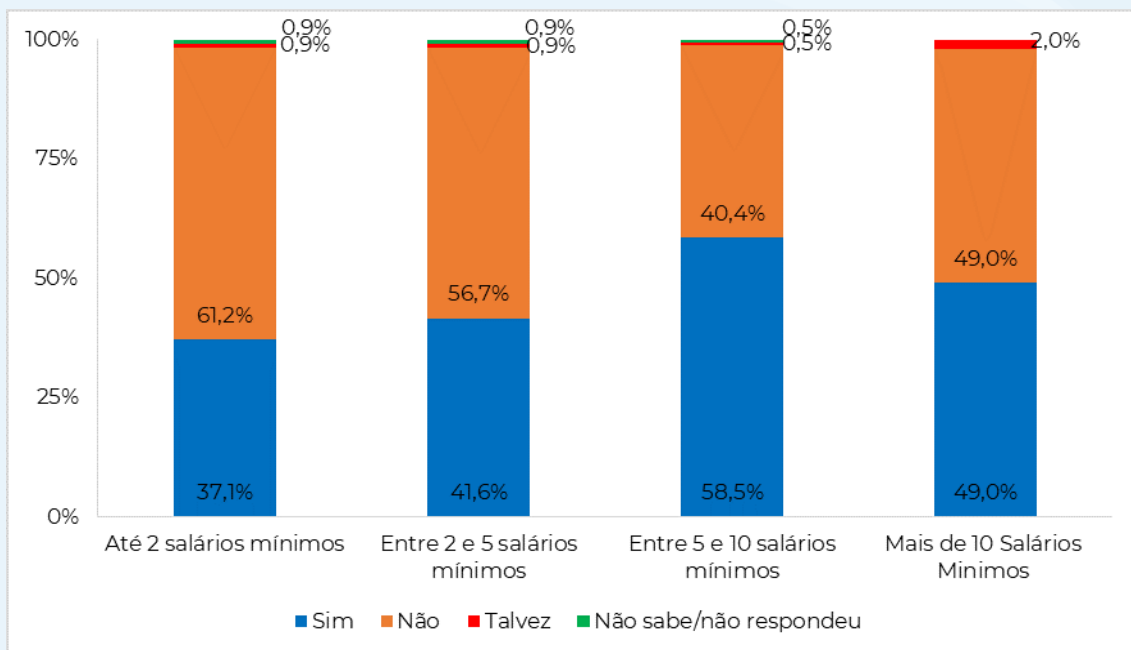
two groups analyzed, it is higher among women, as shown in Chart 11: 62% of the interviewees responded that they would not vote if voting were not

**Chart 11: In this year's elections, would you have gone to vote if voting were not mandatory? (2018, by gender)**



Source: 2018 Brazilian Electoral Study. Our elaboration of the chart.

**Chart 12: In this year's elections, would you have gone to vote if voting were not mandatory? (2018, by income)**



Source: 2018 Brazilian Electoral Study. Our elaboration of the chart.

mandatory in Brazil, against 52% of men. Also, the number of potential non-voters among the lowest-income portion of the population is higher, as Chart 12 shows.

These data allow some considerations on the possible implementation of optional voting in Brazil. As Gabriel Casalecchi and Natália Aguiar (2016) pointed out, the fact that the most marginalized groups are those that historically turnout for the elections the least raises concern about the non-visibility of such groups before the government, which would tend not to be as responsive to them as it is to the politically active segments of society (VERBA, SCHLOZMAN, & BRADY, 1995, 2001). Since the inclusion of the demands of interest of the popular strata in the political agenda occurred concomitantly with their inclusion in the participatory scenario, it is concerning that, being far from the process aimed at the choice of political representatives, these groups may also be far from the agenda of public policy formulation (ARAÚJO, 2007; HERRMANN DE OLIVEIRA, 1999; LIJPHART, 1997).

In addition to voter participation, another form of social participation in Brazil concerns the complex system of Public Policy Councils. These are participation channels that articulate representatives of the population and members of the state public power in practices related to the management and supervision of public policies. Councils could become important instruments to combat political inequality, as they allow the participation of new actors in the decision-making arena that, without the existence of this channel, would probably not be included. Still, it is observed that there is inequality in the profile of the councilors, as shown by a study by Alencar et al. (2013), although much lower than that found in the elective offices of the Legislative Branch.

The study found that 63% of national councilors were men, and only 37% were women. As for skin color/race, 66% of the councilors were white, and only 30%

were black. The exception is on account of the rights guarantee councils<sup>3</sup>, in which the representation of non-white people and women is more equivalent. Moreover, in all councils, there is a more considerable presence of councilors with high education levels, income above the Brazilian average, and residence in the Central-West Region of the country. With this, it is observed that, although in a much less significant way than in the Legislative Branch, the participation in these spaces may end up expressing more the demands of middle sections of the population who have more resources for political participation, such as the ability for a certain type of speech and time available for meetings.

Knowing what political inequality is and how it manifests itself in Brazil are two challenging tasks, both due to the subjective character of some manifestations and the absence of data in others. However, more than that, it is necessary to understand what are the mechanisms that allow it to be generated, maintained, and reproduced.

<sup>3</sup> The study mentioned above analyzed the following rights guarantee councils: CNCD/LGBT (fight against LGBT discrimination), CNDM (women's rights), CNPCT (traditional peoples and communities), CNPI (indigenous politics), and CNPIR (racial equality).

## **Mechanisms of production and reproduction of political inequality**

Evidently, understanding how political inequality is produced and reproduced is a complex task with several answers. Social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors need to act together and constantly for a considerable period for political inequality to occur, crystallize, and naturalize. Each of these factors contributes isolatedly but cannot be a sufficient cause of this phenomenon. In this section, for didactic purposes, the arguments are presented in the topics below, but it is important that we do not lose sight of the complexity and correlation among the causes of political inequality.

### **5.1. The late entry into the democratic game**

According to Dalton (2017), the more socioeconomically unequal a national state, the more difficulties and resistance the political elite has in including specific sectors, such as women and non-white and poor people, in the democratic game. This would happen because of the "fear" of the wealthier sectors that there be a more significant redistribution of the economic resources produced and those captured through taxes.

In Brazil, political inequality originates from how the Brazilian state assured political rights to the different groups and social strata. In this sense, for example, only with the Federal Constitution of 1988 was political citizenship extended to the illiterate, who previously had no right to vote. This restriction affected a significant portion of Brazilian society since the percentage of illiterate adults was significant: in 1991, for example, almost a fifth of Brazilians aged 15 years or older were illiterate, which excluded an important part of citizens from political participation. The prohibition for illiterate people to vote delayed the elaboration of public policies for the universalization of education because, without the right to vote,

the pressure to incorporate these policies into the government agenda was minor. After the Constitution of 1988, the right to vote of the illiterate was established but still with restrictions: firstly, while voting, in general, is mandatory, for the illiterate, it is optional; secondly, in the letter of the law, the illiterate can vote but cannot be voted, which represents the recognition of half of their political rights.

Regarding the political rights of Brazilian women, they were only equated with those of men in 1965. The right to vote, obtained in 1932, was a significant advance, but it did not imply political equality between genders since the Electoral Code enacted by Getúlio Vargas established that, for men 21 and 60 years old, voting was mandatory, and for senior citizens and women, it was voluntary. Also, most of the illiterates at that time were women, who, as already said, did not have the right to vote then. While the voluntary female vote prevailed (1932–1965), women enlisted in smaller numbers than men: the ratio is around one woman for every two enlisted men (LIMONGI et al., 2020).

The late expansion of political rights to these actors helps explain the relative "strangeness" that these historically excluded sectors have relative to political participation compared to the middle and wealthy strata of society and white men. However, more than 30 years after the enactment of the Federal Constitution of 1988, it is certain that other factors influence the perpetuation of Brazilian political inequality.

### **5.2. Economic inequality translates into political inequality**

Democracy presupposes the autonomy of the political actors who must have the material and symbolic means to establish fair disputes for access to the public policy decision-making centers. Thus, the inequality of classes or social strata is already indicative of political inequality. This is what the data already shown

in this bulletin indicate: white men, who make up the social group with the most socioeconomic resources, are also those who have the most political resources. On the other extreme, women and black people have fewer socioeconomic resources and much fewer political resources.

Some mechanisms operate by translating economic inequality into political inequality. First, low income requires individuals to occupy much of their time in remunerative activities, leaving little time for interest and participation in political activities. Second, the low education level, which affects black people more than white people, brings difficulties in using information and communication technologies to mobilize their peers and place their demands on society. Third, people with low incomes certainly have more difficulty financing parties and candidates and lobbying governments to introduce their agendas to other social sectors. The association of these factors aggravates the difficulty of organizing themselves into groups or unions, participating in demonstrations to demand policies and programs of their interests, and participating in electoral processes either as candidates or voters.

This situation is aggravated by the "emptying of meaning" of democracy, which has been reduced over time to a mere "competitive choice of governors" that resembles a market, i.e., a "political market" (MIGUEL, 2012, p. 106). In this sense, being a member of the classes that own the economic resources guarantees a significant advantage over the others, not only because there is the possession of a more considerable amount of material resources concentrated with these actors but also

<sup>4</sup> We address the socioeconomic disadvantages undergone by women in Brazilian society

– especially black women – in Bulletin No. 8 of this Observatory: ["Poverty, a feminine noun"](#).

<sup>5</sup> In turn, the socioeconomic disadvantages of black people were addressed in Bulletin No. 7 of this Observatory: ["Talking about racism: Some notes about racial inequalities in Brazil"](#).

because there is the mastery of other less tangible resources that affect behavior, communication skills, and the possibilities of being present in the arenas and instances of political decisions.

These less tangible resources are called symbolic capital, which may be expressed at the level of education, class origin, and gender of individuals. In this case, there is the presence and dissemination of the idea that particular social groups are better fit to make decisions and participate in political processes, which causes a hierarchy based on the merit of such groups, conquered over time due to their "work and sacrifice for the common good".

The Brazilian scenario shows that certain social groups and strata have an easier time organizing themselves and presenting their demands to society and the government than others. The damages to society and good governance of this unequal influence are generally also visible. The business community is a prominent case since even when it is not disputing elective offices in the government, it manages to ensure that its demands are always present in society and on the government agenda, even if harmful to most of the population.

Discussions on tax reform in Brazil exemplify this scenario. Although the regressiveness of the Brazilian tax system is notorious<sup>6</sup> – as it penalizes the poorest by favoring taxes on products and services (indirect taxes) –, there is the dissemination through the mass media that the Brazilian business community is suffocated with the amount of taxes paid and can no longer bear to pay them. Thus, the pyramid of those who proportionally pay the most taxes in the country is falsely reversed. The result is the lack of adherence of significant portions of society to a fairer tax reform, which is unlikely to happen, even if the majority of

<sup>6</sup> The regressiveness of the Brazilian tax system was addressed in Bulletin No. 6 of this Observatory: ["Inequality, taxation, and public spending"](#)



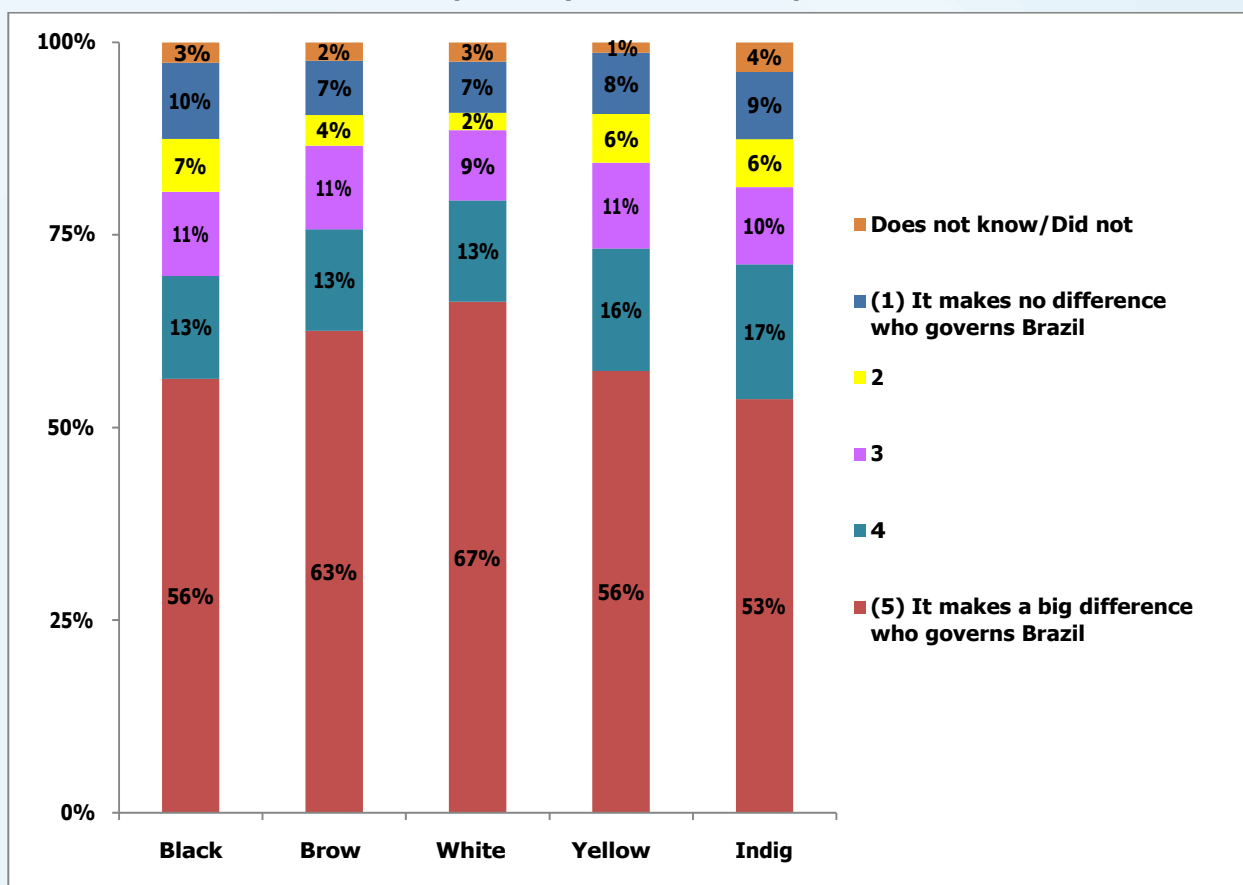
the population – wage earners, underemployed, or in a situation of poverty – is the biggest direct beneficiary.

On the other hand, women and black people face difficulties in their claims and in putting their demands on the government agenda without facing more intense conflicts (CAMPOS & MACHADO, 2015). Hence, gender agendas, such as the right to abortion, equal pay, and policies to combat domestic violence and femicide, are postponed. Also, racial policies, or those with a cutout in the race/skin color criterion, such as minimum income or health and education programs with an emphasis on respect for ethnic or color diversity, have only recently been implemented, still insufficiently so.

### 5.3 A cycle not at all virtuous

In the face of these difficulties for political participation, and with their demands less met by the State, two consequences may be pointed out regarding the relationship of the most socially marginalized groups with politics. The first refers to a greater discredit of these groups in the ability to carry out changes through the political route. Chart 13 illustrates this matter: upon asking respondents to assign a score from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that "it makes no difference who governs Brazil" and 5 that "it makes a big difference who governs Brazil", it was found that white people were the ones that most believed that it makes a difference who governs Brazil (67% answered 5, i.e., they believe that it makes a big difference who governs Brazil), followed by brown (63%) and black people (56%).

**Chart 13: I would like you to assign a score of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that "it makes no difference who governs Brazil", and 5 that "it makes a big difference who governs Brazil" (2018, by skin color/race).**



Source: 2018 Brazilian Electoral Study. Our elaboration of the chart.

The result is repeated for men relative to women and for the wealthiest relative to the poorest.

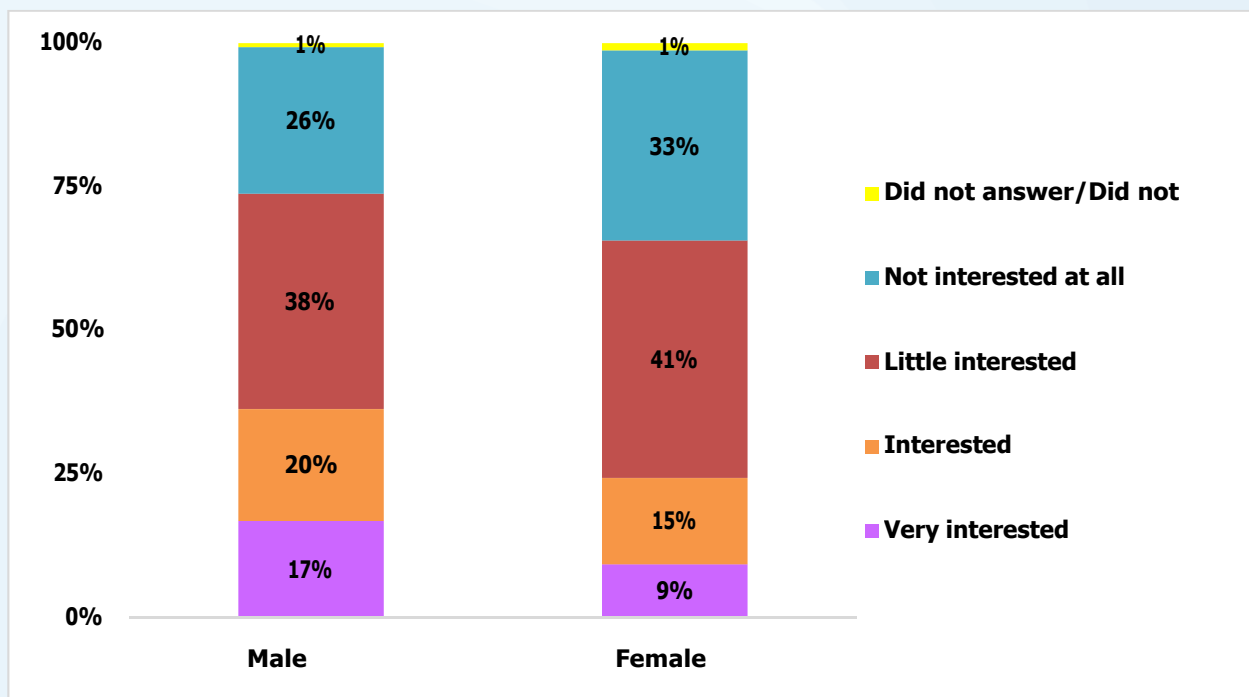
Thus, if the most socially disadvantaged groups believe less that elected representatives can make changes in the country, it is likely that they will also be less engaged in the electoral process and other forms of political participation.

The second consequence is closely related to disbelief in politics and refers precisely to the decrease in interest in political issues, illustrated in Charts 14 and 15. The charts show, respectively, the greater interest in politics of men than women and the greater interest of the members of the most favored economic classes relative to the poorest.

This situation feeds a cycle not at all virtuous of political inequality: the difficulties imposed by historical,

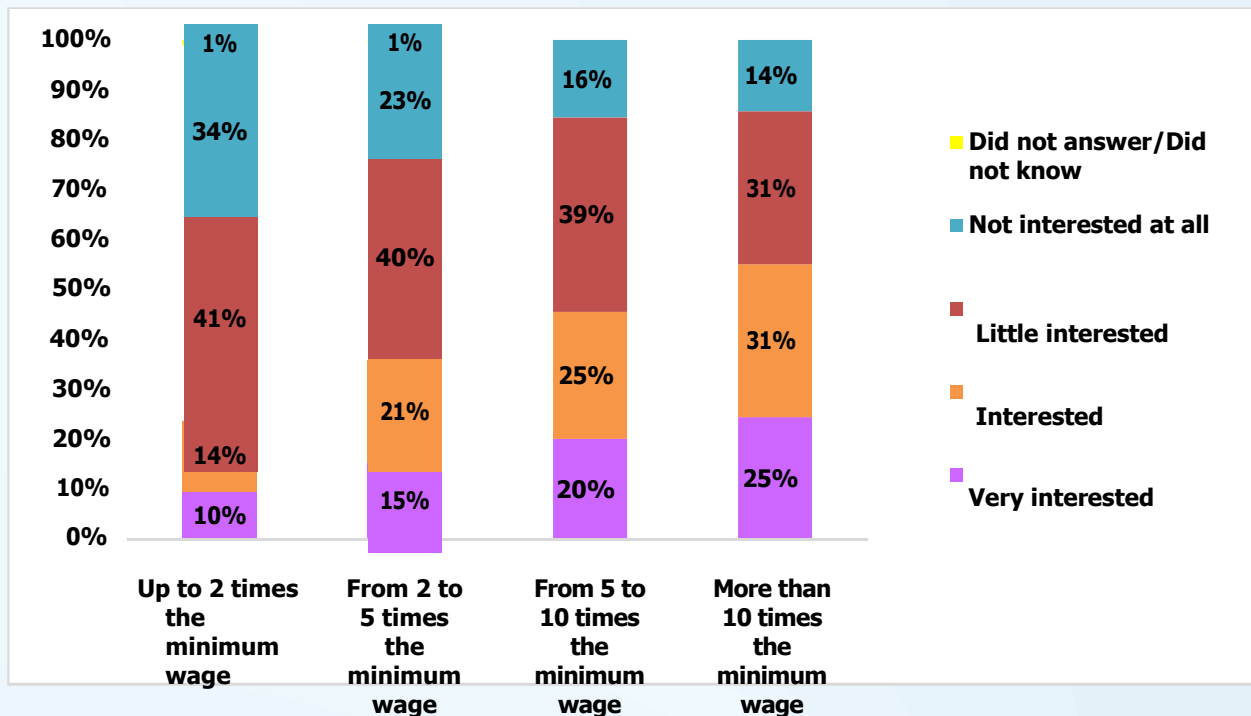
institutional, cultural, and economic factors generate the lower participation of specific groups in politics, which implies fewer demands of interest to such groups being debated in the public space and met by the State; with fewer public policies aimed at these groups, social inequality deepens even more and generates more and more discredit and less interest in political activity – factors that further reduce political participation. In summary, there is a cycle in which social inequality becomes political inequality, which contributes to the reproduction of social inequality. Multiple factors feed back, causing the widening gap that separates poor and wealthy, men and women, and white and non-white people in political disputes over State resources, aggravating violence and weakening democracies (DALTON, 2017; SCHÄFER & SCHWANDER, 2019).

**Chart 14: To what extent are you interested in politics? (2018, by gender)**



**Source: 2018 Brazilian Electoral Study. Our elaboration of the chart.**

**Chart 15: To what extent are you interested in politics? (2018, by income)**



*Source: 2018 Brazilian Electoral Study. Our elaboration of the chart.*

## Is it possible to reduce political inequality?

Is it possible to interrupt this vicious cycle of social and political inequality? It is clear that phenomena such as the relationships among politics, inequality, and democracy are of such complexity that we are only beginning to touch them in the limited space of this bulletin. It is also very evident that, when it comes to issues so deeply rooted in and structuring of society, there are no single alternatives that generate immediate or comprehensive results. And no legal or public policy measure replaces or dispenses with the slow and complex process of popular organization, the articulated effort to give voice to the excluded and marginalized, the public debate that points to the roots of the inequality and engages citizens to tackle it. These are tasks for generations.

There are, however, mechanisms, rules, and instruments that may contribute to the transformation of social and economic inequality into political inequality and others that act in the opposite direction, of which we will give just a few examples here.

The first is the very expansion of the spaces and forms of incorporation of citizens in political decisions beyond elections and mandates, which should be the floor, not the ceiling, of democratic participation. Brazil has made a significant contribution to this field of political innovation and incorporation. Initiatives such as participatory budgets and conferences and councils on public policies, among others, if they have not been able (no isolated measure will be) to eliminate the political inequality, have contributed to making less unequal not only the access to decisions and the formation of the public agenda, but also the recruitment and training of leaders.

Another important and controversial element is the voting model: optional or compulsory. There are normative arguments and empirical arguments from both sides that are legitimate. From the viewpoint of those who defend optional voting, the main argument is normative: if voting is a right, one cannot be obliged to vote. A right that one is obliged to exercise is no longer a right. But there are also empirical arguments, although they tend quite a bit to

elitism: if voting were optional, only the most "conscientious", "engaged", "prepared" people, or whatever term one prefers, would vote; the vote would lose in quantity but would win in quality. This last kind of argument harbors, as has been said, a dangerous elitism: who is in a position to judge and establish which votes and voters are better qualified or of better quality? The tendency will always be that those who already occupy positions of prestige and power present themselves as the parameter of virtue and "quality", reinforcing existing inequalities. In principle, if someone is seen as capable of complying with the laws (and of being punished if they do not comply with them), they must also have recognized their total capacity to participate in the process that produces these same laws.

From the point of view of those who defend mandatory voting, normative arguments begin by questioning the involved notion of democracy and rights. Some rights cannot be renounced: for example, one cannot reveal their vote (one may say that they voted for someone, but the secrecy of the vote itself cannot be broken) even if they want to, and this is a general protection, that is, for everyone, against intimidation, bribery, or blackmail on the voter; one cannot choose to become a slave to someone; one cannot choose that their child will not be vaccinated or not be educated.

However, more than that, voting is not "just" a right in the ordinary sense of the term. It is instead a delegation of trust and power from society to each one, as well as the recognition of the civic competence of citizens. It is also a delegation of power over others, so it also involves an obligation.

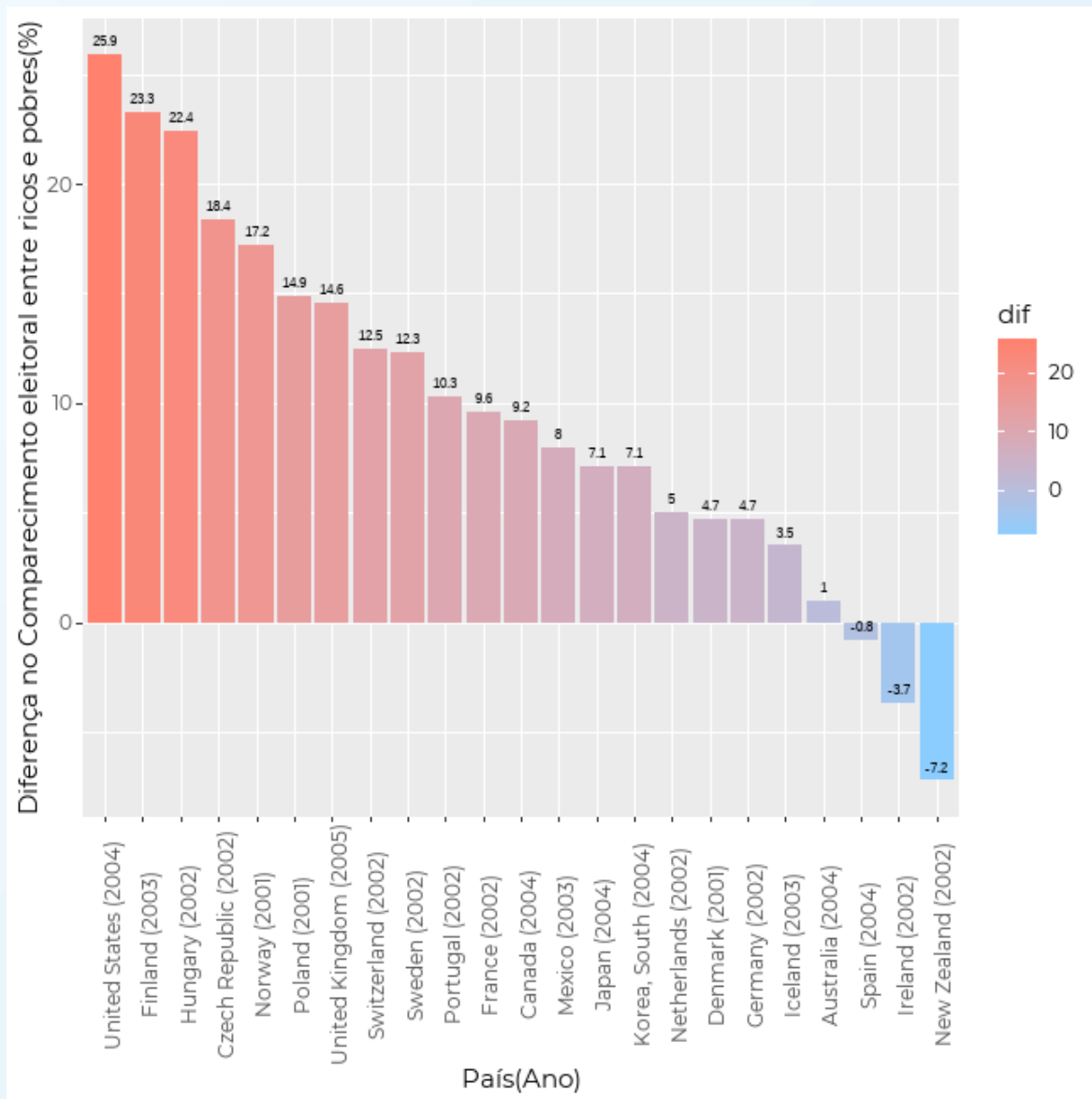
But from the point of view of interest here – inequality – the main argument is empirical and denounces the apparently libertarian but effectively iniquitous proposal for optional voting, mainly in a socially and politically unequal society like ours. Indeed, Seymour Lipseth<sup>á</sup> warned a few decades ago:

"When the voting rate is low, it almost always means that socially and economically disadvantaged groups are underrepresented in government. The combination of a low voting rate and a relative lack of organization among lower status groups means that such groups will be neglected by politicians who will be receptive to the desires of the most privileged, participatory, and organized strata" (1981).

Chart 16 expresses this reality for several countries in terms of income. It should also be borne in mind that these factors are combined with other more specific discrimination vectors in each country: ethnic, regional, gender-related, religious, etc. The data we have previously exposed about Brazil are also quite clear and reinforce Lipset's warning: the better positioned socially and economically, the greater the propensity to turnout for elections. Thus, the result of optional voting would be a mechanism to reinforce our political inequality. The more a particular social group is excluded from voting, the less likely it is to find political agencies willing to defend their interests. The mere fact that a representative knows that participation exists alters their way of proceeding in the public arena. Thus, differentiated voter participation of social groups causes different effects on the performance of government authorities.

Moreover, Renato Janine (2014) pointed out that the result desired by those who defend optional voting – i.e., that only a "qualified" minority turnout to vote – attacks democracy itself. According to the author, this thinking often masks the desire for the poorest not to vote. However, there is only democracy when everyone, which means a majority of poor citizens, has power. This means that it is the multitude of simple people who must decide the fates of the country and the world. Against the thinking that justifies optional voting, Janine also argued that the decision for the paths of the country is based on values, with management competencies not being

**Chart 16: Inequality of voter participation in the income dimension**



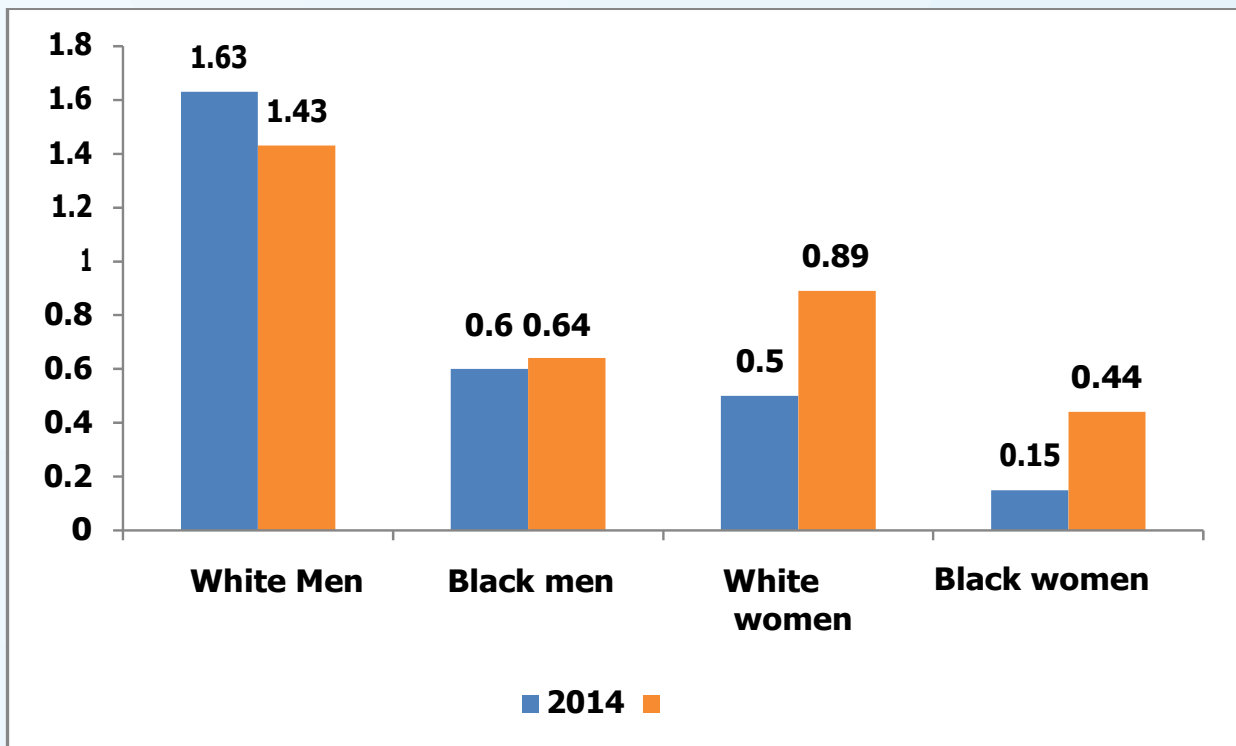
**Source: JAIME-CASTILLO, Antonio M. (2009).**

necessary for such – these competencies are essential only to the bureaucracy that will implement public policies.

The third example is campaign funding. For citizens to be able to choose with freedom and enlightenment, it is essential that there be electoral competition through campaigns in which candidacies seek to convince voters of their qualities and also that they point out the problems of other candidacies and reduce the cost for the voter to obtain such information. The more balanced and fairer this completion,

the more autonomy citizens will have when choosing. And campaigning has a cost that needs to be funded. How to do so? This is also a complex topic, because it involves varied issues and not just political inequality. Nor is there a formula in place that equally satisfies the criteria of representativeness, participation, renewal, and equity, which interests us here. However, the more expensive the campaigns are, the more they depend on private funding (people and companies), and the fewer limits are

**Chart 17: Ratio of the proportion of total income to the proportion of candidates by gender and race/skin color – Federal Deputies**



**Source: TSE.**

imposed on private donations, the more channels economic power has to transform itself into political power: not only because it may influence the chances of some candidates being elected (by choosing to fund those candidacies more in tune with their interests), but also because of privileged access to those elected, either because they contributed to their election or because of the expectation of future funding. And this is not a problem of the character of the candidates or the financiers, but the direction in which the rules of the game push all the participants, creating an unequal competition in which some voters (the wealthiest) have much more power than other citizens.

Chart 17 illustrates this point. From 2014 to 2018, court decisions and legislative amendments modified the rules for campaign funding. Among them, funding by companies was banned, the share of public funding was expanded, and it was determined that at least 30% of this funding should go to female candidacies. The set of

effects of these changes is still being evaluated, and there are criticisms of them; however, some effects on political inequality are noticeable. Inequality in favor of male and white candidates and to the disadvantage of women and black people is still high, but it has been reduced between the two years, demonstrating that it is possible to at least institutionally mitigate some of the factors that generate inequality in political resources to which different groups have access.

But, as we said, there is no ideal solution, nor have there yet been any successful cases of exclusive public financing; most democratic countries adopt some combination of public and private resources. However, some guidelines may be thought of to reduce the weight of campaign funding in producing political inequality. First, there needs to be a minimum level of public funding guaranteed to all so that those who represent disenfranchised sectors or who defend proposals that do not have the

sympathy of the most wealthy may have conditions to make their proposals available to the public. Second, there should be limits to a candidate's reliance on a single or very few financiers (e.g., a ban on a single donor accounting for more than half of the fundraising of a campaign for deputy). Third, there should be nominal limits (i.e., in reais) on how much a person can donate in an election to the same candidate and in the total of that election. Fourth, there should be a ceiling, also nominal, for the maximum amount a single candidate is allowed to spend on their campaign. In addition, it is also possible to adopt mechanisms to distribute public funds among candidates better, democratizing access to them: in the last elections, for example, the TSE determined that parties allocate at least 30% of the resources of public campaign funds to female candidacies since unequal access to funding is one of the determinants of the low political representation of women in Brazil. These are guidelines that do not eliminate inequality but contribute, on the one hand, to the competition among candidates being fairer and, on the other, that the influence of financiers is not concentrated and unbalanced.

There are other dimensions of the functioning of democracies and political and electoral rules that affect political inequality, such as electoral and voting systems. However, their exposition and discussion involve a set of technicalities, the clarification of which would require space and emphasis that exceed the objectives of the bulletin. For now, it suffices to point out that if it is not possible for a rule or law to eliminate structural inequality, there are mechanisms and instruments that can moderate or, on the contrary, amplify the transformation of socioeconomic inequalities into political inequality.

### **Some final considerations**

The Observatory of Inequalities brought several topics for debate and pointed out, through studies, how

manifest themselves in various ways. It remained to address the political inequality that is no less relevant than the others. Indeed, equity in the representation of the interests of the various social groups and actors within the State should be the ideal for the principle and practice of redistributive justice to be central in public policies. Thus, this bulletin sought to render explicit what political inequality is, how it was produced, how it is reproduced, and how it relates to other inequalities. For such, we resorted to our own studies and those of other research centers that sought to express how this inequality affects specific social groups and sectors, such as women and black and poor people. And also to those who have dwelled on the arenas of representation of interests present in Brazil and elsewhere on the planet.

To handle its undertaking, this bulletin first highlighted that talking about political equality refers to the discussion of democracy. It argued that only democratic regimes with broad spaces of organization and social and political participation can ensure the means for social actors to present their demands and needs to others and fight, using institutional resources, to ensure that they appear on the government agenda. It also found that this is not the case in Brazil, as there is an underrepresentation of women and black and poor people in the spaces of political representation and social participation. Among the reasons identified and mentioned, the late entry of these actors into the democratic game for institutional reasons stands out, given that the legislation prevented their electoral participation and hindered their social participation. The bulletin identified that the economic and cultural reasons work together to reinforce and make it difficult for these groups to be represented on an equal footing with the white and wealthy men who predominate in the political and social spaces of the country.

Hence, it was pointed out that women and black and poor people find themselves in a vicious circle in which the

economic and cultural difficulties of participating and being present in the decision-making arenas of public policies contribute to their continuing to be among the poorest and most vulnerable strata of the country, which, in turn, makes political participation even more difficult. Given this picture, the bulletin pointed out some possible ways out. Ensuring that the democracy that ensures the participation and political equity of social groups and actors is consolidated and perpetuated is one of the requirements to overcome political inequality. Along with it, other institutional instruments are needed, such as the minimum percentage of women and black and poor people in political parties and that they have access to a minimum percentage of public funds for campaigns; public funding of electoral campaigns; compulsory voting; instruments of social participation, such as councils and conferences, for the provision, management, and supervision of public policies; combating machismo, racism, and all forms of discrimination in electoral campaigns and spaces of participation.

The bulletin also found an interweaving of institutional, social, cultural, and economic variables that explain the production and reproduction of political inequality. In isolation, they are insufficient to produce satisfactory explanations.

And it is also difficult to say which of them has the most significant explanatory weight. What is inferred is the complexity of the causal network behind this inequality and, mainly, the complexity that it will be to tackle it. In turn, studies show that institutional changes alone are not being enough to solve the problem of underrepresentation of non-white people and women who run for and are elected to electoral offices in Brazil. This is an indication that excluded or underrepresented groups will need to undertake more efforts if they want to overcome this scenario in Brazil and other parts of the world.

In the face of the significant obstacle that presents itself to non-white people, women, and other social groups underrepresented in political spaces, having

institutions that strengthen democracy, as demonstrated by Dahl (1997), and having them be perennial are initial paths to new future conquests. Along with them, policies to reduce socioeconomic and cultural inequalities are necessary to strengthen the organizational capacity of social groups and strata excluded from or underrepresented in decision-making arenas. The improvement in equity, organizational capacity, and representations increases the legitimacy of the State and politics and contributes to the stability of democracy and a virtuous scenario of development and social peace.





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