THE DRIVERS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON MESSAGING APPS

Habits and Perceptions of Brazilians in 2020

INTERNETLAB
pesquisa em direito e tecnologia

REDE CONHECIMENTO SOCIAL

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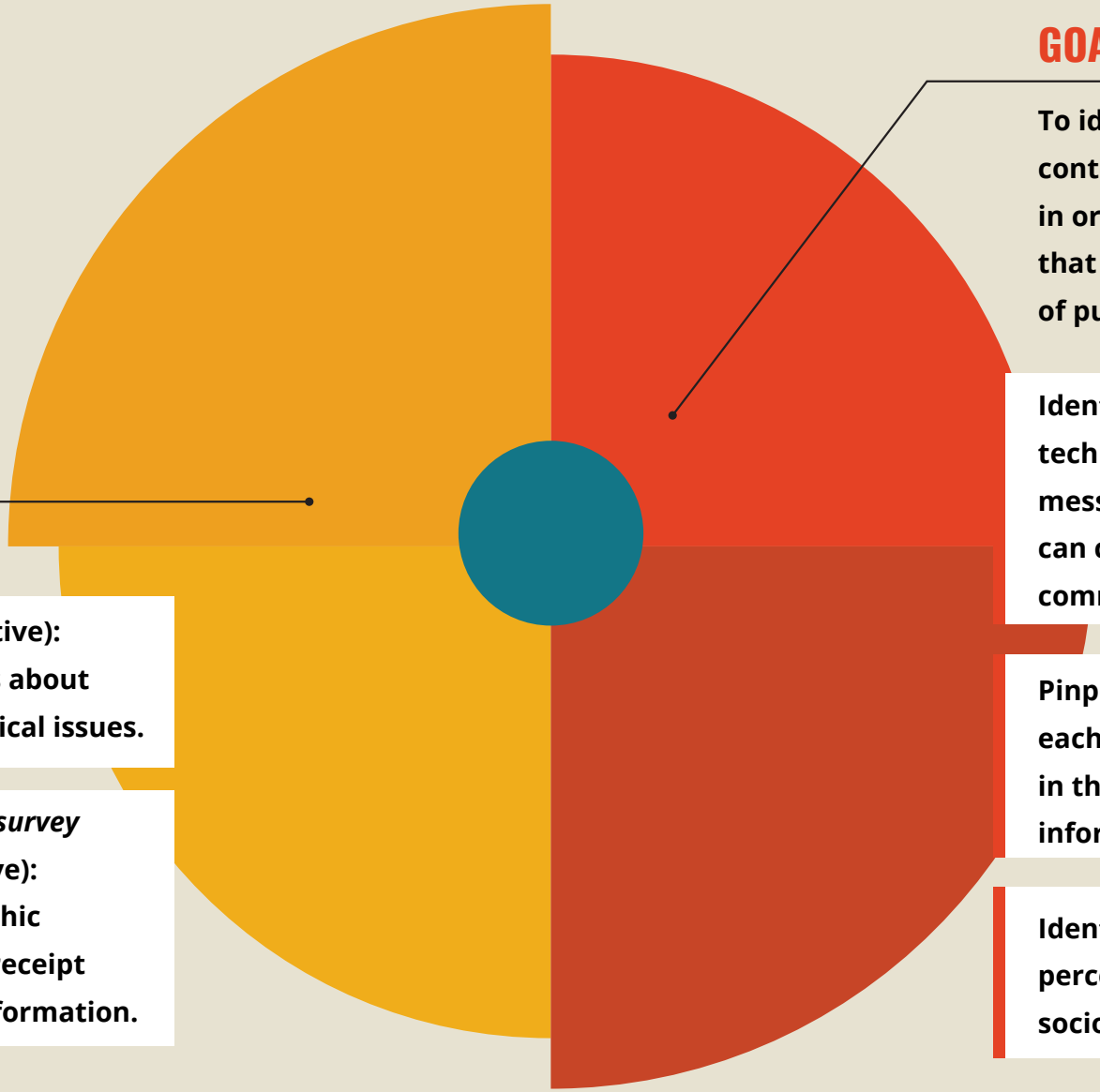
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH DESIGN



METHODOLOGY

multimethod research.

Online discussion groups **(Qualitative): to survey habits and perceptions about WhatsApp usage as regards political issues.**

Nationally representative sample survey using an online panel **(Quantitative): to identify which sociodemographic variables have a bearing on the receipt and dissemination of political information.**

GOAL

To identify the drivers of political content dissemination on WhatsApp in order to provide solid foundations that can contribute to the design of public and private policies.

Identify the (contextual or architectural/ technological) factors that trigger message sharing among users and that can create broadcast dynamics in private communication networks.

Pinpoint the perceptions that each individual has about their role in the dissemination of political information on messaging apps.

Identify how these factors and perceptions change among different sociodemographic groups.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESULTS

WhatsApp usage is predominant, but other emerging messaging apps are being used for specific purposes.

There is a diverse range of group types, and each one has its own ethos, with autonomous moderation practices. Each group's diverse dynamics shape the content dissemination.

The 2018 elections mark a turning point in users' habits and perceptions.

There are no significant differences in the behaviors and perceptions between users who identify as right-wing and those self-identifying as left-wing, except for the habit of fact-checking news which presents a difference of 15 percentage points between the groups.

Political content circulates on messaging apps through complex and meshed communication networks. In these networks, different nodes (such as groups or users) play a key role in content dissemination, rendering the content's circulation contingent upon how it interacts with each group's informal rules and with each user's individual behaviors and perceptions. There is evidence of abusive or improper conduct, but because of these network dynamics this conduct does not seem capable of achieving the mass distribution of political content in a sustained and exclusive manner.

** the goals, methodology, and results presented here are part of one of the research tracks of the project "Investigating the drivers of electoral content dissemination on WhatsApp: a Brazilian case study". The full project has two other research tracks that are still ongoing.*

RESEARCH DESIGN

METHODS

QUANTITATIVE
SAMPLE SURVEY

DATA COLLECTION:
Panel of online respondents

PUBLIC:
Brazilian population 16 years of age or older that has internet access and uses WhatsApp

DATE OF EXECUTION:
Dec. 7 to 16, 2020

SAMPLE:
3113 interviews spread across Brazil's 5 regions

MARGIN OF ERROR:
3 percentage points on the total sample (95% confidence interval)

WEIGHTING FACTORS:
Sample proportional to the surveyed universe; there was no need for weighting.

QUALITATIVE
DISCUSSION GROUPS

DATA COLLECTION:
Online discussion groups

PUBLIC:
Brazilian population 16 years of age or older that has internet access and uses WhatsApp

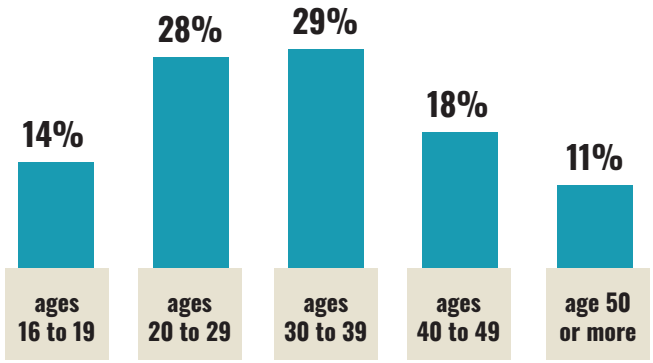
DATE OF EXECUTION:
Nov. 11 to Dec. 14, 2020

SAMPLE:
groups with 7 to 8 people, as follows:

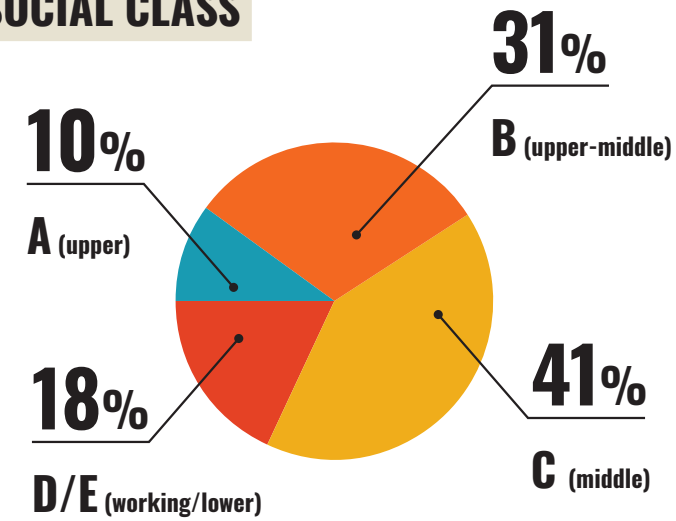
	Under 40 years old	Over 40 years old	Mixed-age
Capitals	1 group	1 group	1 group
Metropolitan regions	1 group	1 group	
Interior	1 group	1 group	
Total number of focus groups		7 groups	

SAMPLE PROFILE OF THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

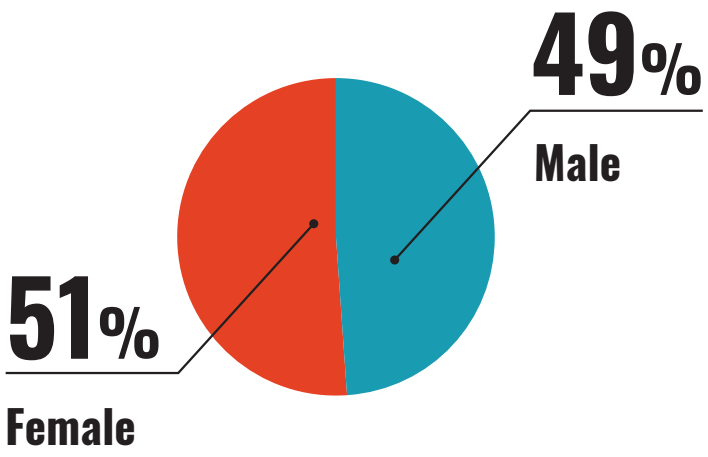
AGE



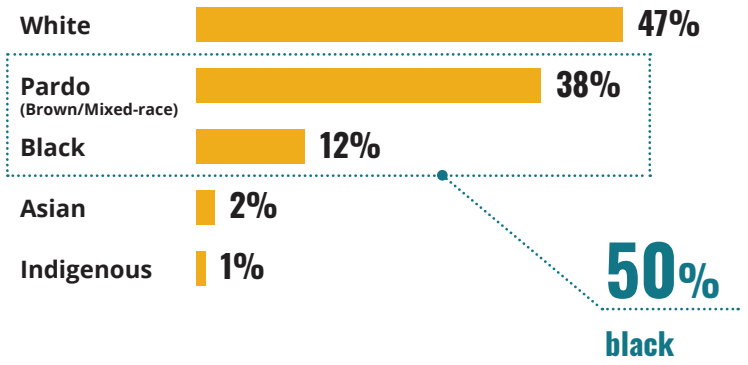
SOCIAL CLASS



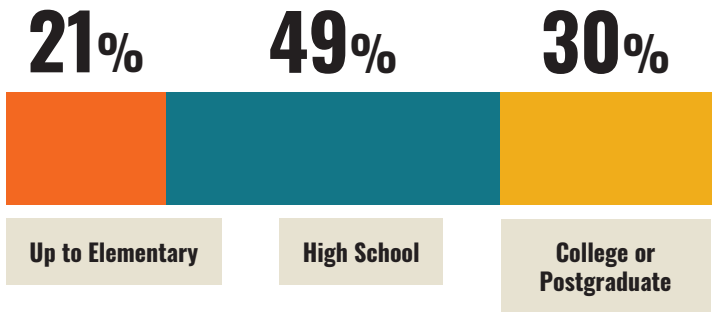
GENDER



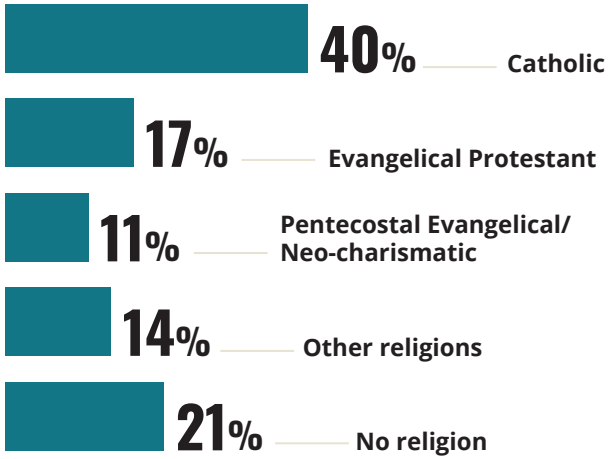
RACE/SKIN COLOR



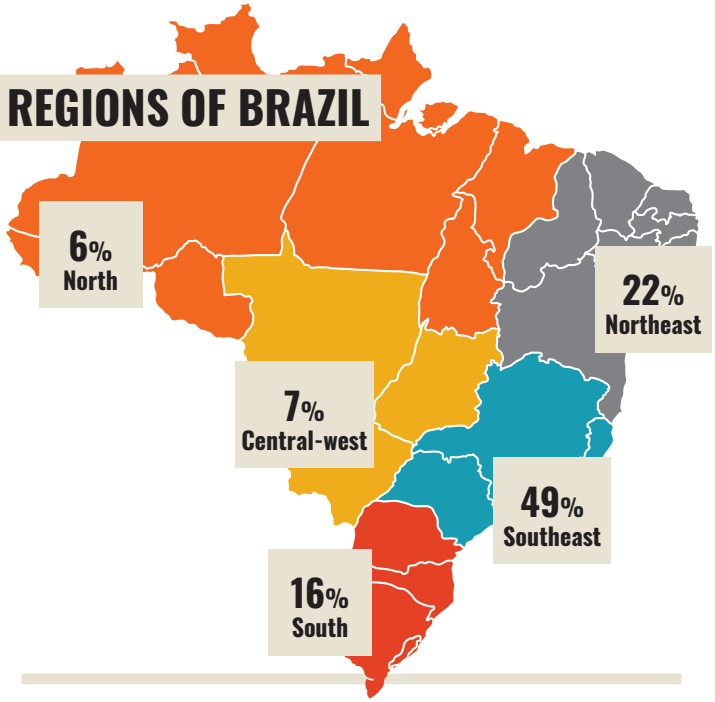
EDUCATION



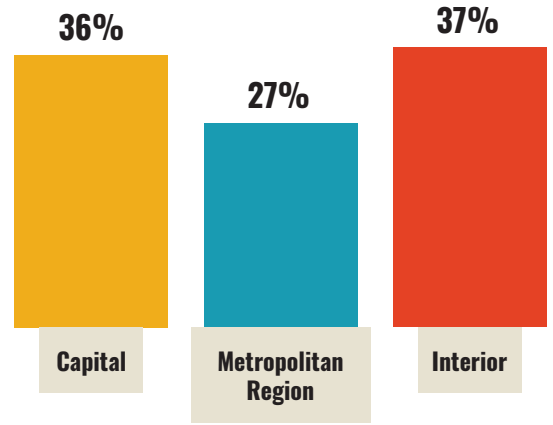
RELIGION



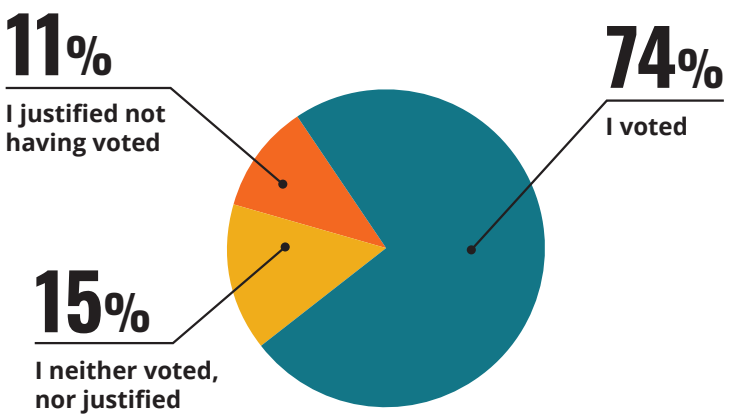
REGIONS OF BRAZIL



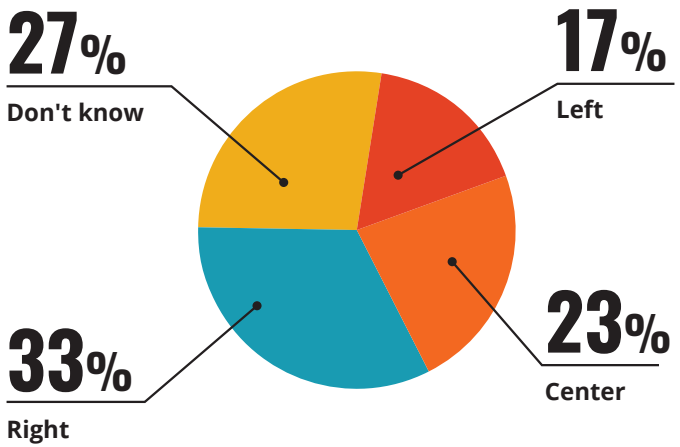
SIZE OF MUNICIPALITY



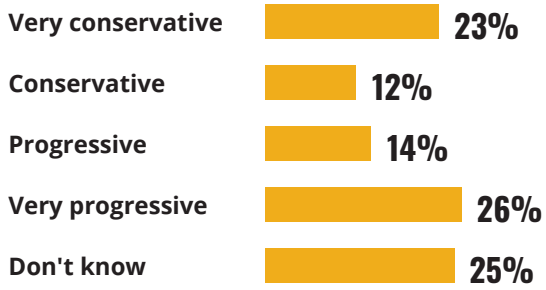
VOTING IN 2020



POLITICAL LEANINGS



STANCE ON POLITICO-SOCIAL VALUES



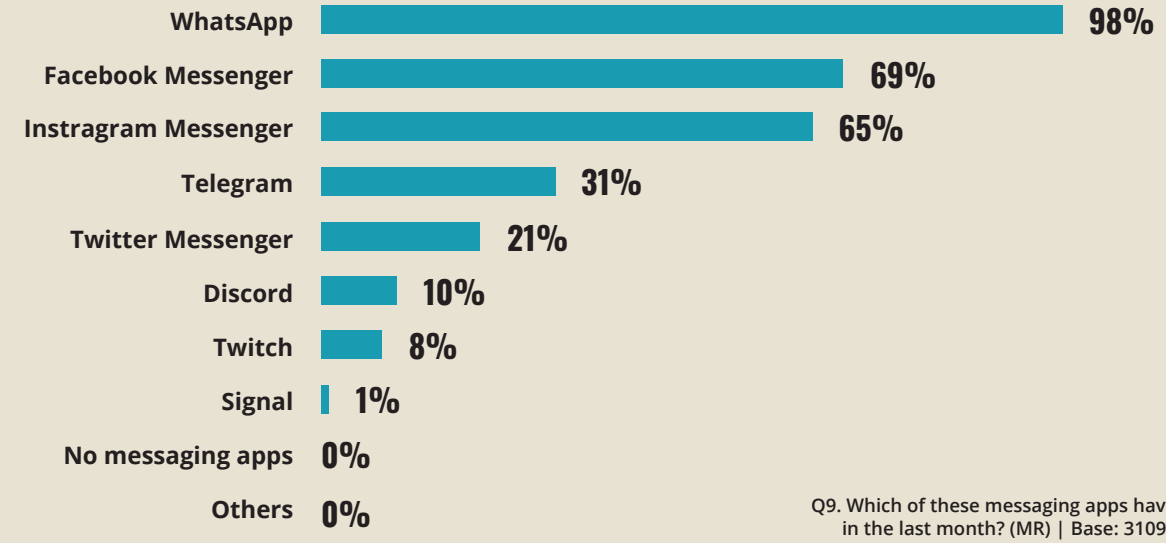
RESULTS

MESSAGING APPS AND THEIR USAGE

MESSAGING APPS USED

WhatsApp usage is unanimous, and WhatsApp is the most used messaging app across all profiles, mainly to have conversations with those with whom one is already in touch. Other apps are chosen consciously and for different uses: the messengers of the various social networks are for locating those who are not in one's phone contacts. Telegram, even before the migration in January 2021, was already seen as a safe and informational environment, with a clear political influence for this move since the 2018 presidential election.

Respondents use 3 apps on average



Q9. Which of these messaging apps have you used in the last month? (MR) | Base: 3109 responses

Woman | -40 | capital | Northeast

"For example, I need to stay in touch and don't have that person's phone number, then the second place I'll go looking is Facebook Messenger."

Woman | 40+ | capital | Southeast

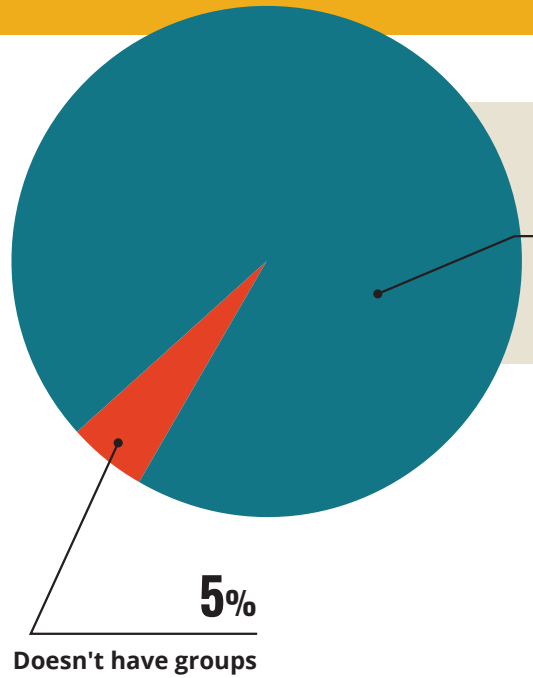
"I joined Telegram at the insistence of friends, because lots of people are moving there and I ended up doing so too, but I prefer WhatsApp. It was during the presidential campaign that information had leaked from WhatsApp and they were scared, but many people ended up not using it and stayed on WhatsApp."

Man | 40+ | interior | North

"An association I belong to started to add many people and there is a cap [on the number of group members] in the WhatsApp group. Then someone suggested Telegram, but my communication on there is more restricted to this group."

NUMBER OF GROUPS ON WHATSAPP

Only a few people report not having any groups on WhatsApp, and the higher the level of education, the more groups they participate in. No one can say how many groups they participate in off the top of their head, but everyone has their own criteria to evaluate if they are in many or a few groups. But regardless of the number, there seems to be a tendency to select the groups in which one participates more.



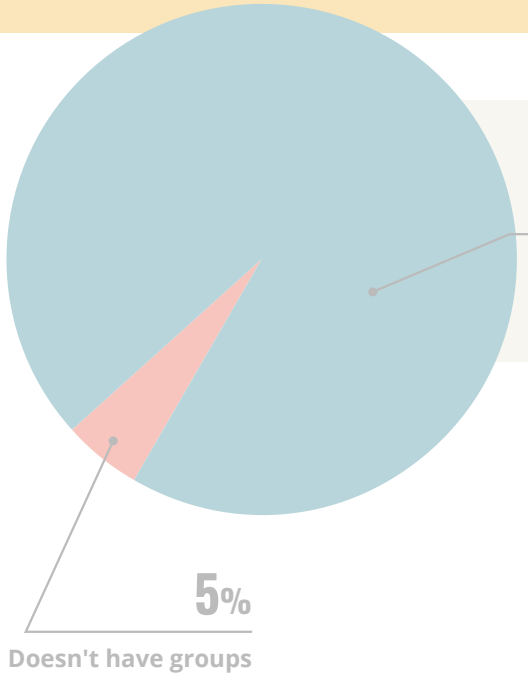
95%
Has groups

5%
Doesn't have groups

		Up to Elementary	High School	College or Postgraduate
1 to 10 groups	81%	89%	85%	68%
10 to 25 groups	15%	8%	11%	25%
25 to 50 groups	3%	1%	3%	5%
more than 50 groups	1 %	2%	1%	2%

Q12. About how many groups would you say you have on WhatsApp? | Base: 3021 responses

NUMBER OF GROUPS ON WHATSAPP



Man | -40 | metropolitan region | Southeast

"I participate in only 4 groups. One family group, one with friends from when I served in the army, one that has friends from an online game, and the other one from another profession I held as a security guard, which I have colleagues there as well."

Woman | -40 | capital | South

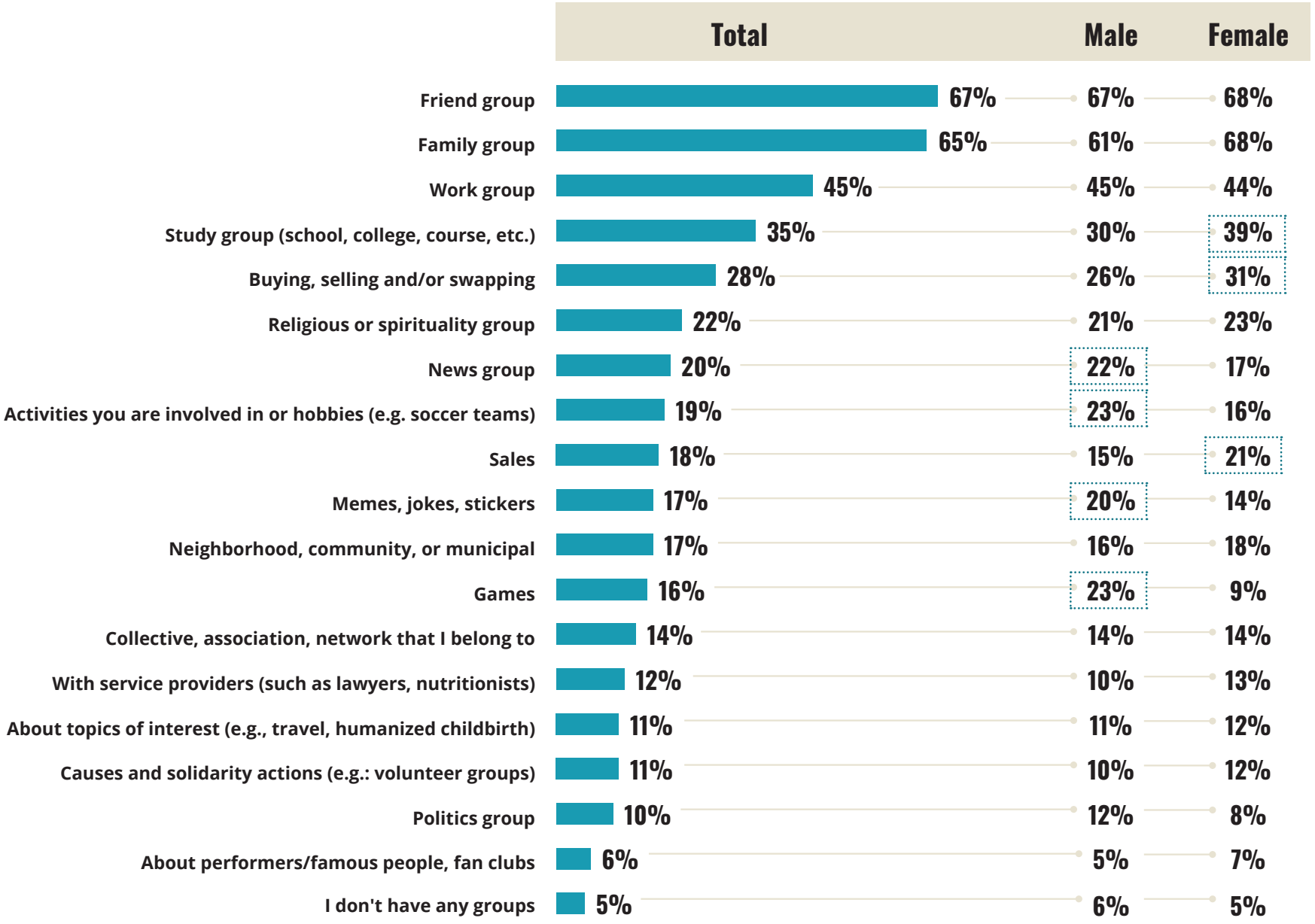
"I don't know how many groups I have, and I think WhatsApp should have a feature to show how many. I have groups that I mute and never read. Apart from those that we are supposed to close later and never do. I definitely have more than 20."

High School	College or Postgraduate
85%	68%
11%	25%
3%	5%
1%	2%

12. About how many groups would you say have on WhatsApp? | Base: 3021 responses

TYPES OF GROUPS PEOPLE TAKE PART IN

The differences between the groups that men and women have on WhatsApp are specific. Groups linked to educational activities and shopping and sales stand out among women, and groups for games, hobbies, news, as well as memes and jokes among men.



Q10. Which of these groups do you have on your WhatsApp? (MR) | Base: 3041 responses

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Q10. Which of these groups do you have on your WhatsApp? (MR) | Base: 3041 responses

The buying and selling (28%) and sales (18%) groups are significant in all social classes and regions of the country.

39% of the respondents who identify as Evangelicals participate in religious groups.

Among younger people, meme/sticker groups (23%) and gaming groups (22%) are popular.

Politics groups are most popular in the North (14%) and Northeast (14%) regions, as well as among people over the age of 50 (16%).

In general, people who have more defined political leanings, both right-wing and left-wing, are also more present in WhatsApp groups.

DIFFERENTS GROUPS, DIFFERENT INTERACTIONS

There is no expected pattern of interaction for each type of group. The pattern is that in their groups, people reproduce the social roles played outside the apps with the people with whom they interact. The universe of groups is diverse, and each group has its own ethos; namely, they have a set of customs, habits, and values, with their own norms of coexistence and moderation rules. The rules within groups arise in two ways: if, on the one hand, citizens see them as important for improving coexistence, on the other, respect for these rules is not yet fully incorporated.

Woman | -40 | capital | South

"Well, there is no difference between what I say in the family group, on WhatsApp, or at a Sunday lunch. The filter is the same. So there are groups where I feel at ease, and there are groups where I don't feel at ease. There are people I've never seen in my life, so how I interact, when I interact, is as if I were entering a group where I don't know anyone. It's the same!"

Man | 40+ | interior | North

"I think one group where the rule is the most effective of the groups I'm in is the books and journals swap group. It's a library, so every time someone says good morning or something like that, the group administrator posts, 'Shh, this is a library!' I am in a library, I have to be quiet because I will disturb the fellow member who is reading. So, it is the group that has the strictest rule. One of the rules is getting kicked out of the group."

DIFFERENT GROUPS, DIFFERENT INTERACTIONS

Oftentimes, the groups' rules pertain to whether or not you can talk about politics, which makes it clear how much these norms of coexistence have amped up following episodes of disagreement due to political stances.

72%

AVOIDED TALKING ABOUT POLITICS IN FAMILY GROUPS TO AVOID ARGUMENTS.

42%

STATE THAT THEY SAW FRIEND GROUPS SPLITTING INTO SMALLER GROUPS AS A WAY TO REDUCE FRICTION OVER POLITICS.

2018 IS A TURNING POINT FOR CHANGES IN BEHAVIORS ON THE APP.

DIFFERENT GROUPS, DIFFERENT INTERACTIONS

Oftentimes, the groups' rules pertain to whether or not you can talk about politics, which makes it clear how much these norms of coexistence have amped up following episodes of disagreement due to political stances.

Man | 40+ | capital | North

"In my groups there are rules, and politics are forbidden. For example, in the neighborhood group, party politics are not discussed, that's the rule. It was so interesting, we saw a very interesting post, someone said, 'Oh, I am very sad,' on account of the elections, and I said in the group, 'We are avoiding discussing politics,' and he said, 'Forgive me, it's just that I have left all the groups, I only have this one to vent.' That was the only group, because there was so much arguing. The fact is that this one doesn't have [any political talk], and conversely I take part in another group that is only about politics."

Woman | 40+ | interior | Central-West

"In 2018 I also left the dance group, which was a group I danced with for 15 years here in my hometown, and the same thing regarding politics. The group was pretty spread out, people from all over Brazil, and that kicked off the most diverse political messages. So, for the sake of avoiding arguments, I prefer to leave. I leave because it is better to maintain friendships."

COMMUNICATION ABOUT POLITICS ON THE APPS

COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS

Woman | -40 | capital | Northeast

“I think a sale is news, especially a sale that says 'buy and get 50 [reais] cash back', to me it's news. I usually do share this kind of information, regardless of the relationship I have with the people in the group, even with people I don't know. Being in the group, they will see that information. I also share campaigns like the Itaú book campaign. I keep up with G1 [a Brazilian news portal] a lot. My cell phone goes straight to G1. For me Twitter is a social network for information. And also to see what people's opinions are, what people are saying about that.”

NEWS

It is a confusing concept for some people, because it is understood as what is made public, regardless of the subject matter, the intentionality, and the source of the information.

FAKE NEWS

If news is already a nebulous concept, fake news can be even more confusing, especially when it comes to the distinction between opinion and information. But the idea that checking the source is important is already widespread and generates concern among citizens. Also, the notion that fake news must be refuted is increasingly present.

Woman | -40 | metropolitan region | South

“Fake news is news without sources, with no place to know if it is real, to search and know if this news is true.”

Woman | 40+ | interior | Southeast

“I find it interesting that I notice a lot of fake news in church groups. It is very interesting, because there is always someone who says, ‘Take this because it will kill Covid.’ In school groups I don't notice it much. Maybe it is because folks do some reading beforehand. Because of this I joined a fact-checking group, and when someone posts in the church's group I go there, research, and write, 'Look, don't share!'”

COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS

30% OF THE PEOPLE INTERVIEWED ADMIT, AT LEAST PARTIALLY, TO HAVING PASSED ON NEWS THEY CONSIDERED IMPORTANT OR INTERESTING WITHOUT CHECKING THE SOURCE

33% OF BRAZILIANS WITH INTERNET ACCESS ADMIT TO SHARING CONTENT THAT MAY SEEM OFFENSIVE WHEN THEY BELIEVE IN AN IDEA

There is a significant difference in the behavior of those who identify as either right-wing or left-wing: 40% of those interviewed who identify as right-wing admit, at least partially, to having passed on news without checking the source, while 25% of those who identify as left-wing admit to the same behavior. In the case of those who identify as centrist or who do not know their stance, the figures are 27% and 23%, respectively.

COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS

Woman | -40 | metropolitan region | South

“I've already shared with family members, in the family group, half are right-wing and half are left-wing, so, to provoke them, I shared something there, refuting a right-wing thing, except that it was a lie. I went there and said that they were lying, and then they were all puzzled by me. I regretted it. I should have left it alone.”

CONCEPTS OF POLITICS

Woman | 40+ | capital | Northeast

"Nowadays, all everyday topics have something to do with politics. But sharing such information always generates conflict, especially in the current political situation in the country. Even the vaccine issue has a political slant to it."

Woman | 40+ | metropolitan region | South

"When we talk about politics, especially during an election period, right away we think of the exposure of the person, of the candidate who is running, of information. Sometimes true and sometimes untrue."

Woman | -40 | metropolitan region | Central-West

"Politics for me is disagreement, most of the time it's fighting, like the others said, politics is a business that - as my dad says - is dirty."

POLITICS

Frequently associated with arguments or discord, as a problem that is part of everyone's life, but that one must handle carefully when discussing it with people.

POLITICAL MESSAGES

Associated with the exposition of opinions and positions on collective issues and values.
It is clear that political messages are not necessarily associated with candidacies.

Woman | -40 | capital | South

"For me, a political message is when you express an opinion on a subject that impacts a collective. So, if you take a stand, for example, against abortion, against sexual abuse, against queerphobia or homophobia, you are taking a stand on a collective issue. To me, this is political. So, every time someone takes a stand with an opinion that is not individual, in the sense that it doesn't affect just them, but rather a collective, for me this is political, and when it comes up, you can be sure that it is one of the messages in the group that I interact with."

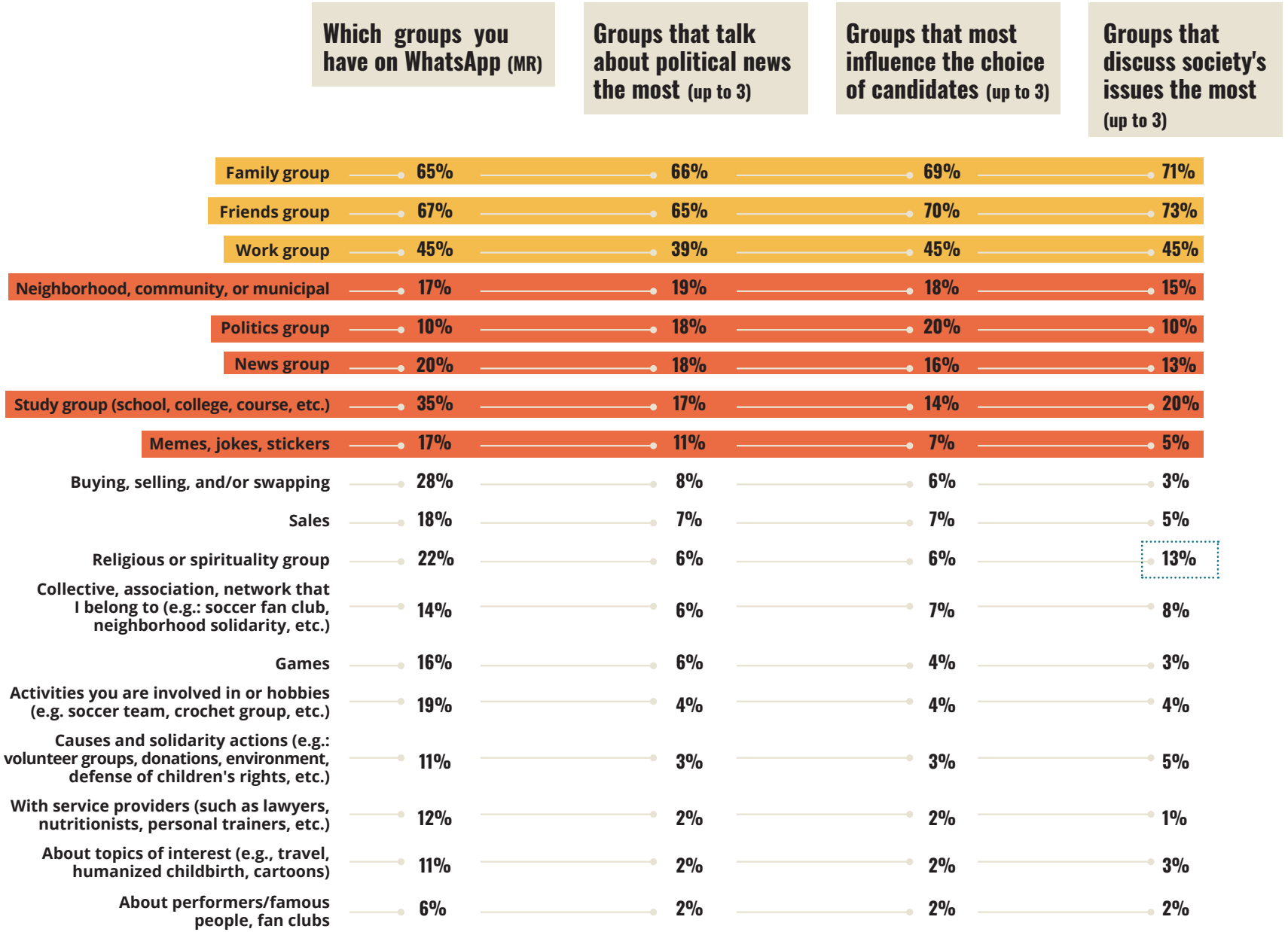
Man | -40 | metropolitan region | Southeast

"I think political messaging is a way to express your political opinion, your ideology and what you believe in, and try to convert that person who disagrees with you or doesn't believe in the same thing you do, the reason why she believes in that."

GROUP COMMUNICATION ABOUT POLITICS

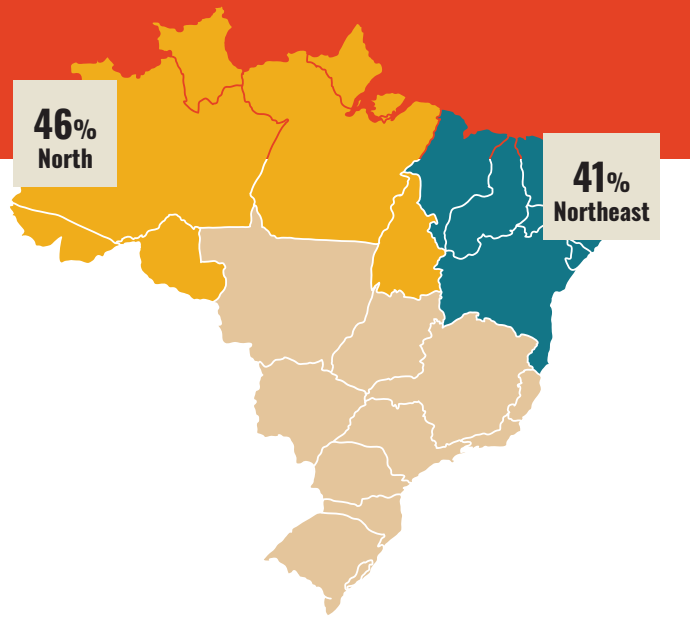
Family and friend groups are the ones that most discuss politics and societal issues and have an influence on the choice of candidates. These are the groups that end up receiving content from other environments where there is a lesser volume of participation, such as: neighborhood/community/ municipal, politics, news, study, and meme/joke/stickers groups.

Q10. Which of these groups do you have on your WhatsApp? (Base: 3041) | Q14a. Of the groups you participate in on WhatsApp, which are the THREE groups in which news about politics, politicians, and government appear the MOST? (Base: 2750) | Q14b. And what are the THREE groups in which content appears to influence how people choose candidates the MOST? (Base: 2701) Q14c. And what are the THREE groups in which discussions of societal issues, such as defense of family, racism, deforestation, etc. appear the MOST? (Base: 2671)



COMMUNICATION ABOUT POLITICS IN GROUPS

FOR **36%**
OF BRAZILIANS THE CONTENT RECEIVED THROUGH THE APP WAS AT LEAST PARTIALLY IMPORTANT TO THEIR VOTING DECISION IN THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS. THIS VIEW IS ESPECIALLY RELEVANT IN THE NORTH AND NORTHEAST REGIONS.



LARGE GROUPS, IN WHICH MANY PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW EACH OTHER, ARE SEEN BY

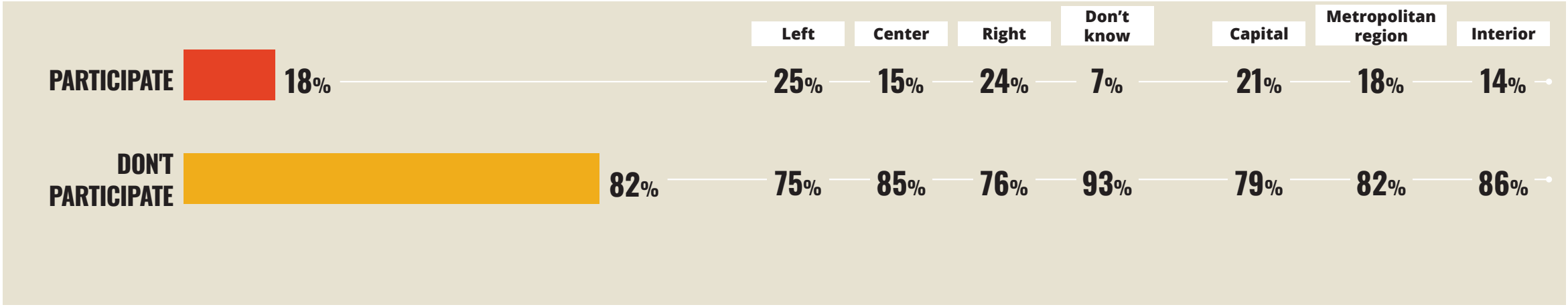
69%

OF PEOPLE AS MORE CONDUCIVE TO THE CIRCULATION OF RUMORS, COMPARED TO THOSE IN WHICH THE PARTICIPANTS ARE KNOWN TO ONE OTHER.

PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL DISCUSSION GROUPS SINCE 2018

2 out of 10 people have participated in political discussion groups since 2018. There is a trend among citizens of larger municipalities to participate more in these groups. There are no significant differences between the behavior of those who identify as right-wing or left-wing.

Q22. Have you been in any WhatsApp groups that aim to discuss political issues since 2018? | Base: 2977 responses



MAIN GROUPS MENTIONED:

- **Proposals to improve the country/municipality/neighborhood**
- **Friends who debate freely**
- **Similarity of values: progressives, Bolsonaro supporters, conservative values**
- **Discussion and debate on opinions and politics**
- **Political parties groups**
- **Family group on politics**
- **College group**
- **Group to support and monitor an elected candidate**
- **Church group on politics**
- **Professional groups from different fields**

INFLUENCE OF THE 2018 ELECTION ON POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS

There is no doubt that the 2018 election process has had an influence on how people have behaved in relation to communication about politics. Each person's experiences prior to, but especially since 2018, guide the way they are interacting and reacting on messaging apps.

71%

OF RESPONDENTS SAY THEY HAVE CHANGED THEIR BEHAVIOR ON THE APP IN SOME WAY SINCE THE 2018 ELECTION, POLICING THEMSELVES MORE ON WHAT THEY TALK ABOUT IN WHATSAPP GROUPS.

50%

SAY THEY HAVE SEEN A CHANGE IN GROUP RULES REGARDING WHAT CAN BE SHARED SINCE THE 2018 ELECTION.

INFLUENCE OF THE 2018 ELECTION ON POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS

There is no doubt that the 2018 election process has had an influence on how people have behaved in relation to communication about politics. Each person's experiences prior to, but especially since 2018, guide the way they are interacting and reacting on messaging apps.

Man | -40 | interior | Northeast

"Since 2018 we have been in a very complicated situation. Since 2016 and coupled with all this, and I would say that since the last election, mainly, we feel the need to reaffirm, to share and discuss this with family members, because it is very necessary."

Man | -40 | metropolitan region | Southeast

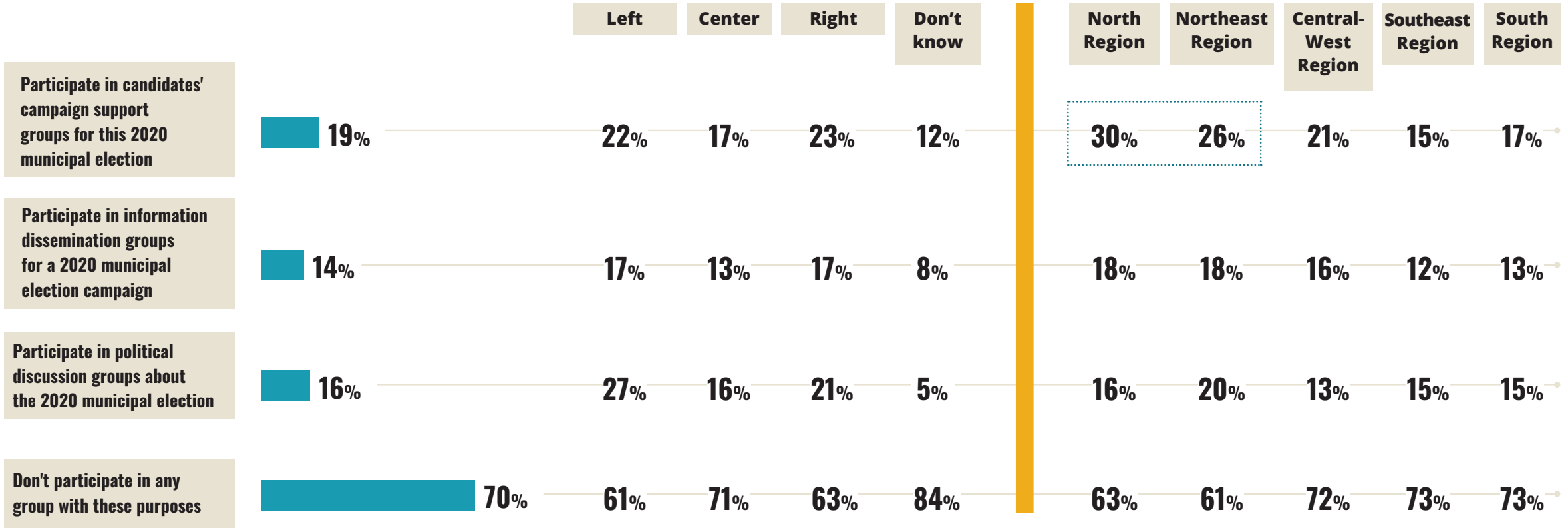
"Now I vote for the candidate and no longer for the party, it used to be by party, right. Then, since there was this business about the Mensalão scandal, Operation Car Wash, I am voting for the candidate now, and when I want to share something I only share a candidate's proposal that I consider to be good. But only with those I know best, the ones I am closest to, not with just anyone, otherwise there's a fight..."

THE 2020 ELECTION ON MESSAGING APPS

GROUPS WITH POLITICAL ACTIVITIES IN THE 2020 ELECTION

3 out of 10 citizens participated in groups created for campaign activities in the 2020 municipal elections. The North and Northeast regions have a more participative profile in relation to these groups, especially with regard to backing and disseminating campaign information. Sympathizers from the left and the right were equally active in support and political discussion groups in the 2020 election.

Q13. Reflecting upon the last 2 months, have you participated in any groups on WhatsApp created for: (MR) | Base: 2977 responses

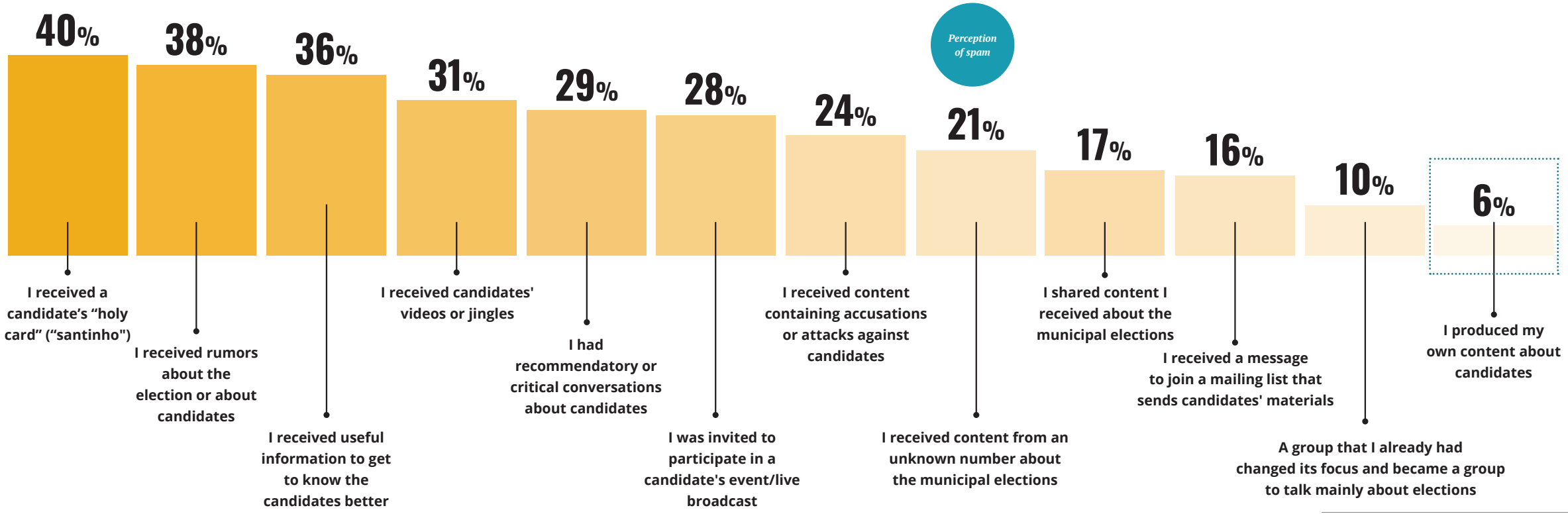


THE 2020 ELECTION ON MESSAGING APPS

4 out of 10 citizens received content that they identified as a rumor, or false information, about the election or candidate. And 2 out of 10 were the target of political spam via the dispatch of electoral content through an unknown number. The sending of campaign videos and campaign jingles via WhatsApp, as well as invitations to live broadcasts, were widely used tactics in the 2020 municipal elections, reaching about 3 out of 10 citizens.

Q15. What situations occurred on your WhatsApp during the 2020 elections ?| Base: 2650 responses

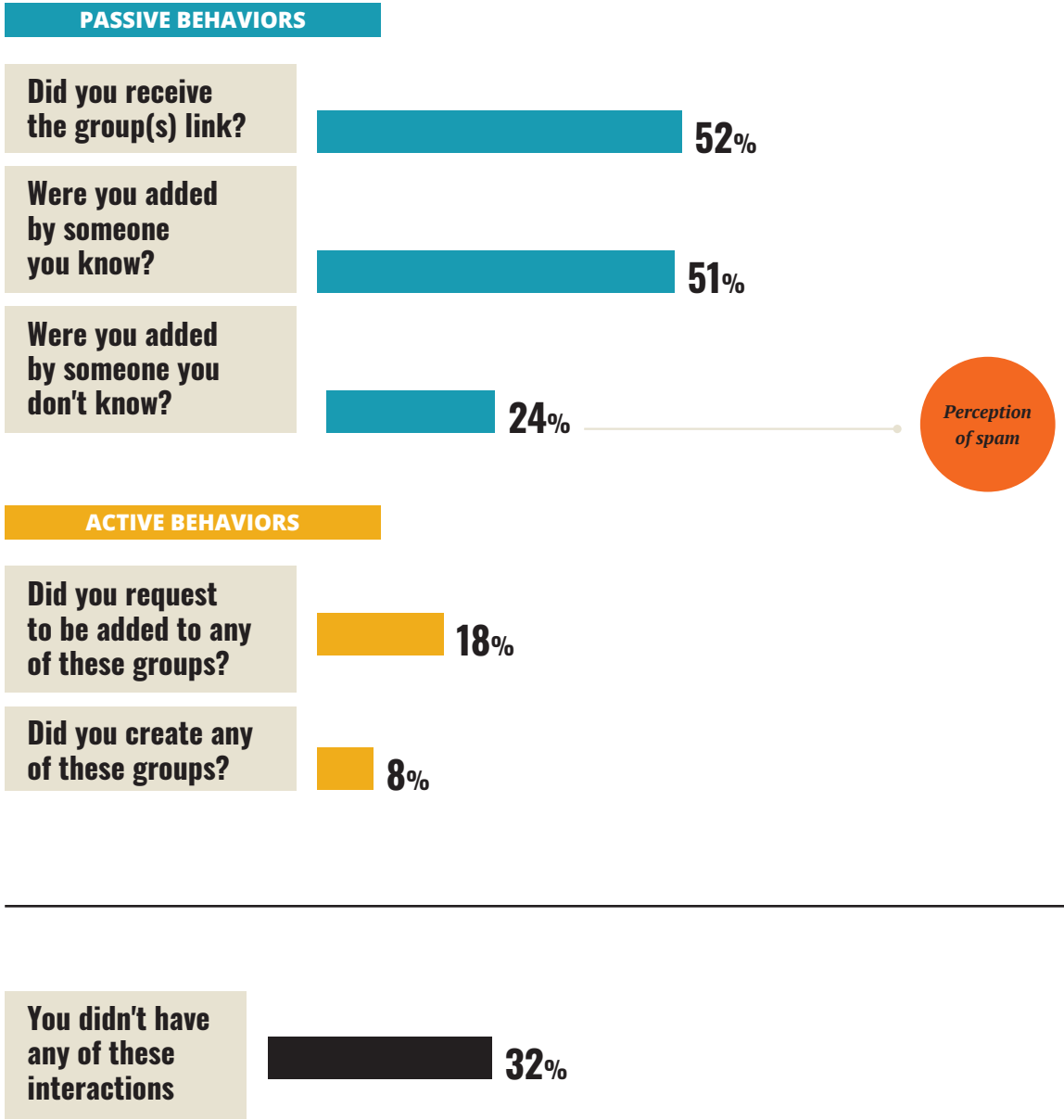
"Santinho" is a traditional means of electoral advertisement in Brazil. Traditionally, it is a publicity printout, similar to a leaflet, with the candidate's name, number, and photo, that is distributed during the electoral campaign. The term comes from a practice related to the Catholic Church where churches distribute small papers with colored images of saints, which are called "santinhos" (holy cards in English). Because of their similar format and size, these political leaflets have also come to be known as "santinhos". Recently, the term has been also deployed in reference to similar digital leaflets that are shared through social media and/or messaging apps.



BEHAVIORS TO CREATE OR JOIN GROUPS ABOUT THE 2020 ELECTION

7 out of 10 citizens had some kind of interaction, passive or active, with groups about the 2020 elections, be it to create or join them. Groups passively reached more than 50% of the respondents through some acquaintance or by sending links. Political spam, through the addition of respondents to groups by unknown people, reached a quarter of said respondents. Those who behaved more actively, asking to join or creating groups, are a minority.

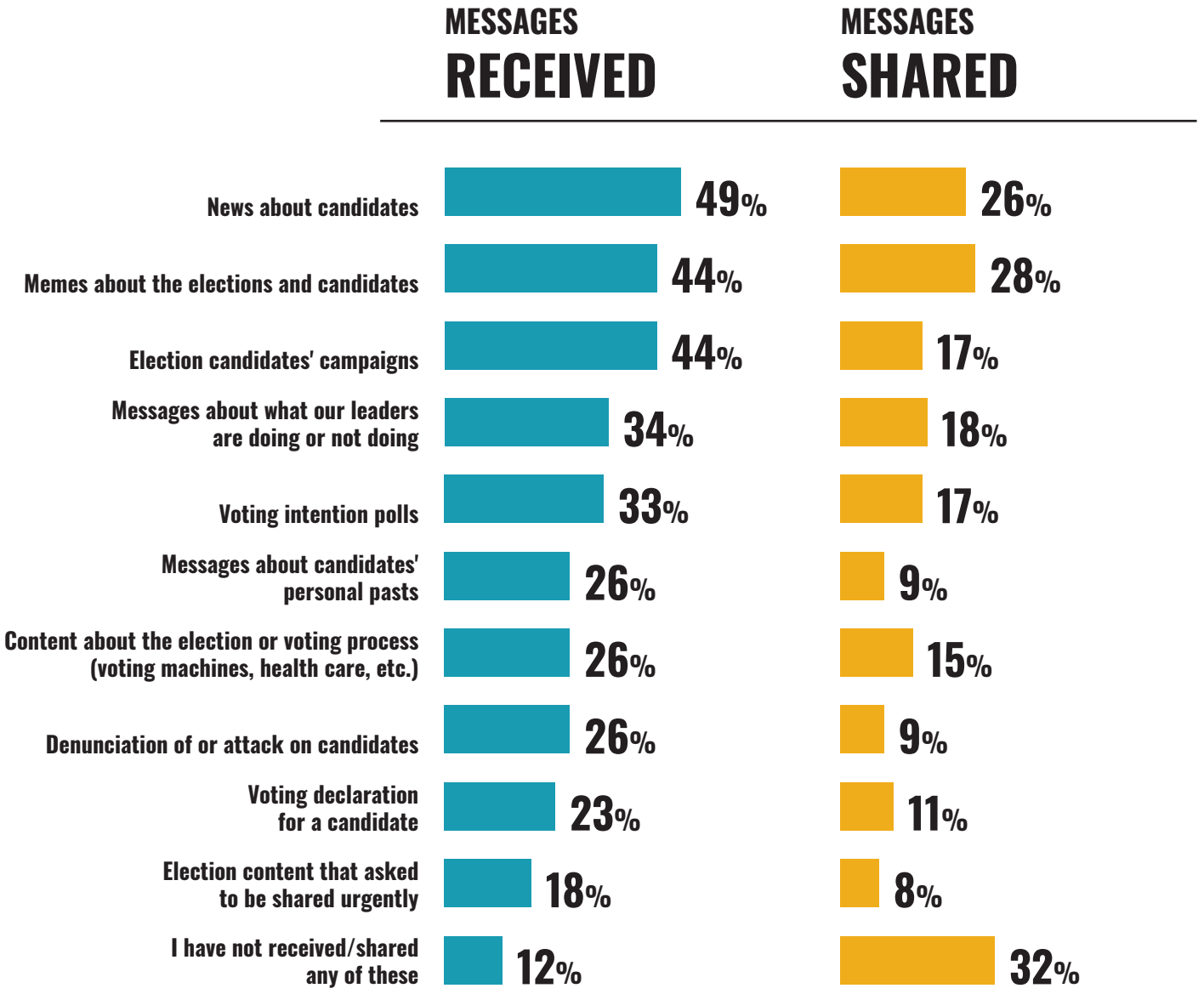
Q16. Considering groups that have dealt with the municipal elections, in the last 2 months: (MR) | Base: 2637 responses



RECEIVING AND SHARING MESSAGES IN THE 2020 ELECTIONS

Memes were a popular format, received extensively (44%) and shared widely (28%). Different social classes and age groups subscribe to them, and they reach both conservative and progressive residents of capitals and the country's interior. A small portion (12%) did not receive messages during the election period, but a majority (32%) of citizens did not share anything.

Q17a. Which of these types of messages did you receive from someone during the 2020 municipal election period? | Q17b. And which of these types of messages did you share? | Base: 2617 responses



STRATEGIES FOR TALKING ABOUT POLITICS ON MESSAGING APPLICATIONS

27% ACKNOWLEDGE SENDING CONTENT WITH THE INTENTION OF PROVOKING THOSE WHO THINK DIFFERENTLY. THE PROFILES OF SOCIAL CLASSES A/B (UPPER AND UPPER-MIDDLE, RESPECTIVELY) AND RESIDENTS OF CAPITAL CITIES ARE AMONG THOSE WHO MOST USE THIS RESOURCE.

63% OF PEOPLE, OF ALL PROFILES, USE HUMOROUS MESSAGES AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TALK ABOUT POLITICS WITHOUT STARTING FIGHTS.

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