

# Incomplete Democracies: The Brazilian Case

## Democracias incompletas: El caso de Brasil

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### ABSTRACT

*The article aims to analyze whether, after 30 years of current Brazilian democracy, political institutions will be resilient enough to deal with the consequences of an authoritarian government elected in the middle of a deep representation crisis. In other words, would this be a turn to an illiberal democracy? From an analysis of the situation, we traced a chronology of circumstances – transition from the authoritarian regime, popular dissatisfaction, critical elections of 2018 as a time of exhaustion for the New Republic, dynamics of the party dispute – that converged to the rise of ultra-right forces, elected through a democratic regime. Data referring to public perception concerning institutions, electoral results, and performance of traditional parties in recent electoral cycles (general election of 2018 and municipal election of 2020) are analyzed. We conclude that the growth of center-right parties in the 2020 municipal elections indicate that – despite the analytical correctness of the literature on the possibility of internal corrosion of democracies by nationalist neopopulism – the thesis regarding incidental rulers has strong evidence visible in Brazil.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *Brazilian democracy, Bolsonaro government, party system, democratic backlash, electoral realignment, critical election.*

### RESUMEN

*El artículo pretende analizar si, tras 30 años de la actual democracia brasileña, las instituciones políticas serán lo suficientemente resistentes como para afrontar las consecuencias de un gobierno autoritario elegido en medio de una profunda crisis de representación. En otras palabras, ¿se trataría de un giro hacia una democracia antiliberal? A partir de un análisis de coyuntura, trazamos una cronología de circunstancias –transición del régimen autoritario, insatisfacción popular, elecciones críticas de 2018 como momento de agotamiento de la Nueva República, dinámica de la disputa partidaria– que confluieron al ascenso de fuerzas de ultraderecha, elegidas en el marco de un régimen democrático. Se analizan los datos referidos a la percepción pública sobre las instituciones, los resultados electorales y el desempeño de los partidos tradicionales en los últimos ciclos electorales (elecciones generales de 2018 y municipales de 2020). Concluimos que el crecimiento de los partidos de centroderecha en las elecciones municipales de 2020 indica que – a pesar de la corrección analítica de la literatura sobre la posibilidad de corrosión interna de las democracias por el neopopulismo nacionalista – la tesis relativa a los gobernantes incidentales tiene fuertes indicios de mostrarse en Brasil.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *democracia brasileña, gobierno de Bolsonaro, sistema de partidos, retroceso democrático, reajuste electoral, elección crítica.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The results of the 2018 elections, with the victory of Jair Bolsonaro as president of the Republic, questioned the future of democracy in Brazil, which had begun to consolidate itself around the 80s through a transition that gave rise to an institutional arrangement denominated as the “New Republic”. Although the “anti-PT-ism” exercised had an important role in the behavior of electors who did not identify themselves with PT, the work of Jairo Nicolau points to a generalized dissatisfaction of the population in all levels of income, age, and education. Even though Nicolau’s work provides, as a backdrop, a discussion about political culture, this work will concentrate its focus on institutional dynamics, having been seen that, as warns Przeworski, despite the fact that democracies need democrats, the relationship of cause and effect between questions and answers related to belief in the democracy gives rise to controversies (Przeworski, 2019, p. 129).

In other words, the question is if Brazilian democratic institutions will be resilient enough to face the consequences of an authoritarian government,

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elected amid a representative crisis, or if it is a turn in the direction of a low-quality democracy – or illiberal democracy, a term adopted in recent literature. Such questioning necessarily goes through the debate and analysis of party disputes, which is par excellence a form of the expression of “general will”. Nevertheless, the analysis of an electoral dispute does not exempt the analysts from the task of contextualizing the elections with a theoretical and historical backdrop that sets the stage of the dispute and puts it in a broader perspective, placing it – using the term coined by Huntington – in a wave that brings with it a demonstration effect.<sup>2</sup>

The main hypothesis of this paper is that the 2018 election, which broke the polarization between the two main parties, PT and PSDB, caused the divorce between society and the political system. Its peak were the protests of 2013, accentuated by the investigations of Car Wash Operation, and it was consummated by the questioning of the 2014 electoral result. To measure the disruptive depth of 2018, we will confront the performance of the main parties elected to Congress, along with the results for mayoral and city halls and city council elections in twenty-seven capitals. Therefore, if there is proof of a steep decline in the number of traditional parties in 2020, we can affirm that the rise of Bolsonarism was a movement of tectonic plates towards a regime of different nature than a competitive democracy. If the return of traditional parties in 2020 is verified, we can classify Bolsonarism – at least the most extreme form of it – as what Sérgio Abranches conceptualized as “incidental rulers” (Abranches, 2020).

For the author, incidental governments are products of popular uprisings against the established parties that lose their connection with society and fall short of the expectations, mainly, of those who are in a less favorable position in a market economy system. Such incidental governments are supported by unstable majorities in parliament, in the case of parliamentarism, or around a leadership that gains popularity in a critical election. Being “incidental”, the rulers generally are not elected to a second term and, therefore, an authoritarian regime does not come to fruition. However, their time in power tends to leave a legacy of discreditation of democracy (Abranches, 2020, pp. 77–96).

From controversial congressman belonging to the lower clergy to president of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro was notable for his aggressive, prejudiced and far-right speech. Always emphasizing obscure passages of the military regime, throughout his terms, now in the exercise of the presidency of the Republic, Bolsonaro approaches a kind of “antigeisel”, trying to promote a slow, gradual, but not always safe closure. However, given the thickening of the political and health crisis, the chances of Bolsonaro becoming an incidental elected official in a critical election are great.

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<sup>2</sup> The first wave of democratization was in the period between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of World War 1. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: The Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. São Paulo: Attica. 1994.

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We divided this discussion into five sections. After the introduction, in the second section, we delimited the historical and theoretical debate to discuss the principal approaches regarding the risks of the current democracy in the context of Bolsonaro's election. In the third section, we laid out a panorama of the public perception of institutions and the implications for the dynamics of political polarization. In the fourth part, we seek to empirically test our hypothesis taking into consideration the results of the 2018 and 2020 elections. Finally, in the fifth section, we present our final considerations.

### **From transition to instability: the background of an authoritarian electoral option**

Many authors have faced the challenge of conceptualizing the diverse regimes that, in one way or another, mix authoritarian components with a democratic façade. This challenge intensified with the election of Trump and Bolsonaro, and that, according to Przeworski, left us a warning that the democratic institutions may not offer the necessary safeguards to prevent their rules from being subverted by the duly elected rulers. (Przeworski, 2019, p. 19).

Among the attempts to conceptualize the current regimes that distance themselves from what is considered a prerequisite for free and complete democracies, perhaps the most fruitful endeavor was undertaken in the 1990s by Fred Zakaria when he coined the term “illiberal” to characterize regimes of peripheral countries that had, as their *modus operandi*, the systematic violations of civil liberties, freedom of speech, corruption, and fraudulent elections (Zakaria, 1997). The idea that democracy can erode from within resounds in the work of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), in their analysis of the election of Donald Trump, and Albertus Menaldo (2018) in regard to democracies in consolidation.

Levitsky and Ziblatt formulate a series of indicators seeking to measure what characterizes as a contemporary demagogue. Among these indicators are the disdain for the “rules of the game”, the attempt to delegitimize the opponent, the tolerance for, or encouraging of, violence and restrictions on the exercise of civil liberties. According to the authors, this would be the authoritarianism that would install itself in the United States and that would parallel the ascension of Mussolini and Hitler. All exaggerations aside – principally concerning the American democracy – it is necessary to recognize the successful finding that the military coups or great revolutions belong, at least for the moment, to the past. On the other hand, it seems irrefutable that the institutional antibodies developed by democracies are the result of the distinct historical processes of institutional enrooting, and therefore, each democracy will produce a different reaction.

In the same line of reasoning, Albertus and Menaldo (2018), with a broader comparative scope point out, like Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), the silent

establishment of authoritarian regimes, but they also emphasize the role of the political elite. According to them, such institutions are designed to safeguard the members of the authoritarian regime. This reasoning leads Albertus and Menaldo to counterpose an elite-based democracy and a popular democracy. A democracy based on the elite is one whose institutions and legal framework limit the distributive responsibilities and, in some way, restrict competition. On the other hand, a popular democracy would ensure a more efficient democratization process in which the “authoritarian rubble” is nullified.

On the other hand, the concept of national populism, as expressed by Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2020), offers a less catastrophic perspective for democracy. For the authors, national populism is an answer to the wariness of what is considered “traditional” politics (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2020, p. 130). The origin of national populism is in the distrust caused by the elitist nature of liberal democracy, the insecurity caused by the migratory waves, the sense of deprivation brought on by the neoliberal globalized economy and by the misalignment between traditional parties and society (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2020, pp. 20–22).

In the Brazilian case, we have a transition initiated “from the top” with the indirect election of General Geisel in 1974. A member of the moderate line, Geisel, along with Golbery, noticed the erosion of the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime, even though the economy was growing at an accelerated rate. Nevertheless, according to Chirio (2012), the transition initiated by Geisel was not aimed exactly at democratization, but at “distension” to neutralize the arbitrariness committed by the hard-liners and the institutionalization of a hybrid regime, in which the representative practice did not threaten the political limits granted on the basis of an authoritarian ideal.

In order to put an end to the distension, Geisel had to maintain the electoral calendar and, on another front, face the regime’s hard-liners. The legislative elections of 1974 and 1978 were moments of great uncertainty regarding the continuity of the process of opening of the authoritarian regime, since the victory of the opposition in the most developed regions of Brazil threatened the government’s majority in the National Congress. In the case of a controlled opening, the elections became the main institutionalized channel for contesting the regime, and, for this very reason, a constant source of rule changes so that the opposition would not obtain an overwhelming victory in the legislative elections.

On the other hand, even if the hotspots of guerilla movements had been done away with in the Costa e Silva and Médici governments, hardline sectors (sectors that the current President Jair Bolsonaro is sympathetic to) continuously expressed their dissatisfaction with the opening of the dictatorship, first with the murder of the journalist Wladimir Herzog and a worker named Manoel Fiel Filho in 1975, then with several bomb attacks during the Figueiredo government, the latter chosen by Geisel to be his successor and carry out the transition.

The New Republic arises from this tension within the military regime and from a transition that preserved the institutional foundations of the political regime and that allowed the majority of the political elite from the previous regime to remain at the head of the public administration. It is in line with the Albertus and Menaldo's thesis about the influence of elites from the previous regime on the institutionalization of the new democracy. According to Souza (1988) and Diniz (1997), skepticism regarding the prospects of a democratic consolidation was justified by the characteristics of institutional continuity and little social representativity of political parties.

Although several academic papers, produced during the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, have verified, based on solid statistical models, the strengthening of rules and intra-institutional mechanisms<sup>3</sup>, the carelessness with historical and social processes did not allow due attention to be given to the fact that the short period of political stability experienced in the New Republic was achieved thanks to the ability to manage large coalitions during the governments of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) and Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010). The first stabilized the economy – while still Minister of Finance of Itamar Franco – and began to build the foundations of a regulatory state, and the latter – benefited from the stabilization of the economy – expanded income distribution and social inclusion.

The sixteen years of political and economic stability (Cardoso / Lula period) were preceded and followed by two impeachments of presidents who failed to manage coalitions (Collor, 1992 and Rousseff, 2016), a high degree of party/parliament fragmentation, unemployment, recession, and corruption scandals that reveal the persistence of promiscuous relationships between parties, the state, and the private sector.

The polarization of the presidential elections, from 1994 to 2014 between PT and PSDB, did not minimize the spread of acronyms present in the general elections. The same strategy of “dividing oppositions to govern”, devised by Golbery do Couto e Silva, when he put an end to bipartisanship in 1979, was used by Rousseff aiming at the destabilization of the PMDB, which, since the re-democratization, had been the center of governance and, therefore, essential in coalitions.

The strategy, which had not worked out in the authoritarian period, was even worse under the democratic regime. The attempt to use the governmental machine to stimulate the creation of new parties increased the price of negotiations between the executive and the legislature precisely at the time when the expansion of government spending had reached its limit, which made it

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<sup>3</sup> The studies produced under the aegis of neo-institutionalism began by focusing on the internal dynamics of the House of Congress (Figueiredo & Limongi, 1999) passing through the connections between the offices of ministers and electoral performance – suggesting the existence of a vicious cycle (Meneguello, 1998; Santos, 2003), and lastly sought to understand the dynamics of the changing of parties and coalitions (among others see Melo, 2004; Krause *et al.*, 2017).

impossible to maintain public policies aimed at social inclusion and caused an intense economic recession.

The rupture of society with the channels of political representation occurred in 2013, with large popular demonstrations mobilized by social networks in the style of the “Arab Spring” and, as observed in the rest of the world, showed the decline of institutionalized channels of political representation. However, notwithstanding other exogenous factors, in 2013 the inability of the Brazilian political system to consolidate accountability mechanisms that allow for a minimum level of accountability between government and governed was an endogenous factor. What followed was the implosion of the political parties’ funding mechanisms, the protagonism of players who did not have elective mandates, such as prosecutors and magistrates, and the desperate attempt to maintain a political system that no longer even looked at the electorate.

It is in this context that the 2018 election takes place, with a weakening participation of the center parties and the confrontation between the left and the extreme right, each highly ideological, in Przeworski’s words, each side believing that the other is the enemy to be destroyed at any cost (Przeworski, 2020, p. 45).

## **Political discontent: a brief overview of public perception of institutions**

Trust in the political system is directly linked to its capacity to respond to the needs and expectations of society. Thus, the recognition of its democratic legitimacy, on the part of society, depends on the performance of its institutions. In other words, institutions only exist inasmuch as people believe in their legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> But trust in governments and satisfaction with the democratic regime are not the only sources of legitimacy in the political system, – there is also a need for free, periodic, and competitive elections (Dahl, 1997; Schumpeter, 1961). In any case, citizens’ assessment of the institutions’ performance is key to understanding the support for democratic norms in the country.

In this section, we assess the Brazilian population’s perception of the functioning of the democratic regime and political institutions through survey from the Brazilian Electoral Study<sup>5</sup> (ESEB). More specifically, the degree of public satisfaction with democracy and the evaluation of Brazilians regarding

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<sup>4</sup> In general terms, the legitimacy of democratic institutions can be considered as “the belief that the political institutions in place, despite their defects and flaws, are better than others that may be established and, therefore, can demand obedience” (Linz, 1978, p. 16).

<sup>5</sup> The ESEB is a post-election survey of academic nature associated with the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project of the University of Michigan, coordinated by the political scientist Rachel Meneguello (CESOP/Unicamp).

the performance of political institutions for the period between 2010 and 2018 will be assessed. Table 1 shows citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of Brazilian democracy based on ESEB three-wave data.

**Table 1.**  
Satisfaction with  
the functioning  
of democracy (%)

	2010 (%)	2014 (%)	2018 (%)
Very satisfied / satisfied	48	38.1	12.3
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	17.5	20.8	4.8
A little satisfied/ not at all satisfied	30	35.9	80.2
DK / NR	4.5	5.2	2.7

Source: ESEB 2010, 2014 and 2018.

In fact, Brazilian democracy does not live its best moments. According to the data, there is a decline in citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and a significant increase among those who declare themselves dissatisfied. Only 12% of respondents affirmed they were satisfied with the performance of democracy in 2018, a drop of 36 percentage points compared to the survey carried out in 2010, while 80% of respondents declared themselves dissatisfied in the 2018 survey, which represents an increase of 50% compared to 2010. Although satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is shaken, in general, most citizens do not endorse authoritarian regimes, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
Preference  
for democracy (%)

	2010 (%)	2014 (%)	2018 (%)
Democracy is always better than any other form of government	78.4	62.1	68.7
In some situations, a dictatorship is better than a democracy	8.2	10.3	15.2
It does not matter	5.3	8.6	5.3
DK / NR	8.1	19.0	10.8

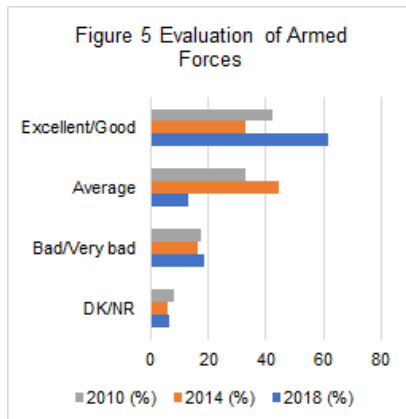
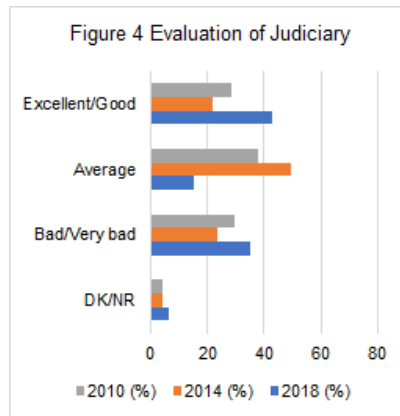
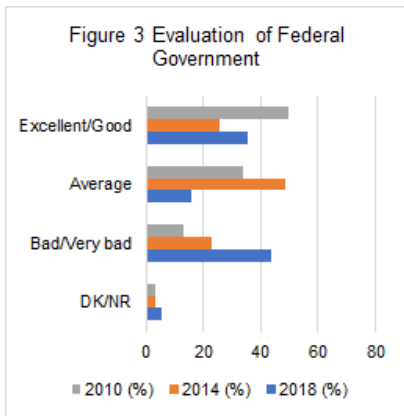
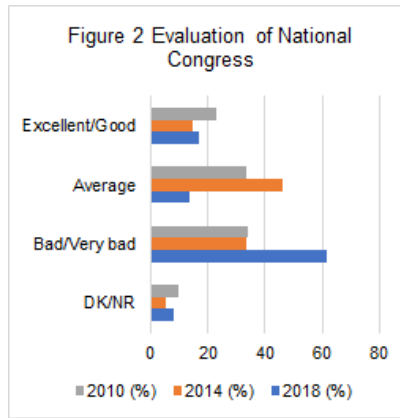
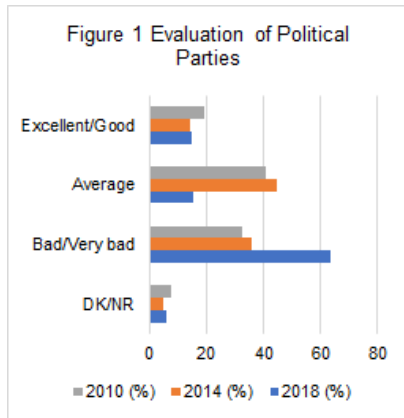
Source: ESEB 2010, 2014 and 2018.

Despite the high preference for democracy, in almost a decade, there was a decrease of ten percentage points in the rate of those who prefer a democratic regime to an authoritarian alternative. The number of those who express preferences for authoritarian regimes has also increased, although it is still only a small part of the population. In contrast to the high levels of preference for democracy, the high dissatisfaction with it is complemented by the negative evaluations regarding the performance of political institutions, which represents widespread rejection. In the figures below, we present how the Brazil-



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Source: elaborated on the basis of ESEB 2010, 2014 and 2018. The question of the survey: “How do you evaluate the performance of (...)?”. In the values, those who answered excellent and good were added; average positive and negative regular; bad and very bad; and did not know and did not respond.

ians evaluated the performance of the following institutions: political parties, National Congress, presidency, judiciary, and armed forces.

As the figures show, there is an increasing tendency in the rejection of representative institutions over the years. Political parties and the National Congress are the institutions whose performance is the most poorly evaluated. The percentage of those who think the performance is bad/very bad continues to grow over time and exceeds 60% in 2018, while the rate of those who consider it excellent/good does not reach 20% for both. The performance of the federal government, on the other hand, shows lower levels of rejection than those observed for parties and Congress, although the rate of those who find the federal government bad/very bad has been increasing over time, exceeding 40% in 2018. The judiciary, in the year 2018, presented a positive rating (43%) close to the rejection rating (35%), but what calls the attention is that during the historical series there is a decrease in the frequency of those who consider their performance to be average and an increase in the evaluations of opposite poles – great/good versus bad/very bad. On the other hand, the armed forces are the institution that traditionally receives the highest positive evaluation, increasing from 42% in 2010 to 62% in 2018, the percentage of individuals who evaluate their performance as excellent/good.

Negative evaluations regarding the performance of institutions contribute to dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the country. That is what the opinions in relation to the representative arenas indicate, in particular, the political parties, for which discontent is widely noticed. In the three waves of the ESEB, similar questions were asked about party identification, more precisely asking whether citizens like and feel represented by any political party. The results of these opinions can be seen in the following Table 3.

	LIKE			REPRESENT		
	2010 (%)	2014 (%)	2018 (%)	2010 (%)	2014 (%)	2018 (%)
Yes	47.7	31.6	15.8	39.2	25.4	27.6
No	51.7	64.5	83.3	57.9	67.8	68.8
DK / NR	0.6	3.9	0.9	2.9	6.8	3.6

**Table 3.**  
Representation and party  
preference (%)

Source: ESEB 2010, 2014 and 2018. Questions: “Is there a political party that you like?” (2010 and 2014); “Do you consider yourself close to any political party?” (2018); “Is there a political party that represents the way you think?”

The data reinforce negative evaluations of the parties. It is noteworthy that there is an increase among those who declared that they did not like any party. In the survey carried out in 2010, approximately 50% stated that they did not like any party, while in 2018, this share rose to 83% of respondents. On the other hand, there was a sharp decline of around 30% in the percentage of those

who declared that they liked a party in 2018, compared to 2010. Among those who declared that they did not feel represented by any party, there was an increase of 11 percentage points, in the 2018 round, compared to 2010, with approximately 70% of respondents declaring that they did not feel represented by any party.

In the survey carried out by ESEB in 2018, questions were also included regarding citizens' trust in the country's political institutions. Once again, mistrust in relation to the parties prevails, with 84.4%, reaching the highest levels of distrust, followed by the National Congress with 81.2% and the presidency with 70.1%.<sup>6</sup>

In general, the data show that in the public perception there is a prevalent feeling of discreditation and distrust of representative institutions, which increased considerably in the last election analyzed. In the next section, we seek to identify how this context of widespread citizen discontent was reflected in the last general elections of 2018.

## From social to electoral polarization

Never before in its political history had Brazil experienced such a long period of democratic institutionality, that is, stability in political competition patterns. However, in a society with little democratic experience and frequently used anti-republican practices, as is the case in Brazil, there was an increasing skepticism towards parties and government institutions.

The intersection of these elements culminated in the growth of radicalism and the intensification of political polarization in society, changing the pattern of competition that had prevailed in the previous six presidential elections (1994–2014) structured around the dispute between the Workers' Party (PT) versus the Party of Social Brazilian Democracy (PSDB) (Braga, 2010; Limongi & Cortez, 2010; Carreirão, 2014), and gave rise to the ascension of the extreme right-wing populist candidates like that of Bolsonaro.

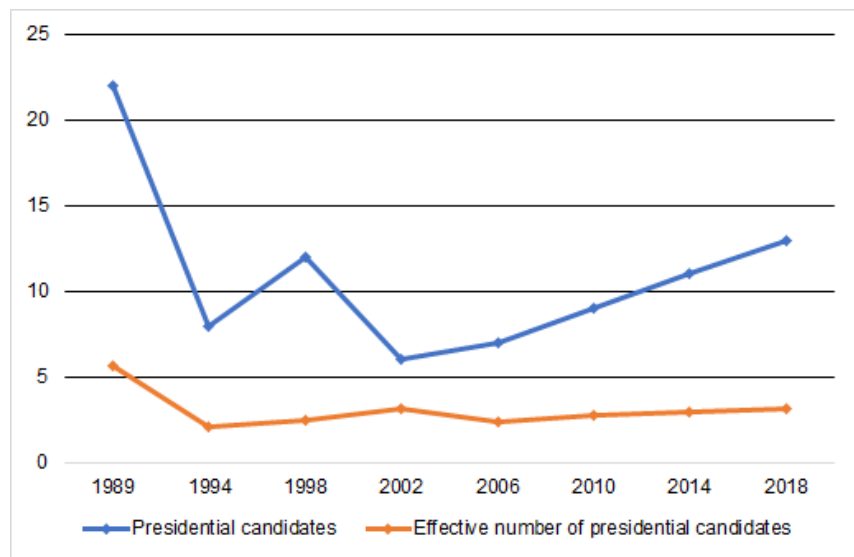
Regarding the polarization of society, the ESEB survey asked about the ideological self-positioning of voters on a scale from zero to ten, where zero represents more to the left and ten more to the right. In 2018, the vast majority, 43%, positioned themselves between seven and ten on the right scale, an increase of 16 percentage points in relation to the 2014 survey. On the other hand, 20% positioned themselves in the center (between four and six on the scale) and approximately 15% positioned themselves between zero and three on the scale in the 2018 survey. These results indicate a turn to the right of society which was reflected in the elections.

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<sup>6</sup> These results included the answers little/no trust. The question in the ESEB survey was: "Regarding these institutions, what level of trust do you have in them?"

In the context of an increase in political polarization of the population, the traditional center-right parties (mainly MDB and PSDB) had a setback in the 2018 elections, opening space for “new” competitive political parties – such as REDE, Novo and PSL itself –, increasing party fragmentation<sup>7</sup>. From a systemic point of view, the dynamics of a polarized pluralism, as Sartori (1982) defines, with centrifugal tendencies of party competition and high propensity to institutional instability, ends up taking over. Under this political context, the center loses its capacity to structure electoral preferences, increasing ideological distances.

At the same time, we observed an increase in electoral uncertainty, caused by the Brazilian (economic and political) crisis, but also by an increase in the supply of candidates in the 2018 presidential race. Figure 6 below shows the evolution of the number of candidates in the presidential elections and the Effective Number of Parties (ENP) coefficients for presidential disputes throughout the post-88 democratic period.



**Figure 6.**  
Number of Candidates  
and Effective Number of  
Candidates in Presidential  
Elections

Source: elaborated on the basis of TSE data.

In the 2018 presidential race, PT, to a certain extent, remained as the uniting pole of the left (rivaling PDT). The novelty was the emergence of Bolsonarism, which managed to attract a large part of the votes of the center-right and

<sup>7</sup> In the Congress elected in 2018, Brazil broke its own record of fragmentation, electing congressmen from 30 different parties compared to 28 in 2014. In the Senate, there were 15 different parties in 2015 and it turned into 21 different ones in 2019. Currently there are 33 registered parties in the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE).

right-wing electorate, as well as of those segments of the center-left that were unhappy with the PT government, increasing anti-PT-ism. Nevertheless, the ENP of effective candidates for the presidential election has remained stable. What gained strength in this election was the ideological polarization, which took a turn to the extremes.

The high degree of uncertainty that marked the 2018 general elections in Brazil translated into a strong polarization around the presidential dispute. For the first time, a government with representatives of the armed forces – president and vice president – was democratically elected in Brazil. The analysis of the results of the first round of the presidential dispute, under the right/left axis, presented in Table 4, shows the high concentration of voting at the extremes of the ideological spectrum (92%), in detriment to center candidates.

Left	Center	Right
PT; PDT; PSOL; PSTU; PPL; REDE	PSDB; MDB; PODE	PSL; PATRI; DC; NOVO
43.41% valid votes	6.76% valid votes	49.83% valid votes

Source: TSE. Proportion of votes by party in presidential elections: PSL: 46.03; PT: 29.28; PDT: 12.47; PSDB 4.76; NOVO: 2.5; PATRI: 1.26; MDB: 1.2; REDE: 1; PODE: 0.8; PSOL: 0.58; PSTU: 0.05; DC: 0.04; PPL: 0.03.

The influence of Jair Bolsonaro’s candidacy generated a coattail effect on other electoral disputes, to the point that many candidates linked their campaign to that of Bolsonaro, in detriment to candidates from the same party. As an emblematic example, this phenomenon occurred with the campaign of the governor of São Paulo still in the first round. The ex-mayor João Doria (PSDB), with “BolsoDoria”, linked his campaign to that of Bolsonaro, then leader in voter intentions for the presidential dispute<sup>8</sup>.

According to the information in Table 5, in the elections for federal congressmen, in large part, this trend was also replicated, with a concentration of votes for the right-wing parties. The coattail effect of the presidential election was also felt in the voting of the small party Partido Social Liberal – Social Liberal Party – (PSL) for which the then presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro ran, becoming the party with the highest number of votes in the 2018 elections and also the one that most increased its seats compared to the previous legislature, skyrocketing from 1 elected congressman in 2014 to 52.

The 2018 election is an example of what in political science is often called a “critical election”, that is, one in which there are significant transformations

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**Table 4.**  
Distribution on the left/right axis of the valid votes in the presidential elections (2018)

<sup>8</sup> Other elected candidates, getting a ride on the Bolsonaro wave were Wilson Witzel, a judge and political novice, elected to the Rio de Janeiro government by the Christian Social Party, and Romeu Zema, businessman and also a novice in elections, elected as governor of Minas Gerais by Partido Novo.

in the patterns of party competition in effect until then. Caught in the wake of a prolonged crisis (starting with the popular demonstrations of 2013 and aggravated by the complaints of corruption revealed by Lava Jato from 2014 onwards), the 2018 election had an overwhelming impact on the electoral performance of traditional parties by breaking the center of the party system and pushing the electorate to extremes in the political spectrum. Meanwhile, the right grew electorally. Led by Bolsonaro, it left behind the stain of the “shamed right wing”, once associated with the political and economic burden of the

**Table 5.**  
Distribution on the left/  
right axis\* of valid votes and  
seats in the 2014 and 2018  
elections for the House of  
Congress, by party (%)

Parties	Votes (%)		Seats (%)	
	2014	2018	2014	2018
Right	38.4	59.2	41.4	58.6
Center	31.9	15.6	30	15.7
Left	29.7	25.2	28.6	25.7

Source: elaborated on the basis of TSE data.

\* Note: Parties in the left field: PT, PSB, PDT, PSOL, PC do B, PCB, PMN, PPL PSTU, PCO, PV, REDE Center: PSDB, MDB, PTB, PMB, PROS, PPS, SD. Right: DEM, PATRI, PHS, PP, PR, PRB, PRP, PSC, PSD, DC, PRN, PRTB, PSL, PT do B / AVANTE, PTC, PTN / PODE, NOVO.

military regime (1964–1985), and assumed the liberal-conservative agendas, which found fertile ground in the 2018 elections, electing the most conservative Congress in the post-re-democratization period. This right-wing wave that has taken over the country is not limited to just a monolithic group but finds support in different sectors of society.

In an insightful article, Timothy Power and Rodrigo Rodrigues-Silveira (2019) distinguish four sectors of the Brazilian right. The first, known as political/clientelist right, is formed by parties and politicians with office-seeking motivations, who prioritize participation in government coalitions aimed at accessing state resources, regardless of ideologies. This category includes parties with no program commitments, and they are recognized as “Centrão” (Big Center), made up of office-seeking parties (PMDB), “parties for rent” from right-center (PTB, PR e PP), and tiny parties, usually co-opted by the governments in office.

The other three sectors of the right show greater programmatic adherence and are identified as the economic right, committed to an agenda of pro-market reforms and shrinking of the state; the religious right, identified with evangelical and neo-Pentecostal segments, committed to defending conservative moral agendas, such as opposition to abortion and homosexuality; and the authoritarian right, which combines a radical defense of law and order with a nostalgia for the military regime (Power & Rodrigues-Silveira, 2019, p. 264).

In the 2018 elections, Bolsonaro got himself elected uniting the last three rights – economic, religious, and authoritarian – and explicitly campaigning against the political right, reinforcing the “outsider” aspect of his candidacy. Paradoxically, while presenting himself with an anti-establishment rhetoric, contrary to conventional party politics, Bolsonaro made use of a long tradition of parties with weak programmatic commitments, which work as personal vehicles, and he was elected by a small party – which he joined a few months before the elections. Before that, he had already been in seven right-wing parties.

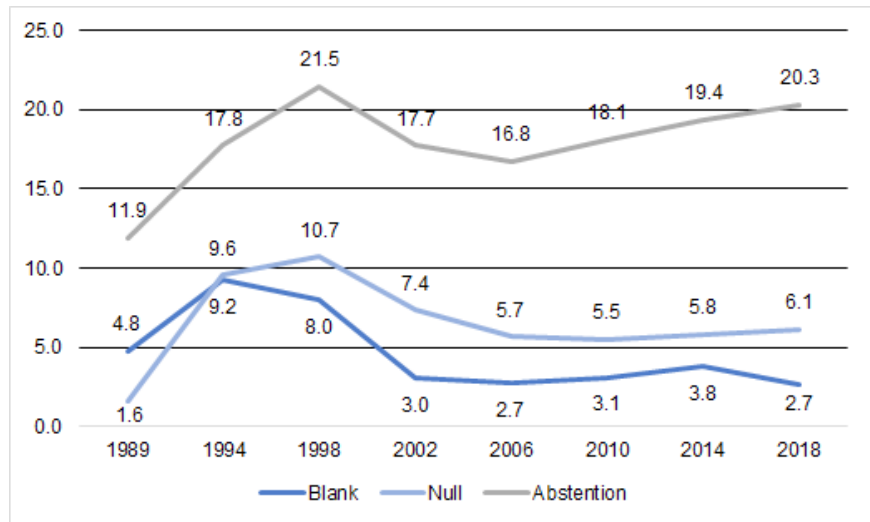
Once elected, Bolsonaro composed his ministerial cabinet mainly with former members from the three right-wing sectors that occupy important positions, but mainly with military personnel, and refused to negotiate the formation of a government coalition and adopt practices associated with what he called “traditional politics” or “old politics”. Such *modus operandi* caused numerous problems of political articulation and increased the protagonism of Congress in the relationship with the Executive power, which had a low success rate in the approval of executive orders sent to Congress and also a high proportion of presidential vetoes overturned, which earned him the nickname “queen of England”.

Instead of appointing technical members, as he had promised, he formed his cabinet of members of the ideological wing given over to radicalism (formed by his sons and the astrologer Olavo de Carvalho) and turned to the military (retired and active), who began to act as “co-signers” of the government that opted for a minority strategy – unprecedented in the Brazilian coalition presidentialism – in the negotiation with Congress. Without a supporting coalition, he runs the risk of becoming politically isolated and transforming himself into a “lame duck” president. The fact is that not only the absence of a coalition with parliament creates a perception that Bolsonaro is a weak president. Other examples can be seen in the breaking away from his former party, PSL, which occurred when he failed to take command of the party and in the plan to found a new party (Alliance for Brazil), which seems more and more distant. At the end of his second year in office, worn down by his disastrous performance in the health crisis, in a context of increasing unpopularity, he turned to acting strategically with parties attracted by the benefits of public power, forming a government coalition with greater room for maneuver in the Legislative branch.

To do so, Bolsonaro gets closer to the political right (the so-called “Big Center”) and negotiates the nomination of positions in companies and state agencies in exchange for support in Congress, in order to ensure his own survival and prevent a potential impeachment process. However, this approximation with the parties of the so-called “Big Center” should not occur without raising tensions in other sectors of the right and the Bolsonaro’s bases, since Bolsonaro himself was elected – and continued after being elected – with a discourse critical of the “Big Center”, whom he associated with “old politics”.

At the same time that the series of crises contributed to the weakening of the president in relation to the other powers, it has also incited tension between the government branches, with Bolsonaro threatening to adopt illiberal practices. It should not be underestimated, given that he keeps at the center of his government the authoritarian right wing – which is not necessarily the military –, openly hostile to institutions and opposition forces.

Finally, another question that is worth highlighting is the high rate of electoral alienation (sum of blank, null or abstention votes), which, in the first round of voting of the 2018 presidential elections, reached almost 30% of the electorate, i.e., almost one third of eligible voters abstained from choosing of the president. These results indicate that, besides the two blocks of polarization in the dispute, there is still another “third electoral force”, composed of those voters who do not feel represented by any of the candidates. The figure below shows the evolution of voter apathy for first rounds in post-redemocratization presidential races:



**Figure 7.**  
Evolution of blank, null and abstention votes in the first rounds of presidential elections (1989–2018)

Source: elaborated on the basis of TSE data.

Figure 7 shows that from 2006 on, electoral alienation rates increased gradually over the years, even though voting is mandatory. A probable explanation for this phenomenon is the dissatisfaction with the political scenario, which faces a serious crisis of representation caused, *inter alia*, by the recurrent involvement of the political class in corruption scandals. In this context, it is noteworthy that, in a very polarized election like the one in 2018, about one-third of the total electorate opted out of choosing the President of the Republic, practically the same number of votes that the president-elect received. In view of all this, the high rate of electoral alienation seems to have the source in the discontentment toward representative institutions seen in the nation’s public opinion.



## Performance of traditional parties in the 2018 and 2020 elections

Incomplete Democracies:  
The Brazilian Case

Maria do Socorro Sousa Braga  
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Finally in this section, we verify in which direction the Brazilian political regime is going with the ascension of Bolsonarism to power in 2018. Therefore, if there is proof of a decline of traditional parties in 2020, we will be able to affirm that Bolsonarism was a shift of tectonic plates toward a regime of another nature than that of a competitive democracy. If the return of traditional parties in 2020 is seen, we could classify Bolsonarism – at least in its most radical form – as what Sérgio Abranches conceptualized as “incidental governments” (Abranches, 2020). To this end, we have prepared tables 6 and 7 which compare the performance of traditional parties in the 2018 general elections with that achieved by the same political agents in the 2020 municipal elections. Traditional parties are those affiliations that have been in the country’s party system since the political opening process in the late 1970s.

The 2018 elections marked changes in relation to previous ones, with a strong shift to the right and the collapse of traditional parties that lost space in the Senate and Congress (PP, MDB, PSDB, PT, and PTB) and the rise of parties that until then had little representation (PSL) and newcomers in elections (REDE and NOVO). This effect was repeated, at least in part, in the 2020 municipal elections, in which, with the exception of DEM and PP, which registered an increase in the number of mayors elected and seats in the city councils, all other traditional parties decreased the number of cities governed and seats occupied in the city councils, compared to 2016.

The 2020 elections were held in an atypical scenario of health restrictions and social isolation resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. The best performances were attributed to the right-wing and center-right parties of the ideological spectrum, such as PP and DEM, which significantly increased the number of municipalities won in 2020. On the other hand, PSDB and MDB were the biggest losers of the executive offices in municipalities. In absolute numbers, PSDB (–277) and MDB (–260) were the parties that lost the largest number of municipalities compared to 2016. Among the parties that are part of the left-wing political spectrum, PT suffered a strong shrinkage since 2016 and, following this downward trend, shrunk even more in municipalities and did not elect a mayor in any of the country’s capitals.

Although traditional parties have lost seats in Congress and significantly decreased the number of elected mayors, parties such as PSDB, MDB, and PT are far from becoming irrelevant. As can be seen, in the 2020 elections, PSDB and MDB partially recover from the strong electoral setback suffered in the 2018 elections, with the MDB being the party that continues to have the largest number of elected mayors in Brazil, governing 784 municipalities in all. The PSDB, on the other hand, although it lost the largest number of municipalities, remained the party that manages cities with the most inhabit-

ants, in total, about 34 million Brazilians live in municipalities governed by the “Toucans”<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, the results of the 2020 municipal elections represented important defeats for candidates supported by President Bolsonaro, as in the case of Celso Russomano (Republicans), who was eliminated from the second round of the race for mayor in São Paulo, and Marcello Crivella (Republicans), who suffered a crushing defeat in the second round of the race for mayor in Rio de Janeiro. The poor performance of the candidates who were linked to Bolsonaro and associated with the erratic conduct of the president in dealing with the health crisis, contributed to the weakening of Bolsonarism and the loss of the president’s prestige. The following tables present the performance of the traditional parties in the 2018 national and 2020 municipal elections.

Votes and Seats	PP	DEM	MDB	PSDB	PT	PDT	PTB	Blank/Null	Total
Percentage of votes in the House of Representatives	5.6	4.6	5.5	5.9	10.3	4.7	2.1	18.712.260	98.398.564
Number of governors elected	1	2	3	3	4	1	0	21.749.078	27
Number of Senate seats	6	6	12	8	6	4	3		81
Number of seats in the Federal House of Representatives	38	29	34	29	54	28	10		513

**Table 6.**  
Performance of traditional parties in the general elections of 2018 (Brazil)

Source: elaborated on the basis of TSE data.

Votes and seats	PP	DEM	MDB	PSDB	PT	PDT	PTB	Blank/Null	Total
Percentage of votes for mayor	7.5	8.3	10.7	10.5	6.8	5.2	2.6	10.969.405	100.879.416
Number of elected mayors	685	466	784	522	183	314	216		5.568
Percentage of votes for city councilmen in the city council	7.4	6.6	8.5	6.6	5.6	5.4	3.8	10.138.845	102.802.066
Number of seats in the city council	6172	4187	7109	4270	2575	3326	2375		58.114

**Table 7.**  
Performance of traditional parties in municipal elections of 2020 (Brazil)

Source: elaborated on the basis of TSE data.

<sup>9</sup> The figure of a toucan is the symbol/mascot of PSDB.

The first important observation from these results is that from one election to the next there was relative continuity in electoral support for the parties. When we bear in mind the total number of valid votes, there was even an increase in the electorate that opted for a political party when casting their ballots. Although voting continues to be mandatory in our context, the choice of a party is one way of expressing society's electoral preferences. But even with all the process of erosion and disorganization experienced in recent years, Brazilian political parties maintain a significant margin of allegiance by the national electorate.

A second important aspect to note is that, among the older parties, those on right of the ideological political spectrum, DEM and PP, and center-right, PSDB and MDB, increased their electoral political power considerably in the 2020 election. While the parties on the left, PT and PDT, decreased the margin of electoral support and, consequently, control of political positions. There was, therefore, a return of conservative forces to political control of the country.

It is important to emphasize that the Brazilian right-wing segment concentrates the oldest parties, under different names, but long standing in national politics. It is the political family that has persisted from the Imperial Age to the Sixth Republic (1985 onwards). Mainwaring, Meneguello and Power (2000) show that the success of the conservative parties in maintaining political power in much of this period is related to the strategy of conciliation with civilian and military groups at the head of the government coalition at the national level, to the extent that they will remain in power even if in alliance with the forces that were politically opposed to them. Specifically concerning the last democratic transition process, Hagopian (1996), O'Donnel (1996) and Souza (1989) point out that the absence of a rupture between the 1964–1985 authoritarian regime and the so-called New Republic resulted in the continuity of the conservative political elites in charge of the reorganization of the new democratic order.

As was the case in the electoral results in the United States with the victory of Democrat Joe Biden, the growth of right-wing and center-right parties in the 2020 Brazilian municipal elections are indicative that, despite the analytical merit of the mentioned literature on the possibility of internal corrosion of democracies, the thesis regarding incidental rulers was evident in the United States and has strong indications that the same evidence will be seen in Brazil.

## **Final considerations**

In the face of the critical election of 2018, the traditional right parties, associated with the political establishment, displayed resilience and were victorious in the 2020 municipal elections. Even though municipal elections do not have a decisive impact on the national one, past trends can pave the way for the path to future disputes. However, the risks to democracy posed by an authori-

tarian government, elected in 2018 to command the fourth largest democracy in the world, raise an alert about the need to maintain constant vigilance.

The 2018 elections consecrated an extreme right-wing candidate as president of the world's fourth largest democracy. If, on the one hand, his victory, legitimized at the polls, is proof of the consolidation of the democratic system in the country, on the other hand, it has sparked fear of a democratic regression.

This fear is justified when we consider that Bolsonaro has met all four requirements proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) to identify potential authoritarian rulers: rejection of or weak commitment to the rules of the democratic game; denial of the legitimacy of opponents; tolerance and encouragement of violence; willingness to restrict the civil liberties of opponents, including the media. In his 28 years as a congressman, Bolsonaro has become notable for his extreme positions and authoritarian bias, with controversial statements not rarely associated with hate speech, disparaging "minorities" (women, LGBT, blacks, and indigenous people) and apology to military dictatorship and torture (Sponholz, Christofolletti, 2019; Smith, 2020). As noted above, the divisive ethos, widely exploited during his campaign, has lasted during the government, which has always been prone to crises and always finds itself in a constant tug-of-war against the Legislative and Judiciary branches.

In the midst of the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Bolsonaro continued to instigate the polarization of society, encouraging participation in pro-government demonstrations and against other branches, ignoring the recommendations of health authorities. Hostility against political institutions and irresponsibility are characteristic of populist-authoritarian politicians, both from the right and the left.

Therefore, a dilemma the democratic process faces is that free and fair elections can elect extremist demagogues who are not committed to institutional limits. This dilemma was emphasized by Fareed Zakaria, in an article written in 1997, in which he coined the term "illiberal democracy" to refer to countries – especially Latin American and Eastern European countries – whose transition to democracy retains traces of the authoritarian period. In the author's words:

*Democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.* (Zakaria, 1997, p. 22)

This phenomenon is extremely challenging since it is the democratic mechanisms of popular elections that allow leaders with authoritarian profiles to come to power (Zakaria, 1997; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). When elected, such leaders subvert the laws for their own benefit, raising the liberal deficit and undermining the system of checks and balances, putting the regime at risk of going down the path of illiberal democracies.

For the first time since the re-democratization, Brazil elected an ultra-rightist as president of the Republic. In this sense, it has come closer to countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, which have elected extreme right-wing populist rulers. As if all the extremist outbursts of President Bolsonaro were not enough, the large number of amendments – and repeals – of decrees and provisional measures have deleterious effects, as they allow the Executive to legislate without the participation of the Legislative branch. In fact, democracy has never been his north. As president, he has further intensified the polarization present in society – as if he were in a permanent campaign – and has been testing institutions and contributing to the corrosion of accountability mechanisms. But unlike his far-right counterparts in European countries – such as Polish President Andrzej Duda and, especially, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán – Bolsonaro does not have the popular and congress support necessary to transform the country into an “illiberal democracy”.

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), for the preservation of democracy, in addition to official rules, political agents must commit to respecting the informal rules of “mutual toleration”, which means recognizing political rivals as legitimate, and of “institutional forbearance”, which refers to the need for parsimony in the use of legal attributions that, at their extremes, may undermine democratic principles. In this case, challenges to electoral results and impeachment proceedings reveal fragile institutional forbearance. The opposite of institutional forbearance is to play the politics of “constitutional hardball”, when institutions are tested to the limit, generating deep animosity among party adversaries. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) assign political parties the responsibility of preventing the emergence of extremist leaders and selecting candidates who respect democratic rules. On this point, the authors are adamant: “political parties are democracy’s gatekeepers”.

With regard to the Brazilian case, the situation of the party system, disorganized by the 2018 elections and still integrated by a large number of parties that have little representation and limited agendas, is quite challenging. Add to this the incentives for candidates to run for ad hoc parties, which function as mere vehicles for promoting their personal careers. One can see the president of the Republic without a party. In turn, these practices are endemic to party institutionalization, because they cause candidates to place themselves above the parties, seeking legitimacy outside the organizations, which generates incentives for individualism and the proliferation of new parties.

We have long known that populist autocrats use political polarization and partisan intolerance to weaken democracy. As a response to this scenario, Brazilian parties have an essential role not only in promoting tolerance and institutional forbearance, but especially in democratizing social, racial, and gender issues if they truly desire to continue managing social conflicts. After all, Brazil reached the 21st century with a relatively stable democracy in terms of the procedures that regulate political competition, the change of political groups in the control of political power at the municipal, state, and national levels, the con-

figuration of a multi-party system, and the expansion of the electoral civil duty. But, at the same time, it presents deficits of representativity of major population segments, such as women, who represent more than 52% of the national electorate, but currently occupy only 15% of the seats in the House of Representatives and 16% in the Senate. With regard to social requirements, the country has not advanced enough to democratize the access of the majority of the population to social welfare policies, deepening inequality in the distribution of income, education, and health, thus increasing the barriers between social classes.

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