The Role of Elections in Oligarchical Brazil, 1909-29

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Proto-democratic elections in Brazil and Latin America in general have been understudied as well as largely underestimated as a topic among scholars. A cloud of stigmatized assumptions have haunted those political events usually described as deceitful, anomalous, and futile to the understanding of democratic development in the region. The specialized literature has mostly focused on contemporary elections, especially on post- World War II processes, when the emergence of the masses unquestionably changed the political scenario in the region.[1] The study of electoral participation in Latin America, therefore, has been closely associated with populist practices such as mass control by charismatic leaders.

Indeed, the emergence of the masses as political actors after 1945 marked a new phase in Latin American history. Candidates could no longer win electoral turnouts without appealing to the people who, in turn, became enthusiastically responsive to a variety of mobilization activities during electoral campaigns.[2] Populist elections featured inclusive mechanisms of participation such as street gatherings, processions, demonstrations, and festivities to intensify the bonds between a candidate and his constituents. Intense propaganda through the media and printed materials became an indispensable device to persuade voters.

Although popular participation in politics has rapidly increased in Latin America over the past forty years, historians are still confronting questions regarding its roots as well as its long-range impact to promote sustainable democracy. The historical origins of electoral participation have puzzled a new generation of scholars who are trying to rescue the meaning of elections in several countries such as Colombia, Argentina, and Chile.[3] These recent studies are pointing to the importance of proto-democratic elections as embryonic manifestations of democratic values in a traditionally authoritarian political culture.

This paper intends to expand the scholarly debate in the field by examining the Brazilian reality between 1909 and 1929. Its main purpose

is to broaden the debate concerning the role of electoral mobilization in the process of forging civic values in modern Brazil by focusing on the first two competitive presidential elections which took place before the populist regime of Getúlio Vargas (1930-45). Both the *Civilista* Campaign (1909-10) and the Liberal Alliance movement (1929-30) have been neglected in the historiography of the period and are normally footnote references in the specialized literature. There has been no systematic analysis of both elections, especially about their dynamics, mobilization mechanisms, and their impact on the creation of inclusive channels of popular intervention in the oligarchical structure of Brazil's Old Republic (1889-1930).

Methodological Approach

In revisiting both electoral campaigns, it is possible to establish historical correlations between them and to demonstrate their electioneering components as breeders of a civic political culture in modern Brazil. Similarities are striking in several aspects of both movements, including their equally disappointing ballot outcomes. This comparative perspective enhances not only their ritualist patterns of action but also their importance as blueprints of electoral mobilization in contemporary Brazil.[4]

Both presidential campaigns introduced new forms of political activism and instilled unconventional electoral orientations among Brazilian voters. The emphasis on collective mobilization, propaganda committees, campaign excursions, street gatherings (*comícios*) became crucial artifacts of persuasion. The printed press also fueled this innovative trend of participation. Daily newspapers and weekly magazines provided the public with detailed coverages of campaign events, frequently accompanied by photographic essays. In depth information on the races appeared in newspapers columns, magazine chronicles, and editorials, updating the public on the last moves of candidates. Political cartoons (*charges políticas*) deserve a special note as the campaigns assumed comical tones. An abundance of these caricatures released in the major Brazilian newspapers reflected a more irreverent reality developing in the nation's political culture.[5]

In light of these participatory mechanisms, I will argue that, contrary to what historians have concluded thus far, the 1909 and 1929 competitive presidential elections in Brazil opened up the arena of politics to new social actors despite the oligarchical nature of the old republican order. As sug-

gested elsewhere, political orientations not only derive from cultural experiences developed within any given social system,[6] but also mature during a certain period of time as a result of repetitive practices, ideas, and values. Although in early twentieth century Brazil electoral orientations reflected the dynamics of a rigidly segmented society, competitive elections offered seminal opportunities to transform a traditionally passive political orientation into a rather active behavior.

Electoral passivity in oligarchical Brazil (1889-1930)

The images of electoral passivity in oligarchical Brazil represented a compelling depiction of political exclusion. A cartoon character *Zé Povo* (John Doe) created to depict the general public frequently appeared in newspapers and magazines as the archetype of submission, ignorance, and powerlessness.[7] Zé is always poorly dressed, talked down to, fearful, and indifferent to political activities, especially elections. He invariably argued against active involvement, claiming that voting required, among other attributes, "bravery"[8] due to the high levels of violence and physical coercion associated with the corrupt system.

Passivity and alienation remained a hallmark of the Brazilian republican system throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Just as the 1824 Constitution had done after independence from Portugal, the first republican charter (1891) disenfranchised most citizens by income or literacy requirements. Official statistics revealed that regular electoral participation was constricted to no more than 3% of the entire population until 1930.[9] Additional socio-political barriers grounded on patronage kept electoral activism an anomaly through the system of *coronelismo* (Brazil's unique nomenclature to define patron-client relations). Its legacy in the early republican era matured as a solution to the decentralized federalist system fostered by President Campos Salles (1902-06), which enforced regional autonomy in exchange for unconditional support at the central level.[10]

Within this system of patronage each state governor remained the sovereign ruler of his domain and political party. He was also responsible for building alliances with fellow governors and the president of the republic, especially concerning the quadrennial presidential elections when all *coronéis* unanimously agreed to support the incumbent president's protégé as a successor.

Presidential elections were, therefore, uncontested and predictable political events. Tacit contracts between *coronéis* (Patrons) and their clientele reserved the presidency to the two wealthiest states in the federation located in the coffee belt area of Brazil: São Paulo and Minas Gerais. The two states produced nine out of the eleven presidents of Brazil between 1894 and 1930, during an era referred to as the "*Café com Leite*" Republic ("Coffee and Cream Republic). Essential to the dynamics of *coronelismo* was an electoral system based on popular exclusion and abstinence from the ballots which guaranteed the supremacy of the coffee-planting elites in the control of the key public offices of the republican administration.[11]

The Presidential Elections of 1909 and 1929

The *Civilista* (1909-10) and the Liberal Alliance (1929-30) campaigns were respectively, the first and last competitive electoral races for the Brazilian presidency during the Old Republican period. I consider those two movements as the foundational patterns of electoral participation in modern Brazil because they entailed a shift in the old order. Both campaigns introduced remarkable mechanisms of popular mobilization and challenged the traditional fraudulent practices of *coronelismo* by inserting the voters as active agents of political change. They may also be interpreted as cohesive symptoms of an unprecedented process of transition within Brazil's political culture despite the disappointing outcomes at the ballot box. The discourse and practice of inclusion started with Ruy Barbosa's contest against the military candidacy of Marshall Hermes da Fonseca in 1909 (hence the *Civilista* or Civilian nature of the movement), and it continued with Vargas's Liberal Alliance campaign against the coffee-based candidacy of Júlio Prestes in 1929.

In common, both movements shared an anti-oligarchical rhetoric, emphasis on widespread propaganda mechanisms and electioneering rituals (pamphlets, tokens, campaign excursions, street meetings, and processions) which switched the arena of politics from the private into the public sphere. The historical context of crisis within the *Café com Leite* system in 1909, and again in 1929, is an additional factor to consider. In both instances the traditional coffee-based elite failed to form a consensus regarding those presidential successions. These unusual intra-elite diatribes generated a conducive atmosphere of contestation, expanding the traditional political sphere to outsiders. The presidential elections of 1909 and 1929 opened

up an unprecedented channel of representation to the Brazilian electorate, marking a crucial transition towards a more participatory political culture.

Nationwide electoral mobilization in Brazil originated with the presidential succession of 1909 when incumbent President Afonso Pena appointed his War Minister, Marshal Hermes da Fonseca, as the official candidate. The reaction among liberal politicians in Congress, voiced initially by veteran Senator Ruy Barbosa, not only protested the nomination but also led to an organized opposition movement to defeat it at all costs. Ruy Barbosa, a traditional liberal politician who among other contributions drafted the 1891 Federalist Constitution, claimed that the role of military officers was in the barracks not in the presidential palace.[12] Accusing President Pena of a "crime of high treason"[13] against the nation, Ruy Barbosa and his *Civilistas* (Civilians) ensued a nationwide crusade to sabotage the traditional system:

> People of Brazil, you must demand civil rights and freedom. You must exercise your sacred rights and be ready for the struggle with your eyes affixed in the Fatherland's heart![14]

For nearly six months the *Civilista* campaign engulfed Brazil's public opinion at the most populated states of Bahia, Minas Gerais, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro. The propaganda caravans initially organized at the movement's headquarters in the city of Rio de Janeiro mobilized Ruy Barbosa's supporters and wandered through Brazil by train, steam ship, and automobile, stopping at stations, docks, and urban centers to mobilize locals for their cause. The itinerary and campaign agenda were carefully planned at propaganda committees where volunteer *Civilistas* crafted a variety of propaganda paraphernalia —pamphlets, posters, and greeting cards (*santinhos*)— to be distributed at street gatherings (*comícios*). [15]

Occupying the streets of Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Ouro Preto represented a strong symbolism of anti-oligarchical practices for the *Civilistas*. Those *comícios* were sketched well in advanced and entailed elaborate liturgies of popular mobilization. Quite frequently these rituals began with long processions through key downtown streets and avenues, where *Civilistas* carrying propaganda placards, accompanied prominent public figures riding on low-speed automobiles (*carreata*), and the invariable music band tunning popular songs (which also included the national anthem), towards a pre-scheduled point of conversion.

This strategy was defined as the "American" way of promoting a campaign (*Campanha à Americana*), and it worked very well to publicize the *Civilista* platform.[16] The *Civilistas* aspired to seduce their constituents by transforming the entire movement into a festivity. Images and reports from those rallies revealed their concern with appearance, organization, glamour, and popularity.[17]

While much of this effort did not suffice to overcome the traditional *coronelista* structure, the *Civilista* campaign remained the blueprint of electoral ritualization in modern Brazil. Ruy Barbosa lost the race against Marshal Hermes da Fonseca on March 1, 1910, and gracefully accepted his fate, returning to his congressional duty in the Senate. But twenty years later, in the midst of a major economic depression, Getúlio Vargas reenacted the same discourse and mobilization mechanisms to finally dismantle the politics of *coronelismo* through the 1930 Revolution.[18]

Within seven months of the New York stock crash of 1929, Brazilian voters would return to the ballots for another presidential election. Considering the eminent challenges of a worldwide depression to the national coffee industry, incumbent President Washington Luís chose a protectionist alternative to the nation's chief export commodity. Arguing that only a candidate committed to the coffee valorization policy (1906) would rescue the economy, President Washington Luís appointed the governor of São Paulo and coffee planter, Júlio Prestes, as the official successor.[19]

Minas Gerais, Paraíba, and Rio Grande do Sul were the three states within the federation whose governors contested the Prestes candidacy on the grounds of economic reorientation and fair competition in the succession methods. Together, Antônio Carlos de Andrada, João Pessoa, and Getúlio Vargas launched the Liberal Alliance campaign to promote

> Direct interference from the people in the election of the President of the Republic and the other offices. Revision of all laws restricting freedom of thought, Electoral reform based on moralizing procedures.[20]

Getúlio Vargas and his running mate João Pessoa ran on a rather unconventional platform which not only included the defense of voting secrecy but also social reforms. The Liberal discourse assumed even more concrete tones of change as the campaign acquired a national scope. They tried to practice what they preached for nearly five months of propaganda

and mobilization, reminding some of the charged climate from 1909.Even more aggressive than the *Civilistas*, the Liberals heavily relied on both verbal and visual communication devices such as stamps, postcards, ballads, and movie theater projections.[21] Also organized in propaganda committees, Liberal partisans busied themselves by manufacturing icons which could be worn on one's garment or displayed on public buildings, squares, at their committee headquarters.[22]

In addition to organizational strategies the Liberals were consistent about their finances. For each state of Brazil, the central committee allocated a specific sum destined not only to electioneering rituals but also a massive voters' registration crusade. "We need to enroll by the bulk and by employing all means," urged chief campaign manager Osvaldo Aranha.[23] Elementary teachers were hired to instruct potential voters on rudimentary notions of penmanship, creating the first literacy drives in the country.[24]

The legacies of *civilismo* were evident not only in the Liberal platform but also on the emphasis of popular mobilization. The table below is an attempt to trace analogies between both campaigns:

Table 1: 'Parallelisms between the *Civilista* and Liberal Alliance Campaigns':

Civilista (1909)	*Liberal Alliance (1929)*
Anti-oligarchical discourse	
Mobilization patterns (Propaganda Committees)	
Electioneering Rituals (Comícios, propaganda paraphernalia, electoral excursions)	
Defeat in the Ballot Box	

Furthermore, both campaigns resulted from similar historical contexts of dissension within the traditional elite. In 1909 and in 1929 both incumbents failed to appoint an agreeable successor, uniting dissident elite members and the electorate in an unusual climate of contestation. In reaching out to the people and by inviting them to take sides, *Civilistas* and Liberals alike created the conditions to engender a participatory orientation among voters.

So much effort, however, ended in profound disappointment. Both campaigns failed to overcome the fraudulent procedures of *coronelismo* and did not lead their candidates to victory. Nevertheless, their legacy must be understood beyond such frustration at the polls. What followed the Liberal Alliance campaign can be considered an attempt to institutionalize the anti-oligarchical nature of Brazilian politics, and to promote durable changes in the way elections functioned in modern Brazil.

Conclusion: Vargas's 1930 Revolution and Beyond

Whereas Ruy Barbosa complied with the "official" electoral results of 1910, Getúlio Vargas and the Liberals turned to armed resistance. After learning about the inevitable defeat for the presidency, Vargas decided not to wait for Júlio Prestes's inauguration and through a military maneuver ousted Washington Luís on October 3, 1930.[25] The 1930 Revolution marked the end of the Old Republican era in Brazil and the beginning of crucial social and political reforms, based on the Liberal Alliance platform heralded a few months earlier.

Among those reforms, the 1932 electoral code must be examined as the "most important contribution of the 1930 Revolution."[26] As an immediate result of the new legislation the Brazilian electorate not only expanded 500% (from 1,466,700 in 1934 to 9,138,372 in 1950) but also became a diversified political entity.[27] Women and youngsters of eighteen years of age were incorporated as citizens and have become crucial components of Brazil's contemporary electoral system. Although authoritarian in nature, the Vargas regime forged and implemented some of the Liberal Alliance's program.

As if still reliving the campaign process, Vargas's mobilizing style in the presidency underwent no major alterations. In tracing links between the Liberal Alliance days and the subsequent populist movements of the 1940s and the 1950s it is possible to identify the permanence of early ritualization patterns for the creation of civic practices in modern Brazil.[28] The *Queremista* movement ("We Want Getúlio" Movement, 1945-50) organized to maintain Vargas in the presidency after the end of World War II displayed essentially the same techniques of mobilization employed in 1929. Five years later, during the presidential race of 1950, Vargas also turned to the same electioneering methods.

Vargas's electoral mobilization tactics worked once again in 1950,

setting a record in Brazil's history. According to official records, eight million Brazilians casted their votes that year, and 48% of those chose Vargas as their candidate.[29] Considering numerical indicators alone, it is possible to conclude that beginning in 1909, the electorate responded positively to the use of propaganda rituals in all competitive presidential elections prior to the 1964 military coup.

Between 1929 and 1964 basic representative guarantees have been implemented in the Brazilian electoral system. These include voting rights to women, youngsters, the secret ballot, and an Electoral Tribunal. All of these innovations have contributed to transform Brazil into the third largest electorate in the world,[30] and despite the compulsory nature of voting introduced in 1932, recent studies suggest that the majority of Brazilians cast their votes willingly. On the eve of the last presidential race (1998), this attitude remained strong. A national survey conducted by polling agency *Vox Popoli* confirmed that 64% of those consulted would vote even if it were not a constitutional demand[31]. These figures are comparatively higher than any other democratic nation in the contemporary world, and reveal a profound transformation in the country's political culture since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The intention of this paper has been to trace the historical foundations of a participatory electoral culture on Brazil. In tracing connections between the first and last competitive presidential races of the oligarchical era, I propose a reevaluation of the importance of proto-democratic elections on the construction of a civic culture in modern Brazil. Today Brazil holds one of the largest electoral bodies in the world, and this participatory trend has a history. Participatory changes have taken time to mature and to shape citizenship values among increasingly active social actors. The 1909 and 1929 elections offered those actors a stage upon which to exercise a role, and introduced the very first civic practices of electoral participation among them. Although my research does not propose definite answers to the process of citizenship building in Brazil, it aspires to enlarge the scholarly debate on the implications of electoral mobilization as promoters of civic values in a society still struggling with its authoritarian past.

NOTES

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