

**The socio-economic basis of the electoral volatility of in recent democracies.
The case of Brazil*.**

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Mesa 1: Partidos, Sistema de Partidos e Arena Eleitoral: As experiências latino-americanas

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The main indicator of a consolidated political democracy is the widespread social acceptance and unconditional obedience of the rules of the game, especially of the idea that elections are the primary means not only of selecting leadership (Downs, 1967; Schumpeter, 1982), but ultimately of processing and solving social conflict (Dahl, 1971). Party politics, as a consequence, plays an essential role in this dynamic. Political parties are the vehicles through which the body of citizens, by selecting among different alternatives of public policy, put the whole political system in motion. Thus, in democracies party politics has an integrative function of paramount importance, given that it channels the social preferences into the political arena and links society and the state (Aldrich, 1995; Cox & McCubbins, 1993).

Due to this primacy of party politics, one of the key difficulties experienced by newly re-democratized countries and young democracies is the sedimentation of the electoral support for the recently created party system. When preferences for the existing parties are highly volatile from election to election, the strain imposed upon a democratic political system might be unbearable in the long run. First and foremost, highly shifting electoral loyalties may engender insurmountable pitfalls to the task of governance in nascent democracies. Gerring (2005), for instance, demonstrates that small parties tend to proliferate in highly volatile political systems, even those governed by electoral plurality formulas. Second, when party systems fail to become deeply entrenched in the social fabric, the risks of the emergence of political alternatives disloyal to the democratic creed and of a party meltdown always loom in the horizon.

Most of the existing studies of electoral volatility in recent democracies focus primarily on measuring its level and contrasting it with the more stable panorama in advanced democracies (Braga, 2003; Cervi, 2002; Figueiredo, 1996; Lima, 1996; Lima Jr., 1997; Mainwaring, 1998 & 2001; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Nicolau, 1998; Paiva & Batista, 2004; Peres, 2000 & 2002). Thus far, a limited number of works have engaged in explaining its causes. Among the latter, most authors

center their analyses on politico-institutional factors, such as the level of fragmentation of the party system, its institutionalization and its degree of polarization, and the age of the democratic regime and of the existing parties (Mozaffar et al., 2003; Mainwaring, 2006). Others center on the impact that changes in macro-economic governmental performance have on voter behavior and, indirectly, on the overall volatility levels (Kramer, 1971; Remmer, 1991). Furthermore, other major limitation of the existing literature about volatility in recent democracies is the fact that they concentrate exclusively on presidential elections (Robert & Wibbels, 1999).

Building upon the existing literature, this article analyzes the causes of the electoral volatility in a recently re-democratized country, Brazil. Even though we incorporate politico-institutional variables in the analysis, such as the level of fragmentation of the party system and the age of all party players, the impact of other classes of phenomenon are also considered. Its main novelties are threefold. The first two stem from our research design. First, this study expands the intra-country analysis to elections other than the presidential one. It includes the elections for the Lower House, Senate, state governors and state legislatures that took place within a two-decade time period (1982-2002). Second, the results of these elections and their volatility levels are analyzed at the state level. One of the positive consequences of these features of our research design is that we are also able to capture the intra-country variance in the analysis. This is extremely important in a case as internally diverse as Brazil. Additionally, we transform a single country with only four presidential elections into a multiple observation set with over five hundred pairs of consecutive elections. Most importantly, studying elections for distinct elective jobs allows us to understand how the same electorate reacts to distinct electoral formulas in concurrent (same-day) elections in the same district and how it impacts, as consequence, the volatility level in elections regulated by proportional representation vs. majority systems.

Third, by including indicators such the mean educational and income levels of the state electorate, the urbanization rate of the district, its GINI index and region, we change the focus from macro-economic governmental performance to

variables that are more indicative of the socio-economic profile of the voters. Our goal is to test whether demand-side factors, e.g. differences in the socio-economic background of voters across states, also help explain variances in the volatility levels.

Electoral volatility in Brazil: the voter's perspective.

Brazil is a unique case among the so-called third wave democracies (Huntington, 1991). First, contrary to most other recently (re-) democratized countries, the 1964 coup completely annihilated the multiparty system in existence before the democratic breakdown replaced it with an artificial bipartisan system that, paradoxically, functioned almost uninterruptedly albeit under repressive conditions during the dictatorship (Soares, 1973 & 2001).

Second, in other countries with similar democratic breakdowns, in spite of differences in the type of transition, the old parties become the key players in the negotiation with the outgoing dictators and very rapidly re-conquered their central role in the political system. In Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, for instance, the traditional parties simply resumed their activities during the transition process as if their structures had just laid dormant (Catterberg, 1983). In Brazil, on the contrary, the outgoing regime deliberately chose to fragment the opposition in the final stages of transition by changing the rules regulating the formation of new parties from excessively rigid to very lax (Kinzo, 1986). As a consequence, the bipartisan system functioning during the dictatorship gave place to a multiparty system with five parties even before the end of the transition ¹.

Third, another factor that added to Brazil's peculiarity was the strategy deployed by its political élites in the course of the transition (Powers, 1998). Their party "hyper-activism" (Sola, 1998) resulted in the explosion of electoral offers – even before the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, which is notorious for its

¹ The norm that changed the party landscape completely was Law 6767, promulgated in 1979. By drastically relaxing the minimum pre-requisites to the formation of new parties, the strategists from the authoritarian regime deliberately created a system of incentives to the fragmentation of the party system. Several groups that composed the MDB – the party that had harbored all the tolerated opposition to the regime and had been the flag-carrier of the re-democratization cause – split up and formed new labels.

liberalism in terms of party laws. Hence, in 1982, three years prior to the formal final transfer of power to civilian hands, there were five registered and electorally active parties. In 1986, twenty nine parties took part in the national elections. In 1990, this number jumped to thirty three (Nicolau, 1998). Therefore, in a very short interval of five years (1985-1990), the number of existing political parties had an increase of approximately 600% ².

These singularities have consequences not only for the dynamics of the party system as a whole, but also for the political parties and the electorate. From the perspective of the political system, the emergency of new parties at the end of the transition, the subsequent hyper-activism of the élites and the resulting fragmentation of the party system complicated the task of creating and maintaining stable governing coalitions, which increases substantially the costs and problems associated with the so-called coalition presidentialism (Abranches, 1988; Figueiredo & Limongi, 2001). Instead of two coalition partners, as in the first civilian presidency (under Sarney 1985-1990), presidents nowadays need to resort to six or more (mostly rent-seeking) parties in order to pass legislation through congress (Meneguello, 1998).

From the viewpoint of the political parties, the consequences were as troublesome. For them, 1982 represented the beginning of a new competitive environment in which several new political groups had to struggle to transform themselves into competitive party organizations. In other words, not only did some of them have to create an organization from scratch (Keck, 19??), but also had to build party label recognition and expand the party structure to the twenty seven states of the almost continental Brazilian federation.

Finally, the counter face of this process was the electorate's reception, assimilation and incorporation of the newly created parties. Due to the explosion of party alternatives, voters were suddenly forced to observe these new offers and to understand minimally their programmatic platform, their ideological profile, their positioning relative to other parties in the political spectrum and the concrete

² As of 2006, this number was still high. According to the Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSE), twenty nine parties are registered and legally able to compete in any election in any district of the country (See www.tse.gov.br).

implications of their public policy proposals. In other words, the parties' job of expanding their physical and organizational structures in order to broaden their clientele was as excruciating as the voters' job to adapt themselves to these new multiple competing players.

Given these panorama, it is somewhat understandable that the electoral volatility levels in Brazil have been so high in comparison to advanced consolidated democracies. Whereas in most countries of North America and Western Europe the mean volatility is around 8% (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006), in Brazil, as thoroughly described below, is more than twice this amount.

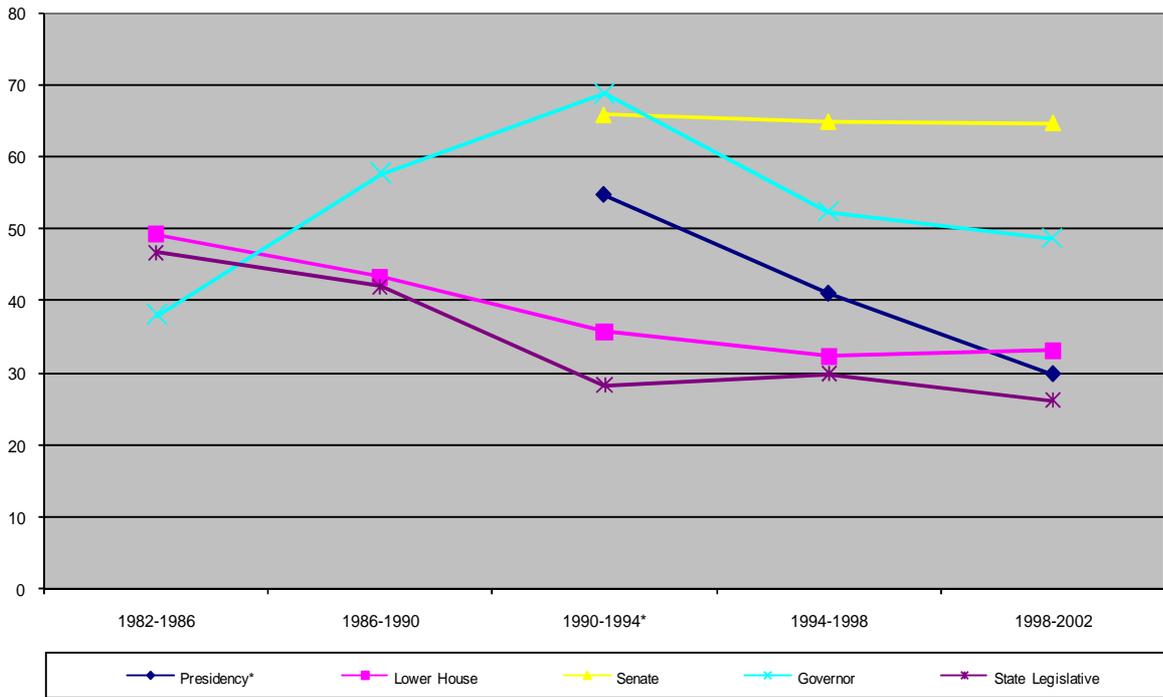
Volatility in Brazil.

The levels of electoral volatility in Brazil have been in decline since 1994. Even though others authors have already called the attention for the decrease in volatile behavior for presidential elections (Braga, 2003; Mainwaring, 1998; Peres, 2002), it is interesting to note that this is a pattern for almost all types of elections (Graph 1). In other words, this trend encompasses also the elections for governor, state and federal legislators. The electoral volatility for the senatorial elections has been somewhat stable, albeit in a higher level.

In fact, this descending pattern is visible across the Brazilian regions. The mean electoral volatility has been falling in simultaneous elections in most regions since 1994 (Table 1). In other words, the electorate seems to be maintaining its electoral preferences over time. This is paradoxical, given the fact that the levels of party identification have not been on the rise. On the contrary, according to Carreirão & Kinzo (2004), they are stable at around 46%. This gap between decreasing electoral volatility and stable levels of party identification remains to be explained. We will resume this point ahead.

Table 1. Mean volatility in concurrent elections in Brazil, by region (1982-2002)

Graph 1. Electoral volatility in Brazil (1982-2002).



* The first presidential election took place in 1989. The elections for the remaining

| Region | 1982/1986 | 1986/1990 | 1990/1994 | 1994/1998 | 1998/2002 |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| North | 37.4 | 53.4 | 53.7 | 46.6 | 44.0 |
| North-East | 55.7 | 46.3 | 47.1 | 43.3 | 39.0 |
| South-East | 37.1 | 48.1 | 44.5 | 45.7 | 45.1 |
| South | 33.2 | 39.2 | 39.9 | 39.1 | 38.5 |
| Center-West | 38.2 | 47.3 | 52.3 | 46.5 | 36.7 |

Another interesting aspect of the electoral volatility in Brazil is the seemingly different landscape in proportional representation elections and contests regulated by plurality formulas. As shown in Table 2, the latter (elections for governor, senator and president) seem to be substantially more volatile – despite the downward trend just mentioned. This is a surprising finding. Elections with a larger number of candidates should increase the voters’ information costs (Rennó, 2006) and make the electoral preferences less stable over time. The elections should be more volatile as a consequence. All these preliminary findings based upon descriptive statistics will be re-examined ahead.

Table 2. Mean volatility by election type (1982-2002)

| Elected position | Elections | Mean volatility |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Presidency | 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002 | 44.8 |
| Senate | 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 | 65.1 |
| Lower House | 1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 | 38.6 |
| Governor | 1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 | 54.8 |
| State Legislative | 1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 | 34.8 |

Socio-economic context: variables.

What elements are usually deployed to explain the oscillation in the support for parties in consecutive pairs of elections? In other words, what are the elements that explain the electoral volatility? Some authors seem to emphasize economic and political factors as important predictors of this phenomenon. Studies such as Kramer (1971) show that electors tend to vote retrospectively based upon the macro-economic performance of the incumbents seeking reelection. As a consequence, given that their oscillation tips the balance in favor or against the governing parties, variables such as inflation and unemployment are normally mobilized to explain the volatility levels (Remmer, 1991; Robert & Wibbels, 1999). This study will incorporate the unemployment level in the analysis³. Following the retrospective economic voting theory (Fiorina, 1981), we expect larger unemployment levels to be associated with greater electoral volatility.

Inherently politico-institutional variables such as the creation of new parties or the disappearance of old ones, the migration from party to party of key political figures with large number of followers (Mozzaffar & Scarritt, 2005), also play an important role. We will focus on three other elements: the mean age and the number of parties competing in the elections and the electoral formula that sets the stage for each electoral contest. The electoral formula is coded “one” for proportional representation and “zero” otherwise. Because they tend to have a high personalist component, we expect elections based upon plurality systems to be more volatile than contest ruled by PR.

³ As we calculate the volatility levels using the states as unit of analysis, we will not be able to use the rate of inflation as an explanatory variables. Unfortunately, there are no official data on inflation at the state level for all the twenty seven members of the Brazilian federation.

As mentioned before, one of the major challenges posed upon the Brazilian parties was to make their labels known. The more label recognition a party has, the greater seems to be its chances of consolidating their electoral support and building up captive clienteles. As a consequence, age becomes a crucial factor. Thus, we expect the increase of the mean age of parties to curb the voters' volatile behavior.

Inversely, we expect the increase in the number of parties to augment the volatility levels. Needless to say, from the voters' perspective, the proliferation of new party offers increases substantially the information and decision costs. It seems to be easier to rely on information shortcuts in long-standing bipartisan systems than environments where even the better informed citizen cannot realistically keep track of all the existing labels and their differences.

This focus on the voter's perspective is of paramount importance. In the end, electoral volatility is the result of the collective action (Olson, 1965) of individuals taken as an aggregate. The basic idea behind the notion of electoral volatility, as it appears in the works of Pedersen (1980), Przeworski (1975) and Bartolini & Mair (1990), is that, in stable party systems, voters tend to remain loyal to their favorite parties in the elections over time. The same behavior is not found in the context of new party regimes. Therefore, despite the fact that the analysis centers on a macro-social decision (the election results), the starting point is always micro-social, e.g. the individual. With that in mind, we included in this study variables that help understand the impact that different kinds of individuals have on the production of a volatile collective behavior. These variables are either a reflection of individual socio-economic features or elements that shape decisively their lives. Among the former we include the mean state illiteracy rates and income levels. The effect of the latter is assessed through the inclusion of the each state's urbanization rate and GINI index.

Finally, we also introduce some control variables. The first one is the growth of each state's electorate for each pair of elections. Needless to say, in any given set of two consecutive electoral contests, high volatility levels may just be a consequence of the entrance of newly enfranchised electors with party preferences

that are different from the previous mean voters. Second, given that myriad authors have called attention to regional diversity of the Brazilian party system (Krause & Paiva, 2002; Lima, 1996; Lima Jr. 1983 & 1997; Moraes, 1995; Neves, 1988 & Paiva & Batista, 2004), region also figures as a control variable in this study. The last set of control are party variables. The electoral victories of Presidents Cardoso (PSDB) in 1994 and Lula (PT) in 2002 were anteceded by the electoral ascension of their parties in different electoral positions in most states. Therefore, we test whether the electoral volatility of these two parties helps us understand the overall levels of volatility.

Results

We conducted different regression analyses. The main findings are presented on Table 1. Model 1 focuses exclusively on politico-institutional factors as possible causes of the electoral volatility. It clearly shows that, as predicted, the number of parties contesting an election in Brazil has a significant impact on its volatility level. Keeping all the variables constant, if the list of contenders that took part in a first election is expanded by the inclusion of four new party players in a second consecutive election, then the volatility level of the latter will increase approximately 3%. A larger number of party offers, as a consequence, creates an incentive for the elector to fragment its vote.

When we broaden the analysis to include macro-economic and socio-economic variables, however, the number of parties loses its statistical significance. The impact of the one of the other institutional factors, electoral formula, however, is robust in all models. This result indicates that, as predicted, proportional representation elections are much less volatile than presidential, senatorial and gubernatorial elections, which are based upon plurality formulas.

Model 2 reveals that, as postulated by the economic voting theory, governmental macro-economic performance matters a great deal. States with higher rates of unemployment present greater levels of volatility, indicating that Brazilian electors, as voters from other national contexts, tend to switch their party

loyalty in the face of employment problems. The numbers for income confirm this pattern of behavior. Among states with higher income levels, volatility is significantly smaller. Paradoxically, however, the results for the GINI index, which are highly significant in all models, indicate that the more unequal a state is when it

Table 1. OLS regression results predicting magnitude of electoral volatility †

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Institutional variables</i> | | | |
| Number of parties | .747*** (.185) | .230 (.278) | .201 (.268) |
| Mean party age | -.397 (.266) | -.248 (.344) | -.515^ (.307) |
| Electoral formula | -9.478*** (2.886) | -19.693*** (4.475) | -18.900*** (4.338) |
| <i>Socio-economic variables</i> | | | |
| Illiteracy | | .849*** (.236) | .903*** (.156) |
| Income | | -.001^ (.000) | |
| Urbanization | | -.048 (.129) | |
| GINI index | | -38.044^ (21.812) | -45.196* (21.118) |
| Unemployment | | .985* (.385) | .615* (.286) |
| <i>Control variables</i> | | | |
| Growth of the electorate | | -.006 (.010) | |
| <i>Regions</i> | | | |
| North | | -4.271 (3.498) | |
| North-East | | -18.558*** (4.694) | -15.275*** (3.230) |
| South | | -.985 (3.568) | |
| Center-West | | -.078 (2.989) | |
| <i>Parties</i> | | | |
| PT's volatility | | .486*** (.102) | .479*** (.101) |
| PSDB's volatility | | .229*** (.057) | .231*** (.056) |
| Constant | 63.083*** (1.984) | 8.951*** (1.411) | 8.517*** (2.885) |
| Adj. R ² | .233 | .630 | .748 |
| (N) | 543 | 474 | 474 |

† Unit of analysis: the volatility in each pair of consecutive election for president, senator, governor, federal and state legislator in each of 27 states between 1982 and 2002. *** p<.001; **p<.01; * p<.05; ^ p<.10. (Standard errors are in parentheses).

comes to socio-economic justice, the less volatile it is. The combination of these findings suggests that, even though social maladies such as unemployment cause voters to punish incumbents and vote for the opposition, therefore, elevating the volatility levels, things change when social inequality reaches exceedingly high levels. Under these extreme social circumstances, the polarization in society might reflect in the political system, causing the “freezing” of the alignment of electoral preferences across (or between) social classes. Needless to say, within the limits we cannot test this scenario.

Differently from the urbanization rate, education attainment also impact the phenomenon being analyzed. Actually, the greater the proportion of illiterates in the population of any given state, the more volatile the elections in that state will be. As the simultaneous inclusion of income and illiteracy produced multicollinearity in Model 2, we abandoned the former in Model 3, which is a more parsimonious model.

Model 3 shows that, as argued by the literature, the increase in the mean age of the parties competing in an election associates with declines in the volatile behavior among electors. In fact, if the same parties continue to engage in electoral competition uninterruptedly, then, holding constant all the other variables, every four years the volatility levels should decrease in about 2%. Therefore, similar to other national contexts, as Brazilian democracy grows older, voters will tend to grow an attachment to certain parties, reducing the overall systemic volatility as a consequence.

Finally, the control variables also reveal interesting aspects of the electoral volatility in Brazil. First, the elections in the North-Eastern states, which comparatively present one of the highest levels of social inequality, seem to be the least volatile among all regions. Second, as predicted the gain of electoral support of the PSDB and PT in their ascendancy to the presidency has significantly resulted in the increase of volatility in Brazil.

Conclusions

This paper has emphasized that the electoral volatility levels in Brazil are high in comparison to advanced democracies. However, it has shown that, overall, volatile electoral behavior has been on steady decline since 1994 in most elections across most regions of the country.

When it comes to the causes of the phenomenon, this study has ratified the importance of politico-institutional factors, such as the age of the parties contesting elections and their number. As delineated in the descriptive statistics, proportional representation elections are much less volatile than other types. This comes as no surprise given the usual personalist feature of majority-rule elections. Also unsurprising was the confirmation that the retrospect economic behavior of voters – in our case, we used unemployment as an indicator of macro-economic performance – does impact volatility significantly.

The most interesting findings of this study, however, was, first, the demonstration that the differences in the socio-economic profile of voters across states matter and matter a great deal. Wealthier states – as measured by their citizens' mean income – experience more electoral stability. States with higher illiteracy levels present more instability. Second, it was also interesting to find out that, despite those two associations, acute social inequalities (as captured by the GINI index), seem to produce social and political polarization, thereby contributing for the reduction in the overall levels of volatility. Needless to say, this path for the reduction of volatile behavior might undermine democratic institutions in the long run.

All in all, this study indicates that, if the stabilization of the party system is important for the consolidation of young democracies as Brazil and if the reduction of volatility levels is a step in that direction, then implementing institutional reforms (to reduce party fragmentation, for instance) is not enough. Decreasing social maladies such as illiteracy and low income seem to be equally important.

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