



# The political career of Brazilian senators in the First Republic

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Under the imperial regime, the position of senator was one mechanism among many others for rewarding or co-opting political allies from the regions directly to the top of the political structure. According to Beatriz Cerqueira Leite,

*The title of senator represented the culmination of a brilliant career [...]. The future senator needed to have overcome essential steps in the art of politics and to have practical training. The only way to do this was to occupy several positions such as Deputy, President of a Province, Minister, Diplomat, and Councilor of State. (Leite, 1978, page 44).*

The Senate was closer to the Federal Government than to the provinces, and this link was under the scrutiny of the crown. Under the monarchy, the emperor appointed the senators from a triple list drawn up by the provinces. There were no regular elections because the title was for life: a senator was part of a privileged mechanism through which the emperor rewarded or co-opted regional political allies as a channel of access to the top of the political structure. As Machado de Assis observes:

*It's also true that the lifetime position gave to that House a sense of perpetual duration, which seemed to be reflected in the faces and behavior of its members. They had the air of a family, which dispersed during the holiday season to go to the beach and other amusements, and later gathered together, for years and years. (Assis, 2004, page 29).*

These characteristics of the Senate were consistent with a centralized political structure such as that of the imperial regime. According to José Murilo de Carvalho (1996), the Brazilian imperial elite had the shape of an inverted pyramid, in which the bulk of positions and salaries were concentrated at the top of the system. This configuration was the opposite of the structure adopted in the United States of America, which maintained a strong concentration at the local level. Thus, *the consequence of this centralized structure was the accumulation of public servants and administrative activities at the central government level, in contrast with their reduced presence in the provinces and their near absence at local level. (Carvalho, 1996, p. 137).*



Photograph of the first meeting of the new legislature at the Conde dos Arcos Palace. *Careta* magazine of 5.11.1918, page 13. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.





In such a framework, we can see that when the federative structure of power was established, this implied an essential change in the ways political power was exercised. The decentralized political structure imposed by the deputies of the constitutional assembly in 1891 set rules that raised the subnational political game to another level, in which the provinces, rebranded as states, would act as the decisive vote in national politics. One of the main factors that brought together the makers of the new regime was precisely the role performed by the politics of individual states.

*[...] it was on the issue of political autonomy that all the provinces, without exception, united in support of the federalist project because only in this aspect could there be an equalization of benefits for all the federative entities. Political autonomy meant eliminating the control the central authority had over local elections and, most of all, guaranteeing the electability of the former provincial presidents who now became state governors. (Abrucio, 1998, page 33).*

If senators' careers were governed by a solely national logic until 1889 (bearing in mind that being a senator was a prerogative of the imperial Moderating Power), from that date onward, the careers of these representatives would be subject to the criteria of the elites that dominated the federative states.

Therefore, in the First Republic, the senators' attributes were put to the test, as their mandates now had to be come from the polls, a crucial transformation. Furthermore, theirs would be the second highest electoral position inside the Federal Government, which would be decided at the state levels and not a mere result of central strategies. Thus, the Federal Senate of the period of the First Republic is a particularly good place for a study of the transition between the political regimes and its effects on the political elite, as it maintained a strong national connotation even though the choice of its representatives happened in the state sphere. In addition, the end of lifelong mandates meant that the above-mentioned effects of the new regime on the profile of the elite are not a legacy of the monarchy—which is not the case for the federal and state deputies. Such features mean that the senators elected during this period are a crucial subject for investigating how the new institutional environment, which was federal and elected, changed the profile of the political representatives chosen.

## What was new about the career of Brazilian senators in the First Republic?



The inauguration of Senator Paulo de Frontin was a news item published by *Careta* magazine on 5.10.1930, page 31. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



The most striking aspect is the career length of the Brazilian senators during the period of the First Republic. For the individuals who assumed office in the Federal Senate from 1900 to 1927, the average length of a career was 24 years from their first public position until their arrival at the Senate. Comparing this with more recent times, we find that for the senators elected between 1946 and 1962, the average career length was reduced to 19.7 years, while during the period of military rule (from 1966 until 1986), the duration of senators' careers was slightly longer, 21 years and 6 months on average—but still shorter than during the First Republic. These figures confirm the traditional view that ever since the beginning of the republican experience, the individuals who reach the Federal Senate have been quite experienced politicians.

However, only the length of their careers, measured this way, may lead to incorrect interpretations, since

*[...] a great landowner can spend twenty years of his life in the Parliament, but for all that, he will not be a [career politician], while a man who wins just one election undoubtedly will undoubtedly be one if his period as a legislator is preceded and followed by any bureaucratic function or other activity on behalf of his party. (Meynaud 1961, page 530, adapted).*

To avoid drawing this incorrect conclusion, there is another measure, not of length, but of the *intensity* of political careers. The indicator of this is the number of public positions held by a politician from his entry into politics until he takes office in the Federal Senate. Considering only the period from 1900 to 1927, Brazilian senators held an average of 6.6 positions until they took office in the Federal Senate. This average drops to 4.6 for senators elected between 1946 and 1962. There is a slight increase during the military regime (legislatures from 1966 to 1986) when the senators held on average 5.1 positions.

These findings reveal that the Brazilian senatorial elite in the First Republic had strongly structured political careers in terms both of length and intensity. Examining the issue superficially, one might conclude that if a politician's career lasted longer, the number of offices held would also increase. That would be a false

conclusion because if the same person remained in the same position, the length of his career would increase, but the number of positions would remain the same.

In this regard, it is worth stressing that the average life of a senator in his position—the number of years the Senate was in operation divided by the total number of senators and multiplied by the legal numbers of senators at any time—in the imperial regime was 14.74 years (Carvalho, 1996, page 116). In the Republican era, this figure decreased to 8.24 years. This shows that the end of the lifelong mandate profoundly transformed the duration of each person's position as a senator. Although this may look obvious, it is important to measure it as, otherwise, one might believe that the same individual could spend most of his life holding the same office.

Results such as those shown above present a general overview of the citizens who composed the Senate. However, as it is well known, the most remarkable aspect to be noted in an analysis of Brazilian politics in the First Republic is the strength of the politics in the states, which produced significant differences. These differences become clear when the same indicators of each federative entity are examined. Map 1 shows the average length of a senator's career, followed by Map 2, which shows the average number of occupied offices per state.

**Map 1 – Career length per state**



Source: author's own drafting based on the DHBB and on the archive of the Federal Senate



Map 1 shows that, based on the duration from the beginning of their public careers to their arrival in the Senate, senators from Minas Gerais had the longest average career durations, ranging from 26.5 to 28.5 years, followed by senators from the states of São Paulo and Bahia, whose averages were 24.6 and 26.5 years, respectively. In contrast, senators from Paraná and Piauí had career durations averaging less than 16.7 years.

These figures are relevant for two reasons. First, because even those senators whose public lives were shorter, still had long careers (the shortest average in Map 1 is around 15 years). Second, because the data suggests that the politicians from Minas Gerais, São Paulo, and Bahia were more likely to remain active in political positions, as the first two above-mentioned states had political parties strong enough to control the dynamic of the process of politics. Political competition was likely more intense in the other states, leaving room for less experienced politicians to emerge, which reduces the average length of their careers.

Map 2 reveals the intensity of those careers, measured by the number of public positions held before reaching the Federal Senate. As shown in the previous chart, it is clear that the high averages do not obscure the differences between the states.

Map 2 – Total number of public positions per state



Source: author's own drafting based on the DHBB and on the archive of the Federal Senate.

Bahia is the state where senators held the most positions before reaching the Senate, almost eight posts for all the senators of that state, double the average in Paraíba. In the states of Minas Gerais, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul, senators held, on average, seven positions before their inauguration in the Senate. These data show the variations between the states but unfortunately do not show the dispersion in relation to the average among senators from the same state.

*The last piece of information which helps to characterize the political careers of Brazilian senators in the First Republic is their links to political parties. An examination of their biographies reveals information about political party affiliations for 300 of the 359 individuals who took office in the Senate between 1891 and 1934. Of the 300 senators whose biographies provide information on their links to political parties, just over half were affiliated with more than one party, while the rest were linked to up to five parties.*



It is crucial not to analyze the political parties of the First Republic as if they were akin to those that emerged in many mass democracies from the 1950s onward. It is essential to consider that, given Brazil's vast territorial expanse, limited communication infrastructure, and the predominance of rural populations, the expansion of the electoral franchise (resulting from the removal of restrictive criteria) inadvertently bolstered the power of local oligarchies.

Given these circumstances, it was highly likely that a social division of labor would emerge within families. For instance, a local political leader might have one son pursuing a career in the Church, another managing the family's business interests, and the youngest—typically the third son—would attend law school, where he would begin his political career and later represent, in both state and federal legislative bodies, the interests of his family and the oligarchic networks to which they were connected. In this context, family and party were two sides of the same coin. Therefore, it is crucial to avoid an anachronistic interpretation of the political parties of the time.

Otherwise, and bearing in mind the major differences in economic structure between the states of the Federation, it is reasonable to imagine that many divisions would arise between the oligarchical groups. This could lead to the overlapping of different cleavages: electoral contests at the regional level could be associated with contests over immediate economic interests, but also with differences in the control of political resources (such as control of public authorities, state repression mechanisms, etc.), or even differences over the social division of labor within families, as mentioned above.

When looking at this structure, the data on links to party organizations among the senatorial elite are significant because they indicate that those who reached the Federal Senate formed a group experienced in strictly political activities. In turn, experience with party organizations was important, as political parties were the venues where conflicts arising from these cleavages were resolved—it made candidacies possible, and the newspapers controlled by party leaders printed the electoral ballots. In short, it mediated between the state capital and the margins of the political system.

Consequently, taking into account what was happening in the different levels of government, the study of senators' careers in the First Republic provides a better understanding of how some of the foundations of political representation were built. These foundations would prevail in Brazilian politics from the second half of the twentieth century onward.

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