



How presidents were made in the First Republic

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Image taken from *Fon-Fon* magazine of 1.2.1926, depicting the members of the Constitutional Convention at the banquet at the Automóvel Clube do Brasil, on the occasion of the presidential succession of that year, when the candidacy of Washington Luís for the Presidency of the Republic was announced. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

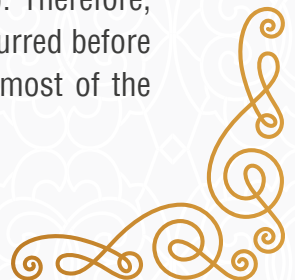
When considering the framework governing presidential elections in the so-called *Old Republic* (the period of the First Republic), it is impossible not to compare them with the most recent elections held in Brazil. On the one hand such comparisons can be valuable, as they shed light on the political constraints and competitive dynamics of the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, by taking recent values and experiences as our starting point, we risk underestimating past political processes and misinterpreting the logic that guided people at that time.

In other words, there is a serious risk of anachronism, which must be avoided. Despite these obstacles, we will persist with the comparison in order to facilitate a quicker and more effective understanding for the reader.

Regarding the recent choice of presidents of the Republic in Brazil, there are at least four fundamental differences when compared to the period of the First Republic. The first was the fact that re-election was not allowed. The second was the almost insignificant level of voter participation. The third was the model of federalism, which positioned the units of the federation as the primary political actors. Finally, we have the difference between the length of the mandates of the head of the Executive Branch and those of the deputies in the legislative chambers. Understanding the impact of these differences is essential for grasping the unique characteristics of the period.

The ban on re-election was an important factor in encouraging fierce intra-oligarchic political contests. Every four years, hegemonic political groups competed to nominate their name and for the support of most of the oligarchies for the chosen candidate. As a result, it was necessary to build or rebuild political alliances at each presidential succession, which made it imperative to renegotiate alliances or resolve any dissent during each four-year term.

Obviously, that competition took place within the confines of the hegemonic oligarchies themselves, but it was not limited to the political chiefs from the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo; it took place among a broader range of politicians, either from other strong states (such as Rio Grande do Sul, Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, and Pernambuco), or from states that were not as powerful but had some individual leaders with a strong national presence (such as Lauro Sodré from Pará, Joaquim Murtinho, from Mato Grosso and Lauro Miller, from Santa Catarina). Therefore, the real electoral competition between the presidential candidates occurred before the elections. If put forward, a name with consistent support from most of the oligarchies was guaranteed to win the election.





Cover of *O Malho* magazine of 10.14.1905.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

This prior contest usually began in the final months of the second year of government and it encompassed a series of negotiations, not always easy and rarely conflict-free. Thus, the hypothesis that a monopolistic alliance between Minas Gerais and São Paulo predominated during the period—known in Portuguese as *café com leite*—does not stand up to empirical analysis. By examining thousands of letters exchanged between the main players in the electoral processes of the Republic, one can notice the intense negotiations that took place in the games of the succession, the diversity of the players involved and the rejection of any attempt to create a monopoly on the part of any federative entity.

Afonso Pena: “There’s no doubt about it. My program was generally well received. My fellow diners at the banquet did not hide their signs of approval.”

Nilo Peçanha: “Perfectly. While Your Excellence was speaking, I squinted and watched, just as I did at the banquet for Mr. Pinheiro Machado. But... we can’t do without popular support and sympathy, without which we’ll be up the creek without a paddle.”

Man in the street (to one side): “My support... My sympathy... Well, gentlemen, everyone wants that... Everyone is cheering me on, and after all, I’m not the one with the most money... My sympathy... Come on... My support... We’ll see, as the blind man says.”

The prominent participation of the Army as a political actor throughout the period should be highlighted, as well as the role of parliament in choosing presidential candidates and appointing cabinet ministers.



Cartoon from *O Malho* magazine of 12.7.1912, page 49, depicting the conversations between the bosses of Minas Gerais to influence the choice of the future president of the Republic. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Of course, these contests took place within a very small elite. The institution of direct suffrage, after the inauguration of the republican regime, would not immediately make it universal. As was the case in other countries in the Americas and in most European countries, a significant portion of the population was not allowed to vote—illiterates, women and those under the age of 21. Furthermore, the optional nature of the vote, coupled with the high levels of violence in electoral processes, further inhibited the population’s participation.



The indicators show that, for the presidential elections, the highest turnout occurred in the contest between Getulio Vargas and Júlio Prestes at the end of the First Republic, still involving only 5.7% of the population. This was the most competitive election (Prestes was elected with 57.7% of the vote). The lowest rate was in the 1906 elections, when only 1.4% of Brazilians turned out to elect Afonso Pena, who obtained 97.9% of the votes.

Presidential elections in Brazil (1894 -1930)

Election date	Elected president	Turnout as a proportion of the Brazilian population (%)	Votes for the elected candidate as a proportion of turnout (%)
3.1.1894	Prudente José de Moraes Barros	2.21	84.29
3.1.1898	Manuel Ferraz de Campos Salles	2.7	90.93
3.1.1902	Francisco de Paula Rodrigues Alves	3.44	91.71
3.1.1906	Afonso Augusto Moreira Pena	1.44	97.22
3.1.1910	Hermes Rodrigues da Fonseca	3.19	57.07
3.1.1914	Venceslau Brás Pereira Gomes	2.40	91.59
3.1.1918	Francisco de Paula Rodrigues Alves	1.48	99.06
6.13.1919	Epitácio Lindolfo da Silva Pessoa	1.5	71
3.1.1922	Arthur da Silva Bernardes	2.92	56.03
3.1.1926	Washington Luís Pereira de Sousa	2.27	97.99
3.1.1930	Júlio Prestes de Albuquerque	5.65	57.74

Source: adapted by Alberto Guerreiro Ramos, in *O problema nacional do Brasil*, No. 4. Editora Saga, 1960.

Although the indicators, when analyzed coldly, attest to little or no citizen participation, one must observe that persuading the registered voters to overcome their apathy and go to the polls was the main difficulty for the political leaders. The electoral game involved a large group of non-voters but who followed, on the streets and in the press, the disputes taking place over the country's destiny. Election periods were occasions of significant social mobilization, especially in the most populous urban centers.

As the electoral laws of the period allowed for independent candidacies without the consent of the parties, an analysis of the election results reveals a much larger number of people with this type of candidacy receiving votes, showing not only a dispersion of interests but also a contest between several contenders. In 1894, the year of the first direct election under the republican system, more than 60 candidates received votes. In 1902, more than 80 names were chosen. That is not to mention the vice-presidential race, an election that was held separately.

When following the electoral processes in the press of the period, whether written or illustrated, one notices a constant allusion to the electoral processes, which occurred for different purposes. The first was to promote the candidacy of a leader who had control over the newspaper; the second was to encourage people's participation acting in a pedagogical way, with the aim of contributing to greater awareness around the importance of voting, the fight against fraud and corruption. The election meetings, which resembled the rallies of the period, helped the population even when absent from the process to find out about the contests or participate in them, even if they didn't have the right to vote. Therefore, the mobilizing nature of electoral processes cannot be contested, even if the number of voters was small.



On this date, *Fon-Fon* magazine devotes a series of articles to the political life of Rui Barbosa on the occasion of his death. *Fon-Fon* magazine of 10.3.1923, page. 43. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



O Malho magazine of 1.24.1903, page 8.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

A third specific feature of the period concerns the political actors and their different repertoires of action. It is known the liberal oligarchic period was marked by the fragility of national political parties and the predominance of state associations. In a way, the institution of federalism, even if not in the most radical way, as proposed by the Castilhos Amendment, strengthened regional identities, transforming Parliament into a stage for states in dispute. Regional parties, although not monopolistic, hegemonized competition between most actors. However much the electoral laws tried to make room for opposition and/or minorities, the closed-list vote made the process difficult.

In this context, regional oligarchies, which dated back to the occupation of the national territory, found themselves strengthened by federalism—since it was enough for them to gain control over internal electoral processes to perpetuate themselves in power, controlling the composition of their respective parliamentary benches. As the composition of the Lower House of Parliament was proportional to the number of voters, with no other brake to guarantee a more proportional outcome other than the indicator of 1 deputy for every 70,000 inhabitants, the result was great inequality in the representation achieved by each state.

The 6 largest states together had more than 60% of the deputies. Minas alone had the largest bench, with 37 members, followed by São Paulo and Bahia with 22 deputies each. Meanwhile the least populated states did not exceed the limit of 4 deputies, as was the case with Amazonas, Espírito Santo, Paraná, Goiás, among others.

This lack of even-handedness in political representation was also a feature of the positions in the Executive Branch (ministries and other second-tier bodies), as well as in the Legislative Branch itself (congressional committees). This made the federalism of the time extremely unequal, so that the most well-established oligarchies controlled the political direction of the country through their caucuses.

The fourth characteristic of the republican presidential regime concerns the difference between the mandates of the National Congress and those of the Presidency



of the Republic. The first had a mandate of three years, the second four. This meant that each president necessarily had to govern with two different benches at the same time and in some successions, the presidential elections coincided with those of the Parliament, generating some level of instability in the processes—which needs to be taken into account when analyzing succession games.

This prerogative of the Constitutional Charter of 1891 acted as a significant counterweight to the power of the Presidency of the Republic—although elected almost unanimously at the polls, it had to negotiate with the benches in Parliament to build majorities, which did not always happen smoothly. The choice of the Speaker of the House was always a dysfunctional period because, as the oligarchies of the states were autonomous and due to intra-oligarchic disputes, often divided, this negotiation was not always easy for the Presidency.

The idea that Campos Salles managed, in 1900, to ensure the election of parliamentary representations that were subservient to the governors, who, in turn, served the *status quo* uncritically, does not stand up to empirical analysis. The regulatory changes proposed by Salles, known as *governors' politics*, did not last beyond the period of his mandate and did not guarantee the stability of the regime.

Given these specific features which, compared to Brazil's current Federative Republic, seems to greatly reduce the democratic character of the first republican experience, a final reflection is necessary. The 41 years of the regime were relatively stable, especially if we compare it to its Latin American neighbors or even some European countries. Such stability was guaranteed by political arrangements, formal and informal, which avoided the monopolization of alliances, to the extent that, in each electoral process, partnerships would have to be renegotiated or recreated. It is, therefore, clear that the stability of the system was guaranteed precisely by the instability of a varied set of institutional arrangements, among which those analyzed this document.

This set of characteristics resulted in a more competitive model than what was envisaged. It involved a greater number of citizens than those provided for in

the electoral codes and also allowed the participation of a greater number of state actors. Finally, it coexisted with a stronger Legislative Branch.

Recommended further reading

CAVALCANTI, Themistocles B. *O voto distrital no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 1975.

LOVE, Joseph. *O regionalismo gaúcho*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1975.

PORTO, Walter Costa. *O voto no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2001.

VISCARDI, Cláudia M. R. *Teatro das oligarquias: uma revisão da “política do café com leite”*. Belo Horizonte: Fino Traço, 2012.