



The election of Epitácio Pessoa and the electoral scene in the re-establishment of the oligarchic pact (1919)

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Careta magazine of 4.16.1921, cover. Artist: J. Carlos (José Carlos de Brito e Cunha – 1884/1950).
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Within the framework of the political relations of the First Republic (1889-1930), presidential successions played a prominent role and, as a process that involved intermediation, served to re-establish the oligarchic pact and the outlines of Brazilian politics so far. More specifically, the power games during the presidential succession processes in the First Republic were responsible for shaping the electoral contests. That is, the disputes and political agreements determined the tone, rhythm, and direction of the elections, and what transpired were merely confirmations of prior arrangements, with the ultimate goal being the preservation of a political elite and a cohesive group in charge of managing the interests of the Brazilian state, although this cohesion was not without fissures and breakups.

In this set of agreements and adjustments of the so-called “politics of the governors,” the 1919 election marked the beginning of a phase of hegemonic alignments between São Paulo and Minas Gerais, with the aim of consolidating the involvement of power-brokers from those two states in choosing the candidates for president of the Republic. Several factors were decisive in this outcome. On the one hand, with the disappearance of Pinheiro Machado, the greatest political





leader of Rio Grande do Sul, that state needed to rebuild itself internally before returning to the political scene. On the other hand, the ageing of the first generation of republican politicians, together with the presence of other much younger figures, limited the available options.

It should be stressed, however, that while the political agreements for the presidential succession of Wenceslau Brás (1914-1918), which led to the candidacy of the Paraíba native Epitácio Pessoa (1919-1922), had the support of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, on the other hand, they also resulted in misunderstandings, adjustments, and power struggles. In this sense, the contests revolved around a small group of politicians, whose bases had been established in the first decade of the Republic, so that maintaining the shape of power meant preserving the political spaces of these leaders: Francisco Sales, Rodrigues Alves, José Joaquim Seabra, Nilo Peçanha, Antônio Azeredo, Wenceslau Brás, Rui Barbosa and Pinheiro Machado. The election itself, therefore, would be the culmination of these agreements and maintain the order established between the large states of the federation.

Even so, the formula for an agreement in governors' politics had to be *sewn together* with the interests of the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco, São Paulo and Minas Gerais, and accepted by the general group of states of the federation, represented by the state republican parties. The political groups from these states had plenty of national political capital, and it was from them—above all, São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro—that the basis of the Brazilian economy during the whole period of the First Republic (1889-1930) came: coffee.

The political context before the presidential succession of 1919

The presidency of Wenceslau Brás (1914-1918) was shaped by a situation of broad political agreements, since the electoral base that had established the candidacy and election of the then-president—the Conservative Republican Party (PRC)—did not hide its desire to take the lead and define the direction of the government, just like the São Paulo politicians, who aimed to increase their

participation in the government to occupy more spaces. And even though the president had been elected by a combination of political forces linked to both the PRC and the São Paulo Republican Party (PRP) (known in Portuguese as *perrecistas* and *coalition parties*, respectively), the strategy adopted by Wenceslau Brás was to fill his government with counterbalancing forces. To that end, he appointed members from both groups to his government and sought to please them. However, although this strategy aimed to ensure some independence for the government in relation to the political groups led by Pinheiro Machado and the São Paulo politicians, it did not achieve much success, as the appointments to the ministries disregarded the recommendations from both groups.

The arrangements and negotiations made by Wenceslau Brás would not have been completed without the same strategy being observed in the committees of the Federal Chamber. This stance provoked a situation of relative independence for the government in relation to the most prominent political forces of the period, but at the same time, it left open sources of discontent within the base groups of the governors' political system. For its part, the group led by Pinheiro Machado (the *perrecistas in Portuguese*) sought to maintain the strengthening of Rio Grande do Sul's position in national politics, by positioning itself as the base of the previous government of Hermes da Fonseca (1910-1914). Meanwhile, the PRC was trying to position itself in a way that would counterbalance the interests of the people from São Paulo, especially those politicians linked to the coffee industry. But, on the other hand, the strengthening of the relations between Minas Gerais and São Paulo tended to grow, both due to the economic foundation and the increasing coordination of the PRP with other allied state republican parties.

What can be observed is that the situation regarding the bloc agreements was not fully settled. However, despite the fact that the interests of the *perrecista* groups and their allies, who were part of the government, had been negotiated, the fragility of the consensus was still apparent. Pinheiro Machado was becoming increasingly isolated, and the context of World War I (1914-1918) made Brazilian politics more focused on economic issues.



Cover of *O Malho* magazine of 6.30.1917 announcing the coffee crisis.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Dialogue depicted on the cover of *O Malho* magazine:

ALTINO ARANTES: “Dr. Wenceslau! We must save the boat!”

CANDIDO MOTTA: “Yes! We must save the coffee!”

CARDOSO DE ALMEIDA: “And we don’t have the money for that!”

PEREIRA LIMA: “There is not enough money in the country!”

MIGUEL CALMON: “There is nothing!”

WENCESLAU: “So things are really bad?”

ZÉ POVO: “Really bad! It’s not just the coffee that’s going down the drain...
Save the boat, but don’t forget to save me too!”

World War I significantly affected external demand and the flow of capital in the country, as well as forcing the government to find a solution for the increasing stockpile of coffee, the main product of Brazil’s trade balance. The proposed solution brought together the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais for a second coffee program of driving up the coffee price through the issuance of unbacked currency (1917 to 1920), that is, the issuance of paper money without the gold standard. Thus, under pressure from coffee producers, São Paulo and the Federal Government teamed up in this effort to stabilize coffee prices. By the end of the war, São Paulo controlled half of the world’s coffee reserves, making a profit of 4 million pounds over 4 years of price appreciation. Meanwhile, farmers in São Paulo saw profits of 130%, with some even reaching as high as 400%.



O Malho magazine of 9.18.1915, page 42. Photographs showing the coffin of General Pinheiro Machado setting sail aboard the ship Deodoro da Fonseca to be transported to Rio Grande do Sul, the politician's home state. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

This political and economic context of Wenceslau Brás's government (1914-1918) outlined fragile political adjustments without consolidated definitions, which would lead to the presidential succession of 1919. The assassination of Pinheiro Machado, in September 1915, weakened the *perrecista* faction and the more immediate ambitions of the PRC and Rio Grande do Sul in national politics, precisely during the second biennium of Wenceslau Brás's administration, when political maneuvering for the succession of the then-president would begin.

The pulling back from national politics of the state of Rio Grande do Sul—now under the leadership of Borges de Medeiros as president of the PRC on one side, and the program to drive up the coffee price on the other, created a context of increasing rapprochement between Minas Gerais and São Paulo. In this scenario, *the name of Rodrigues Alves had to be put forward through the reconciliation of broader interests, such as those of the federal government, the PRC, the allied parties, and the people from São Paulo* (Viscardi, 2012, page 234).

The nomination of Epitácio Pessoa, the presidential campaign and the 1919 election

By mid-1916, the succession scenario was already taking its first steps—and the nomination of Rodrigues Alves, from São Paulo, seemed to reflect broader interests—beyond the ambitions of Minas Gerais and even President Wenceslau Brás himself, since internal political disputes in Minas Gerais failed to put forward a candidate who could challenge the nomination from São Paulo. It is interesting to note that the definition of the Rodrigues Alves/Delfim Moreira slate, in mid-1916, for an election that would take place in March 1918 and with support from Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul and the Northern and Northeastern states, seemed to have restored harmony within the country's ruling elite. With Pinheiro Machado dead, there would be no divergences, nor would major adjustments be necessary since, by maintaining a supposed independent stance, Borges de Medeiros, at the head of the PRC and the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was not willing to risk the internal loss of capital from political plots either with the



people from Minas Gerais—due to the alliance with the then President Wenceslau Brás—nor with the interests of the state of São Paulo.

However, although elected in 1918, Rodrigues Alves did not take office. Already elderly and having contracted the Spanish flu, the then president died on January 16th, 1919. The vice-president, Delfim Moreira, however, could not assume the Presidency permanently, since the Constitution established that the vice-president could only take over the position permanently if the president died two years after taking office. Thus what seemed like a combination of aligned forces once again had to be negotiated within the political factions.



The picture shows the vice-president of the Republic, Delfim Moreira, going to the Federal Senate on November 15th, 1918, to be sworn in as interim president. *Fon-Fon* magazine of 11.23.1918, page 21. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil

In this regard, the political support of Vice-President Delfim Moreira was necessary within the power relations in place at the time, because Delfim's premature removal could lead São Paulo to gain absolute control over the succession process and, consequently, result in the loss of Minas Gerais' influence in decisions about

the candidate for the presidential succession after Rodrigues Alves. According to the recommendations of Antônio Azeredo, vice-president of the Senate, *it is necessary to reach a candidate of ours, that is, not from Minas Gerais* (FRANCO, 2001, p. 438). Therefore, the focus shifted back to power games and negotiated decisions, but with the aim of maintaining the rotation system among the political elites of the major states in the Federation. To that end,

[...] Rio Grande do Sul, in the absence of names to submit, limited itself to vetoing the likely candidates. On this occasion, Borges de Medeiros affirmed that he would support the name indicated by Minas Gerais and São Paulo, provided that the candidate did not come from either of the two states. However, Minas Gerais was determined not to support a name chosen without their consent. Minas Gerais had been involved in all the succession arrangements since 1906. It would not accept a subsidiary role (Viscardi, 2012, page 241).

In this context of uncertainties, Rui Barbosa's candidacy had become established as promising, and although it was not based on consensus, its announcement forced swift decisions either by supporting the candidate from Bahia or by defining another name that would unite the triad of the most politically powerful states at the time. This was because the elections were scheduled for April 1919, and the uncertainties had been dragging on since the death of Rodrigues Alves in January 1919.

Among the advances and setbacks in the political agreements, the name of Epitácio Pessoa was put forward as an alternative, because the then retired judge of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) had already achieved national prominence, first when he defended the candidacy of Rodrigues Alves against the attacks from Rui Barbosa, in 1916, and later when he played an important role as head of the Brazilian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. But it was only at the National Convention where the representatives of the national political forces were gathered (first conceived under the presidency of Arthur Bernardes as leader of the state of Minas Gerais) that a decision was made on the consensus candidate of the political elites of the larger states of the federation: with 139 votes, Epitácio Pessoa defeated Rui Barbosa, who obtained 42 votes.



O Malho magazine of 3.1.1919, page 16. Photograph of the National Convention held on February 25th to appoint the future president of the Republic. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



News item in the newspaper A.B.C. of 3.15.1919, page 18, reporting the work of the National Convention in which the choice of Epitácio Pessoa as president of the Republic was announced. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



This enshrining of Epitácio Pessoa as the candidate of the national political elites was supported by the states of Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, Mato Grosso, parts of Bahia, Maranhão and Pernambuco. Rui Barbosa, despite being defeated, launched himself as the opposition candidate with the support of Rio de Janeiro, parts of Bahia and Pará. Thus, the following candidates were defined for the electoral race of April 13th, 1919: Epitácio Lindolfo da Silva Pessoa, from the state of Paraíba, a law graduate and retired justice of the Supreme Federal Court. His running mate and vice-presidential candidate was Delfim Moreira da Costa Ribeiro, from Minas Gerais and also a law graduate, who served his second term as vice-president on Epitácio Pessoa's ticket until 1920, when he withdrew from politics. Meanwhile, the opposition candidate was Rui Barbosa de Oliveira, from Bahia, a law graduate, diplomat, and journalist, whose vice-presidential candidate was Alfredo Ellis, from São Paulo and a medical graduate, who had served as a federal deputy for the PRP.



Epitácio Pessoa

Epitácio Lindolfo da Silva Pessoa was born in Umbuzeiro, in the hinterland of the state of Paraíba, in 1865. He graduated with a law degree from the Faculdade de Direito of Recife in 1886. After serving as a constituent deputy (1891), in 1898, he became the minister of Justice under President Campos Salles, where he contributed to the drafting of the Civil Code (which was finally approved in 1916) and the Education Code of 1901.

Photograph of Epitácio Pessoa on the front page of *Fon-Fon* magazine of 3.22.1919. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

He was appointed judge of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in 1902, where he served until 1912, when he was elected senator for the state of Paraíba. In 1918, he was part of the Brazilian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. After serving as president of Brazil (1919-1922), he held a position at the Permanent Court of International Justice established by the League of the Nations in The Hague; he was re-elected senator in 1924. He supported the Liberal Alliance and the 1930 Revolution but withdrew from public life in 1931. He died on February 13th, 1942.

The election campaign dominated the newspapers, and before the official announcement of the candidates, the *Correio da Manhã* newspaper from Rio de Janeiro, on the day the so-called National Convention met to decide which candidate would be *recommended to the nation*, boldly declared: *The candidacy of the Brazilian ambassador stands against the candidacy that the people have been acclaiming from north to south [...] and the struggle will be fought with all the the revolt of the Brazilian conscience [...] against the meaningless phrase: 'for the presidency, everyone but Rui Barbosa'* (*Correio da Manhã*, February 25th, 1919, page 1). Daily, the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* editorialized about the backroom deals and the decisions made behind closed doors, alleging that the choice of Epitácio Pessoa had been orchestrated in order to maintain the *status quo* of the current political system, without considering the will of the nation. It also asserted that this fact could be perceived, for example, by the inexplicable vote of Bahia's political leader, J. J. Seabra, *considered an enemy of Epitácio Pessoa, yet who voted in his favor. This caused an uproar.* (*Correio da Manhã*, February 26th, 1919, page 1).

For the Rio de Janeiro newspaper, it was hard to understand how the state of Bahia, represented by J. J. Seabra, rejected its native son, Rui Barbosa, and voted for a confessed enemy of the then parliamentarian, Senator Epitácio Pessoa. On the same day, the *Correio da Manhã* published an article saying that



Fon-Fon magazine of 6.21.1919, page 28, reporting Epitácio Pessoa's travels in Italy.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

the greatest lesson in honor and loyalty came from the state of Paraíba, as both the opposition and the ruling factions of that state had set aside their political quarrels and voted for Epitácio Pessoa, something not seen in Bahia (*Correio da Manhã*, February 26th, 1919, page 1).

The curious thing about this nomination is that all the political negotiations were carried out without the presence of Senator Epitácio Pessoa, who was the head of the Brazilian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. When he was informed on the telephone of the decision of the National Convention by the foreign minister of the Campos Sales government, Olinto Magalhães, he replied: *How is this possible, Olinto? Can't you see that these are jokes?* (Pessoa, 1925, page 298). Once his nomination was confirmed, his answer came via a telegram sent to the president of the National Convention, senator Antônio Azeredo: [...] *I accept, then, the candidacy that you offer me and, if I am elected, do not doubt for an instant that my sole concern in the government will be to justify the nation's trust* (*Correio da Manhã*, February 28th, 1919, page 1).

Epitácio Pessoa's words reinforced the idea that the *justification of trust* raised by the then candidate would not necessarily be to the nation, but rather to the political group that backed him and was responsible for his nomination. In other words, if elected, Epitácio Pessoa would reaffirm the commitment to the governors' policy and honor the actions of the political elites from the major states, especially São Paulo and Minas Gerais. This was, at least, what the PRP, PRM, PRC from Rio Grande do Sul, and the coalition parties in the states expected.

The São Paulo newspaper *Correio Paulistano*, an institution of the São Paulo Republican Party (PRP), proudly announced the nomination of Epitácio Pessoa with a manifesto—to the Brazilian nation—whose tone consisted of praising the diversity of those who had nominated Epitácio Pessoa as candidate *by voting, in the freest broad-mindedness of ideas and putting forward of names, all political shades, without excluding a single one [...] the result of this free, considered and competent expression of will was the choice of one name by all titles, the illustrious and respected Epitácio Pessoa.* (*Correio Paulistano*, February 28th, 1919, page 1).

The electoral campaign was intense in the newspapers, with accusations and legal issues filling the pages from February to April 1919. Epitácio Pessoa's campaign was entirely run by his supporters, since the official candidate of the dominant elites would only return to Brazil on July 21st, 1919—after election day, scheduled for April. Rui Barbosa, in turn, acted as best as he could: he went to São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Bahia; gave interviews; wrote articles; delivered speeches; and fiercely attacked the political establishment's *gros bonnets*. Against his absent competitor, he aimed at what he perceived as his most vulnerable point. (Pessoa, 1925, p. 325).



Political meeting in São Paulo in favor of Rui Barbosa's candidacy, *Fon-Fon* magazine of 2.15.1919, page 19. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The main argument of Rui Barbosa's campaign was that Epitácio Pessoa was not an eligible candidate because, as a retired justice of the Federal Supreme Court, he could not run, a claim widely publicized by the newspapers and led to heated debates. However, the Brazilian legal expert Clóvis Beviláquia, when consulted by the PRP and by its allies, clarified the issue: [...] *Mr. Epitácio Pessoa is not prohibited from receiving the popular mandate, to hold an elected office.* [...]

The Constitution gave Congress alone, in other words, the federal legislative body, the power to use the votes given by the Brazilian people, to choose its president (Pessoa, 1925, page 327).

Faced with this legal opinion, Rui Barbosa's campaign continued to express its suspicions about the illegality of Pessoa's candidacy, but shifted to attacking the government plan of the establishment candidate. In its pages, the newspaper *O Imparcial* stated that the plan of the then candidate from the *leading states* was nothing more than a private conference for friends, as what had been presented as a government platform had been read at a banquet in favor of Rodrigues Alves in 1916. The same newspaper also accused Epitácio Pessoa's candidacy of being *vice-ridden and born out of plots* (*O Imparcial*, March 4th, 1919, page 2).

The 1919 presidential elections presented Brazilians with an unusual dynamic—the slates in contention could not confront each other directly, owing to the absence of the candidate Epitácio Pessoa. However, the perception created by the newspapers was that Rui Barbosa's candidacy was in tune with the aspirations of

Political meeting in the state of Bahia. *Fon-Fon* magazine of 4.12.1919, page 27. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.





the Brazilian people and, with just over a month of the campaigning left to go, the journalistic pages appealed to Rui Barbosa's political strength and oratorical ability. The analysis published in *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper was as follows: *Mr. Rui Barbosa has lifted the nation from the stagnation in which it was immersed [...] he upheld his name at the polls because he could not accept the result of the Convention of February 25 [...] the vote he has received so far is brilliant, with real benefits for the country* (*Jornal do Brasil*, April 14th, 1919, page 4). Regarding Epitácio Pessoa's performance, the newspaper merely stated that his noble mission as head of the Brazilian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference was no less important, but that it only revealed the character and cultured personality of the then candidate (*Jornal do Brasil*, April 14th, 1919, page 4).

This was also the perception of some periodicals of the time, such as the magazine *Careta* from Rio de Janeiro, which published:

[...] what makes senator Epitácio Pessoa incompatible with the Presidency of the Republic is not the rejection of his past [...] it is the fact that Brazil is a republican country with a leader elected by the direct vote of the people, and the fact that the people want, not Mr. Epitácio Pessoa, but Mr. Rui Barbosa. [...] the truth is that the people are indifferent to Mr. Pessoa and want Mr. Barbosa. (*Careta* magazine, March 29th, 1919, page 6).

However, the newspaper *Correio Paulistano*, an institution of the PRP, had a daily front-page column, from February to April 1919, which set out the purposes and legitimacy of the National Convention to choose the candidate *recommended to the nation*. The qualities of the political representatives were praised; and the idea that emerged in the text published by the newspaper conveyed the idea that this representation was national and that the interests were also national, not those of groups or political deals.

In the middle of the fevered debates, the campaign followed its course. Rui Barbosa's rallies in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, were well-attended, with expectations of hearing Rui's oratory and his government platform. Without

major incidents, the newspapers reported the public's enthusiasm for Rui Barbosa and, to some extent, paid little importance to Epitácio Pessoa's candidacy, except in Paraíba, his home state. In turn, Epitácio Pessoa's rallies in Rio de Janeiro, and the capital of Paraíba were held by his allies without the candidate's presence: the career of the legal expert was praised, and his participation in the Paris Peace Conference highlighted.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, in March, the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* reported a small incident which led to a fight and the arrest of supporters, but without major repercussions—according to the newspaper.

Two days after the election, *Correio da Manhã* had already announced the candidate Rui Barbosa as the winner of the contest: *Against the forces of the government machines [...] even Mr. Epitácio Pessoa cannot accept the position of president [...] when the real electorate vetoed his candidacy so emphatically.* (*Correio da Manhã*, April 15th, 1919, page 2). But, amidst the vote counting, the newspaper *O Imparcial* published the following editorial: *The reports from the manipulated states begin to inflate the vote count for Mr. Epitácio Pessoa.* (*O Imparcial*, April 16th, 1919, page 1).



Front page headline of *O Imparcial* newspaper of 4.16.1919 on the election results.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Epitácio Pessoa and the electoral machine. *Caretta* magazine of 4.26.1919.

Author: J. Carlos (José Carlos de Brito e Cunha – 1884-1950). Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Rui Barbosa's victory was not certain. The ballot boxes of the allied states were opened, and the situation quickly turned around. Epitácio Pessoa emerged victorious. In fact, the political machine of the PRP, PRM and their allies in the states was the winner of the 1919 election, as the candidate from the political machine didn't even need to appear or reinforce his government platform. All that was necessary was the news that he was fulfilling a highly distinguished mission, due to the context of the First World War that the world had experienced from 1914 to 1918.

Thus, the presidential election of 1919 elected the governors' political machine, endorsed by the interests of the São Paulo and Minas Gerais elites and legitimized by the approval of Rio Grande do Sul and the allied states of the Federation. The machine's official candidate went through a smooth election, without disturbances, and Epitácio Pessoa received 249,342 votes against 118,303 given to Rui Barbosa, with the prerogative of appearing three months later to take office.

Even though he could not expect to have the same freedom of action that a candidate from São Paulo, Minas Gerais or Rio Grande do Sul would have due to the natural prerogative of their state of origin, Epitácio Pessoa was not as aligned as his national political support base had hoped (Lewin, 1993, page 280-281), when, for example, he formed a cabinet entirely composed of civilians and promoted the creation of the Instituto Federal de Obras contra as Secas (IFOCS—a *federal government body to fight the effects of droughts*).



Correio Paulistano newspaper of 7.28.1919, page 1. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Recommended further reading

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The picture shows the vice-president of the Republic, Delfim Moreira, going to the Federal Senate on November 15th, 1918, to be sworn in as interim president.

Fon-Fon magazine of 11.23.1918, page 21.

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