

## CRISIS WITHOUT END? On the differences of presidential crises in Brazilian media coverage

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### ABSTRACT

Political crisis and presidential breakdowns are not merely political events. Such events are also elements of the narratives found in news media. This article argues that media construct or project endings for presidents in crisis, based on the cultural scripts available to newswriters. Using the media scandals and political crises of the three latest Brazilian presidents Bolsonaro, Temer, and Rousseff, the article shows how media at a structural level search for solutions when covering politics in narrative forms. Some types of presidential crisis, e.g. those related to corruption scandals, have well-known scripts for resolving the crisis in the form of court cases, elections, or impeachment proceedings. The kinds of crises predicated on presidential incompetency, however, currently lack satisfying narrative endings.

**Keywords:** Narrative. Presidential crisis. Scandal.

### CRISE SEM FIM? Sobre as diferenças das crises presidenciais na cobertura da mídia brasileira

### RESUMO

Crise política e quedas de presidentes não são meramente eventos políticos. Tais eventos também são elementos das narrativas na cobertura da mídia. Este artigo retrata como a mídia constrói ou projeta fins para presidentes em crise, com base nos roteiros ou enredos culturais disponíveis para os jornalistas. Usando os escândalos da mídia e as crises políticas dos três últimos presidentes brasileiros, Bolsonaro, Temer e Rousseff, o artigo mostra como a mídia em um nível estrutural busca soluções políticas nos materiais jornalísticos. Alguns tipos de crise presidencial, por exemplo aqueles relacionados a escândalos de corrupção, têm scripts bem conhecidos para resolver a crise na forma de processos judiciais, eleições ou processos de impeachment. Os tipos de crise decorrentes da incompetência presidencial, entretanto, carecem atualmente de conclusões narrativas satisfatórias.

**Palavras-chave:** Narrativa. Crise presidencial. Escândalo.

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## INTRODUCTION

Media was undoubtedly a part of democracy's long-winded evolution (HABERMAS 1989[1962]), but in many democracies today, it seems as if the media no longer fulfils democratic functions, neither as watchdog nor as the arena for public opinion and deliberation. In this global moment, civic society, scholars, and traditional politicians question the power, quality and role of media. It is a moment of citizen journalism, of fact-checking and debunking, of media observatories and denunciations of fake news (ZIMDARS AND MACLEOD 2020). These movements and trends shine a light on the complex interplay of power and discourse in media agenda-setting (MCCOMBS AND SHAW 1972; MCCOMBS, SHAW AND WEAVER 1997), and at best unfold hitherto hidden layers of this interplay. Despite the current peaks of attention to media power (and the occasional self-scrutiny efforts by media institutions), is it not true that media storms and media-borne candidates have had profound impacts on recent electoral choices? In half a decade, the world has seen a number of unexpected, even bizarre or dangerous parliamentary situations, and presidencies which seemed improbable or even unthinkable 15 or 20 years ago. As a thought experiment, is it possible to imagine the ascendancy of presidents such as Donald Trump in the United States, or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or the rapid turnover of British prime ministers pushed by the Brexit campaign, without today's media environment?

The awareness of democratic deficits in the media system - unhealthy media concentration (LIMA 2004), polarized echo chambers (JAMIESON AND CAPELLA 2010), bubble-like media storms (BOYDSTUN 2014, HENDRICKS AND HANSEN 2016) - has not prevented anti-establishment, populist political lone wolves in exploiting media hypes. In some democracies, such actors have even succeeded in escaping or partly overturning existing party systems, for example in France, Brazil, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Although there are many causes and different factors at play, across the board, it is clear that the Western and Latin American media systems are currently intertwined with crises of political leaders (not to mention environmental crisis and the double crisis resulting from COVID-19). We are not just witnessing "personalized politics" in a break from traditional party/ideology-driven politics, but something beyond this: The post-political, post-factual, anti-political, or post-democratic moment, depending on the theoretical frame (CROUCH 2004, RANCIÈRE 1995, HENDRICKS AND VESTERGAARD 2018, WILSON AND SWYNGEDOUW 2014). I will argue that a key feature of this moment is the crisis of political leaders; both for the (supposed) newcomers and for the traditional party-affiliated leaders. But how do media contribute to this global crisis of political leadership?

In this paper, I will take a closer look at Brazil's presidential crises and instability during the last five years. In these recent waves of scandals, institutional conflicts and crises, certain crises have

had clear-cut solutions identified in the media, whereas at least one crisis appeared as “*sem saída*” - as a crisis without end. The fundamental research question of this article is why solutions appear in some cases of political crisis, whereas in others, a crisis may appear unsolvable in political commentary and interpretations, to pundits and newspaper editors. What are the underlying structural characteristics of a presidential crisis, in which no exit appears ready in the next day’s opinion pieces and blogs?

By picking Brazil as case study of a range of presidential crises, we get access to a great wealth of differing narrations about presidents. Crucially for a case study, this variation was present in the very same media system over a short period of time. In the period from 2013 to 2020, three presidents (not to mention a large number of other political leaders) have experienced severe crises. Brazil’s presidential crises constitute a maximum-variation case (FLYVBJERG 2006:230). Here, the internal variation of the different crises, existing under mostly identical conditions of the media system, is ideal for isolating contextual features in order to examine the factors that might explain the variation. One such factor that I will highlight is the narrations. I will make the case that the media narrations of the presidential crises have played out along quite different plotlines. Some of the crises have had clear solutions when narrated by pundits and commentators, while at least one has literally been presented as dead ends for Brazil.

One general theoretical contribution of this article is a starting point for exploring the special kinds of presidents seen in the post-political era, and how they are impacted by media narrations of crisis and scandals. Due to space restrictions, I must forego any detailed description of the corruption scandals engulfing the country since 2014, and instead home in on the phenomenon of presidential crisis as portrayed in media. Details about the intertwined corruption cases engulfing the governments led by the Workers’ Party can be studied at length elsewhere (ALBUQUERQUE 2017, DAMGAARD 2018, FERES JÚNIOR 2016, BIROLI AND MANTOVANI 2014), and will be kept at a minimum here. The later corruption cases involving the presidents Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro have not to my knowledge been extensively covered by researchers yet (but see DAMGAARD 2018:150 and SØNDERGAARD 2020). In any case, the focus of this article is not coverage of corruption or scandals per se, but rather the way that political crisis and presidential crises seem to prompt a search for solutions in the media. The notion of “solutions” and “a way out” of crisis appears under-theorized, but it is clearly a major concern (for media and for political actors) in actual crises. Uncovering this topic (and presenting a method for doing so) is the specific contribution to the literature offered by this article.

## 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

My method to explore the cases of presidential crises in Brazil is purely qualitative, based on a narrative approach developed in more detail elsewhere (DAMGAARD 2018). This approach attempts to look at the structures of certain narratives present across the landscape of a particular media system, and assess the relationship between actual political events and the underlying narrative structure which molds the news texts covering (and commenting on) those events.

Like many other kinds of news, political news often tell familiar stories (BELL 1991, MOTTA 2013, PRIOR 2015, TUCHMAN 1978). The stories of crises inevitably build tension along a narrative arc, and producers of news often look for suspension of that tension when writing and editing text or commentary (DAMGAARD 2018). Corruption crises in political parties, for example, have certain pre-scripted solutions - scripted to great detail and used by both producers of news and the spin doctors and media advisors that try to weather the storm in a scandalized party. Admission of guilt or outright denial are two points on such plotlines (THOMPSON 2000), and depending on the media system, one might be more common and effective than the other (ALLERN AND POLLACK 2012). The judiciary might intervene at one point, moving the scripts into the arena of courts. The scripts of court processes, by their nature of legal proceedings, offer some kind of conclusion to ongoing coverage of scandals, because a trial and its sentence or acquittal narratively resolves the basic question of guilt and truthfulness.

Before expanding this, it is necessary to acknowledge that a vast literature exists on the larger topic of presidential crisis, mostly from political science. The Latin American experiences of presidential breakdowns have been a source of comparative insights especially (HOCHSTETLER 2006, LLANOS AND MARSTEINTREDET 2010, PÉREZ-LIÑAN 2014). These researchers have explained how, why and when mass mobilizations and legislative bodies come to either align or oppose each other during moments of presidential instability in the region, and identify important mechanisms that lead to presidential breakdowns with ensuing stability or instead to democratic breakdowns.

The interplay of political forces in society is no doubt important in order to understand what it is that topples presidents in Latin America, but the sections following this one opt for a social-constructivist, narrative approach. This is not to deny the relevance of the approaches from political sciences. Rather, I will present the most relevant waypoints of this existing literature briefly here, and use it to set the stage for the analysis below. Three very relevant insights from scholars researching Latin American and Brazilian political science help understand the context and sequence of scandals, political crisis, and the media coverage following the former: First, the theory of a legislative shield (PÉREZ-LIÑAN 2014); second, the Brazilian constitution and the checks-and-balances of the

Brazilian democracy (ARANTES 2002, MAINWARING and WELNA 2003); and third, the morosity of Brazilian courts (FALCÃO, HARTMANN AND CHAVES 2014) and the usage of material from court proceedings in the elite media (ARANTES 2002, 2011) as well as in internet blogs produced by networks of online media entrepreneurs (CARVALHO AND ALBUQUERQUE 2017).

The first item on the list of highly relevant research results stems from comparative analysis of Latin American presidencies. It can probably be extrapolated to many presidential democracies outside of the region, and even to certain parliamentary democracies. The general idea is, simply put, that a scandalized or crisis-mired president will not need to step down (or do anything much) as long as a significant share of the legislators still back the president. In the case of Brazil, one-third of the Congress members are needed to shut down impeachment petitions, for example. The members of the legislative body may not even really agree with the president, but still prefer the current president to the alternative. According to Pérez-Liñán (2014), the legislative body may shield the president, but the legislative is in turn somewhat susceptible to social movement pressure.

The second item is the general shape of Brazil's particular political system - most notably, the coalitional presidentialism, checks-and-balances, and accountability mechanisms relating to the president. Starting with the coalitional system, it is noteworthy that the Brazilian Congress has numerous parties, and that the presidents of Brazil, since the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello in 1991, have been forced to make increasingly wide coalitions in order to govern. The second Rousseff administration, for instance, united nine out of the 28 elected parties (or 317 of the 511 seats of the Lower House of Congress). Rousseff only directly controlled one-ninth of Congress through her party (the Workers' Party). The ideological distance internally in this broad coalition was considerable, however (POWER AND ZUCCO 2011), which put Rousseff in a fragile position vis-a-vis impeachment proceedings.

In practice, impeachment proceedings are not initially controlled by majority votes. Instead, the Speaker of the House (usually a senior politician from one of the largest or most influential parties) has the discretionary power to deny petitions for impeachment, even when ordered by the Supreme Court to open proceedings. The unwritten rules about impeachment combined with coalitional politics mean that Brazilian presidents should court at least the one or two major parties (apart from their own) that may elect a Speaker, as insurance against impeachment petitions. Presidents cannot be investigated directly or tried before a court, according to the letter of the law, although the former rule is quite malleable in practice. Impeachment is one of two feasible ways (see below) to interrupt the four-year turn from the outside: Under the 1988 Constitution, neither the Supreme Court nor the Armed Forces can end a presidential mandate. The indirect threats of interventions heard in the last few years are thus interpreted as threats to the constitutional order itself. In sum, the power of vertical accountability (MAINWARING AND WELNA 2003) is limited to a narrow channel within the

legislative body in the form of the Speaker, and the horizontal accountability is locked into the electoral four-year calendar.

Finally, the morosity of courts must be mentioned with an explicit eye to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Court. Starting with the latter, a presidential mandate can in principle be annulled by the Supreme Electoral court, but in practice it is extremely unlikely that this court will finalize proceedings before the end of the term (however, see the case of the Rousseff/Temer ticket below).

The speed of federal-level prosecution is also a problem for high-level corruption cases close to a president. The Supreme Court must hear cases relating to federal politicians, and the investigation and prosecution resorts under the federal prosecutor's office in Brasília. Here, the average Supreme Court penal case lasts 5,5 years (FALCÃO, HARTMANN AND CHAVES 2014:57), and the appeal processes last another two years on average. This means that discharged ministers and politicians stripped of office (a quite rare occurrence) are not brought to justice until well after the mandate period has ended. A president, as mentioned, cannot be charged or investigated, while close political allies can, but usually all too late relative to the overall electoral calendar. The voters will usually have their say long before the gavel strikes the bench presided by a federal judge. Long-winding court processes may also work as a shield for a president with allies allegedly involved in corruption, because as long as paperwork is shuffled around and the jury is still out, the benefit of the doubt can be invoked, at least rhetorically.

The political system with its legislative shield and checks-and-balances combined with a slow judicial system are important factors determining the general shape of a presidential crisis relative to corruption and criminal cases in Brazil. Another area of scandal is “behaviour” scandals - featuring inappropriate conduct in the personal sphere, rather than in the political sphere. This area deserves more space than I can include here, unfortunately. Briefly, the limits of decorum and “decent behaviour” have lately been extremely challenged by the leaders in several presidential democracies, not least in Brazil and the United States. In both cases, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump have effectively shattered all existing limits pertaining to codes of conduct, media relations, and classic statesmanship. Since both were well-known in public before coming into power, neither elected legislators nor public opinion appeared to be much surprised by their behaviour as presidents, given their previous (political or public) career and campaign strategy.

Thus, what is considered scandalous “personal” conduct (as defined, for example, in the existing literature on scandals, i.e. ADUT 2008, THOMPSON 2000, or ALLERN AND POLLACK 2012) was already anticipated if not accepted openly or tacitly by the voters electing these presidents. Obviously, the political-personal style of the rebel or the anti-establishment candidate has won both presidents many votes. Concordantly, the scandal of Trump's sexual-blackmailing relations with a

porn actress caused less stir than it would have for virtually any other candidate. Abandoning all pretensions of a clean sheet in the area of conduct turns out to be another shield, of a sort: A shield of already-lowered expectations, where the outrageous becomes mundane after a short while.

The final parts of this literature review will be devoted to arguing for the relevance of media studies and especially a narrative approach to the cases of presidential crisis in question here. First, in the literature, it is widely accepted that media is the core arena in which scandals play out, since the public sphere (CALHOUN 1992, HABERMAS 1989[1962], WARNER 2002) is a mediated construction (in complex ways, no doubt). But scandals are not the only thing triggering a presidential crisis: Social mobilization, fragmented political coalitions, fiscal problems, and many other factors may also start a snowball of bad news for a president. However, and this is the second part of the argument, when diving into the causality of presidential crises, it cannot be denied that the media play a central role in framing a problem as something beyond and above a temporary setback or minor challenge. This is what makes the snowball roll, in a sense.

A great deal of literature exists on the topic of framing and crises in the vein of Entman (ENTMAN 1993) who clarified the concept which had been used in various disciplines (including prospect theory in psychology and Goffman's strand of anthropology) for two decades (for a recent Brazilian framing study relevant to the present topic, see GUAZINA, PRIOR AND ARAÚJO 2018). The often-quoted researchers Gamson and Modigliani thought of frames as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events... The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (GAMSON AND MODIGLIANI 1987:143). In the following, I will continue this idea found in framing studies inspired by Gamson and Modigliani. I will consider news as not merely framing events as political problems on a case-by-case basis, but instead make the case that chains of news constitute narratives over extended periods of time and across numerous instances of text. When analyzing longer sequences or series of news, most other strands of framing studies have less to offer than those tapping into the quite rich and complex tradition of narrative studies. That is not to say that I disagree with mainstream framing studies (which I usually do not), but to point out a difference of scope. With this, I will turn to outlining the narrative approach used for analyzing the Brazilian case. The intended theoretical contribution, then, is introducing a new (or rather, old) method to the study of political crisis and presidential crisis or even breakdowns.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAME AND MAIN CONCEPTS

To set the stage for the argument, I will introduce two concepts used in the following analysis. The first concept is *scripts* determining how news texts (and images) are put together, on

one hand, enabling strips of events to be infused with meaning. The second is the concept of a *narrative solution*. The former is used for explaining the common-place phenomenon that interpretations and emplotments of events appear over and over in media coverage, across multiple media outlets. The latter concept is used for questioning why certain emplotments (and not others) float to the surface of the vast ocean of news stories found in a given media system. Before introducing these, I will clarify my use of the phrase “media system”, because media system theory (propelled by Hallin and Mancini originally in “Comparing Media Systems”, HALLIN AND MANCINI 2004) forms a stage or passive backdrop for the theoretical approach.

Within media system theory, specifically the adaptations of Hallin and Mancini’s seminal work that best describe the Latin American context (ALBUQUERQUE 2011, HALLIN AND PAPATHANASSOPOULOS 2002, MIGUEL, BIROLI AND MOTTA 2012), the presence and role of presidents in media systems/presidential democracies entail certain features in coverage patterns. To Albuquerque, the system of government is an important variable in understanding media systems (2011:90), arguing that

... the separation of powers affects both the manner in which the media organizations represent politics and the role that they intend to play in it. Media representation of politics is affected in two main ways. First, media tends to focus on the president as an individual person – presidents literally give government a body – to the detriment of collective agents such as political parties. Second, in a presidential system media tend to reinforce the emphasis on the administrative aspects of government, rather than on party politics. (ibid:91)

Although much, much more can be said about the merits of comparison and the theoretical foundations of media systems theory, let us stay with the two insights above. Both are extremely important in the case of presidential crises from 2013 till 2020, and we shall later note the spiralling tendency of presidential crises being interpreted as crises of democracy - in some cases with no exit signs leading out of this vicious circle. Albuquerque highlights that in a presidential democracy, the news texts appearing in a media system will often foreground the president as an individual, making him or her the active agent in news texts about governmental decisions. This tendency becomes a two-edged sword when a scandal breaks or when crisis looms; in such situations, responsibility will also tend to be placed at the foot of the presidential palace.

Given the focus on the president as individual actor (even in as complex a political system as the Brazilian), the stage is set for media narratives with a clear protagonist or antagonist - depending on the situation, of course. What are the scripts, then, in which this media character acts? Scripts, in the following, are the prototypical sequence of events in cultural narratives used as templates by newswriters. This concept starts from the commonplace idea that news are stories, several scholars view news as a particular order of discourse that weaves a very special, often



complex, narrative web (BARTHES 1977, BELL 1991, HALL 1984, TUCHMAN 1978). Echoing this idea, FAIRCLOUGH (1995) pinpoints the intertextual space between actual texts as the place to go looking for narratives. We all live in intertextual spaces, and we grow up to know by heart the clichés and stereotypical characters residing in these spaces. Likewise, we know how plots usually go, from a “once upon a time” to a grand finale of the narration, whether a tragic or a happy ending. Journalists and pundits also write on the basis of this cultural pool of textual resources - tropes, metaphors, archetypes, and not least scripts that help them group events together with minimum textual effort (and help the reader or viewer comprehend and decode the news coverage). According to Appadurai, media is full of such “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives” (APPADURAI 1996:35; note the similarity of this concept to the frames described by Gamson and Modigliani in the quote above).

One overlooked but very crucial aspect of the script is that it suggests or entails certain endings or solutions. When a journalist employs the textual devices (for instance certain frames) that tie events together into a script, the ending to the script’s storyline may be implied to the reader or actually spelled out by the journalist. A horse-race election must have a winner at some point, for example, and a journalistic text using this script will therefore very likely anticipate the election’s result. Likewise, a crisis demands some kind of solution; just like a scandal requires a satisfying punishment. In all three cases, which are common scripts in political coverage, the expected or anticipated ending is ideologically loaded. The search for endings to the scripts is not just loaded with ideology due to the newswriters’ personal bias, however objective they may try to be. Rather, the scripts are guiding both the reader and the producer of text, in the sense that the scripts’ tension and (likely) endings appear to be culturally predetermined. Though they can change over time, in order to be satisfying as narratives, they must have endings we can relate to.

The best theoretical argument for the narrative desire for a symbolically satisfying closure was developed by Fredric Jameson in his book “The Political Unconscious” (JAMESON 1981). Jameson argued that the stories we tell are, at their deepest core, about the society and the tensions of society. The characters, plots and textual forms revolve around certain tensions in society; indeed, the strength of plots lies in their ability to juxtapose the conceptual endpoints that map our social structure and political unconscious. Thus, narratives can be read as symbolic-political acts. This seems highly relevant in the tales of political crisis, corruption and conflict spun by newswriters in Brazil. Even the most pragmatic voices and the most mundane suggestions for escaping presidential crisis may map unto the underlying imagined blueprint of Brazilian society.

Some solutions put forth by actors in Brazil have focused on political and electoral reform. In several later cases, the “solutions” discussed by pundits and commentators have been a menacing return to more authoritarian society: Both military actors and the president Bolsonaro have hinted at a democratic rupture or directly threatened the entire institutional order in response to a crisis - as a “solution for Brazil”. Thus, solutions and crises also seem to call into question the shape of democracy itself, and thereby fuel a discourse of instability. The crises of presidents and political parties related to corruption scandals have also contributed to institutional tension, weakened accountability, and exposed political motives in various branches of government outside of the Executive or Legislative.

In this way, the contours of the political imagination begins to take shape, when we read the media representations of crises as narratives that play out the most basic symbolic distinctions of society’s structure. Both tragedies and stories of triumph can be found in media coverage of political events. The difference, of course, lies in the ending, the lesson learned, and the actors that ended up as protagonists or antagonists. At the most obvious level, the method used in the following tries to read news as real-life fairy tales or plays, which conform to a certain story logic. However, the goal is not to simplify real news too much; rather, it is the point to discover how scripts are embedded in reporting and political commentary. Then, we must ask what ending is projected by a specific script, and how and why they come up with certain solutions to the narrative tension of that script. Ideology is at stake, but at a deeper level than party politics-ideology: It is the normative evaluation of core concepts in society that may be played out in the scripts deployed by newswriters. In the political news of Brazil, the basic scripts are woven from grand moral narratives about personal sin and guilt, about nationhood, hierarchical society and the Rule of Law. In the coming sections, I will attempt pointing out the scripts that were used in coverage of presidential crises from 2013 till 2020, and highlight the presence of solutions in this coverage.

### **3 CASE STUDY**

#### **3.1 The crises and impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (2013-2016)**

Dilma Rousseff assumed the presidency on January 1, 2011. Initially, she was framed by the media mainly as an administrator, a technical bureaucrat starkly contrasting her charismatic predecessor Lula. The image of Rousseff as a maid with a broom, sweeping out corruption from Brasília, was a satire cartoon favorite early on. This particular media reflection of Rousseff was based on her swift discharges of cabinet members involved in corruption. Upon close inspection, the zero-tolerance stance was less pronounced when members of Rousseff’s party PT were involved by the media (ARAÚJO, COSTA AND FITTIPALDI 2016). Still, the broom-wielding image captured how

corruption scandals were managed and framed under the first Rousseff presidency: As something external to the president, who swept away crises.

The efficient technocrat with a tough stance on corruption was a media representation that later got replaced by another image, centering instead on her incompetence as coalitional leader. Especially after the June 2013 revolts (the so-called *Jornadas de Junho*, see AVRITZER 2016, chapter 3), a new narrative emerged which inverted the image of a technically competent administrator. Rousseff was increasingly seen as unable to steer Brazilian politics. This so-called crisis of governability (AVRITZER 2016:44) was directly linked to her person in the media coverage. Within the changed framing, Rousseff in her incompetence had a personal responsibility for the growing popular discontent (GUAZINA, PRIOR AND ARAÚJO 2018). Given this negative, personalized framing taking center stage in most traditional media outlets and their subsidiary regional media outlets, it was not surprising that the solution presented to counter the crisis of governability was Rousseff's exit. As the presidential elections loomed on the horizon (in October 2014), the most obvious end to the script of a president failing to lead the nation was her expected loss in the elections. Echoing the 2013 revolts, some calls for Rousseff to step down still lingered at the margin of the media, but pundits saw the elections as the more likely end to Rousseff's reign.

However, even while Rousseff's approval ratings declined in 2014, mostly with the middle-class voters (AVRITZER 2016:105), the presidential race was never a lost cause. In the polls of mid-2014, more voters still opted for Rousseff than other candidates. The two-step presidential election however meant that the difference between Rousseff's candidature and the opposition leader Aécio Neves' ticket was very small, should the two end up in the second round of elections.

At a crucial moment just prior to the first round of voting in October, Rousseff was directly linked to an unfolding corruption scandal within the large state-owned oil company Petrobras. A police investigation code-named Lava-Jato had uncovered a money-laundering scheme with ties to one of the directors of Petrobras. The weekly magazine *Veja*, and then the rest of the dominant media outlets, related this story to both Rousseff and her predecessor Lula. The media had obtained quotes from a testimony made by a plea bargaining *doleiro* (money launderer). The quote "they knew it all" on *Veja's* front page tied the former and current president to the large kick-back scheme draining Petrobras and filling the slush funds of their party.

This exposé changed the framing of Rousseff again; now, the tables had turned on Rousseff and her alleged corruption became the center of attention. Despite this game-changer, she still won the second round of presidential elections. However, since the eve of the second round of presidential elections in 2014, the legitimacy of Dilma Rousseff's second period as president was questioned by the political opposition and by the media.

The Congress majority overwhelmingly shifted towards the center-right at the same election. This required Rousseff to construct a much more fragmented and less heterogeneous party base to support her political initiatives in Congress. Even the center-right parties of the coalition that gained seats in the Cabinet joined the Christian-conservative parties in Congress, and formed an alternative majority. During 2015, Rousseff struggled to get fundamental legislation passed, including the state budget law.

So, while the election did nothing to solve but rather accentuated the crisis of governability, the corruption exposé stemming from the Lava-Jato case combined with the PSDB electoral court lawsuits presented a new solution: the election of Dilma Rousseff could be annulled, on the basis of evidence brought to light by the probe. A steady stream of media exposés based on police investigations in late 2014 and early 2015 kept Rousseff's Workers' Party under pressure.

No evidence appeared that linked directly tied Rousseff or her election campaign to the graft in Petrobras, except the doleiro testifying that she knew about it. Thus, the electoral court case did not seem as the likely end to Rousseff's presidency, and few news about the court case appeared in the main media outlets. Four months into 2015, however, the crisis of governability was compounded by a new problem for Rousseff. In April 2015, the question of Rousseff's personal involvement in fiscal delays known as "pedaladas" (DAMGAARD 2018:112-118) gained traction in the media again. The issue of delays in transfers of funds between the State Treasury and public banks had already been news material back in April 2014. Now, in 2015, the fiscal delays were chosen by opposition leaders as the argument that could support a successful impeachment petition. The delayed transfers had conveniently helped reduce the apparent deficits of the state accounts - convenient for the incumbent in an election year. The solution to the presidential crisis could then be narrated in new terms by editors and political commentators. It was no longer her incompetence as president that spelled the end for Rousseff, but her role as antagonist in a moral narrative, initiated by the Lava-Jato investigations and compounded by her complicity in the fiscal delays. With three crises combined and a well-formed narrative in the media, the ousting of Rousseff was set up in the eye of the public.

The technical and legal steps to impeachment followed a complex route in the second half of 2015 and the first months of 2016. In this period, the political elite willing to unseat Rousseff gathered around the solution which was literally termed "The Temer Solution" - referring to the Vice-President, Michel Temer of the party PMDB. Rousseff and PT launched a counter-narrative, but to no avail. The story line of this counter-narrative was centered on Temer's lieutenant and Speaker of the House, Eduardo Cunha, who formally started the impeachment process, while also being directly involved in the Petrobras graft, under investigation in the Lava-Jato probe, and target of a disciplinary process in Congress for lying about his secret, Swiss bank accounts. Cunha dodged these, however, and was then able to oversee the process of impeachment, which removed Rousseff and her cabinet

temporarily in May 2016. Michel Temer could then appoint an interim cabinet and pick up the mantle from Rousseff.

### 3.2 The Michel Temer Government and Corruption Scandals (2016-2018)

Michel Temer was sworn in as president on August 31, 2016, taking permanently over from Dilma Rousseff at the conclusion of the impeachment process in the Brazilian Senate. At this moment, Temer had what Rousseff lacked: A legislative shield (PÉREZ-LIÑAN 2014) and a working majority in Congress. Temer's legal and technical competency to rule was not questioned initially, even though his name had been associated with several corruption cases in the same period as Rousseff. Members of his party PMDB had already been under heavy media scrutiny in the Lava-Jato case, not just Eduardo Cunha, the Speaker of the House, but several PMDB politicians coming into his interim cabinet in May 2016. Because of exposés and leaks from the Lava-Jato probe, three ministers were forced to step down even before Temer was sworn in permanently, and two of Temer's ministers and partisans from PMDB were arrested (Henrique Alves and Geddel Vieira Lima) later in Temer's period.

The media pressure on Temer was curiously low in the first period after Rousseff's ousting (DAMGAARD 2018:149-151). The possibility of removing two presidents in a row was never mentioned, even while leaks made the purpose of "the Temer Solution" clear. The leaks of backstage dialogues in PMDB prior to the ousting of Rousseff featured the phrase that Temer was a solution to the problem. To be concise, the problem discussed by the involved PMDB top politicians was not governability or fiscal delays, but rather the success of the Lava-Jato investigations and Rousseff's unwillingness to curb the probe. The solution that the politicians hoped for involved not just a new Executive, but also a pact with the Judiciary in order to stabilize Brazilian politics and "stop the bleeding of the political class" (VALENTE, 2016). Temer, then, was supposed to stop the onslaught of the investigations. Before going on to the latter part of Temer's mandate, it is important to underscore that editors from the mainstream media must have consciously pulled news on Temer's corruption cases away from the front pages, headlines and editorials, as the ousting of Rousseff was coming closer:

Temer's alleged corruption cases made the front-pages of *Estado de S. Paulo*, *Globo*, and *Folha de S. Paulo* at several moments... Even so, the media interest quickly died out. When the testimony of Sergio Machado, director of the state company Transpetro, was published by the press on June 16, 2016, including elements indicating Temer's involvement in grafting the state company, *Estado* even noted on their front page coverage of this plea bargain that this was "the first time in the Lava-Jato case that Temer was linked to illicit funding." In fact, *Estado* had reported a similar claim made by Delcídio do Amaral two months before, on March 15 (and printed it on the front page the following day), and in the claim to novelty boldly ignored the exposé printed in *Folha* in December 2015 about Temer

receiving kickbacks from OAS (like Lula), as well as the case of bribes in the Porto de Santos (admittedly unrelated to Lava-Jato). However, even when they made the front pages..., these exposés were never included in the reporting on his taking over of the Presidency; nor were the cases reported as an ethical problem for the parties supporting his coming into power. (DAMGAARD 2018; p.149)

Underplaying Temer's role in corruption cases was not a permanent strategy for the editors, however. With the media eliding the role of democracy's watchdog, the early evidence of Temer's complicity and the tapes documenting the plan for a backstage truce after installing Temer turned out to become merely minor crises for his government. In general, Temer had a solid grasp on Congress in the year following his inauguration.

In May 2017, the major incident that provoked instability for Michel Temer's government occurred. A few months earlier, meat industry tycoons Joesley and Wesley Batista had agreed to a plea bargain in the Lava-Jato case. Their participation in the corruption probe actively brought new material to the case, incriminating Temer and eventually stealing the media spotlight on May 17. That afternoon, the *O Globo* columnist Lauro Jardim revealed quotes from a recorded dialogue between Temer and Joesley Batista, dating April 2017. From the transcript, it seemed that the President encouraged Batista to pay monthly "hush money". Literally, Temer said "this should be maintained", when Joesley Batista talked about keeping the imprisoned Eduardo Cunha happy. This, according to the Prosecutor-General's official indictment, was merely an euphemism for buying Cunha's silence and avoiding a plea bargain with devastating evidence against Temer. In the very same dialogue, Batista was advised by Temer on how to solve certain "problems". The solution was later documented on video tapes released by the Federal Police: Rodrigo Rocha Loures, former aide or liaison for Temer and congressman of Temer's PMDB party, left a meeting with Batista's lawyer with a carry-on luggage brimming with R\$500,000. The bribe money had been tagged electronically, because the Batista brothers, in their plea bargain, agreed to participate in a police action to acquire evidence. This allowed the Federal Police to literally follow the money. The case eventually led to the arrest of Loures. After Jardim's exposé, *O Globo*, in an editorial, argued that Temer ought to resign:

Este jornal apoiou desde o primeiro instante o projeto reformista do presidente Michel Temer. (...) Mas a crença nesse projeto não pode levar ao autoengano, à cegueira, a virar as costas para a verdade. Não pode levar ao desrespeito a princípios morais e éticos. Esses diálogos expõem, com clareza cristalina, o significado do encontro clandestino do presidente Michel Temer com o empresário Joesley Batista. Ao abrir as portas de sua casa ao empresário, o presidente abriu também as portas para a sua derrocada. (O GLOBO 2017)

However, the Batista plea bargain was a major liability to many Congressmen as well as to Temer, and the case stalled again. In the same period, by maneuvering deadlines and court processes, also Temer succeeded in substituting one judge for another in the Supreme Electoral Court and

thereby managed to fend off the court case that could have annulled his (and Dilma's) candidacy in June 2017. He was indicted twice that year by the Prosecutor-General, but those cases stalled for the remainder of his presidency.

Although the "Fora Temer" protests remained alive as hashtags and slogans on walls, the political world, like *O Globo*, soon turned a blind eye to the demands for renunciations. Media calls for his renunciation faded away, and all eyes were set, in the media and in political circles, on the upcoming 2018 elections, rather than the remaining months of Temer's reign. Technically, impeachment of Temer was on the table (since a number of petitions had been handed in to the new Speaker of the House), but de facto, no actors in the Legislative had anything to gain from it. Thus, the portion of the backstage talk in Congress which was picked up by journalists there rarely spoke of this solution to Temer's problematic double role as both ring-leader and president. Temer had promised not to run in 2018, and even if he considered doing so anyway, his days were numbered in any case by virtue of low approval ratings. Temer's exit after the 2018 elections were the expected solution in editorials for the most of the time, even if *O Globo* and other media established brief windows of opportunity for another tale to be told.

### 3.3 Jair Bolsonaro's Presidency and Crises (2019-2020)

Despite being hospitalized for much of his campaign due to a knife stab, Jair Bolsonaro won 55% percent of the valid votes in the second round of elections in October 2018, and assumed presidency on January 1, 2019. Already before winning, Bolsonaro had been the object of nationwide street protests and rallies under the slogan #EleNÃO, opposing his perceived misogynist and macho-conservative opinions and statements. On the other hand, Bolsonaro had also quite successfully mobilized a voter base around his electoral platform. Already during the process of impeaching Dilma Rousseff, Bolsonaro appeared in rallies and protests against Rousseff, and was already considered a likely candidate by political reporters.

Two months into his presidency, *Folha de S. Paulo* covered accusations and evidence of corruption involving Gustavo Bebbiano, the Secretary-General of the Presidency, former party president of Bolsonaro's party PSL. Bolsonaro sacked him, and left PSL late in 2019 after conflicts with the party leadership.

Three of Bolsonaro's sons, all of them members of legislative bodies and active political forces in Bolsonaro's political project, were under heavy media scrutiny in 2019. Eduardo Bolsonaro, the most-voted lawmaker in the Lower House of Congress, was suspected of being involved in potentially money-laundering real-estate speculation. The second son Carlos, councilman of Rio de Janeiro and his father's main social media strategist, is at the time of writing still involved in an

ongoing case about organizing chains of social media attacks with slanderous content. The eldest brother, senator Flávio Bolsonaro, was suspected of having ties to investigated persons (alleged death squad members) in the case revolving around the assassination of Marielle Franco, a prominent left-wing member of the Rio de Janeiro City Council.

In mid-2020, the last two cases have precipitated Bolsonaro and his sons into yet another presidential crisis. Bolsonaro's star minister, former Lava-Jato judge Sergio Moro, left the cabinet on April 24 (as the 9th minister leaving in 16 months). Moro stated that he was deeply worried about Jair Bolsonaro's attempt to curtail the investigations against his family in Rio de Janeiro by way of appointing a new director to the police force. As a strong anti-corruption proponent (hated by the left-wing, but adored by right-wing voters), Moro's accusation carried a lot of weight. On top of this very prominent exit, ever-growing numbers of deaths related to the COVID-19 virus brought health care systems of several major cities close to tipping points. Jair Bolsonaro, however, was frequently denying the danger of the virus, initially countermanding the state governors' orders for lockdown, and neglecting to use a mask in packed, public spaces.

A third layer of presidential crisis has been the escalating institutional conflict between the president and the Supreme Court. By the end of May 2020, pro-Bolsonaro protesters called for "intervention in the Supreme court", shooting fireworks directly against the Court building, echoing Bolsonaro's endorsements of a return to the military rule of 1964. Thus, the accumulated instability of Bolsonaro's presidency by mid-2020 was significant. Bolsonaro was battling both the Supreme Court (in media conflict and in the "Fake News" investigation targeting his son Carlos), the traditional media (especially *Folha de S. Paulo*), some state governors, the economic crisis entailed by the COVID-19 lockdown, and the impending health crisis of a yet unknown magnitude.

For this final case, I will highlight a telling piece of political commentary, entitled "There will be no way out for Brazil with Bolsonaro in power". The piece is penned by the author Bernardo Carvalho, printed in *Folha de S. Paulo*, June 13, 2020. The article's headline, already at the outset, declares a narrative problem: The lack of a happy ending to the tale of crisis and instability. Carvalho depicts Bolsonaro as the enemy of Brazilians, as a man to whom you would not entrust your kids. That some liberal-conservatives and the army generals still back Bolsonaro is a sign of bad faith, Carvalho declares, because one must be blind not to see the president as "armed delirium, combining calumny with neo-nazi ideas, conspiracy beliefs, and the banners of Ukraine, Israel, and the United States. Maintaining Bolsonaro as President is suicide for the nation, Carvalho concludes. Here, the concept of "saída", a way out, is not linked to impeachment or the next election, as in the two presidential crises described above. Rather, the dire end for Brazil in Carvalho's projection may be a blind and collective suicide at the hands of the president:



He is first of all an enemy to Brazil and the Brazilians. Bolsonaro knows how to rise to the occasion and to the task of destroying the country. ... a disease tailor-made to our social, economic and intellectual misery has been revealed, arousing very specific interests in strategic sectors, from the Armed Forces to the police force. It is time to think about surviving now. We must start by expressly refusing the invitation to collective suicide... (CARVALHO 2020)

These alarming lines express a new narrative, which foregoes any pretense about living a democratic system. Instead, the health crisis of COVID-19 is seen as the weapon wielded by strategic sectors to ensure Bolsonaro's reign. If the idea of impeachment were subdued from media early in Bolsonaro's mandate (perhaps because of fatigue with the idea after three years' of constant repetition, or due to editorial decisions or ideological support by owners), Carvalho's ending is entirely too apocalyptic to consider political or legal exits to the crisis. Here, it is either collective suicide or some kind of uprising against a fascist regime cloaked as democracy.

## CONCLUSION

The perhaps only thing that united Rousseff and Bolsonaro as presidents in crisis was the diagnosis in common between them: Incompetent leaders, enemies of Brazil - and even though the critique came from two opposing ends of the political landscape, the diagnosis in both cases had a hard time finding a cure for incompetence. In both cases, the presidents' problems of alleged incompetence were also overshadowed by allegations of corruption. Political corruption, in contrast to political incompetence, do have a script with a predefined solution found in a legal trial. To foresee how the story of an incompetent president plays out, however, is not as easy for political commentators, editors or pundits.

There are several good explanations that help us understand why non-traditional politicians come into office: Electoral boredom or protests against traditional politicians and party politics, as well as a tendency towards polarization of political discourse favoring the most extreme viewpoints with more spotlight and airtime. The way to remove radically different, anti-establishment presidents is much less clear. In the case of the United States, it seems likely that the electoral four-year cycle will define the end of Trump's narrative. In Brazil, the impeachment of Rousseff proved that the similar four-year cycle could be interrupted, but it required the perfect storm of media attention, investigations, and discontent in the political elite. Trump's Brazilian counterpart Bolsonaro might be the center of attention, but the media cannot identify his exit from the limelight.

It might not be a big surprise if Bolsonaro at some point faces impeachment proceedings, but the political elite and current Congress would likely prefer to not have to deal with a direct responsibility for weathering the economic crisis and health crisis. Since political news in general are

so fixed on the president in this media system (ALBUQUERQUE 2011:90), the upside of coming into power may be outweighed by the downside of facing society's demands for fixing the errors of previous presidents.

It seems that other politicians in the world who have reached or will reach the presidency on waves of polarized and post-factual political discourse can relax, then. When media actors fail to imagine an exit to presidential crises, this special type of president can simply ignore the traditional rules of accountability and let scandals wash over them, as long as the scandals and crises do not drag the rest of the political elite onto the stage. The key to Bolsonaro's or Trump's staying power is not just a legislative shield (PÉREZ-LIÑAN 2014), but the way they completely escape the existing narrative molds. Their rhetorics might offend and baffle the press on a daily basis, but it also appears that their poetics and narratives confound. In the long term, media systems are apparently unable to shift their political commentary and analyses of the presidential instability towards new scripts that are meaningful. Simply put, there are stories that can't be told because they have no end in sight. Sadly for democracies in the world, crisis without exits seem to take their toll on the quality of democracy, while the presidents wreaking havoc within existing institutional frameworks seem to escape unscathed.

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