



Political parties, competition and electoral frauds

Paolo Ricci
Universidade de São Paulo (USP)



Cartoon published in *O Malho* of 6.19.1908, page 20.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Parties in the First Republic

The early years of the First Republic were characterized by a heterogeneous and conflict-ridden political landscape. In 1893, in the National Congress, the Federal Republican Party (PRF) was established by a group of politicians whose affinity in discourse was perceptible, allowing them to be classified as “historical republicans”—parliamentarians from different states who frequently referenced the time of propaganda, passionately defending the Republic, and who acted together.

The PRF was led by republicans from São Paulo, with Francisco Glicério as its chief, who also served as the majority leader in the Chamber of Deputies. The party had a brief existence, splitting in 1897 after a conflict between president of the Republic Prudente de Moraes and Glicério. Until the end of the First Republic, the competition for representative positions would take place exclusively among state parties.

These parties played a central role in organizing political contests at the state level. The political struggle for parliamentary seats was not limited to the municipal contests, nor could it be regarded as an individual practice or one confined to the actions of the colonels and local political leaders who would lead masses of voters to the polling stations on the election day.

Securing seats in the National Congress was not guaranteed, nor did it emerge only on the eve of elections, nor was it solely linked to clientelism and the personal influence of the candidates. It was a struggle that took shape and was carried out within the party organizations present in each state. With regard to the electoral process, two aspects should be highlighted. On one hand, there was the selection of the party slate. This was a crucial issue for party leaders, reducing the chances of splits and possible defections among the most influential politicians. The most troublesome scenario was one in which each faction ended up putting forward its own slate of official candidates.





Photographs of the convention of the Republican Party of Rio de Janeiro State in 1924 published in *O Malho*, on 8.23.1924, page 47. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The composition of the party slates was determined by various decision-making bodies, involving multiple political actors and following statutory rules. At the highest level, the party leader—usually the governor or a senator—was ultimately responsible for selecting the candidates who would run for office. However, it was also common for candidate nominations to be decided by the party executive or board, which was responsible for finalizing the list of candidates. Finally, in a more inclusive process, the party convention publicly ratified the names put forward by the party. It is worth noting that the selection process was not limited to the executive committee, the state-level party board at the state level, or instances of clear gubernatorial influence. Negotiations took into account both the party's internal bodies and the preferences of municipal leaders.



Slate of the Conservative Concentration in Minas Gerais for the 1930 election, *Correio Paulistano* newspaper of 2.28.1930, page 6. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Another aspect to be highlighted is the election campaign. Two topics emerge from it: the use of the press and the electoral journey. All reasonably organized political parties in early 20th-century Brazil had an official newspaper. Newspapers served as the party's voice. The party affiliation was easily identifiable through the acronym that appeared below the newspaper's title, as shown in the following images.



Diário da Manhã newspaper of 5.19.1908, Espirito Santo. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



A Federação newspaper of 10.1.1898, Amazonas. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



A Republica newspaper of 1.10.1907, Rio Grande do Norte. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Folha de Sergipe newspaper of 3. 21.1909, Sergipe State Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Republica newspaper of 14.2.1928, Santa Catarina.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



O Democrata newspaper of 9.5.1929, Mato Grosso.
State Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

In these images, you can see the party identification just below the newspaper headline.

The importance of newspapers at the time must be analyzed considering their multiple functions. Firstly, they served to organize the electoral process. These publications announced the dates and locations for electing the electoral boards which were by law selected before election day. The newspaper invited eligible citizens to appear at the party headquarters for registration. They also identified those responsible for voter registration, listing their full names and any published registration addresses. In the weeks leading up to the election, newspapers also provided the addresses of the polling places and the headquarters of the polling stations.

In the context of the electoral campaign, newspapers consolidated their role as privileged vehicles of party propaganda. As elections drew near, these newspapers gave voice to their party candidates. In particular, they conveyed three key pieces of information. The first was the announcement of the party's official slate—marking the official start of the electoral campaign—usually published shortly after the conclusion of the party convention that had endorsed the names of the official candidates. The slate typically appeared on the front page among the most relevant news of the time and was reprinted in several editions up until election day.

Another significant piece of information was the publication of the party's political manifesto. This became more complex and presented broader scope from the 1920s onward. Beyond publishing official documents, the party press was also characterized by attempts to delegitimize political opponents. Various strategies were employed to achieve this. Satire was one of them, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when photographs were still rare. More frequently, accusations appeared in editorials and articles featured on the front pages of newspapers. The accusations triggered responses and counter-responses, resulting in an authentic war of editorials.



Political editorial opinion piece in the newspaper *O Dia*, of 2.19.1927, Paraná.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil

At a time when the number of means of communication was limited, the electoral journey played a crucial role in the electoral struggle. The rhetoric of the public meeting—as the rallies were called at the time—underscores the importance of this act. From a practical perspective, the accounts of observers clearly reveal the pursuit of contact, in the pre-electoral phases, with influential figures. During the electoral journey, one candidate stated that they sought to speak with the most influential leaders, *instilling in them a love for the public cause, reinvigorating them amidst widespread disillusionment* (Archives of the Chamber of Deputies, May 25th, 1903, page. 34). In addition, traveling required significant physical and material effort, leading the candidate on a pilgrimage through municipalities that were very far apart from each other. Thus, it was not uncommon for candidates



to report having participated in rallies and conferences, presenting themselves in public squares, in buildings that could accommodate large crowds—such as theaters—even in party headquarters, or that banquets were organized for them to deliver speeches before distinguished citizens.



Meeting in Praça dos Martyres, Fortaleza (Ceará), in favor of the candidacy of the Colonel Franco Rebelo for President of the State in the magazine *Fon-Fon*, of 1.27.1912, page. 44.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

A key takeaway from these accounts is that the electoral journey was not a solitary political endeavor carried out solely through the personal strength of each candidate. Given the distances traveled and the need to reach voters, it was common for these electoral excursions to be organized rather than left to chance. A network of actors and stakeholders was directly involved in the pilgrimage across the various municipalities of the electoral district.

Beyond electoral fraud

Electoral fraud is often recalled to discredit the vote in the First Republic. There is no doubt that electoral competition was based on controlling voter registration, forging false records, or manipulating vote counting. However, the practice of fraud must be understood beyond the mere distortion of electoral reality and considered in terms of the competition for control of the electoral process. Inter-party conflicts over monopolizing voter registration, choosing receiving boards and organizing the poll itself—from choosing the headquarters of the polling stations to the practice of escorting voters to the polls—embodied the struggle for power among the political forces.

Fraud was exposed amid the intensification of this struggle. To some extent, allegations of fraudulent practices reflected not so much the violation of individual rights, but rather the elite's inability *to control their own electoral bureaucracy*. The lack of electoral challenges, therefore, stemmed from the monopoly exerted by a single political force over the electoral process at the local level and, by extension, in the electoral district. Given the often fierce nature of the contest, fraud claims proceeded through the various stages outlined in electoral legislation until they reached the National Congress, the last decision-making body. There, the last stage of examining the electoral records took place—occasionally preventing some candidates from taking office. This practice became known as *degola*. However, this moment should not be seen solely as a means of controlling electoral outcomes. Any instances of *degolas* in the process of recognizing official electoral mandates in the National Congress were the result of intense political disputes within the states. Thus, Congress intervened to *correct* the situation, at times politically eliminating certain political groups.



The issue of electoral fraud in a satirical cartoon in *Careta* magazine on 1.23.1909, page. 17.

Artist: J. Carlos (José Carlos de Brito e Cunha – 1884/1950).

Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil

Recommended further reading

RICCI, Paolo; ZULINI, Jaqueline Porto. Partidos, competição política e fraude eleitoral: atônica das eleições na Primeira República. *Revista de Ciências Sociais*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 57, n. 2, p. 121-157, 2014.

TELAROLLI, Rodolpho. *Eleições e fraudes eleitorais na República Velha*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1982.



Meeting in Praça dos Martyres, Fortaleza (Ceará), in favor of the candidacy of the Colonel Franco Rebelo for President of the State in *Fon-Fon* magazine of 1.27.1912, page. 44.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.