



A moribund president: the election of Rodrigues Alves in 1918

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Amidst fiercely contested elections for the Presidency of the Republic from 1892 to 1930, one of them broke the pattern and was considered the most consensual and peaceful of the whole period. In 1918, the candidate Rodrigues Alves was an elderly, experienced politician who had already been president. In his attempt to secure re-election, he could rely on a favorable context, marked by the absence of other names to occupy the Catete Palace—the headquarters of the federal government—, but his greatest adversary came from outside the political scene and prevented his mandate from occurring.

Over the course of the 41 years of the period that has become known as the First Republic (1889-1930), some presidential elections were strongly contested from the time when the candidates were being chosen. As each electoral period drew nearer, the state oligarchies began discussions to decide who would run for the position of president of the Republic. The negotiations did not always go the way of the leaders of all the units of the federation, which resulted in fierce disputes. However, for the election of 1918, the situation was very different. To understand better what occurred, it is important to recall some of what had happened in the previous administration.

From 1914, the country was governed by Wenceslau Brás (1914-1918), from the state of Minas Gerais. The choice of this politician for the Presidency was not straightforward; various state oligarchies proposed their own leaders to succeed Marshal Hermes da Fonseca (1910-1914). Even though he had been Hermes da Fonseca's vice-president, there was no consensus around the choice of Wenceslau. Even so, the state of Rio Grande do Sul, especially the figure of Pinheiro Machado and the state of São Paulo, under the leadership of Rodrigues Alves, were the great sponsors of the candidate from Minas. Despite this, when it came to ministerial appointments, Brás did not include politicians from Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo. He sought to assemble a government independent of the interference of other states, but without completely cutting ties with these partners.

In his government, Brás also had to deal with Spanish flu, which he himself contracted, with the outbreak of the First World War and the resulting economic problems. Difficulties with the flow of international capital, such as loans, and the fall in the coffee price in the market led his government to implement a policy of supporting the value of the *rubiactae* by capitalizing debt instruments not backed by the gold standard.





Cover of *O Malho* magazine of 7.14.1917 alluding to the First World War.
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In the middle of 1916, in other words halfway through Wenceslau Brás's term, the oligarchies were already organizing themselves to choose the future presidential candidate. For the leaders of São Paulo, this was a new opportunity to send another one of their own to the Presidency—after all, they had not occupied the Catete Palace since 1906. The last president from São Paulo had been Rodrigues Alves (1902-1906), and the fact that they had not been close to the head of the Executive Branch at times during this period had disadvantaged the São Paulo leadership when it came to decisions on national economic policy, especially those related to the production and marketing of coffee, at the time the state's and the country's main product.



Cartoon from *O Malho* magazine of 6.30.1917 showing the discussion between leading politicians from São Paulo and President Wenceslau Brás about the coffee crisis. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

In political terms, this was a good moment for the people from São Paulo. One of the main deal-makers in Brazil's elections, Senator Pinheiro Machado, from Rio Grande do Sul, had left the scene in 1915, when he was assassinated by a madman in the lobby of a hotel in Rio de Janeiro. This meant that the state of Rio Grande do Sul lost its prominence on the political scene, at least with regard to the projection of one of its representatives for the Catete Palace. Minas Gerais, in turn, could not nominate a successor to Wenceslau Brás. This would have been viewed negatively by the leaders of the other states, since Minas Gerais had held the Vice-Presidency during the mandate of Hermes da Fonseca and had remained at the top of the Executive Branch in the following term, with Brás himself.

Despite the difficulties for Rio Grande do Sul and Minas Gerais in nominating candidates, the São Paulo oligarchy feared being once again excluded from the presidential contest. Perhaps this was why the conversations about the choice of the future presidential candidate were already starting towards the end of Brás's first two years in power. Even though they were allies, the representatives of São Paulo feared what the people from Minas would do. And for that reason, they hurriedly launched the name of Rodrigues Alves as the candidate.

At the time, Francisco de Paula Rodrigues Alves was one of the main leaders of the state of São Paulo. He began his political career back in the days of the Empire, when he served as general deputy and president of the province of São Paulo. Once Brazil became a Republic, he was a deputy, a minister, president of his home state, president of the Republic, and a senator. In 1916, Rodrigues Alves even left the São Paulo government to take up a seat in the Federal Senate.



Photograph of Rodrigues Alves published in *O Malho* magazine of 11.16.1918.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Rodrigues Alves

Born in Guaratinguetá, in the hinterland of the state of São Paulo, the attorney Rodrigues Alves first became president of the Republic in 1902. He had led São Paulo twice: under the Empire, as president of the province, between 1887 and 1888, and as president of the state, from 1900 to 1902 (he later held that position again from 1912 to 1916). Formerly a counselor under the Empire, he was a deputy to the Constitutional Congress, minister of Finance under Floriano Peixoto and Prudente de Moraes mandates as presidents of the Republic, and also a senator. In his first term as governor of São Paulo, he inaugurated the hydroelectric plant of Santana do Parnaíba and dealt with epidemics of yellow fever. In doing so, he came into contact with the Finlay Doctrine, regarding the transmission of the illness by mosquito bites, a finding that would be of fundamental importance later in the urban renovation of the federal capital, during his term as president.



Photograph of Delfim Moreira published in *O Malho* magazine of 6.30.1917.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Even though he was a beloved figure on the political scene, proposing the name of Rodrigues Alves as the candidate would depend on agreements, especially with politicians from Minas Gerais. Thus, the make-up of the slate was *stitched together* by the president of São Paulo, Altino Arantes, and by the former deputy from Minas Gerais and minister of Finance in the Wenceslau Brás mandate as president of the Republic, Sabino Barroso. Both agreed on the names of Rodrigues Alves for the Presidency and of the then governor of Minas Gerais, Delfim Moreira, as vice-presidential candidate. The inability of other large states to launch their own names for the contest, combined with the closeness of Minas Gerais and São Paulo, meant that Alves's candidacy was accepted quickly and without reservations, a rare event during the years of the First Republic.



O Paiz newspaper of 10.23.1917 with the news of the candidacy of the Rodrigues Alves/Delfim Moreira slate.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Cover of *O Malho* magazine of 4.7.1917 satirizing the possible candidacy of the elderly Rodrigues Alves for the Presidency.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The choice of Rodrigues Alves was also helped by the reduced range of options available, at the time, for the Presidency of the Republic. The most senior level of the first generation of politicians in the Republic had suffered big losses owing to advancing age, which contributed to the swift choice of the candidate for the 1918 poll. The restricted alternatives in the political marketplace also meant that a choice was made for two individuals who suffered from fragile health.

In his program for government, launched in Rio de Janeiro on October 23rd, 1917, Rodrigues Alves stressed the country's economic situation, which was affected by restrictions on trade due to the First World War. The candidate was concerned about the issuing of government bonds not backed by the gold standard and the issuing of paper money during the government of Wenceslau Brás. For that reason, Rodrigues Alves highlighted, in the speech that launched his plan for government, the economic difficulties that Brazil would face in the next few years.

Rodrigues Alves's candidacy was soon accepted, without any resistance from the oligarchies, or criticisms from the press or from society, which contributed to a smooth period between its launch and the election. This was due, in part, to the fact that there were no other competing candidacies, along with the general social concern with the progress of the First World War, an issue highlighted on the front pages of newspapers and magazines of the time. Another important factor was how easily Rodrigues Alves was accepted by the electorate, since he was an active ex-president who, during his first term, had undertaken a wide range of projects to bring sanitation and urban renewal to the capital of the Republic, as well an intense and even controversial campaign against yellow fever. Given these factors, the election took place without any disturbances, and Alves's victory was unchallenged.

Rodrigues Alves was elected with 386,467 votes. The runner-up, Nilo Peçanha, an influential leader from the state of Rio de Janeiro and minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, won only 1,258. Rui Barbosa, a charismatic figure from Bahia who was always at the front of the electorate's minds in presidential elections, came third with 1,014 votes. The figures show that Rodrigues Alves was elected with 99.1% of all the votes cast for president at the ballot boxes! This overwhelming victory clearly



showed the consensus established around the candidacy of Rodrigues Alves. The election of the candidate for vice-president, which in those days took place separately from the presidential poll, was equally successful. Delfim Moreira received 382,491 votes; and the runner-up, General Emídio de Dantas Barreto, won only 376.

The overwhelming victory of Rodrigues Alves and Delfim Moreira in the presidential election held on March 1th, 1918, was regarded by the National Congress, when it issued its opinion on the result of the poll, not as an election—contested between various candidates and with the fight for votes even leading to violence in some situations—, but as an *acclamation!* This description was due to the fact that they had been the only candidates who had received a majority number of votes. The other people who had received votes were not even candidates—which was allowed by the electoral law at the time. It is also important to stress that Rodrigues Alves was the only president of the Republic elected twice in four decades of the First Republic. Despite this, he did not fulfill his second mandate.



Photographs published in *Caretta* magazine of 11.16.1918 showing the situation in Rio de Janeiro. In the photograph on the right, Dr. Carlos Chagas Filho, the sanitation specialist, appears. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

In 1918 a pandemic caused by the influenza virus spread all over the world. The illness, which became known as Spanish flu, due to the large number of deaths it caused in Spain, killed, according to experts' calculations, between 20 and 40 million people globally. In Brazil, a substantial proportion of the population also contracted the disease, including Wenceslau Brás and the president-elect. Unable to take office on November 15th, 1918, in Rio de Janeiro, Rodrigues Alves was confined to bed in his native town, Guaratinguetá. The post of head of the Executive Branch was assumed on an interim basis by his vice-president, Delfim Moreira. Because of this situation, magazines of the time caricatured Rodrigues Alves as a sick man sleeping deeply in his bed while the country was left without its president.



Cartoon published in *O Malho* magazine of 11.30.1918 making fun of the different concerns of the presidents affected by Spanish flu. Wenceslau Brás dreams of a restful existence in his own city, and Rodrigues Alves dreams of being sworn in. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The start of the new government did not inspire confidence either in the population or the press. There were doubts in the air, even about the health of the vice-president, as well as suspicions of a possible resignation. After something of a recovery, Rodrigues Alves went to Rio de Janeiro to take office but had a relapse and died on January 16th, 1919.



It was ironic that the man who in his first presidential term had undertaken urban renewal in Rio de Janeiro aimed at better health and the eradication of diseases, succumbed years later to one such illness. Therefore, even though he had no opponents in the presidential race, Rodrigues Alves's greatest adversary was *Spanish flu*, which, as well as preventing the inauguration of the only president of the Republic to be re-elected during the First Republic, also made it impossible for his vice-president to take over in his place. This was because the Federal Constitution of 1891 established, in its Article 42, that, whenever the position of president or vice-president became vacant less than two years after the start of the presidential mandate, a new election should be called to fill the position.

Curiously, death was also in the air when Rodrigues Alves was first elected president in 1902. That time, however, the person who died before being sworn in was his vice-president, Silviano Brandão, from the state of Minas Gerais. On the first occasion, death took the vice-president from Minas Gerais; on the second occasion, it was the president from São Paulo.



Funeral procession on its way to the church after arriving in the town of Guaratinguetá, in the state of São Paulo. *Careta* magazine of 1.25.1919, year 12, No. 533, page 15. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The death of Rodrigues Alves, although it was not a surprise, given his advanced years and the illness he contracted, caused concern among the population and put an end to doubts about the future government of the Republic. Until Alves' death, it was uncertain whether there would be a resignation or if the elected president would take office. All these possibilities were being constantly considered by the press. Although he was younger than Rodrigues Alves, the health of Delfim Moreira was also questioned. With the president's death, the country's destiny was definitively sealed and altered compared with previous experience. This was because the name chosen for the new election did not come from any of the large states (São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul), but from a small unit of the federation in the northeast of the country, Paraíba. The man chosen was the healthy political leader from Paraíba, Epitácio Pessoa, who proceeded to be elected. And, until his swearing in on July 28th, 1919, Delfim Moreira governed the country.

Recommended further reading

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