

# The Workers' Party and Democratisation in Brazil

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To answer the question effectively this essay will outline three key issues that have characterised Brazil's democratic deficiencies. Namely these are elite political domination, an unequally disenfranchised populace and a lack of equality of opportunity afforded to them. As this essay will demonstrate, these issues have remained historically resilient. Thus, this essay will outline that we cannot term Brazil as a 'democratised' nation. What we can assess however, is the influence which the Workers' Party (WP) has had on an ongoing democratic consolidation. Through this analysis, we can thus understand the role which the WP played as a *democratising* force in an evolutionary process. To underpin this argument, we will examine not only the institutional democratic framework, but we must incorporate the economic too. This will outline strides which the WP has made in both enhancing economic opportunities (which we will understand as a core democratic necessity) and the broader stability of the consolidation process.

To understand the framework which the WP was working within, we must analyse the context in which democracy arose. Throughout the 80s, Brazil suffered from historically high levels of hyperinflation (Tullio & Ronci, 1996). This subsequently placed pressures on the authoritarian regime from both coalitional and opposition forces. With regards to the former, there had been an alliance between the domestic industrial bourgeoisie and the military (Malferrari, 2001). However, the inability of the government to effectively manage economic policy was detrimental to the subsidies which were enjoyed by the domestic industrialists. Essentially, this was a catalysing factor in dismantling authoritarian rule. Thus, we must understand that the very origins of democratic consolidation centred around the economic stability of the state. This economic crisis itself should be seen as an "opening" for a more pluralistic political arena. This is evidenced by the growing confidence of social movements within the 80s (Goertzel, 1999). This was extended onto the unions with a "social pact" being agreed in 1985, when inflationary pressures had reached a climax (Keck, 1989). We should thus understand that democracy arose because of an onus on economic stability from state elites. We should also understand the unions, rather than deciding on a subversive course of action, recognised that the consolidation process had begun. These were the foundational aspects of what we will later recognise as the WP's commitment to democratic, as opposed to revolutionary, transformation.

However, this focus on economic stability has ultimately been detrimental to the opportunities afforded to Brazilian citizens. Throughout the period of economic liberalisation in the 1990s there was marked rise in economic inequality in regions which liberalisation affected most (Castilho et al). Ultimately, this was indicative of a change in the composition of elite political domination from the industrial bourgeoisie to international and capital dominations. This is evidenced most notably by the rise of foreign direct investment within the 90s (ECLAC, 1998). The two presidents, alongside a numerous other politicians notably received strong campaign finance donations from capital elites (Samuels, 2001). President Collor reduced tariffs with competitive consequences for domestic industrialists (Olivieira, 2010). This was a political articulation of the move away from industrial domination to that of international and domestic capital. This was evidenced by the banking industry who financially benefited from the liberalisation process (Boito & Resende, 2007). This represented the increasing economic and political power of capital elites. The composition of elite domination had changed from industrial to capital elites but Brazilian political influence had remained highly unequal. This was an elite shift, rather than a pluralistic mass one. Subsequently, we must understand that this characteristic had extended itself from the authoritarian regime to the democratic. This disproportionate level of influence matters because within a democratic system, equity is crucial. Civil society actors should exercise relatively similar levels of influence if democratic equity is to be achieved. Therefore, it is critical that

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we examine what the WP has done to counter this democratically counterproductive element.

Alongside this domination, the WP was a democratising force with regards to encouraging political mobilisation, participation and providing representation. This was aptly demonstrated in its time in opposition. It's important to examine the role which it performed in this period because Brazilian democracy remained in relatively early stages of consolidation. In these early stages, creating strong links to civil society and institutionalisation are amongst the key roles which political parties must play (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995) Certainly, this had relevance within a Brazilian context given the historic levels of elite domination and the lack of popular participation (Guidry, 2003).

The internal organisation of the Workers' Party demonstrated an attempt to address this fundamental issue. Within the Workers Party a highly organised, disciplined and democratic internal system dictated its direction. Policy was created by consensus, with blocks holding democratic control over policy (Hunter, 2007). This differentiated it from other parties at the time in that it was essentially a party with its roots in mass movement which had continued in this course. Ultimately, we can assert that this characteristic of the WP made it historically significant in the consolidation process. Initially spanning from new unionism, this internally democratic nature and the coalitional nature of Brazilian politics has attracted a variety of other social movements. The Catholic Church, left wing intellectuals and feminist groups are amongst others that were active in the WP in the early 1990s (Branford, 1995). Indeed, it was the WP who led the vocal protests in 1984 which initially demonstrated civil society's discontent (Goertzel, 1999). These groups who had previously been on the fringes of a clientalistic state who were either ignored or oppressed by the authoritarian regime, were essentially being incorporated into, and represented in a democratic system. The WP here were essentially performing one of the key functions of its role as a political party, that of representation and mobilisation. This came relatively early on in the consolidation process and we must thus, attribute them credit in this regard.

That it was the first (and continues to be the most) "open" mass party that has socialised various political actors into the democratic framework is a democratic achievement in itself. Linz and Stepan characterise part of the democratic consolidation process as when competing actors accept democracy as the only platform to achieve their larger goals (Linz & Stepan, 1998). The internal democratic structure of the party has provided an effective, democratic platform in socialising competing interests within Brazil. The representation which the WP afforded these groups should be accepted as empowering and brought them into an electoral process. Achieving representation for these groups is key to integrating them into the democratic process.

Aside from representation, Brazil has historically suffered from high levels of political disengagement (Nylen, 2002). Within a Brazilian context, we should understand that the roots of public disengagement toward the political system lie not just with the oppressive instruments employed by authoritarianism. Rather, high levels of income inequality and the prolonged politics of austerity has left much of civil society disempowered from the potential impact they can have on their own quality of life (Linz & Stepan, 1996). The WP attempted to effectively tackle it. In line with the democratising "bottom-up" approach which the WP is noted for is the introduction of participatory budgeting. This initially had begun in opposition with the WP controlled Porto Alegre. This proved successful in consolidating democracy. It achieved this in two ways: it made democratic practises more comprehensive and it opened access of public services to the Brazilian poor. Research indicated that neighbourhood associations lost their clientalistic access to public goods and that Porto Alegre residents enjoyed an improved quality of life (Avritzer, 2010). Alexis de Tocqueville remarked "the strength of free peoples resides in the local community" (Embassy of France in Washington, 2007). The WP addressed this core democratic requirement with their participatory budgeting, giving individuals the *opportunity* to influence their local community. This case should be judged as an improved state of democratic equity within the context of a highly centralised Brazilian state.

The successes in Porto Alegre lead to the programme's enrolment in virtually all WP controlled districts (Abers, 2000). Whilst we must deem this a success, given its success elsewhere, the composition of these participatory organisations must be examined. Notably, within Belo Horizonte and Betim, the schemes there were indicative of a trend which was evidenced in Porto Alegre, too. Participation within the programmes was largely taken up by existing local political actors (Nylen, 2000). Essentially, these groups (neighbourhood) were already somewhat active within local and mass movements previous to the introduction of these schemes. Effectively, the problem of an ambivalent,

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disengaged society remained given the relatively low levels of participation. Given the relative nature of participatory politics, we must understand that these levels of participation are ultimately relative to that of elite driven politics. The failure to engage the disengaged would ultimately maintain the elitist character of Brazilian politics.

To further examine attempts at participatory budgeting we should examine the neo-corporatist Council for Economic and Social development. This institution was originally designed with the intention of providing federal level access to budgetary decisions to civil society (Valk, 2009). However, whilst making some minor advances in participatory politics, it ultimately became unimportant in policy formation and favoured both business elites and the prosperous South (Doctor, 2007). This indicated that within a federal level, budgetary decisions remained outside of the reach of civil society. Politics at the federal level had essentially remained in the realm of elite competition. Therefore, given the largely incomplete nature of the participatory process both at a local and federal level, we cannot yet define this process as finished. However, what can confidently be said is that the WP have both provided *opportunity* at the local level and altered the discourse on the federal. The latter remains important given the federal state's traditionally centrist tendencies. The success of it, while important, should not thus be the sole judgement.

This elitist strand however, was not limited to the participatory process. The WP's own inner democracy, which it has been commended for, became more autonomous from the party itself (Samuels, 2004). This subsequently resulted in a changing ideological shift within the policies of the WP. Lula's bloc within the party had gained substantial increases in their influence over the overall policy within the party. This was a shift toward accepting the economic consensus which largely accepted the neoliberal market reforms which the previously mentioned economic elites had supported and through their domination, driven. This reformation was evident both within the policy of the party and the image it wished to portray. Lula transformed his public image to that of an individual that was favourable to business classes. This was reflected in his reassurances of his commitment to pay Brazil's public debts and his media image (Miguel & Resende, 2006). This was coupled with a comprehensive change in policy to adhere to "hegemonic certainties" (Miguel & Resende, 2006). This presents a key area of analysis. It was representative of the WP shedding much of its revolutionary rhetoric or commitment to socialism. This was key, given that this mentioned socialism ultimately rejected the democratic framework. Acceptance of it represented a desire to catalyse change from within.

It was an acceptance of the economic consensus which maintained inequality. This is important to note given that economic inequality itself tends to coincide with undemocratic regimes (Tilly, 2003). Thus, we should understand that the WP by effectively accepting this economic doctrine had in larger, theoretical terms, accepted the unequal economic legacy of the 1990s. However, crucially, this was within a democratic framework. The WP's own internal democratic system meant that it was only with the consent of the party that Lula was able to reform policy (Mainwaring, 1999).

The shifts to these hegemonic certainties whilst having the potential to further alienate the working classes should in fact be viewed as democratising. Limited ideological polarization enhances the prospects for stable party competition (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). This was effectively what the WP was achieving. The handover of power from one president to another with little ideological conflict should be viewed as a stabilising factor. In the Brazilian political and economic arena we should translate this as mitigating the potential for an elite reaction to the election of a left wing party. Essentially, the essence of the economic policies was a strong continuation, rather than a revolutionary. This should be viewed as a continued socialisation of the disenfranchised. Their competition could now lie in a democratic arena as opposed to a counterproductive revolutionary one.

Crucially, what the election did not represent was an acceptance of the social hegemony of the elites. While we must acknowledge the shift to the right, we must also understand that this was not an unequivocal change. Rather, Lula, having shed much of his revolutionary rhetoric had changed the emphasis to "democratising the economy" (Hunter, 2007). Interpreted within the context of democratic consolidation this was an extension of citizens social rights. These social rights are defined principally by every citizen having a right to adequate health care and education (Beetham, 1994). This process should be understood as democratising even within a neoliberal democratic framework. Lamounier argues that when considering consolidation, we must incorporate socioeconomic conditions into our model (Lamounier, 1999). These issues are critical because their reformation will influence the structure of a new

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democratic system as a whole. By this, we mean that these increased opportunities should enhance the opportunities citizens will have to participate within a neoliberal economy and thus increase their own democratic equity (Sen, 1999). We should therefore understand that the WP's commitment to this was an attempt to alter the nature of the democratic participation and strengthening of citizenship itself. However, this would be through both the democratic framework and through a programme that would incorporate, as opposed to rejecting neoliberalism.

This commitment to adequate opportunities was articulated by Lula's commitment to "economic pragmatism with a human face" (Castro & Carvalho, 2003). Deconstructed, we can understand this as an informal statement it represented an acceptance of most of the neoliberal doctrine. The reflective policy of this were the creation of programmes to tackle food stability, women's rights, human rights and to create various institutions aimed at tackling social injustice (Bohn, 2011). The centrepiece of this programme was the 'Bolsa Familia' programme. The programme was largely successful in many respects. This was evidenced in the conditions it placed on child nutrition which have demonstrated marked improvements in the levels of anaemia amongst other nutritional factors (Oliveira et al, N/A). These successes were not limited to nutrition, crucially extending themselves into education too, with levels of school enrolment increasing and subsequent increases in employment (Glewwe & Kassouf, 2010). The World Bank have recognised these achievements heralding it, internationally, as the most successful programme of its kind and noting its contribution to declining levels of income inequality (World Bank, N/A). This reduction is crucial given our understanding of the importance which equality holds over democracy. However it did have problems with regards to its organisation, apparent political bias and the criticism that it fostered dependency rather than an adequate decrease in capacities (Hall, 2006). It should be noted too that while progress has certainly been made in education and health, there remains much to be done. The country's gini coefficient in 2010 was at a historic low of 0.53 from its 1990 peak at 0.61 (BBC, 2011). Whilst this was significant progress, it remains high in relative terms.

Contextualised, this has been a significant progress within the consolidation process, however these numbers remain relatively low. Thus, whilst we must recognise the achievements made by the WP in this regard, we cannot define economic opportunity as yet democratised. However, despite these continuing problems we must note that the existence of the programme is a democratising in itself. It was a system that was based on federal to community collaboration, bypassing local elites (Fenwick, 2009). Not only did it conform to the priority inversion mentioned by the WP, but the structure itself was democratic in that it was a localised programme aimed at the disenfranchised. This was a problem that we evidenced in the participatory budgeting process. Rather than engage existing actors, it aimed to give the disenfranchised from society the *capacity* to engage within the economic and democratic system. This capacity we must note was only achieved because of the WP's adherence to the economic consensus and consequently, acquisition of power.

Brazil since the 1990s has been characterised by democratisation and economic liberalisation. The WP strongly contributed toward the former within its own capacity as a political party. However, economic groups more powerful than it have largely dictated the political discourse within Brazilian politics to enhance and maintain their own interests. So whilst we must acknowledge the Workers' Party as a democratising force, we cannot define it as a democratiser given Brazil is not yet "democratised" as the statement implies. However, it is important to note that democratic consolidation is ultimately an evolutionary process (O'Donnell et al, 1986). It is with this in mind that we must judge the achievements of the WP. The party has avoided being a potentially damaging propagator of class struggle and worked within a democratic framework which it had a limited impact in creating. Its participation within this framework itself is an indication of the party's commitment to democracy. This, coupled with its representative function has proved a democratising feature in itself. We must recognise that it has subsequently made strides to encourage participation, provide representation and enhance the opportunities of those from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds. Although these programmes have not been comprehensively successful, what must be recognised is that the WP has been a largely *democratising* force in what is a *continuous*, evolutionary process.

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