

WHAT DOES THE BLOOD TEST SHOW? MEASURING AND ANALYZING GOVERNABILITY IN BRAZIL

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Brazilian presidentialism does not seem to be in good health lately. After the 2014 elections, the deterioration of the relationship between the Executive and the Legislative branches led the government to near-paralysis, resulting in the removal of former President Dilma Rousseff and the establishment of an unpopular government. The polarized and exhausting electoral process of 2018 culminated in the curious combination of an over-fragmented Congress and the victory of the extreme right, supported by anti-system speeches and unskilled in terms of dialogue and conciliation.

The Brazilian political system in place since the 1988 Constitution combines presidentialism, a multiparty system, bicameralism, federalism, and proportional representation. Experts analyze this “coalitional presidentialism” (Abranches 1988) from two competing perspectives. Some contend that the model is very vulnerable, with high governability costs, since its explosive combination of institutions tends to generate decision-making paralysis (Abranches 1988, Mainwaring 1999; Ames 2001; Anastasia and Melo 2002). Others argue that the system has tools that allow for coordination between the Executive and the Legislative branches and enable effective governance. In particular, the latter argue that presidential powers and procedural rules in the legislature can correct those potential destabilization tendencies (Limongi and Figueiredo 1995, Limongi 1998, Figueiredo 2001, Santos 2002 and 2003, Pereira, Power and Rennó 2005; Pereira and Mueller 2002; Pereira and Melo 2012).

Until the end of Lula’s second term, conflicts between the Executive and the Legislative branches seem to have been damped by the system. After 2014, in particular, this balance was disrupted, with the emergence of an acute political and institutional crisis. Considering that since the Constitution of 1988 the rules of the game had remained unaffected, a purely institutionalist account (cf. North 1981, Hall and Taylor 1996, Mahoney 2002) – political results stem from the institutional setting – does not explain this crisis.

Based on the findings of Pereira (2017), we have been developing a quantitative methodology to analyze the

dynamics of the relationship between the Executive and the Legislative branches. This “blood test of governability” is composed of 13 indicators aimed at measuring the coordination between these two government branches in each presidential term (Figure 1). Our aim is thus to allow one to verify the health of the system, with parameters related to legislative proposals, coalition characteristics, the dynamics of ministerial appointments, and party fragmentation.

DIMENSIONS	INDICATORS
Proposition and approval of laws	Participation rate
	Success rate
	Dominance rate
Presidential Vetoes	Percentage of projects withheld
Approval of Medidas Provisórias ⁽¹⁾	Rate of conflict in Medidas Provisórias
Characteristics of the coalition	Coalition’s proportional size
	Coalition’s discipline
Degree of coalescence	Coalescence rate
Cabinet changes	In general
	Involving congressional interlocutors
Party fragmentation	The effective number of parties
	Number of parties with less than 10 seats in Congress
Changes in budgetary law	Time and kind of changes

Figure 1. “Blood Test of Governability”: Dimensions and Indicators
Source: Authors’ elaboration

⁽¹⁾ Presidential acts valued as laws that may be approved by the Congress to maintain their effects

Our study comprises the period between 1995 and 2016, including the two terms of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), and Dilma Rousseff.



Following the consolidation and treatment of primary data, a table was built to summarize “test” results, the lowest scores being observed in the Rousseff government, especially during her second term.

The preliminary findings indicate that factors other than the institutional framework of coalitional presidentialism may influence the balance between the two branches and, consequently, governability. Non-institutional circumstances seem to have operated to alter the balance in the system, especially during Rousseff’s administration. For instance, informal rules and presidents’ profiles may matter, as hypothesized in the literature on presidential styles (Barber 1972; Neusdat 1990; Greenstein 2000, Siavelis 2010; Alessandro 2013 and 2014, Lassance 2015).

In terms of methodology, one must have in mind that governability is a highly complex phenomenon in a context of multiple challenges. It is difficult to isolate specific variables and ignore other causes as potential explanations for the current crisis. Brazil has experienced a severe economic crisis in combination with the effects of the anti-corruption initiative “Carwash,” which affected the political class at large. Facts such as these impact political stability, hence jeopardizing governability.

Yet our findings show evidence that these analyses should also take into account behavioral ingredients, not strictly the individual personality of the president, but the administration’s profile, more broadly, such as the center of the government. Does this mean we will be able to carry out predictive exercises and anticipate the responses of our political system to the present and future governments, according to personal traits? This quantitative study will not offer a definite answer, but it calls attention to the potential of this line of research.

Notes

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