

Reassessing the idea of political competition in oligarchic regimes: evidence from Brazil (1889-1930)

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Abstract

The use of electoral manipulation by political parties has attracted much attention from political scientists recently, but the debate has focused primarily on the contemporary period and autocratic regimes. In this paper, our objective is to analyze the use of electoral manipulation during the historical Brazilian oligarchic regime, observed much before its first democratic transition. While most authors claim that electoral fraud at that time was widespread, turning the level of political competition extremely low, we contend that fraudulent practices were actually an instrument for regulating political competition. We base our analyses on an original dataset with information from historical Annals of the Brazilian Congress. Evidence from appeals presented at the legislative floor by parties that had lost previous electoral contests suggests high level of political competition in most Brazilian federative units. Those parties had the ability to report cases of violence, intimidation of voters, and other kinds of fraud, within the frame of a legitimate federal political arena, suggesting that not one, but several parties were legitimately competing for state resources in each state. In a political system characterized by clientelistic voter-politician relations and lack of citizenship rights, the maintenance of political stability required the control over the electoral process, from voters' registration to the counting of votes, but several parties were persistently competing for such a control. Electoral fraud during the Brazilian pre-democratic period served as mechanism for regulating elites' struggle for power, rather than for eliminating competition altogether.

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Introduction

The study of elections in liberal regimes has traditionally been dominated by two negative views of electoral practices. On the one hand, the literature frequently portrays these regimes as lacking political competition. In Europe, unanimous electoral results was common in the 19th century, gradually disappearing until the end of First World War, when almost all countries showed significant levels of political dispute (Caramani 2003). In general, the probability that incumbents would win an election at that time was 0.79 (Przeworski 2009). At the same time, the literature tends to disqualify these contests, because they “were almost exclusively defined by fraud and violence; their results, far from being the expression of the popular will, were in fact the outcome of various governmental and partisan machinations” (Posada-Carbó 2000, 612). That was a common phenomenon during the period. If Richard Bensele claimed that “the act of voting in mid-nineteenth-century America was clearly undemocratic” (Bensele 2004, 84), in Italy and Spain, “elections were held by means of breaking electoral laws” (Renzato 1991, 115), and “the aspects of nineteenth-century English electioneering most often condemned at the time were bribery and treating, rather than violence” (Hoppen 1994, 609).

This article criticizes the way fraud is commonly interpreted, as well as the view that competitive elections were absent at the turn of the 20th century. Starting from an analysis of the electoral market, we demonstrate that political conditions observed at that time were sufficient to produce political competition among rival parties. Both in terms of formal rules and of observed behavior of political parties, we find that real competition did take place, even though it had different characteristics from what we observe today: the main goal was to take control of the electoral machine – the legal apparatus for managing (and, as a rule, for conditioning) electoral results. From this perspective, fraudulent practices deserve reconsideration. They were persistent at that time, becoming visible especially in situations of high political competition. The phenomenon of fraud was a set of practices and strategies mobilized by all parties, an instrument of political struggle, and the true mechanism for gaining power. In the same vein, our study makes room for rethinking the role of voters. We show that they had a central role in liberal elections, although most of them tended to be collectively coopted by party agents, rather than to express their free will individually. That is, the vote in that period was a collective task, ostensibly performed in the local context. It was the control over the “community” of voters and electoral-administrative machines that characterized the *modus operandi* of political competition before the dawn of democracy, as we know it.

Surely, the best strategy for highlighting this dynamics would be comparative analysis. However, our interest in investigating fraud and political competition taking place more than a century ago makes comparative analysis a hard task. In most cases, original records of electoral competition have not been scanned and digitalized for public access, and data collection demands research in local archives. It is no coincidence that our knowledge about the phenomenon is restricted to a few valuable case studies.² Here, we focus on Brazil during the First Republic (1889-1930), because its federative political structure enables us to conduct a *within-case* comparative

² Among the most notorious works dedicated to pre-democratic elections and fraud are those of Germany (Anderson 2000), Costa Rica (Lehoucq and Molina 2002), and Bolivia (Victoriano 2000). With respect to compilations, it is worthy remembering the books organized by Posada-Carbó (1996) and Annino (1995).

analysis for eleven elections, which is a great analytical advantage relative to other cases.³

Brazil adopted a Republican federative system in 1889, subdividing the territory in twenty states and one federal district. The first ten years of the new regime are usually portrayed by scholars as a period of high political and economic instability.⁴ In 1899, President Campos Sales sought to circumvent the existing tensions between political factions in Congress, by means of negotiating a solid legislative majority that would solve the institutional crisis that shook the Republic. He reached an agreement with state governors, promising to respect the power of local oligarchies in exchange for unconditional support for major issues that were being debated in Congress. It was determined that each state would be represented in Congress by a unified group, composed of delegates nominated by each governor. By recognizing only delegates nominated by governors, regardless of the political group to which those governors belonged, the reform promoted the consolidation of states' domination structures, and, to use the words of a contemporary congressman, 'the dissolution of legislative power'.⁵ Opponents and states' internal dissidents were eliminated in elections or excluded in the later stage of "preparatory sessions", when votes were formally validated after the electoral contest.⁶ As a consequence, the so-called "oligarchic arrangement", "Campos Sales model", or "governors' politics" have been established – all of these terms interchangeably representing the distinctive way of doing politics in First Republic Brazil. Such an arrangement has been deemed responsible for the fact that the political order would remain highly decentralized in the following thirty years, structured around twenty-one different party systems, each of which corresponding to a Brazilian state. This allows us to thoroughly observe the dynamics of political competition within a single case (Brazil), identifying similarities and differences across federative units, and, most importantly, allowing us to provide generalizations about distinctive features of the political-electoral dispute in oligarchic regimes in late 19th and early 20th century.

The article is organized as follows. First of all, we analyze the structural conditions under which competition in national legislative elections took place. Then, we measure real levels of electoral competition using two indicators commonly employed by the literature: margins of electoral victory (difference of votes between winners and losers) and the presence of opposition in the Chamber of Deputies. In order to test the hypothesis that the level of political competitiveness raises the level of fraud, we compare districts with and without fraud complaints. We analyze formal appeals made by defeated candidates in the Chamber and fraud reports published in newspapers. We show that there is a positive association between political competitiveness and fraud complaints, but not between the former and actual fraud – in spite of the common wisdom. In the 19th century, fraud was ubiquitous, because it was the mechanism through which the opposition and incumbents competed in elections – an overlooked fact among those who insist in using current notions of democratic political competition to interpret the past.

³ For within-case analysis, see Gerring (2004).

⁴ In 1897, the only national party split into two factions at the beginning of the legislative term, resulting in a divided Congress. To make matters worse, the president elected in the following year had to negotiate an international settlement in order to refinance the country's foreign debt (Carone 1972).

⁵ The quote was extracted from *Secret Diary* (Campos 1954, 94), but the author assigns it to Medeiros de Albuquerque in an article published in the *Jornal do Comercio*.

⁶ A recent study has shown that the annihilation of states' internal oppositions rather happened during earlier electoral stages (e.g., the enrollment and electoral processes), than later stages, when electoral certificates were analyzed by the National Congress. See Ricci e Zulini (2012) for empirical evidence.

Political competition, contestability and competitiveness

Thinking political competition in an oligarchic environment requires a different methodological approach relative to studies of democratic regimes. The basic challenge is to adapt indicators of vote disputes to a context where individual freedoms are restricted. By definition, we need to disconnect the concept of competition from ideas of close electoral contests and small margins of victory. Approaching the problem in those terms, we end up taking only electoral results into account when measuring political struggle. Hyde and Marinov argue that “excluding elections in which the opposition can compete but did not perform sufficiently well may introduce biased estimates in research on a wide ranging set of questions” (Hyde and Marinov 2012, 192). To escape from this trap, we should first consider the rules that establish the conditions for political competition.⁷ Following Dahl (1971), Adam Przeworki has associated the idea of competition with the possibility that an opposition has “some chance of winning office as a consequence of elections” (Przeworki et al. 2000, 16). Consequently, our attention turns to “a structure of political opportunity for new and old potential claimants” (Bartolini 1999, 460), enabling the analysis of political struggle in non-democratic periods. In order to assess if conditions for political competition existed, we looked at three specific dimensions:

First dimension: frequency of elections as a method for choosing representatives.

It refers to the maintenance of an electoral calendar established by law, without interruptions resulting from unilateral decisions by the ruling government. Article 16 of the 1891 Federal Constitution established a three-year limit for the legislative term, putting the National Congress in charge of setting election days. Between 1894 and 1930, elections occurred regularly every three years, always in the first quarter of the year slated for the contest. In only one occasion, still in 1894, the election was postponed in the southern states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná as a result of the outbreak of an uprising against the federal government.⁸ In those states, elections were held months later, but in the same year.⁹ In practice, there is no doubt that frequent elections were a *condicio sine qua non* for choosing representatives during the oligarchic regime.

Second dimension: absence of legal restrictions on the entrance of opposition parties into the electoral market.

⁷ It is important to remember that the notion of *political competition* is a concept that has four dimensions: contestability (the degree of potential contestation observed in a given regime), availability (vote elasticity), decidability (differentiated supply) and vulnerability (effective ability to punish those in power) (Bartolini 1989; 1990). In this article, we discuss only the dimension of contestability, but use the expression “political competition”, because it evokes a broader and more common idea in the literature.

⁸ It is the Federalist Revolt, a flag wielded by advocates of state autonomy and that ended up unleashing a civil war extended to the territories of the states of Santa Catarina and Paraná.

⁹ The 1894 federal elections were carried out across the country in March 1st, except for those states situated in the region of the revolt, where elections were postponed. In Santa Catarina, elections were held on September 9th, and in Rio Grande do Sul on October 10th. In the latter of them, a postponement happened again after the outbreak of another revolt in 1927, but the elections, originally scheduled for February, took place in May, after the end of the uprising.

The 1891 Republican Constitution did not mention the word “party”, but assigned to the National Congress the responsibility for regulating the general conditions of the electoral process. Regarding eligibility for Congress, the electoral legislation was broad and relatively non-restrictive, requiring only that candidates were Brazilian citizens and eligible for voting, although banning foreigners, women, illiterates, homeless, and military personnel.¹⁰ This allowed for the candidacy of independent candidates, as there was no law restricting competition to existing political forces. Interestingly, several labor movements nominated candidates during that period (Castellucci 2010). It is true that laws constraining the freedom of association and organization were enacted, especially in the late 1920s, with the goal of controlling increasing social conflicts. However, the legislation did not preclude the nomination of opposition candidates up to 1928, after communist contenders had won two seats in the municipal council of the Federal District (Karepovs 2006).

Third dimension: presence of opposition parties.

This last dimension refers to the existence of opposition groups effectively competing in elections. In order to estimate it, we collected information on political parties nominating candidates in the eleven federal elections held between 1900 and 1930. Figure 1 displays the average number of parties competing in each of them, by state. Our criterion was relatively conservative: we counted as a party only those who nominated more than one candidate, and we excluded independent contenders. By doing this, we avoided overestimating the number of parties.

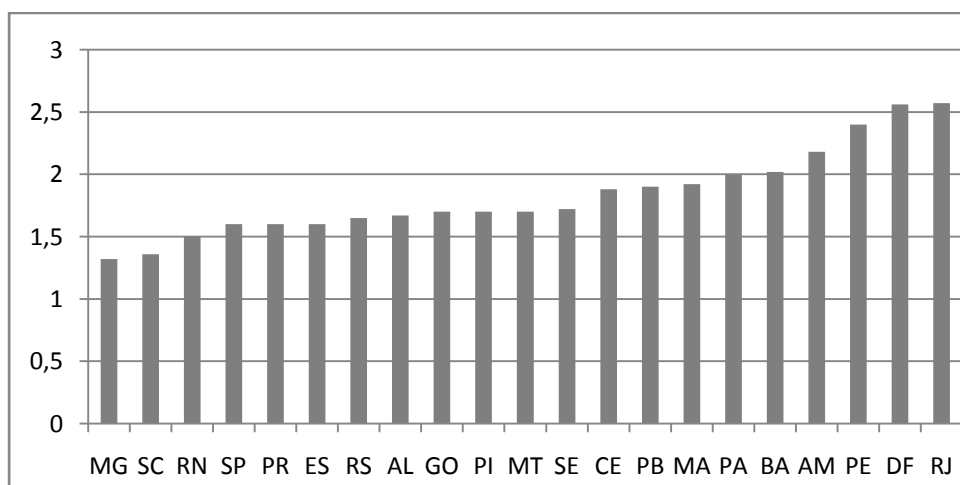


Figure 1. Number of competing political parties, by state (1900-1930)

The data are unequivocal. Generally speaking, all twenty-one states had more than one political party competing in elections. The extreme cases of the Federal District (DF) and Rio de Janeiro (RJ) suggest the occurrence of intense disputes and party activity. According to recent studies, this could be due to parties’ inability to build strong and cohesive organizations in those federative units (Ferreira 1994; Freire 2000;

¹⁰ Law 35 of January 26th, 1892 (article 29). The same criterion remains in other two important laws of that time: law 1,269 of November 15th, 1904 (art. 105) and law 3,208 of December 27th, 1916 (art. 34).

Pinto 2011; Veneu 1987). Still, even in politically stable states with dominant parties, like São Paulo and Minas Gerais, the number of competitors is always higher than one. The explanation is twofold. On the one hand, new political forces like the Democratic Party and the Liberal Alliance emerged, especially in the 1920s, with a clear objective of breaking the representation monopoly of traditional parties. On the other hand, dominant parties faced internal turmoil that led to political splits, like those observed in 1901 and 1924 in São Paulo. Moreover, the institutionalization of the Republican Party of Minas was gradual and slow, ending only in 1906 (Resende 1982).

The fact that these three dimensions are fully observed in Brazil during the First Republic indicates that it can be considered a competitive oligarchy, as there was room for oppositionist political parties to compete in elections. However, as suggested by Sartori, the existence of a set of rules making elections “potentially competitive” does not mean that they are in fact competitive. It is also necessary to consider the system’s real degree of competitiveness, which could be “measured by the closeness of the nature of the returns and/or by the frequency with which parties take over from another” (Sartori 1976, 194-195). Therefore, we use two indicators to estimate the degree of competitiveness between 1900 and 1930: the margin of electoral victory and the distribution of seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

The set of indicators used by the literature to measure margins of victory is large, ranging from more basic variables (e.g., differences in vote shares between winners and losers, the proportion of votes for the winning party/candidate, the number of candidates per seat) to relatively more complex ones.¹¹ However, such a variation in the use of indicators is only apparent. Indeed, all of them are based on a single source of information: electoral results. We estimate the degree of competition at the level of electoral districts as the ratio of total votes for the first loser (FL) and total votes for the last winner (LW).¹² That is:

$$\text{Competitiveness} = (\text{FL}) / (\text{LW})$$

This indicator may vary from zero to one. The closer it gets to one, the higher the degree of political competition is in the district. Figure 2 displays estimates for each of the Brazilian twenty-one states.

¹¹ For studies employing more complex indicators, see Pereira and Rennó (2003), Coelho (2012), and Sugiyama (2008) for country studies of Brazil, and Pérez-Liñán (2001) for a comparative analysis.

¹² The decision to use this formula to measure competition derives from the difficulty of collecting data and information for all candidates. Still, we found information on votes for first losers and last winners in 432 districts, leaving us with only sixty-three missing cases.

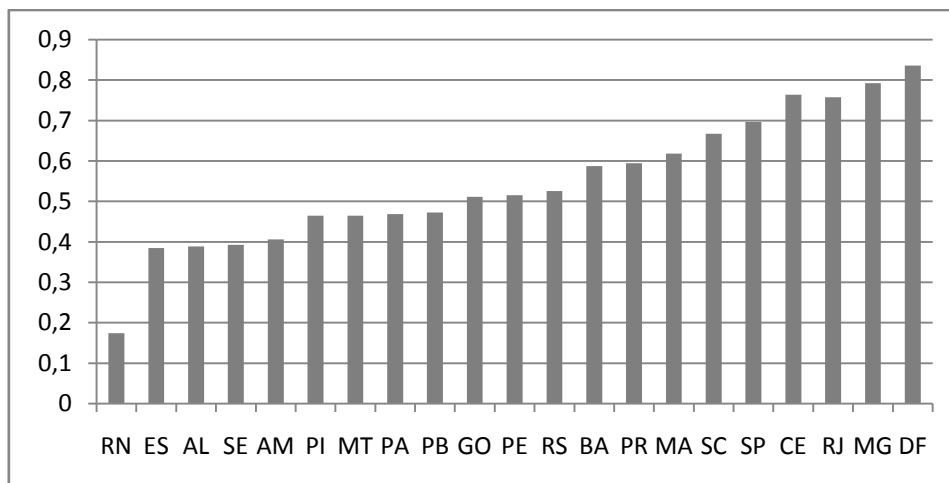


Figure 2. Level of electoral competitiveness, by state (1900-1930)

The figure is a warn against the dominant view that the political environment of Brazilian states froze after the election of 1900, as a result of Campo Sales’ pact with state governors (Lessa 1988; Lima Junior 1999; Motta 2008). Our data point toward a different perspective, with many close elections and important cross-state variation. Between 1900 and 1930, the median value of competitiveness was 0.61 and the mean was 0.57, suggesting that elections had high levels of dispute.

Our second indicator captures the presence of the opposition in the Chamber. Scholars tend to assume that, as a result of the “governors’ politics”, the Chamber of Deputies had always been composed of twenty-one unified parties, each of which faithfully representing the corresponding state governor. To test this common interpretation, we sought to identify the parties of the 2,328 deputies elected between 1900 and 1930. Because this information could neither be found in Annals of the Chamber, nor in official post-electoral documents, we resorted to newspapers. Parties used to publish the list of their candidates in their respective newspapers one month before election day. Based on those records, we mapped the party affiliation of 2,279 deputies, or about 98% of the total. The data presented in Figure 3 displays average proportions of members belonging to the same party for each state.

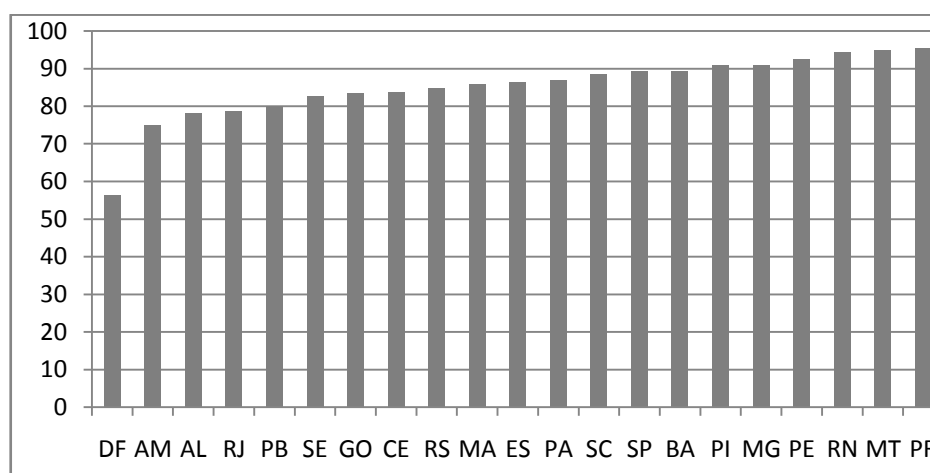


Figure 3. Political composition of the Chamber, 1900-1930 (%)

The evidence is telling: records of elected candidates show that, on average, they belonged to the same party 84.9% of the time. The lack of full unity is due to the presence of independent candidates. This should not be interpreted, however, as an indication that independent candidates succeeded against the ones favored by governors. At that time, it was common for state governors to not present a list of candidates for all available seats, making it possible for independent candidates to be elected. As Getulio Vargas claimed in 1930,

“some of the dominant incumbents in the states allow for one or more opposition names, but, in reality, having the same origin, they are as incumbent as all of the others. In other states, the representation of minorities is an act of governors’ generosity, a grant, an humiliating favor, rather than the acquisition of a right.”

Diário do CN, 23/04/1930, p. 7420.

Thus, winners were virtually all from the same party, and the place of the “opposition” within the list sponsored by state rulers was agreed upon.

In summary, we observe the following scenario: 1) there were rules and regulations potentially allowing for competition; 2) parties/factions faced one another in close elections; and 3) there was only one winning group holding the monopoly of representation in the Chamber. So far, most analysts have restricted their attention only to the third of these aspects, deducing from it that the Republic had no political parties.¹³ Our data show that, despite the fact that one party per state had access to the Chamber, the oligarchic Brazil was actually characterized by high levels of competitiveness at the polls.

Clarifying the association between competition and fraud

The obvious question arising from these data refers to the role of fraud during the electoral process. Some studies have found a positive association between competitiveness and fraud.¹⁴ This finding, which has also important implications for studies addressing electoral corruption in authoritarian regimes, is directly associated with the idea that governments use fraud to win elections when they face intense competition (Lehoucq e Molina 1999; 2002; Darde 1996; Ziblatt 2009; Alonso 1996; Argensinger 1985).¹⁵

The challenge of analyzing fraud rests on the difficulty of observing and measuring it. As Fabrice Lehoucq points out, “no one who stuffs the ballot box wants to leave a trail of incriminating evidence” (Lehoucq 2003, 233).¹⁶ In order to circumvent these difficulties, scholars of the 19th century have used formal appeals against electoral results as a proxy for fraud. These appeals were formal complaints against electoral results, made directly to legislative committees responsible for validating vote counts, either by defeated candidates or frustrated voters. They sometimes requested the

¹³ Such interpretations were proposed by Lane (1988), Kinzo (1980), and Cardoso (1975).

¹⁴ For a study discussing the causal link between political competition and electoral fraud, see Lehoucq (2003).

¹⁵ For studies on present-day regimes, see Nyblade e Reed, 2008; Geddes, 2006; Magaloni, 2006.

¹⁶ Yves Meny argues in the same direction. In his words, “Par définition, la corruption est un échange occulte, secret qui permet d’accéder à des ressources que le respect des règles et procédures n’aurait pas permis d’obtenir ou aurait rendu aléatoires. Cette opacité des échanges rend donc extrêmement difficile une mesure empirique du phénomène, puisque seuls quelques cas délictueux arrivent à la lumière” (Meny, 1992:241). Consequently, it is common for us to observe fraud without having the means to identify its perpetrators. (Dompièr, 2007:126).

annulment of the election, or, more frequently, the recounting of votes with the exclusion of those that were allegedly manipulated – an alternative that could potentially benefit losing candidates. Using appeals as a proxy, Lehoucq and Molina (2003) estimated the pervasiveness of fraud in elections for the national legislative body in Costa Rica. A similar strategy was pursued by Green (2007) for the American case, by Ziblatt (2009) and Anderson (2000) for Imperial Germany, by Kam (2007) for England, by Charney (1964) for France, and by Andreucci (1995) for the Italian liberal age.¹⁷ All of these studies used formal appeals by defeated candidates as a proxy for electoral fraud.

Such a methodological strategy may be misleading. The main problem lies in not differentiating fraud from the act of denouncing it, as if both were the same thing. Lehoucq and Molina, for example, claim that “greater levels of political competitiveness encouraged politicians and parties to commit and denounce acts of fraud” (Lehoucq and Molina 2003, 61). Still, although this alleged association is valid for explaining formal complaints, one would hardly argue that low levels of party competition indicate absence of fraud. The data collected for Brazil support such a critique. Figure 4 displays frequencies of districts for each of twenty-five categories of electoral competitiveness, both for those where there were no fraud complaints (upper panel) and for those where there were (bottom panel). It shows that the higher the level of competitiveness was, the more defeated candidates formally questioned the fairness of the elections.

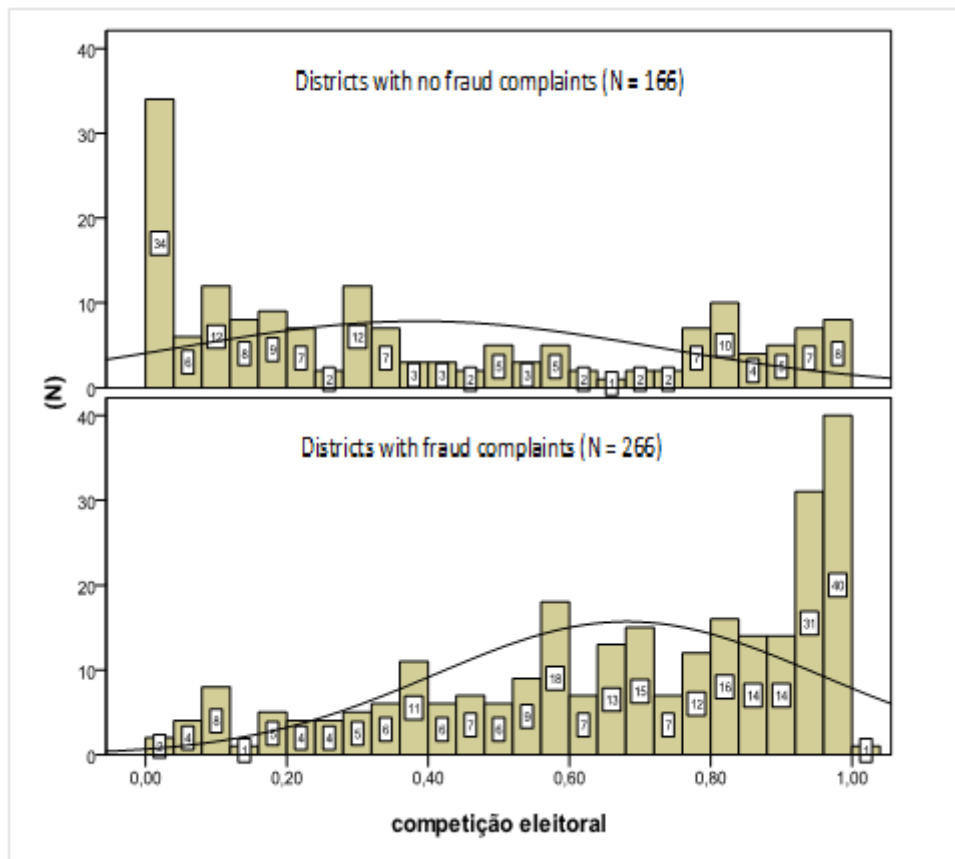


Figure 4. Complaints and competitiveness by type of district

¹⁷ For a comprehensive review of the literature on electoral fraud, see Lehoucq (2003).

The fact that competitiveness is positively associated with complaints of fraud does not mean that it is also associated with the occurrence of actual fraud. In other words, the number of appeals does not necessarily capture fraud itself, but only allegations of it (Dompnier 2007, 127). As political calculus sometimes influences the way parties deal with electoral corruption, the information available in appeals is hardly indicative of what we want to observe (Id., 124). Green (2007) warns us that focusing on formal appeals may underestimate the occurrence of actual fraud, since potential appellants would have to deal with their own subjective interpretation of facts before deciding to present a formal challenge or not.¹⁸ Alberto Simpser points out that, in authoritarian regimes of the XX century, politicians resort to fraud even when it is unnecessary to ensure victory (Simpser 2013). Finally, it is well-established that fraud was a common phenomenon in liberal regimes of Latin America, practiced by all political actors, both incumbents and oppositionists (Posada-Carbó 2000). On the other hand, the act of contesting elections in the United States was part of a political agenda aimed at eradicating urban party machines, although it was not really frequent (Allen and Allen 1981). That means that “electoral manipulation ought to be understood not merely as a marginal vote-getting technique, but also as an important tool for consolidating and monopolizing political power” (Simpser 2013, 4).

Gathering information from different sources may reduce difficulties in analyses of fraud. For cases of close elections, that is, contests with high levels of competitiveness, we agree that focusing on formal appeals is the best possible strategy for studying fraud at the turn of the 20th century. It allows us to observe the most common fraudulent practices, the stakes that were in dispute, and the way parties controlled the voting process. For Brazil, it must be emphasized that, from 1900 to 1930, an average of 56.5% of electoral districts was subjected to allegations of fraud.¹⁹ This is a high value in comparison to other country studies, which attests to the relevance of formal appeals presented to the Chamber.²⁰ Still, what would be the best way for us to observe fraud when it is not denounced? In our opinion, newspapers are a valuable source of information.²¹ During the First Republic, it was common for parties to use newspapers for different purposes. Through the printed press, they requested followers to register, reported lists of registered voters and election judges, the location of polling stations, as well as the list of party members responsible for delivering party ballots in each polling station during election day.²² Being their official media outlets, newspapers reported parties’ most important decisions and, weeks before the election, highlighted on the first page the list of candidates they had nominated. In some cases, candidates presented themselves to readers by introducing a summary of their political

¹⁸ They would also have to consider the costs of presenting an electoral complaint and the chances of this complaint being successful (they may depend, for example, on the expected vote of the legislative majority during the process of vote validation), as well as the value they assign to a seat in Congress.

¹⁹ Up to the 1903 election, the average was 63%. After the 1906 election, the average decreased to 41%. The number of elected deputies remained 212 throughout the whole period.

²⁰ In the German Empire between 1871 and 1912, the average number of districts with formally contested electoral results was only 18.8% (Ziblatt, 2010); in Italy between 1892 and 1913, it was 28% (Piretti, 1998); and in the U.S. House of Representatives between 1861 and 1899, the period with the highest level of contested electoral results in American history, it was below 10% (Jenkins, 2005). Therefore, Brazil, more than other case, provides us with a great opportunity for studying fraud by analyzing formal appeals made by defeated candidates.

²¹ Despite recognizing the importance of newspapers as an instrument for parties’ propaganda and canvassing, few researchers used these sources systematically to study fraud. A notable exception is a study of the American case by Cox and Kousser (1982).

²² A few case studies have confirmed that political parties used the media strategically at that time. See Pacheco (2012) for a study of Porto Alegre, Brazil, and Pinto (1998) for a study of Rio de Janeiro

program in the same way voters used to sign manifestos in defense of some candidatures. On a daily basis, newspapers encouraged voters to turn out, vote for the party's candidates, and not switch their support to other candidates. At the same time, it was common for newspapers to publish governor's telegrams exhorting readers to vote for official candidates. More important for our purposes, newspapers tended to be used for denouncing oppressive practices by political opponents, such as electoral fraud. In line with other studies, we search for evidence of fraud in newspapers for cases where no formal appeal was presented by defeated candidates. These two sources of data suggest that fraudulent practices were strategically used for controlling both the electoral process and voters.

The use of appeals for denouncing fraud

According to the literature, attempts to influence electoral results before preparatory sessions, when vote counts were validated and winner candidates formally took office, occurred at different stages of the electoral process: (I) voters' registration, (II) the act of voting, and (III) the vote counting process both in local polling stations and at the state level (Carvalho 2003).

Attempts to suppress political competition before election day were common. The stage of voters' registration was the very first moment in which the government competed against opposition parties. The process that defined who would have the right to vote was regulated by law, but managed by political parties - the actors that controlled the electoral bureaucracy *de facto*. The registration stage was also a collective process. Even if the citizen tried to register by himself, he would face potential barriers imposed by ruling parties, which controlled the access to the electoral market. Legal provisions defining the criteria for registration did not ensure that eligible citizens would receive their registration certificates. The acquisition of such certificates rather depended on a process organized and supported by political parties acting in collusion with administrative agents responsible for enlisting citizens. A winning candidate from the ruling party was resolute when defending his party's victory: 'if our candidates won, as did independent ones running under our banner, this is because the minority [...] didn't take care of voters' registration'.²³

In line with this fact, formal appeals also suggest that parties interfered in the second stage of the electoral process, which was equally important for keeping control over the vote: the nomination of local election judges. Reports of struggles between different factions over the nomination of election judges are common. The goal was to make it possible for parties to oversee voters' behavior in election day. It would guarantee the exclusion of opposition voters (by rejecting their electoral certificates) and the admission of supporters who had their certificates denied during the registration stage.²⁴ At the same time, fraud complaints by opposition parties were easily disregarded, which reduced costs commonly incurred by incumbent parties, such as vote buying and bribery.²⁵ A unified team of election judges also made the vote counting easier after local polling stations closed their doors, which is the third stage of the electoral process. Without opponents, judges could "count the way they wanted"; eventually adjusting results in favor of some candidates or producing fake polling

²³ Annals of the Chamber of Deputies (ACD), 30/04/1918, p. 289.

²⁴ ACD, 15/05/1912, p. 692.

²⁵ ACD, 04/05/1903, p. 176; and ACD, 30/04/1918, p. 263.

records. Critiques of distortions of electoral results were also made against the work of *Juntas Apuradoras* (state counting committees), which released state-level electoral results and granted victory certificates to elected candidates.

Qualitative research of formal appeals elucidates the relevance of party monopoly over the electoral and administrative processes, from voters' registration to the stage of vote counting at local and state levels – a privilege that ensured electoral success. Some documented statements of that time illustrate the way electoral processes worked during the First Republic and suggest reasons for incumbent candidates' electoral victories. Contesting electoral results in the state of Alagoas, a member of the opposition party claimed:

“We competed in Alagoas' federal elections as opposition candidates against a party that controls all of the official positions. [...] While we faced a situation of overt hostility, from the voters' registration stage to the end of the electoral process, on the part of most government agents responsible for the enforcement of the new law as well as of all of those who had any authority in municipalities of the countryside, our opponents, who control municipal and state bureaucracies, enjoyed unrestricted freedom to break the law for the sake of their cause.”

(ACD, 06 de maio de 1918, p. 200)

The important role of appeals at the municipal level is indicated by the way the winning party in Piauí responded to an accusation made by a defeated candidate:

“Influence and dominance in representation and in municipal government, and the control over resources that constitute the political and governmental administration in municipalities, are, for parties that manage to obtain and keep them, not only an uncontested proof of their strength and numerical superiority, but also the assurance of their electoral victory, in face of the electoral regime we have adopted.”

(ACD, 28 de maio de 1900, p. 255)

These statements indicate that the common wisdom, which says that physical intimidation and corruption were sufficient conditions for controlling electoral results, should be reviewed. It was rather parties' control over the administrative and electoral machines, that is, the organizational structure regulating the electoral process according to the norms of the time, the best strategy for reducing uncertainties in electoral results.

Formal appeals also provide us with important information about the role of voters. Although the party monopoly over the administrative and electoral machines was a means for controlling the three important stages of the electoral process, the success of such an organizational system depended also on another factor: parties' effective ability to persuade, mobilize and control voters. Besides physical violence and fraud, there were other mechanisms employed by politicians to captivate eligible voters, suggesting the existence of a dynamic electoral market.

Let us start with practices aimed at persuading voters. Appeals reveal the occurrence of an unexpected phenomenon during the First Republic: politicians engaged in electoral campaigns. The most widely used instrument in electoral campaigns was the party-controlled printing press, which channeled flows of information towards voters. At the time, parties' newspapers had an important role as a mechanism for disseminating their ideological and political positions and as an alternative way of denouncing fraud. These media outlets published official rules for voters' registration, the list of registered voters and election judges, the location of polling stations, and the list of party agents responsible for handing out party ballots in each polling station. They also reported the party's main decisions, and, weeks before the election,

highlighted on the first page the list of candidates they supported. In some cases, candidates presented themselves to readers by means of a summary of their proposals, in the same way voters signed manifestos in favor of some candidates.²⁶ These newspapers recommended, on a daily basis, that voters turned out and voted for the party's candidates, "rather than for any other".²⁷ Moreover, it was common for them to publish telegrams from the governor exhorting readers to support official candidates.²⁸

What is clear from the content of appeals is that parties used the press to discredit their opponents. Official newspapers were not the only way of accessing voters and the public opinion, however. Candidates did engage in electoral campaigns, visiting towns, campaigning in streets, and even searching for new supporters door-to-door.²⁹ There are reports of candidates participating in meetings of unions and local associations, like in 1927, when the governor of the state of Amazonas was accused of making "apology of his candidates" in one of these meetings.³⁰ In 1918, João de Figueiredo challenged electoral results in the Federal District, arguing that he had obtained the support of about 400 workers from the National Press Company after addressing personally "each of them".³¹ Candidate Helvecio Coelho Rodrigues pursued a similar strategy in campaigns for the 1927 election in the state of Piauí, approaching citizens directly and introducing himself in public squares of the capital and countryside towns.³²

Different strategies adopted by politicians to influence citizens' vote decisions attest that the vote was not fully controlled by oligarchic parties.³³ First of all, we see some of them engaging in bribery, which "[competed] with fraud".³⁴ Examples of such practices are investments in local public works, which tended to benefit their business friends. Importantly, formal appeals put special emphasis on direct vote buying. For example, a newspaper reported that candidate Octavio Ramirez Miranda delivered "to each of those who voted for him a \$2 bill in his own home".³⁵ There was a market where votes were exchanged for handouts: some people would request "some money" to pay for their "room"³⁶, others would exchange their vote for the discharge of their tax debt,³⁷ while some candidates would offer free lunch on election day.³⁸ All of these examples indicate that the controlling the electorate was not easy, as each vote had its own cost. Precisely for this reason, an election was not carried out in Itaberaba, state of Bahia, in 1927, as candidate Arlindo Leoni reports: "The candidate was here, and he heard from local bosses that meeting with voters would cost large amounts of money, and that, therefore, they would not summon them".³⁹ Similar reasons discouraged, in 1903, Federal District candidate Heredia de Sá: he was "tired of gathering votes, and had switched his strategy to gathering thugs".⁴⁰

²⁶ See *Diário da Bahia*, 12/02/1927.

²⁷ ACD, 25/04/1927, p. 295.

²⁸ ACD, 29/04/1918, p. 169.

²⁹ Ver ACD, 28/04/1912, p. 68-9

³⁰ Cf. ACD, 24/04/1927, p. 137.

³¹ ACD, 30/04/1918, p. 233.

³² ACD, 25/04/1927, p. 340.

³³ See the study of the São Paulo case by Woodard (2005).

³⁴ ACD, 27/04/1927, p. 204.

³⁵ ACD, 30/04/1918, p. 227.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 254.

³⁷ ACD, 25/04/1927, p. 359.

³⁸ ACD, 30/04/1918, p. 264.

³⁹ ACD, 24/04/1927, p. 235.

⁴⁰ ACD, 08/05/1903, p. 297.

The degree of parties' control over voters was not the same in urban and rural areas. Basically, formal appeals suggest that in the countryside, where "*mandonismo* [was] the law"⁴¹, it was easier to control the vote, due to voters' higher dependence and lower level of education.⁴² In 1918, during a session at the Chamber of Deputies, candidates Do Souto and Pereira Nunes described the situation in these terms: "the farther away districts are from the city and the weaker law enforcement is, the more frequent is the falsification of electoral documents, the more 'consensus' becomes a regular phenomenon, the more turnout grows amazingly high, and the more the electoral rhythm acquires a cadence set by aligned numbers in a symptomatic uniformity".⁴³ In 1912, candidate Victorino de Paula Ramos was even more sarcastic, when he said that "the electoral activity grows astonishingly more intense when one travels from the city to the country, that is, when the ratio of squared distances increases and the masses of the population decrease".⁴⁴

These statements lead to a second observation, related to the way voters were mobilized. Formal appeals reveal that the act of voting was a collective experience, rather than the exercise of an individual right. Frequent reports of group registration are illustrative of this interpretation. As reported by Marcelino Rodrigues Machado, the registration of underage citizens and the rejection of oppositionists' applications were common.⁴⁵ When we look at the act of voting, the conclusion is the same. A good example is reported in 1927, when some oppositionist voters had their right to vote denied in the municipality of Sento-Sé: "Unable to vote in the municipality due to the lack of registry books and polling stations [...] my friends formed a civic movement [...], came to the city in a group of 687 pilgrims [...], and then, without finding a court judge, left with immense sacrifice to the nearest town, where they voted publically and notoriously at the office of my political opponent".⁴⁶

The use of the expression "my friends" and the image of a civic movement counting 687 people who get together to vote are indicative of a particular way of voting, which is collective. Moreover, the candidate's self-identification with the electorate sheds light on the nature of the bond existing between them. The mobilization in support of a candidate is collective, carried out by "friends" coopted in different ways, which invariably included handouts and promises of future benefits. Even if the cooptation frequently becomes physical coercion, it does not change the fact that voting was a collective experience.

The use of newspapers for denouncing fraud

Evidence from formal appeals does not shed light on political circumstances surrounding 210 districts that did not have electoral results challenged by defeated candidates. In order to fill this gap, we sought for information in newspapers, concentrating our research efforts on the states of Maranhão, São Paulo, and Pernambuco. Complementary information was also collected for Alagoas in 1921 and the Federal District in 1930. This corresponds to only 53 districts without contested

⁴¹ ACD, 06/05/1918, p. 240.

⁴² See ACD, 24/04/1927, p. 240; ACD, 02/05/1918, p. 821; ACD, 30/04/1912, p. 215.

⁴³ ACD, 02/05/1918, p. 960.

⁴⁴ ACD, 29/04/1912, p. 174.

⁴⁵ ACD, 26/04/1927, ACD, p. 15.

⁴⁶ ACD, 24/04/1927, p. 221.

electoral results, or 25.3% of the total.⁴⁷ In general, governmental newspapers rarely discussed electoral fraud. On election day and the days after, short reports and the editorial of official newspapers usually announced that elections took place in absolute order, that citizens freely cast their votes, and that the opposition was capable of overseeing the whole process.⁴⁸ Most of the time, news articles supported incumbent parties against charges from the opposition, but mentioned a few towns where elections did not take place for different reasons, such as lack of election judges⁴⁹, fraudulent registration⁵⁰, and the disappearance of voters' proofs of registration.⁵¹

The analysis of articles from oppositionist and independent newspapers is telling and reveals two patterns. The first one is their general agreement with the view of peaceful and orderly elections, instead of denouncing possible wrongdoings. In 1906, for example, the oppositionist newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* denounced situations of violence⁵², fraudulent registration⁵³, denial of access to party agents⁵⁴, intimidation of the opposition by governmental authorities⁵⁵, and lack of election judges⁵⁶, but these were seen as exceptions to the rule. In 1930, the Federal District independent newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, which had repeatedly criticized governmental oligarchies, acknowledged that the election “took place with no major incidents, in a rare expression of respect for the most diverse opinions”.⁵⁷ In general, it was acknowledged that the government ensured the freedom of the election. In order to understand the reasons for the lack of protests against the electoral process we should pay attention to electoral results. That is, the opposition often managed to win and get some of its candidates elected. It was not in their best interest, therefore, to challenge the fairness of the electoral process.

A second pattern is evident in articles of oppositionist and independent newspapers. None of them makes reference to the vote as an act of individuals, but rather interpret the voter as a collective agent. This confirms evidence from formal appeals. The reasoning found in oppositionist newspapers in this regard is interesting. At the time of the 1906 election, the editorial of *O Estado de São Paulo* stated that the opposition had won in the state of São Paulo due to their control over voters: “look at voters and care for them, as this is something the others are not capable of doing”.⁵⁸ In the same year in Maranhão, the newspaper *A Pacotilha* stated that one thing was to acknowledge that the election was orderly and free; another was the corruption and coercion against voters [...], particularly in the countryside.⁵⁹ That is, the problem was not fraud itself; it sufficed to control voters by handing out benefits such as jobs, or by putting pressure on civil servants. The same newspaper stated that, in the election held in 1909, public employees were strongly and effectively pressured to vote for the incumbent: “They either vote for me, or I will take the bread away from their mouths”.⁶⁰

⁴⁷ Our goal is to keep searching for information in newspapers from other states, particularly Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul, which would correspond to about 50% of our target.

⁴⁸ See, for example, *Correio Paulistano* in 1924 and *Diário de Pernambuco* in 1909.

⁴⁹ *Correio Paulistano* 04/02/1906, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Correio Paulistano* 05/02/1906, p. 2; 06/02/1906, p. 4.

⁵¹ *Correio Paulistano* 06/02/1906, p. 2.

⁵² *Estado de São Paulo* 01/02/1906, p.1

⁵³ *Estado de São Paulo* 09/02/1906. P. 2

⁵⁴ *Estado de São Paulo* 01/02/1906, p.1 e 2

⁵⁵ *Estado de São Paulo* 02/02/1906, p.1.

⁵⁶ *Estado de São Paulo* 04/02/1906, p.1

⁵⁷ *Correio da Manhã* 02/03/1930, p. 1

⁵⁸ *Estado de São Paulo* 13/02/1906, p. 1

⁵⁹ *A Pacotilha*, 10/02/1906, p. 1; see also *A Pacotilha*, 02/02/1909, p. 1

⁶⁰ *A Pacotilha*, 18/01/1909, p. 1.

In 1927, the oppositionist *Jornal de Recife* denounced vote buying incidents in these terms: “We all know the way elections are carried out: agents of nominated candidates go to voters’ homes and demand that they vote for a candidate, or they will either lose their jobs or be persecuted by the police of local bosses”.⁶¹ Examples like these abound in newspapers, especially in election day, which generally highlight practices of gathering voters. In 1924, the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* reported that, in Araras, the ruling party managed to take over the area of a school where voters could have some comfort under the shade of trees and shacks, whereas oppositionist voters had to wait in the back street under the “blazing sun”.⁶² Voters had better luck in São Luis do Piratininga, São Paulo, during the 1906 election, when the opposition party summoned “their” voters “at 9:30 AM” to a meeting at a farmer’s private property, so that they could go vote together.⁶³

All of these examples show that, even under conditions of peaceful elections and no opposition, votes were up for sale. They were rather a mechanism for legitimizing power, than an expression of individual rights.

Discussion

Focusing on the Brazilian case, this article encourages us to rethink the association between competition, competitiveness and fraud in oligarchic regimes. Below, we present some final thoughts and argue in favor of a research agenda aimed at reassessing comparatively oligarchic regimes at the turn of the 20th century.

Firstly, *fraud must be understood as something more than the distortion of the electoral truth*. In this article, we claimed that its importance in terms of vote adulteration should be reconsidered. We interpret it as a way of competing in oligarchic regimes. We do not belittle the phenomenon of fraud, but rather relate it to the broader issue of disputes for controlling elections’ administrative machines. Figure 5 summarizes three kinds of political environment that may be observed in oligarchic regimes. First, we may observe a situation in which elections are rather plebiscitary and organized for reelecting incumbent candidates, reinforcing their monopoly over representation. In most of these cases, electoral results are not challenged by defeated candidates, and any possibility of political competition is absent. The opposition is not expressive, and, when present, often abstains from participating in elections. In First Republic Brazil, such a situation was common in the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul. The Republican Party of each of these states were successful in taking control of all stages of the electoral process, and competition was restricted to party members, who would hardly object the victory of their colleagues. This scenario is similar to the one observed in many European countries up to mid-19th century (Caramani 2004). This was the main characteristic, for example, of the first elections carried out in the Second French Empire: in the 1852 election, the opposition did not present candidates in four fifths of the districts (Price 2001). At the local level, the same situation is observed in several areas of Imperial Germany (Anderson 2000) and liberal Italy: in about 26% of Italian electoral districts the defeated candidate obtained less than 5% of the votes in the 1892 election (Cammarano 1999). In the first three elections of independent New Zealand (held in 1853, 1855, and 1860), about half of the districts had no competition, and this figure increased to 61.7% in 1866 (Martin 2005). Similar

⁶¹ *Jornal do Recife*, 03/03/1927, p. 3.

⁶² *Estado de São Paulo*, 19/02/1924, p.2.

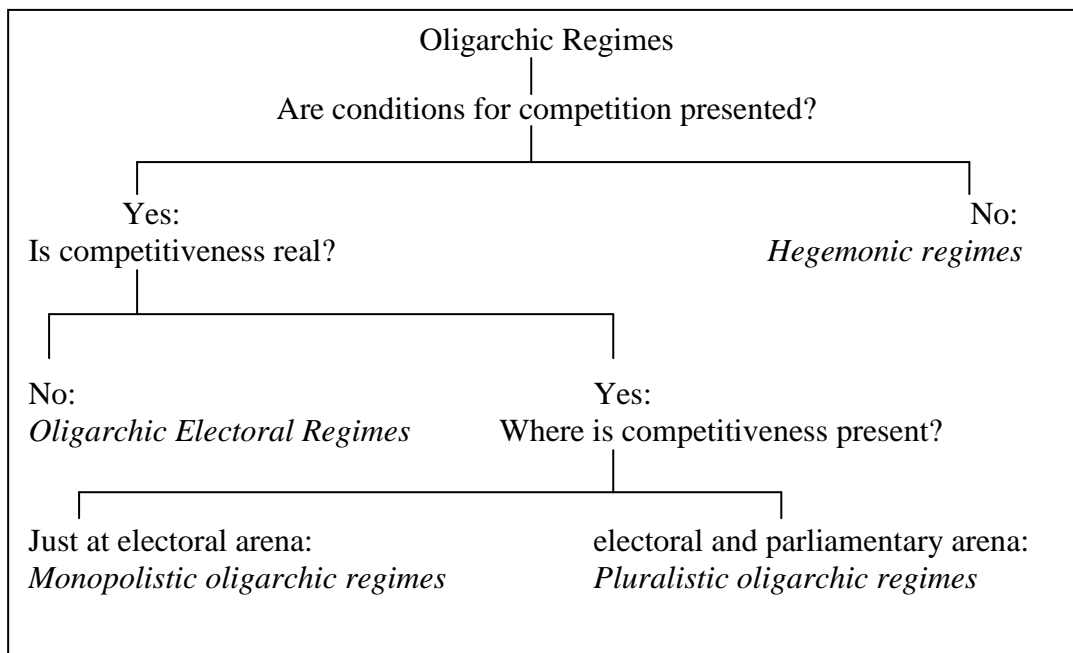
⁶³ *Estado de São Paulo*, 17/02/1906, p. 2.

conditions characterized other Latin American countries, like Argentina during the Rosas government between 1835 and 1852 (Ternavasio 2003), and Mexico during the Porfirio Diaz regime (Annino 1995), where single lists of candidates were prepared by the government and presented to voters. In Spain before 1876, elections were rather an administrative concern, designed only to guarantee the peaceful rotation in power between liberals and conservatives (Ortega 1999). These are cases of *oligarchic electoral regimes*. Their main characteristic is that fraud has a limited role in the electoral game, as electoral victory is assured both by the lack of oppositionist forces and government's complete control over the electoral process.

A second situation corresponds to a lower level of governmental control over the electoral stages. The opposition participates in the electoral game, but the government still monopolizes representation. In the case of Brazil, we observe this situation in most of the states. This is also observed in numerous Italian districts at the turn of the 20th century. Despite a decrease in the number of non-competitive districts and the spread of socialists in the country, electoral results still favored governmental forces (Piretti 1998). In the Second French Empire, we only observe the reemergence of the opposition after the third election, in 1863. In the following elections, non-competitive districts gradually disappeared. However, the electoral support for incumbent candidates still prevailed, especially in rural areas, as a result of electoral manipulation (Price 2001). Such political environments can be labeled *monopolistic oligarchic regimes*. This theme is not new in analyses of other Latin American countries and brings to mind the notion of *gobiernos electores*, that is, the view that parties competed for the monopoly of the electoral bureaucracy, and that winning candidates were defined aprioristically.⁶⁴ Electoral fraud becomes a crucial part of the electoral dynamics. It was the main instrument used by candidates, as "fraud helps but it can help only those incumbents who have good odds of winning even without it" (Przeworski and Gandhi 2009, 27).

Finally, there are also situations in which the government exerts a low level of control over the electoral process, leading to higher rates of success among opposition candidates. Such situations were the exception in First Republic Brazil, being observed only in a few elections held in the states of Rio de Janeiro and the Federal District. In contrast, they became the norm in some European countries in the late 19th century, when new political forces entered the Parliament. In the Second French Empire, the success of the opposition was clear in the 1869 election, forcing Napoleon to organize a plebiscite that would allow him to implement liberal reforms (Price 2001). In Italy, even though the government employed different tactics to control the vote, opposition parties were becoming electorally more successful after 1909, particularly in the North (Ballini 1988). In Argentina, Paula Alonso claims that it "does not necessarily mean 'clean' competition. It does mean, however, that the government could not easily manufacture results, that their outcome could not be predicted, and that all parties competed in elections with a chance of success" (Alonso 2000, 156). As a result of new actors entering the political arena, we can label such situations *pluralistic oligarchic regimes*.

⁶⁴ See Posada-Carbó (2000).



Box 1. Classification of oligarchies

Besides thinking the way elections were controlled, we need to understand the logic of the vote. Reports about the different instruments used by politicians to captivate voters in Brazil confirm findings for other cases and indicate a dynamic electoral market. These considerations should turn our attention to the way the voting experience evolves. Initially, the act of voting was undoubtedly collective (Annino 1995), and it acquires an individual character only subsequently. Instead of restricting our attention to the restrictive character of elections in oligarchic regimes and to the fact that political rights were limited⁶⁵, we should seek to understand the process through which the act of voting evolves from being a collective experience to becoming the expression of individual calculus. This is a process that certainly does not correspond to the expansion of political rights, as is attested by the fact that several countries had adopted universal male suffrage in the 19th century: France (1871) Germany (1871), Greece (1844), Spain (1867), Colombia (between 1853 and 1863), and Argentina (1921). The central question then becomes how the government loses control over voters. From an institutional point of view, the adoption of the Australian ballot is probably more important than the expansion of political rights.

⁶⁵ This is the focus of the most important analysis of the evolution of citizenship in Brazil (Carvalho 2003).

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