

**Between Hope and Despair:  
Support for Democracy, Protest, and Elite Cues in Brazil<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Can democratic legitimacy be sustained in the context of Brazil's long-term political crisis? We draw on recent qualitative fieldwork, an original survey experiment, and six waves of the AmericasBarometer to understand how parallel economic and political crises have affected ordinary Brazilians' perceptions of the legitimacy of democratic governance, as well as the forces maintaining support for democracy in the context of crisis. We find that few elite cues boost support for democracy, yet references to polarizing, pro-democracy leftist social movements *erode* democratic legitimacy. These findings may have serious implications for the future of Brazil's democratic form of government.

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Support for democracy is under threat around the world. Three years ago Larry Diamond claimed that “the world has been in a mild but protracted democratic recession since about 2006.”<sup>2</sup> More recent work only intensifies concerns, now also showing a sharp decline in the perceived *value* of democracy: both in the established democracies and the newer democracies of Samuel Huntington’s so-called “third wave.”<sup>3</sup>

Brazil, the focus of our paper, parallels these trends. It appears that many Brazilians have come to echo the citizens Janice Perlman interviewed in Rio’s favelas a decade ago: “The people we interviewed do not feel they have gained a voice in the political arena—only a *potential* voice. They do not perceive increased receptivity or fair play among government officials....The majority of our sample...said ‘*the end of the dictatorship had no significant impact* on their lives.”<sup>4</sup> This is surprising, particularly given how quickly opinion trends have eroded. In the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey, 72 percent of Brazilians agreed with the statement, “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.”<sup>5</sup> This optimism was reflected in contemporaneous accounts written by observers of Brazil.<sup>6</sup> Yet by the 2017 wave of the AmericasBarometer survey, only 52 percent of respondents agreed with the pro-democracy statement. As Figure 1 shows below, Brazilians on average gave this statement a response of 0.58 in 2017—near the midpoint of the recoded 0 to 1 response scale, running

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Jay Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 144.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel P Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Mollie J. Cohen, Noam Lupu, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, “The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016/17: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Governance” (Nashville, TN: Latin American Public Opinion Project, Vanderbilt University., August 2017); Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (January 10, 2017): 5–15; Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 6, 2016): 5–17.

<sup>4</sup> Janice E. Perlman, *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 203.

<sup>5</sup> Analysis of question ING4.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Larry Rohter, *Brazil on the Rise: The Story of a Country Transformed* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2012).

between strongly disagree and strongly agree, and substantially lower than in previous years. Thus, by April 2017 Brazilians—long supportive of democracy after their experience with military rule—had, on average, become essentially indifferent to their country’s regime type.

In this essay, we reflect on the nature of and reasons for this precipitous decline, and we ask what political actors can do about it. We argue that both domestic and global forces contribute to Brazil’s troubles. The roots of Brazil’s democratic malaise are local, yet the soil is international. Foremost in Brazil’s story are a severe economic recession, rising insecurity, and a political crisis triggered by a tangled corruption scandal implicating politicians from every political party, including at least three presidents. Yet global forces also help to explain receding support for democracy in Brazil. Across middle-income countries, citizens have become increasingly politically assertive in contexts of rising living standards and pluralistic information environments. In the 2010s, Brazil partook in a global wave of protest facilitated by new technologies of communication.

Brazilians’ democratic crisis has occurred at the intersection of these two trends: rising citizen political demands, and mediocre democratic performance. The democratic corpus is being hollowed out by a profound loss of citizen trust—driven by the interaction between opaque institutions and the evident failings of the human beings inhabiting the institutions: from civil society groups, to bureaucrats and the courts, to politicians. Loss of citizen trust does not necessarily cause democratic institutions to implode in the short term. Assuming willing elites, the mechanics of democracy can continue to operate even without citizens to give flesh to the barebones of institutions. Yet in Brazil’s prisoner’s dilemma in which all actors have come to expect defection, restoring cooperation and interpersonal trust will be a tremendous challenge.

Perhaps ironically, though, the saving grace for democracy may be that most Brazilians *also* distrust the military as a potential governing force.

Our results suggest that Brazilians now situate themselves in an uncomfortable dilemma: between skeptical disillusionment with democracy's evident shortcomings in Brazil and pragmatic optimism regarding democracy's value relative to other potential systems of government. Many retain hope for the country's future under idealized democratic institutions, despite the perceived failures of current institutions and political elites. Yet, some citizens have fallen into democratic despair and look to other, non-democratic solutions to restore a sense of order to their political lives.

What can be done? Can stakeholders maintain and restore democratic legitimacy in the midst of the country's ongoing political and economic crises? We consider the potential efficacy of social movements, elite opinion leadership, and institutional reform, but our qualitative and experimental results point to predominantly pessimistic conclusions under current conditions.

Our findings underscore the ambivalent relationship between protest and democracy. On the one hand, protests reflect the democratic aspirations of their participants and serve as a critical vehicle for citizens to communicate with elites. On the other hand, protests—particularly unruly ones—can also trigger a backlash with potentially profound democratic consequences, particularly among citizens on the center and right. Yet our findings drive home even more strongly the current impotence of elites as spokespeople for democracy. Analyzing a survey experiment, we discover that elite cues urging support for democracy have limited effect. The only experimental effects we find are in the opposite of intended direction—among rightists, leftists' (often disruptive) pro-democracy activism *reduces* the legitimacy of democracy. Thus, organized elites may be ineffective in boosting support for democracy, yet unpopular elites can

*tarnish* democracy. Finally, our data point towards political reforms that could help to restore trust in the system.

In this essay, we report results from national-level studies, including six waves of the AmericasBarometer (2007–2017) and an online survey experiment. We also report results from qualitative fieldwork: nine semi-structured interviews conducted in September 2017, in Manaus, Brazil.<sup>7</sup> At that moment, the country was marking the one-year anniversary of former President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment. What is more, residents of Manaus had just returned to the polls to elect a new governor in a special election, after the former governor had been removed from office for campaign violations. The interviews explored respondents’ levels of support for democracy and the current political system; their individual conceptualization of democracy; their willingness to accept an authoritarian (military) alternative regime; their support for lawful protest; and their ideas about political reform.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, interviews reflected residents’ most salient local and national concerns and experiences at this turbulent moment in Brazilian history.

### **The Roots of Democratic Despair**

It is not difficult to find explanations for Brazilians’ loss of faith in politics. In the 2000s, citizen expectations for government performance and accountability rose rapidly—fueled by a regional economic boom, by policies such as conditional cash transfer programs that targeted the working class, and by an increasingly pluralistic, assertive media environment. By the mid-2010s, however, these expectations were crashing into a hard reality. Since 2014, Brazilian citizens have experienced a nearly daily spectacle of the prosecution, arrest, and imprisonment of

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<sup>7</sup> Interviews were conducted by Matthew Layton, with approval by the IRB of Ohio University.

<sup>8</sup> On average, the nine interviews lasted just over 23 minutes each. Four women and five men were included in the small sample, ranging in ages from 22 to 85 years old (41.9 years on average), from both high and low socioeconomic classes according to self-reports.

political elites from virtually all political parties on charges of corruption and influence peddling, a result of the still-unfolding Lava-Jato (Operation Car Wash) corruption scandal. In 2016, in the midst of this crisis, Congress saw fit to impeach President Dilma Rousseff from the Workers' Party, as many parties defected from her legislative coalition. Though Rousseff was not at the time herself implicated in corruption, defecting parties brought charges of fiscal mismanagement—a move her supporters saw as an attempt to squelch corruption investigations. Congress subsequently protected her replacement, the former Vice President Michel Témer from the PMDB (now just MDB) party, from prosecution for a series of corruption allegations (Brazil's constitution requires Congress' assent for prosecution of the president). And in early 2018, the favorite to win that year's presidential election, former President Lula from the Workers' Party, was convicted on corruption charges, likely disqualifying him as a candidate.

Simultaneously, the political system's performance on the economy, human development, and security has been somewhere between mediocre and poor. Brazil experienced one of its deepest economic recessions on record during this period, with negative growth in every quarter of 2015 and 2016, as well as the first three quarters of 2017. A nationwide truckers' strike in May 2018 may have undercut a return to sustained growth, if only temporarily. July 2018 brought the news that the country was experiencing its first rise in the infant mortality rate since 1990.<sup>9</sup> Overall, the country now risks another “lost decade” of economic and human development that mirrors the setbacks of the 1980s. Meanwhile, homicide rates, long high, have ticked up further; rates rose from around 22 per 100,000 in 2010 to around 30 per 100,000 in 2017.<sup>10</sup> It is little wonder the country's citizens feel that they have lost out, particularly in the

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<sup>9</sup> “Brasil registra alta de mortalidade infantil após décadas de queda.” G1. July 16, 2018. <https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/noticia/brasil-registra-alta-de-mortalidade-infantil-apos-decadas-de-queda.ghtml>.

<sup>10</sup> Data from UNODC and Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. <https://data.unodc.org/#state:1> and [http://www.forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ANUARIO\\_11\\_2017.pdf](http://www.forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ANUARIO_11_2017.pdf).

wake of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio, which were to have been the signal of Brazil's arrival on the top tier of the global stage.

This sequence of tangible losses, particularly coming on the heels of rising expectations in the 2000s, clearly appeared in our respondents' expressed attitudes. As one interviewee remarked dramatically, "It is sort of a complicated business, I think,...to not have hope....I never ever thought about leaving Brazil, but if I did not have family here, I would have already gone."<sup>11</sup> This was even more shocking to hear given that this respondent is well educated and has a stable career in the public sector. There would seemingly be few pocketbook economic issues to cause his lack of hope for the future.

How did our interviewees explain their disillusionment with democracy? We identified several types of answers: concerns with complex electoral rules,<sup>12</sup> general disdain for elected politicians,<sup>13</sup> and classist perceptions of an uneducated, "unenlightened," lower class that votes "because it is compulsory, or votes in exchange for something."<sup>14</sup> We categorize their responses in terms of attitudes towards *rules and institutions* and towards *political actors*. Citizens did sometimes criticize political institutions, yet they reserved their greatest disdain for political elites. As one interviewee put it, "[V]oting makes no difference, because they want to win just for themselves, and not for us."<sup>15</sup> Another declared, "they are not people that are being chosen by us; they are people that are imposed and we have to choose between the least bad."<sup>16</sup> A third explained that,

"The problem, the only problem of democracy, is not in the ideology of democracy per se but in the...people that are in power, whether in the executive, legislative, or

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<sup>11</sup> LS\_70043

<sup>12</sup> LS\_70042

<sup>13</sup> LS\_70043

<sup>14</sup> LS\_70049

<sup>16</sup> LS\_70042

judiciary....Sometimes I think that this is a flaw of democracy. It is the only flaw of democracy, when we have...corrupt politicians.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet the problem was perceived as more fundamental than simply a handful of bad apples. Rather, respondents saw that the political system enabled consolidation of power within the executive, while creating incentives for a compliant and venal legislature willing to delegate its power to the executive. When a large enough proportion of players within a system fail to uphold formal and informal norms related to rule of law, self-restraint, and checks and balances, institutions themselves begin to implode. Perhaps as a result, the same respondent continued,

“I have totally lost faith in the judicial branch, in the legislative branch, in the executive branch, so, if you do not trust in these people as your rulers, how do you plan to see a better future, do you understand?...Because it is a judicial branch that you cannot trust to act more judicially than politically; it is a legislative branch that only acts according to the will of the chief executive, so you have...you cannot count on any of that; and an executive branch that is practically dictatorial, that is the truth. Because the legislative branch is totally submissive to the executive because of who is in control of the money. So, it is hard, a deputy, even if against his will, complies with the president’s wishes to get money, to get amendments, for local politicking, do you understand? So, it is an avalanche of... [Interviewer: *Where does it stop?*] Where does it stop? It doesn’t stop, do you understand? For me, this is the situation we are in and I do not see a light at the end of the tunnel, I do not see a light at the end of the tunnel.”<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, the combination of the consolidation of executive power and legislative corruption can subvert democracy itself. One respondent articulated the fear that Brazil had already become an electoral authoritarian regime:

“In reality, we do not have democracy; we have a pseudodemocracy....Those who are in power do not want to lose power and will use all of their trickery to keep themselves in power. So, when you talk about democracy,...it is just the absence of military forces in power, right? A civilian leading the country. But there is also the ‘white dictatorship’ [*ditadura branca*], or rather, civilians are in power, but do not want to let go of that power...”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> LS\_70043

<sup>18</sup> LS\_70043

<sup>19</sup> LS\_70041



Yet the problem extended beyond elites, to citizens more broadly. Another respondent expressed disillusionment not so much with elites, but with voters.

“[T]here are people who are not interested and nevertheless voting is compulsory here ...What we see in the city of Manaus,...that there is a truly poorly educated lower class. I will not say that the fact that you do not have schooling means that you are not an educated person, right....So here,...when the elections are coming,...many people sell their votes. For anything, for a favor....The process, it is great, it is perfect. The problem is the way that people are dealing with the democratic process. It is like, I have a friend who says, they do not take it seriously. For example...sometimes you have a really good representative, you look at their record, you see that they are not involved in anything that was illegal, but they are not able to be your representative because they need to have a majority vote....I have friends that are now starting to doubt whether the democratic process is the best process for Brazil.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, our interviews suggest that receding democratic support in Brazil is linked to the erosion of both interpersonal trust and trust in political institutions. Multivariate analysis of the AmericasBarometer from 2007 to 2017 reveals that, indeed, confidence in fellow citizens and the political system impact support for democracy. And, as we see in Figure 1, levels of interpersonal trust and trust in the courts have declined in tandem with support for democracy since 2012.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> LS\_70049

<sup>21</sup> Interpersonal trust is based on AmericasBarometer question IT1: “Speaking of the people from around here, would you say that people in this community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy?” Trust in courts is based on question B1: “To what extent do you think the courts in Brazil guarantee a fair trial?”

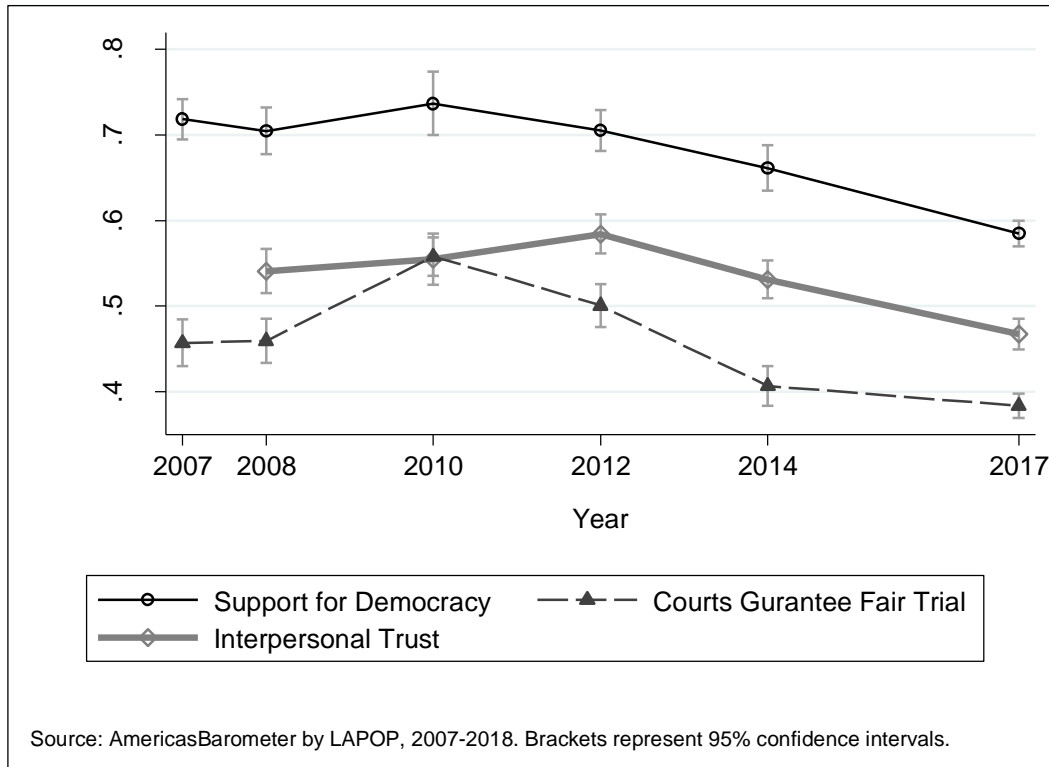


Figure 1. Support for Democracy, Support for the Courts, and Interpersonal Trust in Brazil

Strikingly, despite their concerns with the practice of democracy in Brazil, respondents overwhelmingly expressed continued support for democracy as an ideal. Asked to define democracy, several themes ran throughout respondents’ answers: democracy involves representation of “the will of the people” and “the common good”<sup>22</sup>; it means “freedom” to “choose representatives,” “to discuss ideas,” and “to know what the politician does while in power”<sup>23</sup>; it entails “equality.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, respondents continued to advocate democratic procedures, to the extent such procedures could be divorced from flawed human beings. One respondent noted that, “even still, despite everything, the institutions are still strong—the state [*o poder público*]. Right now, we are dealing with a president who is being accused of something

<sup>22</sup> LS\_70041; LS\_70042; LS\_70043

<sup>23</sup> LS\_70044; LS\_70047; LS\_70048; LS\_70049

<sup>24</sup> LS\_70041; LS\_70046

every hour, but...[w]e do not have many options. So he will finish out his term in office, which I believe will be through next year [2018] and after that [we will] make a good choice.”<sup>25</sup> And even the respondent who had called Brazil a “pseudodemocracy” continued, “But it is truly better to have democracy, or rather, all of its defects than to have...the imposition of...an olive-green government, of a military government.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Support for a Military Solution?*

To what extent should we be worried about public support for the adoption of a military regime in Brazil? Strikingly, though the AmericasBarometer registered a slight uptick in support for a hypothetical military coup in 2014—less than a year following the June 2013 protests—by 2017 support for a coup had dropped again to among its lowest levels ever measured.<sup>27</sup> About 35% of 2017 respondents said that a coup would be justified if corruption were very high, and 37% said one would be justified under conditions of high insecurity.

Both education and personal experience fueled skepticism of military intervention in our qualitative data. One young journalism student noted, “I argue with my dad a lot because of this, because he says, ‘ah, but there used to be order [under the 1964-1985 military regime], there used to be this, there used to be that.’ Except that it was worse than it is today. ...they used to hide what was really happening.... it has become absurd that people are asking for a return of a military regime.”<sup>28</sup> Another respondent with family ties to the military said, “I have family that is in there [the military] and my own family is against a military government. No. The military is

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<sup>25</sup> LS\_70046

<sup>26</sup> LS\_70041

<sup>27</sup> Analysis of AmericasBarometer questions JC10 and JC13.

<sup>28</sup> LS\_70042

one thing; government is another, and they have to be well separated.”<sup>29</sup> We heard a similar expression of mistrust in the military from the one respondent who would have been old enough in 1964 to have a clear adult memory of the full sequence of events that surrounded the military regime. He noted, “This is sort of complicated. Because the little I know about the military regime, there were even more problems. ...I think that the military regime, I do not think that it is a good idea to come back.”<sup>30</sup>

So where are the calls for a military regime coming from? Two voices supported a military regime among our respondents. First, a middle-aged female domestic worker speculated that: “Something like [a military regime], that could make our life better. Someone who is not from the army, is nothing...They fumble and bumble through governing [*a trancos e barrancos*]. So if maybe the army were to come in, who knows, maybe it would get better....for everyone.”<sup>31</sup> We heard similar sentiments from an upper middle class, middle-aged, male, civil servant: “In extreme cases [a military regime] might be necessary. Almost what Brazil is like now...with the lack of credibility. I am capable of voting for a person that promotes backward ideas [*ideias retrógradas*]...like I plan to, if Jair Bolsonaro declares his candidacy, to try, in some desperate way, to try to resolve the situation.”<sup>32</sup> These respondents base their support for the military on a presumption of its competence, discipline, and support for law and order. The 2018 military intervention in Rio de Janeiro may provide citizens who share these perspectives a chance to test their theories of the institution’s capacity to provide an orderly return to security. Our interpretation of the early evidence suggests that there will be no sudden return to order in Rio; perhaps these events will undercut their support for such solutions.

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<sup>29</sup> LS\_70048

<sup>30</sup> LS\_70044

<sup>31</sup> LS\_70045

<sup>32</sup> LS\_70043

## From Despair to Hope

Barring a military intervention, how can confidence in democratic governance be restored? Two aspects of Brazilian public life could potentially bolster citizen faith in the political system. First, political elites themselves often advocate for democracy. In Brazil's post-1985 democratic regime, a wide range of civil society groups—and even government agencies—undertook the process of teaching citizens with very few resources about their rights within their new democracy.<sup>33</sup> Political and civil society elites generally express strong support for democracy. For instance, Smith shows that religious elites within churches express much higher levels of support for democracy than do their own congregants.<sup>34</sup> Over the past three years, in the context of protracted political and economic crisis, many elites and civil society actors have continued to advocate for gradual reform and improvement of the democratic system.

The work of anti-corruption campaigners could be particularly important. During the early years of the Lava-Jato corruption scandal, many citizens applauded the ferocity of public investigations, perceived as evidence that rule of law was finally beginning to work. Figures such as Judge Sérgio Moro and federal police officer Newton Ishii became folk heroes. Nonetheless, over time the luster of anti-corruption forces began to dull, as investigations were increasingly

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<sup>33</sup> Hunter, Wendy, and Natasha Borges Sugiyama. 2014. "Transforming Subjects into Citizens: Insights from Brazil's Bolsa Família." *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (04): 829–845; Marques, Ângela C. S., and Rousiley C. M. Maia. 2010. "Everyday Conversation in the Deliberative Process: An Analysis of Communicative Exchanges in Discussion Groups and Their Contributions to Civic and Political Socialization." *Journal of Communication* 60 (4): 611–35; Mische, Ann. 2008. *Partisan Publics: Communication and Contention Across Brazilian Youth Activist Networks*. Princeton University Press; Morrison, Penelope Kay. 2010. "Democracy 'At Risk'? Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations, 'At Risk' Youth and Programming in Juiz de Fora, Brazil." Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh; Smith, Amy Erica. 2017. "Democratic Talk in Church: Religion and Political Socialization in the Context of Urban Inequality." *World Development*.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, Amy Erica. 2019. *Religion and Brazilian Democracy: Mobilizing the People of God*. Cambridge University Press.

framed as politicized, partial, and biased. The perceived partiality of prosecution might undercut any boost to the legitimacy of the political system.

Second, beginning with massive nationwide protests in June 2013, Brazilians have been increasingly politically assertive. Their demands for accountability and change partake in a global wave of protest facilitated by new social media technologies. The AmericasBarometer has registered dramatic increases in protesting in Brazil. Only 5% of citizens reported participating in a protest in the past year in 2010 and 2012; the rate rose to 8% in 2014 and 14% in 2017.

Such passionate engagement could sustain support for democracy, providing a channel for citizens who have lost faith in other democratic institutions to communicate with representatives. Indeed, in the 2014 AmericasBarometer, Brazilians indicated that protest is significantly more effective than elections in making elected officials pay attention to what they want.<sup>35</sup> Our qualitative results also speak to this perspective. As one respondent explained,

“I think that our politicians are very distant from the population, do you understand? You do not have access....Therefore,...because you do not have this link [*elo*] with the representative, you have to demonstrate, to make them hear another way.”<sup>36</sup>

This reference to the “linkage” between voters and representatives strikingly echoes political science research on democratic representation.<sup>37</sup> A second respondent also drew on the concept of representation:

“I believe that demonstrations are a way for the people to shout to the world, to their representatives, that they are not satisfied with that way of governing....In one way, you are...saying, ‘look, I am holding you accountable, I put you in power, you have to represent me, you are not representing me.’”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Analysis of BRACID1 and BRACID2.

<sup>36</sup> LS\_70043

<sup>37</sup> For instance, Herbert Kitschelt et al., *Latin American Party Systems*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Herbert Kitschelt, “Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities,” *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6–7 (2000): 845–79.

<sup>38</sup> LS\_70049

Every interviewee expressed at least qualified support for protest along these lines. In essence, respondents said, when the government is not fulfilling its responsibilities, citizens have the right, maybe even the responsibility, to hold the government accountable through protest.

Nonetheless, we suspect that protests also sometimes undermine support for democracy. Support for protest was conditional in nearly every response. Perhaps the clearest response expressed support for the *objectives* of protest while opposing certain *methods*:

I agree...when it is, for example, an issue that the government has promised and is not fulfilling that promise....Now, I do not agree in any way when many people...go impede traffic with fires, with blocking roads, with commotion [*baderna*] and property incursions [*invasão*], nothing along those lines. This can't happen. If things are not good, how can I hope to make a demand by making things even worse than they already are? For example, sometimes they burn two, three buses; you can't do that, right? Public transit is already a problem [*já não tem transporte*] and you are going to go and destroy the little that there is? So, this is what I say, the people also need to improve their behavior to be able to demand improvements from their rulers.<sup>39</sup>

This sentiment is echoed in other responses: protest is acceptable if it remains “peaceful and orderly,”<sup>40</sup> if people “know what they are doing”<sup>41</sup> or are “fighting for a cause,”<sup>42</sup> or the protesters “are not disturbing anyone.”<sup>43</sup> Some drew the line at property destruction. For others, sponsorship by a political party was inappropriate. Another respondent cited the lack of “propriety” and a “polite and orderly manner”<sup>44</sup> as potential problems.

How do elite cues and protest affect citizens’ democratic attitudes? We turn to results from an online survey experiment involving 1,878 participants, fielded in June 2017 through the panel provider NetQuest.<sup>45</sup> The experiment included a control and five treatment conditions,

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<sup>39</sup> LS\_70044

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<sup>42</sup> LS\_70049

<sup>43</sup> LS\_70048

<sup>44</sup> LS\_70041

<sup>45</sup> The study was certified as exempt by the IRB of Iowa State University. Our sample underrepresents citizens in the bottom strata of the income distribution, “Class D” and “Class E.” It also skews slightly younger than the population as a whole. As a result of these two imbalances, it also has substantially higher levels of education than the

highlighting support for democracy among (1) Catholic bishops; (2) the military; (3) social movements; (4) the left-leaning singer Caetano Veloso, a pop culture icon; and (5) Judge Sérgio Moro, a prominent figure from the Lava-Jato investigations. To improve external validity and eliminate the need for deception, all the scenarios featured real public figures who had recently advocated for maintaining and strengthening Brazilian democracy. The conditions were the following:

1. *Treatment 1:* In the context of the political crisis that Brazil is facing, **the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, the group of Catholic bishops**, made a statement in favor of democracy. They declared that *“it’s necessary for solutions to the current crisis to respect and strengthen the democratic state and rule of law.”*<sup>46</sup>
2. *Treatment 2:* In the context of the political crisis that Brazil is facing, **General Eduardo Dias da Costa Villas Bôas, Commander of the Army**, made a statement in favor of democracy. He declared that *“both the Public Security Forces and the Armed Forces are dedicated to preserving democracy.”*<sup>47</sup>
3. *Treatment 3:* In the context of the political crisis that Brazil is facing, **Frente Ampla Nacional [Broad National Front], a coalition that includes social movements**, made a statement in favor of democracy. They declared that *“the solution to this crisis depends fundamentally on the participation of the people in the streets and at the polls.”*<sup>48</sup>
4. *Treatment 4:* In the context of the political crisis that Brazil is facing, **Caetano Veloso, the singer**, made a statement in favor of democracy. He declared that *“one thing should be certain within us, to defend what we conquered with much difficulty: democracy.”*<sup>49</sup>
5. *Treatment 5:* In the context of the political crisis that Brazil is facing, **Sérgio Moro, the federal judge**, made a statement in favor of democracy. He declared that it’s necessary to *“advance in the implementation of the rule of law and strengthen democracy.”*<sup>50</sup>
6. *Control:* In the context of the political crisis that Brazil is facing, various people and organizations have made statements about democracy in the country.

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population. Nonetheless, the sample is balanced on gender and region, and reports a similar distribution of partisanship as found in the 2017 AmericasBarometer conducted almost contemporaneously.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/politica/2017/05/cnbb-defende-mudancas-na-forma-de-se-fazer-politica-para-resgatar-a-etica>

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.valor.com.br/politica/4979872/ha-consternacao-e-preocupacao-no-planalto-diz-comandante-do-exercito>

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.cut.org.br/noticias/entidades-nacionais-se-unem-por-diretas-ja-37fd/>

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.tsf.pt/internacional/interior/caetano-veloso-e-outros-artistas-saem-em-defesa-do-governo-5104033.html>

<sup>50</sup> <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/moro-pais-esta-em-encruzilhada-mudanca-vem-com-turbulencia-21349472>



After reading one randomly assigned statement, respondents then read, “Now we want to know your opinion: Democracy may have problems, but it’s better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?” Responses were reported on a five point Likert-type agree/disagree scale (recoded below from 0 to 1).

Different elite endorsements may differentially shape citizen attitudes. We expect pro-democracy messages from religious and military elites to be relatively non-controversial. However, political messages from social movements and from anti-corruption crusader Judge Sergio Moro may be perceived through partisan lenses. On the one hand, participation in disruptive social movement activism is more frequent on the left, while citizens on the right are more likely to express disapproval of protest. When leftist groups marry pro-democracy language with protests, we suspect that rightists’ skepticism of the latter may affect their attitudes toward the former. Rightist suspicion of disruptive pro-democracy activism may also affect attitudes toward the message from the famous cultural figure Caetano Veloso, who is associated with left-leaning groups. On the other hand, while Judge Sergio Moro was initially lauded as a national hero for his anti-corruption activism, over the course of the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff many leftists came to perceive him as biased against the Workers’ Party.<sup>51</sup> Thus, pro-democracy messages from Sérgio Moro might be unconvincing to citizens on the left.

Figure 2 presents results from the survey experiment, by party. We code party in terms of sympathy with the Workers’ Party, or PT (“Petista”); sympathy with another party (almost exclusively parties of the center/right); or no party sympathy. The most striking finding is that no

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<sup>51</sup> Although the Lava Jato investigation was distinct from the impeachment proceedings against President Dilma Rousseff—in substance, the charges against Dilma were not based on claims of corruption—the two processes nevertheless became conflated in popular discussion.

experimental treatment elevates the legitimacy of democracy above the control condition. This may be in part because elite support for democracy is not novel; indeed, the great majority of citizens have already been exposed to such messages in the past. Nonetheless, we suspect that more is at play. If political elites have broadly discredited themselves and the political system, citizens may simply resist elite advocacy of democracy.

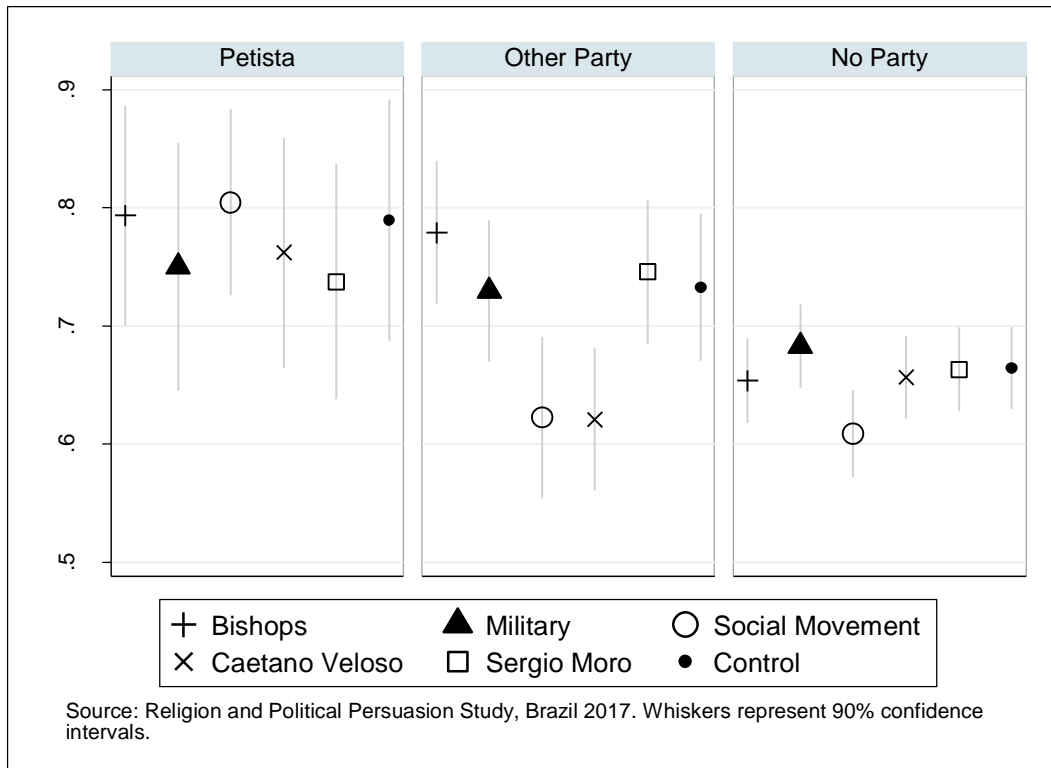


Figure 2. The Impact of Organized Elite Endorsements of Democracy

However, we do find one set of statistically significant effects. Among citizens sympathizing with parties other than the PT, the two treatments involving leftist activists and social movements lead to a drop in support for democracy. The previously discussed qualitative interviews help us interpret the findings. Skepticism of “disorderly” protest, and protest sponsored by partisan groups, likely explains negative reactions to our experimental reminders of what democracy can look like in practice. Yet this may ultimately undermine the efficacy of

protest as a means of representation, since some amount of disruption of daily activities is likely necessary for protest to work.

Our results do not necessarily mean that elite endorsements of democracy never work. The experimental treatments exposed respondents to relatively distant elite messages encountered via the media. Civic education is likely to be much more effective in the context of prolonged, iterated encounters with teachers or public agencies, particularly in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. A recent study of congregational socialization indicates that clergy attitudes toward the legitimacy of democracy and the political system affect the attitudes of congregants.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the results do suggest that in present circumstances, elites have limited power.

Beyond the experiment, the analysis also indicates that partisanship provides a linkage to the democratic system. Though many Brazilians express alienation from politics, experimental respondents with party affiliations express significantly higher support for democracy regardless of treatment condition. It is important to note that among PT sympathizers, support for democracy is unaffected by the condition featuring Judge Sérgio Moro, despite the fact that many *petistas* perceive him as biased against their ingroup politicians.

### *Institutional Reform*

We also explored the possibility of institutional reform. Our qualitative respondents had a number of ideas, including implementing voluntary voting; enforcing the *ficha limpa* law that disqualifies candidates convicted of crimes; transitioning to a parliamentary system; cutting back on bureaucracy; altering the special privileges enjoyed by elected officials; and restructuring the

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<sup>52</sup> Smith. 2019, *ibid.*

party system. Interestingly, two respondents objected to Brazil's complex Open List Proportional Representation (OLPR) electoral system. In a country with well over twenty individual parties represented in the legislature, and where voters have relatively low party loyalty, the great majority of citizens vote for candidates, rather than parties. Yet the system aggregates votes within parties, which can lead to different personal vote thresholds for different parties. This feels fundamentally illegitimate to many citizens. As one respondent put it, "It is not a system where...the one with the most votes wins."<sup>53</sup> Combined with the perception of widespread corruption, it appears that at least some voters associate electoral outcomes with other nefarious behavior on the part of political elites. In effect, these respondents felt that a more transparent, majoritarian electoral system was long overdue.

### **Conclusion**

Brazilians will go to the polls to elect a new president in October 2018. As of this writing, and based on the results of our research, it is unclear that there is any candidate with sufficient popular support and the leadership qualities necessary to disrupt Brazil's descent into democratic despair. In fact, given the evidence available to us in this study, it is unclear that any *one* leader would be capable of restoring public trust in the political system. Brazilian citizens are voicing demands for a wholesale restructuring of the political culture and the functioning of democracy in their country. While some may see military intervention as the most efficient means of doing so, many others would prefer to walk an alternative path. Interestingly, tracing that alternative path will likely require both direct citizen action and institutional reform. The question remains how to develop sufficient social trust in precisely those areas that are currently

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<sup>53</sup> LS\_70049

subject to so much skepticism. If Brazilians can solve this collective action problem and pro-democratic leaders can find the courage to act, our findings suggest that a reservoir of support for the abstract value of democracy, while diminished in recent years, remains intact. Ultimately, for those who prefer to see a democratic Brazil, this is potentially a reason to continue to hope and to work to achieve that future.