

Brazil's Executive-Legislative Relations under the Dilma Coalition Government

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Contrary to the consensus among scholars and political analysts, unified government in the multiparty coalitional-based presidential regime might not necessarily lead to an easier life for the newly-elected Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff-PT, in regard to her relations with the Brazilian Congress.

Mostly as a consequence of the proportional representation electoral rule for the Chamber of Deputies in Brazil, the political party of the president has not been able to enjoy a majority of seats in Congress. However, with the exception of Collor, a minority-elected president in Brazil has never been prevented from building a post-electoral majority governing coalition in Congress. The novelty in the 2010 election in Brazil however is the fact that, in numeric terms, the electoral coalition supporting Dilma obtained the majority of seats in both houses in Congress. Whereas in the Brazilian Senate, Dilma's coalition will have nearly 64 percent of seats, and in the Chamber of Deputies she will enjoy about 61 percent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Political Party Seat Allocation in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies

| Dilma's Electoral Coalition | | | Opposition | | | Independent | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Party | Currently | Elected 2010 | Party | Currently | Elected 2010 | Party | Currently | Elected 2010 |
| PT | 79 | 88 | PSDB | 59 | 53 | PP | 40 | 41 |
| PMDB | 90 | 79 | DEM | 56 | 43 | PV | 14 | 15 |
| PR/PL | 41 | 41 | PTB | 22 | 21 | PHS | 03 | 02 |
| PSB | 27 | 34 | PPS | 15 | 12 | PSL | | 01 |
| PDT | 23 | 28 | PMN | 03 | 04 | PRP | | 02 |
| PSC | 16 | 17 | PSOL | 03 | 03 | PRTB | | 02 |
| PCdoB | 12 | 15 | PTdoB | 01 | 03 | | | |
| PRB | 01 | 08 | | | | | | |
| PTC | 02 | 01 | | | | | | |
| TOTAL | 297 (57.9%) | 311 (60.62%) | | 137 (26.7%) | 139 (27.09%) | | 57 (11.1%) | 63 (12.28%) |

Source: Brazilian Electoral Tribunal – TSE.

Based on these favorable numbers it has been widely-specified that Dilma will face fewer difficulties in governing than Lula in Congress. However, in addition to the number of seats, other aspects are also fundamental for understanding executive-legislative relations in a multiparty presidential regime.

The elected president will have to make at least three interconnected managerial choices that would bring about important consequences for the quality, sustainability, and capacity of governing in Congress. These choices include: the number of parties that will take part of her coalition; the degree of ideological heterogeneity of those parties; and the degree of power-sharing among coalition partners.

In a series of co-authored forthcoming papers with Power and Raile (2011), we argue that each of those managerial choices engender trade-offs and different costs for the executive. Coalitions that are larger, with greater ideological heterogeneity, or with a higher concentration of power in one of its members are more difficult to manage. The less proportional the cabinet, the less satisfied the coalition partners in the legislature, and the higher the cost of “purchasing” their loyalty. A cabinet constituted disproportionately of an executive’s own partisans may also create external animosity, but the larger effect would be to disrupt relationships within the governing coalition. Such situations imply a higher cost of governing, more coordination problems, and a greater necessity of side payments to discipline the coalition. Ignoring such expectations can undermine support from within the governing coalition.

A comparison of how the former three Brazilian presidents managed their respective coalitions in Congress might be very illustrative for understanding the impact of those choices on executive-legislative relations in the future government of Dilma Rousseff (see Table 2).

Table 2: Participation of Coalition Members within the Collor, Cardoso, and Lula Cabinets

| Party | Collor | | | | Cardoso | | | | Lula | | | |
|---------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|
| | Cabinet Posts | % Posts | Coalition Seats | % Seats | Cabinet Posts | % Posts | Coalition Seats | % Seats | Cabinet Posts | % Posts | Coalition Seats | % Seats |
| PSDB | | | | | 6 | 28.57 | 99 | 25.98 | | | | |
| PFL | 2 | 20.00 | 91 | 37.14 | 4 | 19.05 | 105 | 27.56 | | | | |
| PMDB | 1 | 10.00 | 130 | 53.06 | 2 | 9.52 | 83 | 21.78 | 2 | 5.71 | 78 | 24.53 |
| PP | | | | | 2 | 9.52 | 60 | 15.75 | | | | |
| PPS | | | | | 1 | 4.76 | 3 | 0.79 | 1 | 2.86 | 20 | 6.29 |
| PTB | | | | | 1 | 4.76 | 31 | 8.14 | 1 | 2.86 | 51 | 16.04 |
| PT | | | | | | | | | 21 | 60.00 | 91 | 28.62 |
| PCdoB | | | | | | | | | 2 | 5.71 | 9 | 2.83 |
| PL | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2.86 | 43 | 13.52 |
| PSB | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2.86 | 20 | 6.29 |
| PV | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2.86 | 6 | 1.89 |
| PRN | 1 | 10.00 | 24 | 9.80 | | | | | | | | |
| Ind. | 6 | 60.00 | | | 5 | 23.81 | | | 5 | 14.29 | | |
| Totals | 10 | 100 | 245 | 48.71 | 21 | 100 | 381 | 74.27 | 35 | 100 | 318 | 61.99 |

Source: Pereira, Power, and Raile (forthcoming 2011). NOTES: Data are for Collor’s first cabinet, Cardoso’s second cabinet of the second term, and Lula’s second cabinet. The totals for seat percentages represent the percentage of total seats in the Chamber of Deputies held by all coalition parties combined. The total number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies was 503 for Collor and 513 for the other two executives. Octavio Amorim Neto (2007) is the source of the cabinet data. The “% of Coalition Seats” is the percentage of within-coalition seats held in the Chamber of Deputies.

Collor (1990-1992) had an initial governing coalition that consisted of only three political parties. Collor’s coalition began with 245 seats, which was about 49 percent; this was clearly a minority coalition government. Collor’s cabinet was relatively homogeneous, featuring mostly right-wing parties. His cabinets however were extremely disproportional. In his first cabinet, 60 percent of the posts went to nonpartisan ministers. He did not share power with parties that could support him in times of need. In 1992, facing massive popular protests around the country and without a credible

and sustainable coalition in Congress, the cost of “buying” support eventually caught up with Collor. Partly as a consequence of this political choice, he was impeached and removed from office.

Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), on the other hand, learned quickly that governing without a sustainable coalition in Congress would be too risky. He initially decided to include only four parties in his governing coalition (PSDB, PFL, PTB and PMDB). However, at the beginning of his second year in office, he realized that he would need a broader majority to gain approval of his many proposed constitutional reforms, which would require supportive supermajorities in both houses. Cardoso recruited two additional parties (PPB and PPS) into his government, bringing the coalition size up to almost 75 percent. Although large in size, the Cardoso coalition was not endangered by internal ideological differences. His coalition was center-right and the constituent parties shared a considerable amount of consensus with regard to the president’s agenda of constitutional reforms. The outstanding feature of the Cardoso coalition was the high level of “coalescence” (Amorim Neto 2002) of his cabinet. The coalition management choices made by Cardoso were decisive elements in helping him to sustain his majority coalition for almost eight years at a comparatively low cost.

Lula adopted a different coalition management approach than his predecessors. He formed a coalition of eight parties expanding the number of cabinet-level posts from 21 to 35. The purpose of expanding the cabinet size was to accommodate loyalists of the president’s own Workers’ Party-PT, which was awarded no fewer than 20 portfolios. In December 2003, the PMDB was added to the coalition as the ninth party in the cabinet, however with only two cabinet positions. The PT did not “make room” for the PMDB. This skewed allocation increased the PT’s dominance over its governing coalition partners. This sharp reduction in proportionality occurred exactly at the same time the *mensalão* is alleged to have begun. The PT controlled 60 percent of the cabinet portfolios while supplying only 29 percent of the coalition’s seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In the second term in office, Lula seems to have learned by adjusting his governing coalition and allocating more cabinets to other coalition members; but the PT continued to monopolize his cabinet. The ideological spectrum of Lula’s coalition was much more diverse than that of Cardoso’s, spanning from extreme left wing to extreme right wing parties.

What would be the coalition profile of Dilma Rousseff’s government? Like Lula, will Dilma have heterogeneous, over-sized, and over-concentrated governing powers in PT hands and thus prefer to satisfy all of the internal factions within the party? Based on the number of her electoral coalition partners and their ideological heterogeneity, the answer is certainly yes. With regard to power sharing, she will also be tempted to follow the same path of her political “guru” given that she will be under great pressure to preserve several PT internal factions in power. However, Dilma will probably need to build a more proportional cabinet allocation, especially with the PMDB. Bear in mind that in addition to electing the second largest number of legislators in the Chamber of Deputies (79 seats), the PMDB will also have the largest number of seats in the Senate (20 seats) as well as the vice-presidency. Thus, disproportionately treating the PMDB and other coalition partners (like PL and PSB) with a small number of cabinet positions and other coalition currencies, as did Lula, might generate growing dissatisfaction within an already fragmented and regionally based key coalition partner. In other words, in addition to numerically aggrandize coalitions, the way presidents manage their coalitions also matters for presidential success in Congress.

References:

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