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RESEARCH

Gendered path dependency: women's representation in 20th-century Brazil

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This study investigates women's under-representation in national legislative elections and the gendered legacies embedded in Brazil's electoral system and party dynamics. Focusing on the historical period prior to the 1996 implementation of a quota law, this article applies a feminist historical institutionalist approach to identify institutions and actors influencing women's representation. Brazil's electoral rules for legislative elections, that is, an open-list proportional representation system, remained surprisingly stable throughout periods of regime change and institutional uncertainty in the 20th century. It was not until the return to democracy and the 1986 constituent election that women were able to carve some space in Brazil's National Congress. This research argues that the relaxing of rules dictating the creation of political parties and the strengthening of women's movements in the prior decade were influential in creating a propitious moment for increasing the presence of women in national legislative politics.

Key words feminist institutionalism • Brazil • political parties • gender dynamics • historical institutionalism • electoral rules

Key messages

- There is a historical legacy of political institutions that influences the evolution of women's representation.
- Brazil's dictatorships influenced the stunting of women's representation in elected positions.
- Women's movements and electoral uncertainties allowed women to gain political space in political parties prior to the 1986 constituent election.

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Introduction

In October 2018, Brazilians elected the highest ever number of women to their National Congress. The 77 women elected represent a 75 per cent increase from the previous election. These numbers are still very low compared to other countries ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021](#)), and it is the lowest percentage of women in lower houses in Latin America ([Gonzalez, 2018](#)). The positive developments in

2018 are likely associated with changes in campaign finance rules and the continuous strengthening of the gender quota law (Rocha, 2019; Thomé, 2019; Sacchet, 2020; Wylie, 2020). Nevertheless, efforts to increase women's presence consistently face a political system and party structure unable or unwilling to fully reform institutions and promote increased representation of historically excluded groups. This research takes a historical institutionalist approach to analyse the roots of women's political exclusion. It argues that Brazil's electoral and party systems undermine women's presence, not only because of the mechanisms outlined by the existing literature, but also because of historical patterns that persistently reinforce masculine dominance.

This research investigates the ways in which gendered institutions empower and constrain political actors in Brazil. As the electoral system was created under a gendered structure, political parties reinforced patriarchal dynamics influencing the nomination and election of politicians, freezing in time certain gender inequities from the past. Looking at four key periods in 20th-century Brazilian politics, this analysis indicates that it was not until the return to democracy in the 1980s, and the strengthening of women's movements, that women were able to enter the formal political system, even if the opportunity led only to a modest change in established patriarchal structures and a limited increase in women's representation. The analysis of Brazil as a case study contributes to the scholarship on women's representation by emphasising the importance of historical analyses to our understanding of barriers to entry for women seeking electoral office. More specifically, the in-depth analysis of one case provides insights into the roots of patriarchal gendered institutions and the mechanisms that help reinforce or weaken such structures.

This study is divided as follows. It first explains Brazil's electoral rules and the scholarship connecting it to women's representation, followed by a description of feminist historical institutionalism (FHI) and a gendered historical analysis of women's presence in Brazil's national legislature. The analysis will show the static nature of Brazil's electoral rules even as regimes change, and will highlight how political actors reinforced previously established gendered (masculine) norms that hindered the entrance of women into electoral politics.

Representation, elections and electoral rules

The study of gender and elections is directly connected to the study of representation. Here, representation is understood as the combination of factors that ultimately lead elected politicians to act on behalf of citizens. Pitkin (1972) conceptualises representation in four dimensions: formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive. This research addresses two of these dimensions: formalistic, or the rules that authorise representation, both 'before it begins and after it ends' (Pitkin, 1972: 59); and descriptive, or the act of reflecting constituents 'as truly and accurate as possible' (Pitkin, 1972: 90). Looking at the evolution of rules determining how representatives are elected and their impact on the election of a specific descriptively under-represented group (women) sheds light on present-day representational woes.

In most modern democracies, including Brazil, women have enjoyed basic formal equality for decades, sharing with men the right to vote, stand in elections and compete for public office (Phillips, 1991). This formal equality has not translated into equality of presence. A simple view of formalistic representation as the rules impacting who is eligible to politically represent a population ignores the importance

historical legacies, the role of parties as gatekeepers (Lovenduski and Norris, 1993; Caul, 1999) and the importance of electoral rules on party eligibility and behaviour (Cox, 1999; Ferree et al, 2014).

Gender representation scholars have paid special attention to electoral institutions as influencing women's representation in legislatures. Studies indicate that countries with closed-list proportional representation (PR) systems and gender quotas with placement mandates tend to benefit women's presence in elected positions (Tripp and Kang, 2008; Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Rosen, 2017; Hughes et al, 2019). In closed-list PR systems, citizens cast a vote for a political party. Preferential-list systems, like Brazil's open-list PR system, allow the voter to cast a 'preference' vote for specific candidates.

Scholars focusing on Brazil have identified various factors influencing women's under-representation in politics: the country's open-list PR system (Araújo, 2003; Araújo et al, 2018), the large number of parties and the nature of party competition (Araújo, 2005; Wylie, 2018), including expensive and personalistic campaigns (Speck and Mancuso, 2014; Wylie, 2020); the uneven sexual division of labour (Wylie, 2018, 2020); and a toothless gender quota law (Araújo, 2003; Wylie and dos Santos, 2016; Wylie et al, 2019).

The dynamics of the 2018 national elections reinforce the importance of electoral rules and political parties. Adjustments in 2015 and 2018 to the electoral law led to the most dramatic rise in women elected to the National Congress since the establishment of the candidate quota law for state and federal legislatures in 1997. The changes included a ban on corporate donations, the establishment of public party funding for campaigns and a requirement that 30 per cent of party campaign funds be used in women's campaigns (Rocha, 2019; Thomé, 2019). Incremental changes to electoral laws and rulings from the Electoral Superior Court and the Supreme Court have been essential in strengthening the candidate gender quota law. Nevertheless, these changes are institutional attempts to discipline parties into providing support to and electing more women. Parties have constantly attempted (and many times succeeded) in skirting the quota law, including the shifting of campaign funds to majoritarian campaigns where women play a secondary role (Marques and Biroli, 2020; Sacchet, 2020) and the growing practice of fielding candidacies receiving little to no support from parties – known as *candidaturas laranja* (extreme non-viable candidacies) (Ramos, 2017; Wylie et al, 2019).

Developments since the implementation of the quota law show continuous attempts by party leaders to undermine the law's objectives. Using legal loopholes and loose interpretations of electoral rules, few parties experienced a marked rise in women elected to legislative positions. Gender disparities in party leadership likely play a role: research shows that parties with more women in their executive leadership tend to field more candidates and elect more women (Wylie and dos Santos, 2016; Wylie, 2018). The question remains: why do political parties and their leaders continue to undermine the advancement of women in politics? This research argues that long-established patriarchal structures in Brazilian party dynamics favoured men in distinct ways for most of the 20th century, creating an electoral environment that was and is unfavourable to women and other political newcomers.

FHI and the Brazilian case

To understand the role that gender played in the development of Brazil's electoral landscape, this study applies an FHI approach. FHI applies feminist theoretical and

methodological grounding to historical institutionalism (HI). HI's focus on large-scale issues and macro-level variables helps explain 'the persistence of patterns or policies over time within individual countries' (Steinmo et al, 1992: 14). HI emphasises process over time, the impact of institutions on individual interest and the importance of time in the development of institutions (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003; Pierson, 2004).

Most HI research pays limited attention to the role of gender in institutional change. Feminist institutionalism (FI) centres on gender as an analytical tool. FI proponents argue that institutions are gendered in the sense that constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in everyday life and influence the way actors interact in society (Kenney, 1996; Krook and Mackay, 2010; Mackay et al, 2010). In other words, gender roles are inextricably part of institutional roles and norms.

While scholars have used institutionalist approaches to study gender and politics before (Weldon, 2002; Krook, 2006; Htun, 2016; Htun and Weldon, 2018), and FI continues to develop theoretically and methodologically, the concept of an FHI approach is relatively new (see Waylen, 2009; Debusscher and van der Vleuten, 2017; Weiner and MacRae, 2017; Jenichen et al, 2019). This research uses guidelines proposed by Waylen (2009) and insights from FHI scholarship to explain women's under-representation in Brazilian politics. Waylen (2009) calls for the use of a three-step process. First, scholars must identify the causal sequences and developmental pathways that led to the specific outcome studied. Second, one must examine the nature of the structural constraints that help determine actors' goals and strategies. Finally, scholars must explore to what extent these outcomes are a result of path-dependent processes and what role gender plays in each of the first two steps.

Two concepts are central to the understanding of how history matters in the creation and evolution of political institutions: path dependence and critical junctures. Path dependence refers to the self-enforcing processes in a political system, or the factors responsible for the establishment, maintenance and change of political institutions (Steinmo et al, 1992; Pierson, 2004). Path dependence centres on the fact that changes in political institutions become harder as processes become normalised. Such processes are reinforced or challenged at key historical moments, or critical junctures, leading to institutional consolidation or innovation/change. A critical juncture is defined as a period of significant historical change that triggers processes reinforcing institutional structures (Collier and Collier, 2002; Pierson, 2004). By pinpointing these critical junctures, scholars explore how: political institutions are influenced by specific historical events; actor behaviour changes before, during and after these events; and previous processes interact with the changes following such events (Collier and Collier, 2002; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003).

Clearly identifying a critical juncture and connecting it to the evolution of political institutions is a complex analytical exercise that requires scholars to create clear methods defining what constitutes a critical juncture (Collier and Collier, 2002; Capoccia, 2015). The idea that institutions either persist and become entrenched in the system or are abandoned is dependent on our understanding of what leads to such outcomes. Institutional change can be highly influenced by modest perturbations at early stages, but as time passes, they become self-enforcing processes that are much harder to change. With these concepts in mind, the following section investigates the institutional dynamics that can help explain women's under-representation in Brazilian politics.

Regime change, electoral rules and gendered actors

Starting at the dawn of the modern political system in Brazil in 1930, the establishment of electoral rules for legislative elections remained surprisingly constant even as the political system experienced drastic changes. What remained constant throughout most of the 20th century was the tacit and subtle exclusion of women from electoral politics. As party dynamics evolved during changes from democratic to authoritarian rule, the exclusion of women became the norm.

There were four periods in the 20th century that have altered political institutions writ large in Brazil: the Getúlio Vargas era (1930–45); the democratic period between 1945 and 1964; the military regime that lasted until the 1980s; and the democratisation period that culminated in the writing of the 1988 constitution. Throughout these four periods, the institutional maintenance of electoral laws, combined with changes between authoritarian and democratic rule, influenced the way key political actors understood electoral competition. The stunting of women's movements and women's roles inside party structures during these changes limited the entrance of women into the electoral arena until the return to democracy in the 1980s, when a more competitive party marketplace opened doors for women candidates in large numbers for the first time. The historical legacy of women's under-representation has repercussions that continue into the 21st century.

The Vargas era (1930–45)

The Brazilian republican era started in 1889 and established the institutional foundation of the new system: presidentialism, federalism and bicameralism (Nicolau, 2012). It was not until the 20th century that significant changes to power structures led to what is known as the modern Brazilian political system (Bonavides, 2000). The 1930 revolution was a moment in which 'nearly every feature of the political system and the administrative structure was subjected to the zeal for reform' (Skidmore, 1967: 7). In 1930, women's presence in politics was almost non-existent in Brazil and the world. Therefore, it was not a unique Brazilian characteristic that the institutions created and reformed in 1930 were organised by male elites for male elites.

Prior to the 1930 revolution, women's movements¹ were dominated by wealthy and middle-class women, often highly educated, living in urban areas (de Melo and Thomé, 2018). Demographic changes, international influence and the rise of a suffragist movement in the early 20th century led to the establishment of women's organisations and the creation of the Woman's Republican Party (PRF) in 1910. The main objective of the PRF was lobbying for women's suffrage, while also addressing other gendered causes of urban women of the time (Schumacher and Brazil, 2000). In 1920, the Feminist Liberal Party was founded, with the causes of suffrage and women's participation in politics as key platforms (Karawejczyk, 2014), at a moment where the suffrage movement (influenced by connections to the US suffrage movement) was becoming more organised and more vocal in the Brazilian capital and key urban centres.

A key institutional change from this period was the 1932 Electoral Code that established a new mixed electoral system and gave women the right to vote (Nicolau, 2006; Silva and Silva, 2015; Limongi et al, 2019). The complex nature of the electoral laws established in 1932 led Congress to reform them and establish an open-list PR system in 1935 (Nicolau, 2012). Suffrage was a major victory for women, a

consequence of urban middle-class women's movements of the time (Rachum, 1977; Hahner, 1980; de Melo and Thomé, 2018), but the language of the code favoured men by making male voting mandatory and women's voting optional (Limongi et al, 2019).

The euphoria of winning the right to vote led many women to run for office in 1934, but the limited support from established male elites, as well as the difficulty of elite women to connect their interests with those of working women and women of colour (Marques, 2016), meant that only one woman was elected to the 214-person Congress (de Melo and Thomé, 2018).

In 1934, the party system was still in its nascent stages and political alliances were mostly established through state and regional interests, with very few of the dozens of parties aligning on ideological tendencies (Fleischer, 2006; Zulini and Ricci, 2020). As these alliances and ideas spread across the country, one of the most visible characteristics was the lack of female leadership. Most women who ran in 1934 were organised within women's parties or women's alliances (Marques, 2016), which meant that most were not challenging the patriarchal structure of already-established parties and alliances.

The change to open-list PR in 1935 was not implemented; in 1937, President Getúlio Vargas took power in a self-coup. Vargas closed the National Congress and ordered the dissolution of all political parties, centralising power in the executive (Diniz, 1999). Between 1937 and 1945, the country did not have elections, political parties or congressmembers, meaning that no woman (or man) was elected for 11 years.

The social transformations ushered by Getúlio Vargas included debates about the role of women in society. The suffrage movement, successful in 1932, was led by women seeking to challenge the status quo, including self-declared feminist Bertha Lutz. However, the debate over women's societal roles cut across regional, race and class dynamics (Marques, 2016). The 1937 establishment of the *Estado Novo* ('New State') meant that dictator Getúlio Vargas and his (male) political appointees had control over how the Brazilian state interpreted women's role in society. This meant an emphasis on traditional roles, casting women as mothers and caretakers in the development of a modern Brazil (Wolfe, 2010; Ostos, 2012).

The populist authoritarianism promoted by Vargas meant that the flourishing feminist and women's movements of the 1920s and early 1930s were disbanded or co-opted. The political influence that a few suffragettes enjoyed during the previous decades was undermined by these efforts. Women's groups promoting traditional gender roles were sponsored by the government, and women challenging the status quo were pushed to gender-specific sections of leftist and communist organisations, where men also dominated leadership positions (de Melo and Thomé, 2018). The lack of elections between 1934 and 1945, as well as the abolition of parties between 1937 and 1945, meant that the pressure the women's movement put on (male) political leaders in the early 1930s was heavily undermined. The dawn of the modern political system in Brazil happened at a period when women's access to political office was practically non-existent.

Situating Brazil within world and regional developments of the time, the period between 1930 and 1945 was characterised by the spread of women's suffrage. By 1947, most European and Latin American countries had awarded women the right to vote (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995). In most countries, women could vote

and run for office, but they seldom pursued political careers (see, for example, [Clark, 1991](#)).

The first democratic period (1945–64)

After the end of Vargas's authoritarian rule, Brazil experienced 19 years of democracy. The electoral system established in 1945 was heavily influenced by the 1932 and 1935 electoral codes, and the open-list PR system proposed in 1935 was reintroduced for legislative elections ([Nicolau, 2006](#)). One key change from the 1932 code led to the rise in importance of political parties: only political parties (and 'party alliances') could field candidates ([Nicolau, 2012](#)). The return to democracy sought to modernise the electoral system and establish clear parameters for who could and who could not run for office, solidifying the role of male-dominated political parties in the process.

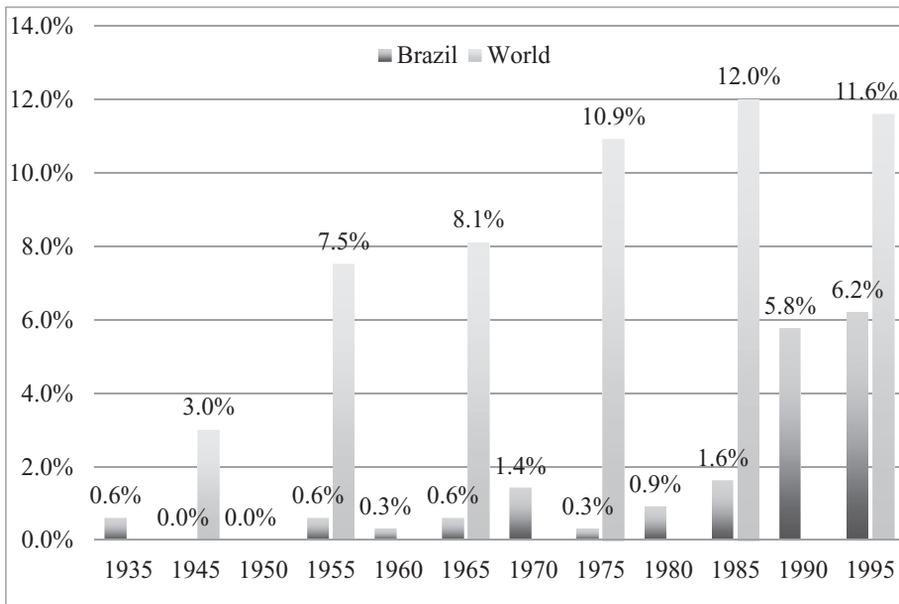
As political parties were banned between 1937 and 1945, the new democratic era saw the development of new parties, all led by men and with limited input from a now-weakened women's movement, to compete for legislative positions under a revised open-list PR system. With only one woman elected in the last election held 11 years prior and the scattering of women leaders, mobilisation for women candidates was limited in the first democratic election in over a decade. The 1945 election saw no woman winning a legislative seat.

While over 20 political parties formed during this period, three dominated the national landscape: the populist Social Democratic Party (PSD), the conservative National Democratic Union (UDN) and the centre-left Brazilian Labour Party (PTB). None of these parties had a strong presence of women in their initial formation, and none of them had a platform to include women in the political process. A fourth party, the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), received strong support in 1945 (8.7 per cent of votes) and included more robust discussions on women's representation. The PCB was forced to disband after the 1945 elections, becoming an organised clandestine party for most of the 20th century ([Venturini, 2019](#)).

Between 1945 and 1964, women's movements regained force in urban areas, and labour dynamics of the period meant that working-class women, mostly factory workers, began to organise inside labour unions and communist organisations. Many of these groups faced backlash and persecution, especially in a post-Second World War environment that feared communism and labour organising ([French and Cluff, 2000](#); [Morente, 2015](#)). After almost a decade of policies and mandates emphasising the role of women as mothers and caretakers, women's organisations challenging this structure were faced with suspicion. Moreover, at a time when anti-communist sentiment was strong in the country, women's groups associated with communism lost power in the national discourse ([Morente, 2015](#)).

Of the three main political parties, only the PTB, with its working-class ideology, had discussions about 'including women and negroes' ([d'Araújo, 1996](#): 62). Therefore, debates about increasing women's political presence were not an important topic in the male-dominated party elites of the time. Nevertheless, the role of women in the democratic process was slowly changing. Women began to join political parties but were confined to 'gender-appropriate' jobs and were not seriously considered for positions of leadership ([Hahner, 1980](#)). The few women elected during this period were, as in most countries during the same period, wives and widows of well-established political figures ([Pinheiro, 2007](#)).²

Figure 1: Women in the lower house 1935–1995: Brazil and world averages



Sources: Adapted from [Avelar \(2001\)](#) and [Pinheiro \(2007\)](#). Additional data from Inter-Parliamentary Union (1995; 2021).

It is in this landscape of a society upholding traditional gender roles, a less influential women’s movement and limited access to and within political parties that women’s presence in politics is stunted in Brazil. The presence of women in electoral politics was lower in Brazil than in many countries between 1945 and 1964. In 1945, Brazil had no women in parliament, while the world average of women in parliaments was 3 per cent. Two Latin American countries (the Dominican Republic and Panama) had at least one woman in the lower chamber of their national congress in that same period ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995](#)). In 1955, the three women in Congress constituted 0.9 per cent of seats. At that same time, the world’s average rose from 3 to 7.5 per cent (see [Figure 1](#)), and nine (out of 21) countries in Latin America elected a higher percentage of women than Brazil ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995](#)). By 1965, Brazil’s six women comprised 1.8 per cent of the seats in Congress, with the world average increasing to 8.1 per cent ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995](#); [Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, 2021](#)) and the Latin America average rising to 4.1 per cent, including the fact that all but one of 14 countries (Uruguay) with data available for that time experienced higher percentages of women in their lower house than Brazil ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995](#)).

The military dictatorship (1964–82)

Women’s limited gains were once again stalled after the military coup of 1964. The military dissolved Congress, disbanded political parties, forbade popular politicians from seeking office and established indirect elections for the 1965 gubernatorial races. While electoral rules for all other positions was heavily altered through ‘Institutional Acts’,³ the military government maintained unaltered the rules of the game for legislative elections. The authoritarian regime did, however, establish tight controls for political parties,

regulating the establishment of a new party structure in 1965 (Nicolau, 2012). Under the new rules, in place from 1966 to 1979, the military junta forced the country into an artificial two-party system, where Aliança Renovadora Nacional (ARENA) became the party supporting the military government and Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB) was a 'watered-down' opposition party (Fleischer, 2006; Nicolau, 2012).

Women's presence inside party structures was directly affected by the 1964 military coup. Women were completely removed, once again, from the formal political process. The military leaders ruling the country were all men, and politicians from both parties were overwhelmingly male. Throughout most of the military dictatorship, the country continued to see a limited number of women in the national legislature: six (five in the opposition party MDB; one in ARENA) in 1966, one (ARENA) in 1971, one (ARENA) in 1975 and four (three from MDB; one from ARENA) in 1979. It is noteworthy that the rise in 1966 was helped by the election of three women running as replacements for their husbands who had had their political rights stripped away by the military government. Five of the women elected in 1966 (all from MDB) also had their political rights stripped away in 1969 (Azevedo and Rabat, 2012).

One important difference between the Vargas period and the authoritarian experience in the 1960s and 1970s was the role of women's movements in the democratisation process following authoritarian rule. As the military dictatorship repressed traditional movements and leaders, women began to enter traditional gendered (male) spaces such as labour unions, already more welcoming to women since the late 1940s, and became involved in organisations associated with progressive factions of the Catholic Church, especially through the Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), and through feminist organising that flourished especially in the mid- and late 1970s (Sarti, 1988; Alvarez, 1990; Soares, 1994; Baldez, 2003; Carneiro, 2003).

Women organising within established movements and organisations still faced gendered barriers and marginalisation from leadership positions in these spaces. Moreover, much of the organising happening in the 1970s had as its main focus challenging the authoritarian regime, meaning that women's movements and feminist movements brought women's issues to the forefront in the context of the bigger political battles of the time, refraining from addressing gender-specific issues for fear of loss of support from left and centre-left organisations (Alvarez, 1990; Sarti, 1988). Nevertheless, the presence of women inside these organisations, including those who would eventually become political parties, put women in political spaces that would play a crucial role in the democratisation of the country.

In 1980, Brazil's 0.9 per cent of women in the Chamber of Deputies paled in comparison to the 10.9 per cent world average and 7.3 per cent average in Latin America (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995). Only Ecuador had a lower percentage of women in the lower house in the region. It is difficult to ascertain the main reason why women were excluded from national politics. This was likely a combination of overt exclusion through the repression of civil society, and subtle exclusion, with military and party leaders preferring well-established (male) politicians.

The return to democracy (1982–88)

As the country began its return to democracy, the open-list PR system was normalised. The military still exerted control over the political system, only completely giving up power in 1985. In 1979, the rule that established the two-party system was abolished.

Given the parameters set by the military government (the need for political parties to hold conventions in nine states and in 20 per cent of their municipalities), five parties obtained the right to run in the 1982 elections (Nicolau, 2012: 110).

The two artificial parties created during the authoritarian regime did not need to directly address women's issues. As the system opened after the 1979 abolition of the two-party system, leaders of the newly forming parties realised the importance of addressing women's issues directly in their platforms. Trying to win women's votes for the 1982 election, most parties opened space for women activists and ran on political platforms featuring women-related issues, such as divorce laws and domestic violence (Alvarez, 1990). This opening, still controlled by male party leadership, led to an unprecedented number of women candidates (42). Of the five parties running in 1982, all but one elected at least one woman, and the number of women doubled from four in 1978 to eight in 1982 (Azevedo and Rabat, 2012).

A few of the new parties gave room to women candidates and included women's groups in their campaign and policy discussions. For example, the Worker's Party (PT) and the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB) both established women-specific institutions within their party structures, allowing women's movements and political leaders to create a connection. Alvarez (1990: 176) argues that given the unequal gender power balance at the time, women joining parties saw themselves in a precarious and subaltern position. Women were expected to make coffee, answer phones and do other tasks that reinforced the idea that women served while men led. In other words, the first multiparty election maintained the gendered institutional roles that were part of the Brazilian political system throughout the 20th century. More importantly, the debate about women's descriptive representation was not a key feature of the political discussions in this initial period of the new democratic system (Borba et al, 1996).

The first time that a more public debate about women's presence in electoral politics happened was in 1985, prior to the election for the Constituent Assembly. With women's and feminist movements strengthened by their role in the democratisation process, civil society leaders pressured President José Sarney (the first civilian president in two decades) to establish an executive-level body focusing on women's issues. The result was the creation of the National Council for Women's Rights (CNDM). The establishment of the CNDM, led by women involved in the feminist struggles of the late 1970s and early 1980s, was influential in making women's presence an important issue. With the 1985 'Women and the Constituent Assembly' campaign, the CNDM emphasised the importance of women's voices in the establishment of the new political order in Brazil (Pitanguy, 2011; Amâncio, 2013).

While the rules surrounding the election of candidates had changed little since 1950, changes in the rules governing political parties changed drastically in the 1980s. In 1985, in preparation for the 1986 election that would determine the women and men writing the country's new constitution, the electoral court loosened requirements for party formation and allowed previously banned parties to rejoin the political arena (Nicolau, 2012). The relaxation of requirements for party formation led to the creation of 23 parties. While all parties were led by men, pressures from women inside parties and women's movements who gained political space, as well as very public calls for women's presence in the constituent process, created pressures to elect more women. The result was 166 women candidates (a 186 per cent increase from 1982) and 26 women elected (a 225 per cent increase) from nine different parties

across the ideological spectrum (Pimenta, 2010; Azevedo and Rabat, 2012). This significant rise still left Brazil behind the world average (12 per cent in 1985), behind the Latin American average (8.9 per cent between 1984 and 1986) and behind 13 (out of 20) countries in the region (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995).

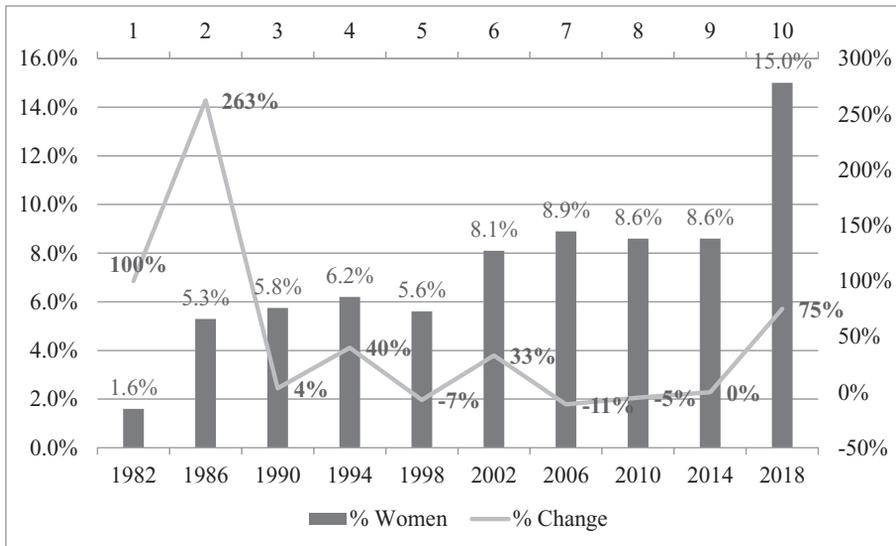
Analysis

Regime change in 20th-century Brazil led to surprisingly stable electoral rules, establishing a long-lasting open-list PR model. Even as authoritarian governments suspended the operations of Congress, the rules about how a legislative candidate is elected remained remarkably constant. The rules dictating party dynamics, however, changed throughout the 20th century, leading to large fluctuations in the number of parties and consequently varying dynamics of party strategy. Regime change caused considerable ambiguity in various aspects of the country's political arena that could (and in many ways did) significantly change institutional structures and power dynamics. In the case of electoral rules for legislative elections, shifts from authoritarian to democratic regimes did little to change the essence of what is now one of the world's longest-lasting open-list PR systems. In the case of women's presence in politics, the critical juncture that led to a significant increase of women elected was the return to democracy in the 1980s, combined with the strengthening of the women's movement and the re-establishment of a multiparty system. Electoral rules have not changed, but party dynamics were very much in flux.

Looking at Brazil in the 20th century and keeping Waylen's (2009) three-step approach in mind, we identify some patterns. Thinking about causal sequences and developmental pathways, two aspects appear to especially influence the low number of women in politics: the weakening of social movements in the Vargas era; and the near inexistence of women inside parties' leadership. Structural constraints and repressive regimes and policies appear to limit women's access to political spaces. It is not until the opening of the political system and the strengthening of women's movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s that we see women being sought after by political parties. Regarding gendered causal pathways, the virtual inexistence of women's voices in the political process is a reinforcing mechanism that dictates party decisions about who should represent the nation in Congress. A long-lasting electoral system establishes the rules of the game, and male party leaders use political calculations based on subtly and overtly gendered rules to justify party strategies that undermine women.

The uncertain party landscape of the return to democracy, coupled with the political clout that women's movements acquired in the 1970s, allowed for women to finally gain a (still small) voice inside political parties. As the democratic political system consolidated, so did electoral strategies. A system that was completely devoid of women now had a small contingent, and as competition for political positions becomes normalised, this becomes the standard. The opening of the system for women in the early 1980s is followed by a hardening of party institutional directives, making the entrance of more women difficult. After 26 women were elected in 1986, the numbers increase only slightly (see Figure 2), even after the implementation of a quota law in 1997 and attempts to strengthen it in 2009, 2015 and 2017 (Araújo, 2010; Wylie et al, 2019).

Figure 2: Percentage of women elected and percentage change since previous election 1982–2018



Source: Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (2021).

The Brazilian quota law is a good example of the power of patriarchal structures in undermining women’s representation. The law was first approved in 1997 with pressure from the women’s movement and women inside the party structure, as well as international pressure following the 1995 Beijing Conference (Borba et al, 1996; Suplicy, 1996). The law that passed, in an overwhelmingly male-dominated Congress, was full of loopholes. Even though this was an institutional change seeking to influence party behaviour, long-held institutional expectations (both formal and informal) subjected new rules to interpretations, debates and contestations (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010).

It was not until 2018 that efforts to strengthen the quota law led to a more significant increase in the number of women elected, but even this increase was not as marked as the 1986 election (see Figure 2). After two decades of continued attempts to increase women’s representation, political parties are still criticised for not doing enough to elect more women. Worse yet, scholars and activists consistently point out the ethically questionable tactics implemented by parties to undermine the quota law and limit support for women candidates (Rocha, 2019; Thomé, 2019; Wylie et al, 2019; Sacchet, 2020).

Since women gained space in 1986, the male-dominated party leadership has fought to maintain the status quo, undermining efforts to increase women’s representation. This study argues that the uniqueness of the 1986 political landscape, characterised by ambiguous party dynamics and women’s movements’ political force at the time, led to a rare moment allowing women to gain political space. As the system normalised, parties and their (male) leaders sought to maintain the gendered dynamics of the past, undermining continued efforts to increase women’s representation.

Discussion

Brazil's experience with authoritarian regimes is not unique. In South America, most countries experienced strong male regimes and military dictatorships at some point in the 20th century. The country is also one of many in the region with a gender quota law, yet the failure to increase women's presence with a quota law is distinctive. The present scholarship provides evidence that electoral rules and party dynamics matter. This research shows the importance of situating present dynamics into a country's historical political development, including the connection between regime change, women's movements and party dynamics.

Future scholarship on Brazil must take a deeper look at the intersectionality of representation. Women's movements led by white, educated and wealthy women influenced women's representation from the 1930s to the 1980s. Brazil's complex racial and social history problematises the rise of women in politics since most of them, even those elected in left-leaning parties, tend to be white, highly educated and from higher socio-economic background. A closer analysis of intersectional women's movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and their role in representational debates, would greatly benefit the literature.

Future work on women's representation in Latin America and beyond should apply similar historical approaches to better understand the competing interests influencing the election of women. For example, while Argentina, Brazil and Chile experienced repressive military regimes in the 1960s and 1970s, they saw different democratisation processes, had varied experiences of the role of women's movements in democratisation and party development after the authoritarian regimes, and experienced varied levels of women's representation in politics throughout their modern history. Better understanding the gendered dynamics dictating electoral rules and party development before, during and after authoritarian regimes can help shed light on contemporary issues related to party behaviour and women's representation.

Notes

- ¹ Throughout the article, I use the term 'women's movements' in order to expand the discussion beyond feminism. Some groups discussed throughout the article declared themselves feminist, but others did not, and some rejected the term. When a discussion of feminist groups is needed, I will use the term. For a discussion about the heterogeneity of Brazil's women's movements, see [Alvarez \(1990\)](#) and [Soares \(1994\)](#).
- ² It is important to note that while there is evidence that familial ties can help women mitigate possible newcomer obstacles in political systems ([Folke et al, 2021](#)), these familial and dynastic dynamics are also present among male politicians in Brazil and beyond ([Feinstein, 2010](#); [Miguel et al, 2015](#)). In other words, familial electoral advantage is a reality regardless of gender but there may be some gendered effects in certain contexts.
- ³ Institutional Acts were executive decrees issued by the military to legitimise the 1964 coup and the military regime that followed. After the establishment of the first Institutional Act in 1964, these decrees expanded the executive powers of the military regime, superseding the constitution, and served as a formal mechanism for the military regime to be legitimised.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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