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The Masses and the Critical Mass:  
A Strategic Choice Model  
of the Transition to Democracy in Brazil

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**Introduction**

The transition to civilian rule in Brazil is perhaps the most intensely studied alternation of regime in recent Latin American history. It has been the subject of some very innovative treatises, many with wider comparative implications, which are far too numerous to review (or even list) in this space.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing these impressive contributions, and not intending to detract from the analytical validity of any one of them, this essay seeks to interpret the transition in Brazil from a theoretical perspective heretofore underutilized in the literature. Strategic choice analysis is a thriving subdiscipline in the field of political theory which is increasingly being called into use by students of comparative politics.

Strategic choice analysis has been criticized from a number of viewpoints. This debate cannot be addressed here; rather, this essay has much more modest objectives. One is simply to add a new perspective to the study of the Brazilian transition by discussing it in the context and terminology of strategic choice theory. A second objective is to attempt to fit Adam Przeworski's (1986) model of strategic choice to the realities of the Brazilian transition. From the empiricist's point of view, this objective can be met only partially because of theoretical considerations (to be discussed below) and because the events analyzed are very recent. This essay is designed to offer purely preliminary reflections on this alternative conceptualization of the transition.

The paper is divided into three main sections. First, I review Przeworski's model of democratic transition. Then I review two political "games" that were played in Brazil in 1984-1985. Finally, I compare the two games both in structure and in the context of collective action theory. I conclude with comments on the relationship of these two games to the substantive content of Brazil's new democracy.

**Theoretical Background**

Strategic choice analysis is perhaps most useful for explaining political events in the short run. As David Collier and Deborah Norden have recently noted, this type of analysis allows us to explain systematically those phenomena which we sometimes consider "the banalities of practical politics."

[Strategic choice analysis] is built on relatively obvious facts of political life, such as: (1) political leaders seek to build coalitions to promote their goals; (2) leaders are often, though not always, better off if they build coalitions in a way that wins new supporters without unnecessarily antagonizing opponents; (3) actors may switch sides in a political battle simply out of a desire to "go with the winner"; (4) leaders must therefore try to convince potential supporters that they will in fact win; and (5) to the extent that leaders are skilled at these tasks, they are more likely to achieve their goals. (Collier and Norden, 1986: 7)

All of these phenomena were present in the 1984-1985 transition to civilian rule in Brazil. (Henceforth I shall use "transition" to mean the dynamic period from January 1984 to January 1985, rather than the 1974-1985 period of gradual liberalization.) Tancredo Neves, a true "political entrepreneur," successfully built a coalition that assured his election in the Electoral College on January 15, 1985. This event signaled the end of twenty-one years of military rule in Brazil.

The critical factor making Neves's election possible was the split in the military-dominated government and the crucial number of government party members who deserted their candidate (Paulo Salim Maluf) to vote for Tancredo in the indirect election. Given the relative stability of the Brazilian system of bureaucratic-authoritarian domination, how was it that members of the PDS (Partido Democrático Social, the progovernment party) were induced to defect from their party, thereby virtually assuring the end of the military regime? To phrase the same question theoretically, what is the strategic calculus facing proauthoritarian politicians during the uncertain period of political liberalization?

Przeworski (1986) has attempted to answer this question. Writing in 1979, he constructed a simple model of the alternatives open to authoritarian elites during liberalization. His analysis is influenced by Thomas C. Schelling's (1978) discussion of  $k$ -groups ( $k$  being the number of actors necessary to provide a collective good). If  $k$ , for our purposes, is the number of actors (authoritarian elites) necessary to achieve a successful transition to civilian rule, then their strategic calculus looks something like this:

If I move and fewer than  $(k-1)$  others join, then I am likely to suffer unpleasant consequences. If I move and  $(k-1)$  others join, I will belong to a victorious movement and can expect to be rewarded appropriately. If I do not move and fewer than  $k$  others do, I will remain on the side of power and benefit from it. Finally, if I do not move, but more than  $(k-1)$  others do, I will again find myself on the losing side. Note that the value of the

