

TEXAS PAPERS ON LATIN AMERICA

Pre-publication working papers of the
Institute of Latin American Studies
University of Texas at Austin
ISSN 0892-3507

Paper prepared for the panel on "Demands for Change and Government Response in Brazil," VII Student Conference on Latin America, Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, April 3-4, 1987.

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

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Paper No. 87-11

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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.¹ 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

outcome increases as the number of actors making a move approaches k , from both sides. (Przeworski 1986: 54-55)

Przeworski notes that in his model, actors' choices are crucially affected by expectations of success. When the liberalization game is under way and coalition building begins in earnest, no position is "safe" for any player, given the very high stakes of this game (that is, the form of the political regime itself, and, in our case, the future vote-getting potential of civilian, proauthoritarian politicians). "What this analysis implies, therefore, is that interests may be quite stable throughout the process but that they will be a poor predictor of behavior when expectations of success shift rapidly" (p. 55). In other words, actors (politicians) may have political or ideological priorities that they will immediately drop when confronted with changing expectations of success or failure ("flip-flopping," in the North American political vernacular, and a "banality of practical politics" explicitly recognized by Collier and Norden). In light of this reality, Przeworski notes, "group analysis may generate weak predictions when groups are identified only by their interests" (p. 55).

Table 1
Przeworski's "Objective Signals" of an Imminent Division within the Ruling Bloc

Signal	Relevance to Brazil, 1984-85
Imminent death of regime founder	None
Strong foreign pressures to reform	None: relevant in 1970s
Mechanism of succession not institutionalized	Some relevance: Gen. Figueiredo fails to "impose" successor, as did his predecessor
Economic crisis	Relevant: recovery under way, but regime still harshly criticized
Loss of legitimacy, as in mass unrest	Very relevant: widespread mobilization against indirect elections

It is fairly easy for us to accept that group interests are poor predictors of actors' behavior once the liberalization game has been initiated. But how does the game begin in the first place?

Przeworski points to two types of "signals" that can start the game. One type is "putschist," meaning "rumors that someone will make a move." Another type consists of "objective" signals, meaning that *all* interested actors "have good grounds to expect that some conflict within the ruling bloc will arise" (p. 55). Przeworski offers several examples, summarized in Table 1, of what might be seen as objective signals.

Either putschist or objective signals may indicate that the liberalization game is about to begin. We may date the actual beginning of the game from the moment in which key actors within the ruling bloc begin to seek support among actors who have been excluded from political life under the authoritarian regime. This phenomenon, according to Przeworski, is "always" present in any political opening and represents "the first critical threshold in the transition to democracy" (p. 56).

At this point the game of coalition-building begins, and authoritarian elites must calculate their strategy in terms of their relative expectations of success. Should they continue to support the authoritarian regime, or defect from it in the hopes of building a more viable political future (for themselves, of course)? The game does not necessarily conclude with the instauration of a democratic regime, although this was the case in Brazil in 1985.

The Two Games in Brazil

Przeworski's model of strategic calculus provides a very useful analytic framework from which to sketch the demise of the Brazilian authoritarian regime. It is particularly useful for describing the game of political maneuvering that went on in Brazil between May and November 1984. However, this game, which was played exclusively by political and military elites, was preceded by yet another game, which saw the participation of civil society. This earlier game also fits into Przeworski's model in the form of an "objective signal." I am referring here to the *diretas já* campaign, the mass mobilization in favor of direct elections which took place from January to April 1984.

In the remainder of this essay, I will describe the essence of these two political "games" played in Brazil in 1984. The first game was played (generally) at the level of the masses.² The second represented a return to more traditionally Brazilian political norms and was played within the confines of the professional political class. The outcome of the first game crucially affected the conduct of the second, and both contributed to the end of the authoritarian regime. I will argue that the opposition's eventual victory can be largely attributed to the change in the nature of the political game.

Game One: Mass Mobilization

With very few exceptions, mass mobilizations have not been a feature of twentieth-century Brazilian politics.³ This was especially true in the climate of generalized depoliticization that ensued after the military imposed the repressive Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5) in 1968. This decree drastically curtailed the activities of the opposition until the Act's abolition at the end of the Geisel government (1974-1979). Beginning with the São Paulo strikes of 1978, civil society slowly began to reclaim its right to freedom of assembly, although often paying a heavy price. By the time of the 1982 electoral campaign, opposition leaders were openly mobilizing the popular sectors against the military regime. But there was no precedent under the military regime for the *diretas já* campaign of early 1984. Both in terms of numbers and of sheer political relevance, the 1984 mass mobilizations were unprecedented in Brazilian history.

The campaign for direct elections originated within the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB), the largest opposition party. In December 1983, leaders of the São Paulo PMDB (Gov. André Franco Montoro, Sen. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and federal deputy and national party president Ulysses Guimarães) invited representatives from the three other opposition parties to begin plotting a strategy for the campaign, which would last from January to April 1984. On April 25, the national Chamber of Deputies was scheduled to vote on the proposed Dante de Oliveira Amendment, which would reestablish direct elections for the presidency for the first time since 1960. Because the government party (the PDS) controlled a simple majority (361 PDS to 325 opposition delegates) in the Electoral College, opposition leaders reasoned that only direct elections would result in a real transition to democracy. In the event of direct elections, it was widely assumed that any government candidate, except perhaps for the liberal Vice-President of the Republic, Aureliano Chaves, would lose.

The *diretas já* campaign was impressive and inspiring from the day of its inception, January 12, 1984, in the southern city of Curitiba. Two weeks later, almost a quarter of a million people rallied in São Paulo. Hundreds of demonstrations were held throughout the country in February and March. The campaign was clearly something new and exciting for Brazil--the populace relished the participation, the media relished the spectacle, and the politicians relished the populace and the media. The country's most popular t-shirts were emblazoned with the words "*diretas já*" and "*eu quero votar pra presidente*" ("I want to vote for president"). Marchers wore the national colors, green and yellow, and hoisted the national flag--indeed, the opposition's campaign had strong patriotic overtones. The campaign wound up with enormous demonstrations of over one million people each in Rio (April 10) and São Paulo (April 16).

Despite these apparent successes, the campaign did not achieve its stated objective. On April 25, the Dante de Oliveira Amendment failed to muster the necessary two-thirds of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies. Although supported by 62 percent of the legislators, the amendment still lacked twenty-two votes.

The *diretas já* campaign ended testily, as the government imposed a state of emergency in Brasília on the day of the vote. Opposition activists in Brasília, crushed by the defeat of the bid for direct elections, suffered the additional ignominy of being jailed simply for wearing the national colors. Unbeknownst to them, perhaps, this was to be the military regime's last great show of force. We may date the end of Game One, the game of mass mobilization, as April 25, 1984.

It would be incorrect to infer from the defeat of the Dante de Oliveira Amendment that the opposition had "lost" the mobilization game. As Mainwaring (1986: 160) points out, the *diretas já* campaign achieved two things: it gave the opposition a sense of confidence unknown since 1968, and it provoked a deep crisis in the ruling bloc. Faced with an unprecedented mobilization on the part of the Brazilian people, and faced with opinion polls that showed the population nearly unanimous in its support for *diretas*, many PDS politicians began to reconsider their political futures. Most important among these was Vice-President Chaves, who announced his support for direct elections on February 8. It became a disastrous political liability to oppose direct elections. In fact, by the time of the April 25 roll call, only 65 of the 235 PDS deputies had the courage to do so. Of the rest, 3 abstained, 55 voted in favor of direct elections, and 112 were absent (Lamounier and Meneguello 1986: 125).

The *diretas já* campaign had real, tangible effects. The opposition had invented a marvelous mechanism by which to raise the political stakes for those civilian politicians who stood with the military government. Although it appeared that indirect elections would still be held, the opposition had succeeded in stripping the last vestiges of legitimacy from the authoritarian regime. The Przeworski model suggests that mass unrest will provoke a "division within the ruling bloc." This is exactly what happened in Brazil in mid-1984.

Game Two: Elite Conciliation

The mobilization for direct elections was not spontaneous, of course. Although it drew its primary strength from the masses, the campaign was coordinated by several opposition politicians (Montoro, Ulysses, governor of Rio de Janeiro Leonel Brizola, Worker's Party president Lula, among others) who clearly had personal interests in the holding of direct popular elections. These were politicians who thrived on mass politics. In contrast, Tancredo Neves, then the

governor of Minas Gerais state, was not such a politician. Although Tancredo openly supported *diretas já* and appeared at several major rallies, he privately considered the campaign to be utopian. His preferred style of politics "was better suited to behind-the-scenes negotiations with political and military elites than to mobilization of the masses" (Mainwaring 1986: 168). In other words, Tancredo was a talented practitioner of the oldest and most important game in Brazilian politics: "*conciliação das elites*" (elite conciliation). When Game Two began in earnest on April 25, 1984, Tancredo became its outstanding player within weeks.

Immediately after the defeat of the direct elections amendment, key opposition figures became resigned to the fact that the presidential succession would now be played out in the Electoral College. To win the election, a "consensus" candidate was needed, a moderate figure who could unite the opposition, pacify the military, and perhaps win some PDS votes in the Electoral College. Tancredo Neves appeared to be such a candidate; he had vast governmental experience and a record of twenty years of solid opposition to the military regime, yet he was considered the most moderate of the major figures within the PMDB.

As Tancredo's name began to circulate widely, the opposition was also gaining from developments on the other side of the fence. It appeared that the corrupt and unpopular former governor of São Paulo, Paulo Maluf, was poised to capture the PDS nomination. Maluf was a kind of anti-Tancredo; he too stood to benefit from indirect elections (he firmly and consistently opposed *diretas*), yet cynics thought his success resulted more from his enormous personal war chest than from any particular worth or competence as a candidate. His nomination would be anathema to moderate sectors within his party.

The first stage (April-July 1984) of Game Two was played by civilian politicians. The first move in this game was made by eight PDS governors from the Northeast, who collectively announced their support for Tancredo on April 27. Tancredo had not yet announced his candidacy (ibid.: 170). Thus began the Neves coalition, although at the outset Tancredo himself took no public role in the coalition building, leaving this to other PMDB leaders. Also at about this time, Senator José Sarney of Maranhão, the president of the PDS who opposed the nomination of Maluf, speculated on national television that Tancredo might be an acceptable "*candidato de conciliação*." A month later, on June 11, Sarney, confronted by the imminent nomination of Maluf, made the spectacular gesture of resigning the presidency of the PDS. Sarney was soon followed by other PDS luminaries, including Sens. Jorge Bornhausen and Marco Maciel. These and other deserters formed a new party called the Liberal Front, which sapped the reeling PDS of much of its best talent, as well as much of its perceived voting strength in the Electoral College.

Meanwhile, in the PMDB camp, unity was building around the candidacy of Tancredo Neves. On June 19, nine other opposition governors met in São Paulo to persuade Tancredo to announce his candidacy. Three days later, he did so. Within the PMDB, the final obstacle to his endorsement was removed on June 29, when Ulysses Guimarães, under pressure from Montoro and others, agreed to drop his own presidential ambitions in favor of Tancredo. Thus, by the end of June, there were three major divisions in the political elite. The PMDB (and to a lesser extent, the smaller opposition parties) had coalesced around Tancredo. The much-weakened PDS continued its ill-fated drive toward the nomination of Maluf. In the center, so to speak, the Liberal Front was leaning strongly toward an official endorsement of Neves. Uncommitted politicians were playing a game of musical chairs.

By the end of July, the major coalitions had largely stabilized. The last key player to take sides was Vice-President Aureliano Chaves, who had been lobbied by Liberal Front members since early June to declare his support for Tancredo. On July 2, Aureliano rejected the plea of former president Gen. Ernesto Geisel (who had earlier pushed Chaves to run for the presidency) for a reunification of the PDS. Over the next week, Aureliano negotiated with his home-state rival Tancredo, demanding guarantees for Liberal Front representation in a Neves cabinet. Tancredo agreed to the vice-president's demands on July 10. As July ended, the Liberal Front joined in a Democratic Alliance with the PMDB, and José Sarney became Tancredo's running mate. Brazilian politics had witnessed a major realignment in the three months since April 25. This was the end of the first stage of Game Two.

The second stage (August to November 1984) of Game Two was played by Tancredo Neves, now the confident captain of the Democratic Alliance, and the armed forces. Tancredo's aim was to prevent a coup or "military veto" of his candidacy, and he succeeded. Once again he was aided by the shifting correlation of forces within the PDS. On August 11, Maluf captured the PDS nomination, as everyone knew he would. At this point, the supporters of Mario Andreazza, the minister of the interior defeated at the convention by Maluf, threw their support to Tancredo. When Délio Jardim de Mattos, the minister of the air force, called the PDS dissidents "traitors," the PDS governor of Bahía, Antônio Carlos Magalhães, responded that the real "traitor" was Délio, who supported the "corrupt" Maluf. Since 1964, no one had ever publicly spoken to a military minister in this way. Governor Magalhães had struck an important symbolic blow against the military and its candidate, a blow that worked in favor of Tancredo. Maluf's prestige was now at an all-time low. His candidacy was mortally wounded after Magalhães's September 4 remark, and it seemed almost unpatriotic to support Maluf thereafter.

The last remaining battle for Tancredo was to negotiate directly with the military in order to forestall a coup. How Tancredo succeeded at this is only partially known, as many of his meetings with military officers were kept secret. What is known is that he held lengthy discussions with President Figueiredo, Army Minister Walter Pires, and with Gen. Octávio Medeiros, head of the National Information Service (SNI). Tancredo also met with the influential former president Geisel, and was photographed in an embrace with Geisel upon leaving the general's home.

Meanwhile, army sectors in Brasília were probably behind a propaganda campaign linking Tancredo to the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). If a coup did come, it was expected to be led by the extremist general in command of the Federal District garrison, Gen. Newton Cruz. General Cruz raised eyebrows in mid-October by planning exercises featuring a mock defense of the Planalto. In Tancredo's view, a successful transition depended on the neutralization of General Cruz. While Ulysses Guimarães urged leaders of civil society to publicly discourage a coup, Tancredo continued to meet secretly with high-ranking officers in all the service branches.

On November 20, the Army High Command met and removed Gen. Newton Cruz from the military command of the Planalto, transferring him to an innocuous bureaucratic post. This action defused the last rumors of a military coup. Tancredo Neves, who now controlled a majority in the 686-member Electoral College scheduled to meet in January, had crossed the final hurdle between him and the presidency. True to his reputation, he had masterfully effected a "conciliation among elites," first among civilian politicians (stage one), then among the armed forces (stage two). Tancredo Neves defeated Paulo Maluf by 480 votes to 180 votes in the Electoral College on January 15, 1985.

The Two Games in Review

Having described in brief how Game One (mass mobilization) and Game Two (elite conciliation) were played out, I would now like to comment on three aspects of the games. First, I shall discuss how the initiation of the 1984-1985 transition is compatible with Adam Przeworski's model, and I shall bring a second theory of collective action to bear upon his work. Second, I shall review and compare the basic characteristics of Games One and Two. Finally, I shall discuss the particular results of the two games in the context of the 1984 realignment of political forces in Brazil.

First, Przeworski's model is attentive not only to the question of how political transitions begin but also to the dynamic period of shifting coalitions that follows. Przeworski mentions both putschist signals and objective signals that may start the game. A typical example of the putschist variety would be Aureliano Chaves's declaration, in early February 1984, that he stood by the goals

