Discussion Questions (10/18)

Discussion Questions: (submitted by Alexandra)

1. Montero argues that as a result of “the fragmentation of legislative politics and the indeterminacy of who is in government” (58) disorients Brazilians in their choices of political representation. One of the indicators of such a trend is the high number of absentee ballots and of blank ballots especially between 1986 and 1998. Since then “turnout rates have fallen steadily,”(59) what does this say about Brazilians’ trust in their political system and what is the situation and turnout rate at this time. Also, has Lula been successful in mobilizing the electoral body?

2. The PT has usually been known and portrayed as a “model of the disciplined and participatory party,” (67) a party whose politics have had to been molded to the economic and social situation/restrictions embedded in Brazilian culture, could this re-shaping and possible damage to the image of the party (corruption scandals) have an effect in future success of the PT and in the process of democracy.

3. Brazilian history has proved that “with low electoral thresholds, an open-list proportional representation system, and frequent switching of parties by politicians, Brazil has a system that is one of the most volatile in the world” (53) Do you think that this characterization of the system forecasts, as a result of recent scandals surrounding Lula, a likelihood of separation in the PT into two different factions, the lulistas and the petistas?

4. Many have argued that the system in Brazilian politics known as filogismo: “mixture of old-fashioned clientelism and pork-barrel politics”(64) has increased over time and can be “associated with an evolution in presidential-legislative relations in a more parliamentary direction” (64). In your opinion, does this illustrate a fact that has to be accepted and worked around for the system to advance in a democratic way in Brazil?

Discussion Questions: (submitted by Ale)

1. Mainwaring argues that “Brazilian federalism facilitates the representation of a large number of parties because key resources are distributed at the local or state level. Politicians need not to belong to a large national party in order to gain access to such resources” (130). Taking this into consideration, is the federalist model of Brazil benefiting partisanship? Would other models of government such as a democratic constitutional republic be more appropriate for Brazil?

2. Mainwaring clearly explains that institutionalized parties have “relatively stable patterns of party competition”, “deep roots in society”, and “legitimacy” (88-89), all of which are lacking in Brazil’s political parties. He also mentions that “even though in presidential systems there is almost inevitably some disjunction between a party’s congressional and presidential votes, [but that] the magnitude in Brazil was extraordinary
in 1986, 1989, and 1990” (110). What accounts for the staggering vote differential between the executive and the legislative?

3. In his analysis of the weakness of institutionalization in Brazil’s political parties, Mainwaring is interested in looking at the ideological distance between parties, as another measure of the party system in Brazil. He follows Sani and Sartori measures for ideological distance: a modified version of mass-level survey data where he studies political elites, ordinal similarity and overlap. Do you consider that the use of these measures is appropriate when the case of Brazil’s politics reflects high volatility, weak party identification and extreme multipartism?

4. In his article Mainwaring states how the political parties in Brazil are poorly institutionalized. How does the weak institutionalization interact with patronage? Does it limit it or does it promote it?

5. On page 92 Mainwaring says that “social movements sometimes overshadowed parties as means of channeling opposition” and that “many activists became involved primarily in party politics and withdrew from engagement in social movements”. With this in mind, how do you account for the rather weak link between social groups and political parties, even when there are some affinities between the two?

**Discussion Questions:** (submitted by Mike)

1. In the authors’ discussion of Satori’s assessment of the Brazilian situation on page 159, they present data rejecting the concept that politicians frequently vote against the party line and have insufficient party discipline. They do not address the issue of changing parties. Does the fact that many politicians change parties lessen the degree of party discipline or is it irrelevant to the authors’ argument?

2. On pages 157-158, the authors discuss the possibility that the president might actually not be sending its true agenda to the legislature because of the opposition that these policies would face. They also mention the importance of building coalitions in order to be able to obtain approval of their agendas. In these coalitions, they necessarily relinquish a certain amount of power to the participating parties. If the executive is not able to get its agenda approved without making serious adjustments even before the legislation is proposed, does this seriously weaken the argument that the president has significant control over legislation?

3. The authors claim that because there is a high degree of party discipline, it isn’t necessary to obtain the support of individual politicians before each vote. Instead, it is only necessary to build a strong coalition government to ensure continued acceptance of an agenda. Do the corruption scandals under Lula refute this theory, or can these scandals be attributed to the lack of a fair distribution of positions of power within the government and therefore support the theory of party coherence?

4. The authors make it very clear that the executive branch has a significant degree of
power over the legislative branch, both in its ability to set the agenda and demand urgency in bringing bills for a vote as well as its ability to essentially pass over the legislature through its use of provisional decrees. Also, the executive is able to have power over the legislature by using its extensive powers of appointment and patronage to build a coalition. Is a strong executive necessary to govern effectively in a multiparty government?