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Anti-corruption, Political Backlash, and Brazil's Illiberal Turn

ABSTRACT This article investigates how Brazil's massive anti-corruption surge, epitomized by the criminal investigation known as Operation Car Wash, contributed to rising illiberalism. Drawing on an analysis of the political dynamics of anti-corruption in the last decades, we explore two interrelated mechanisms. The first is the delegitimization of political elites: by imposing severe costs on once-powerful political actors, the investigation opened space for new forces to arise, culminating in the election of Jair Bolsonaro, whose presidency tested the resilience of the country's liberal institutions. The second is political backlash: both emerging and established actors cooperated to curb the independence and powers of oversight institutions, including those that had spearheaded the anti-corruption surge. While recognizing that other factors also shaped this outcome, we argue that illiberalism was, to an important extent, an unanticipated consequence of the anti-corruption drive—yet this illiberal potential ultimately could not be fully weaponized due to political and institutional constraints. Our findings contribute to debates on the consequences of anti-corruption, providing nuance on the conditions under which it may help unleash illiberal forces. **KEYWORDS** anti-corruption, illiberalism, Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, political backlash

The links between anti-corruption and illiberalism are not new in Brazil. In 1930, Getúlio Vargas led a *coup d'état* under allegations of electoral fraud and remained in power for 15 years, first as a provisional president and later as full-fledged dictator. Afterward, the tables turned. As Brazil experienced democracy for the first time, starting in the 1940s, Vargas was elected president and became himself a target of corruption allegations by the media and the opposition. Allegedly adrift in a “sea of mud” and politically isolated, he committed suicide in 1954. Ten years later, it was the armed forces' turn to launch a military regime (which would last 21 years), also partially justified on the premise of fighting corruption.

But this is only part of the story. Especially since the transition away from authoritarianism in the 1980s, anti-corruption in Brazil often advanced alongside liberal values and institutions. Recurring corruption scandals over the following decades helped spur reforms that empowered several oversight institutions and bolstered governmental transparency. Shaped by civil society engagement, media scrutiny, and electoral competition, this heightened responsiveness to the public underscores the democratic character anti-corruption largely assumed as Brazil moved past its illiberal legacies in the 1990s and 2000s (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b; Melo and Pereira 2013).

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In effect, as Brazil started the 2010s there was reason for hope. Not only did democracy seem robust, but also new reforms were being enacted that expanded the anti-corruption arsenal, and many institutions became increasingly willing to enforce the existing laws. Several cabinet members were dismissed at the first sight of impropriety, and federal-level politicians were convicted in the courts. Epitomizing it all was the massive Operação Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash, OLJ), a criminal investigation into corruption and money laundering that started in 2014 and reached into the highest echelons of government and some of the country's largest companies, raising hopes that a new era of accountability had arrived in Brazil.

By the decade's end, however, the picture looked decidedly different. Four years into OLJ, Brazil elected far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro, whose antiestablishment rhetoric resonated widely. Once in power, he pushed hard to undermine the workings of several oversight institutions, packed the government with military personnel, repeatedly questioned the reliability of the voting system, and ultimately resisted a peaceful transfer of power after his electoral defeat. Seemingly gone, the links between anti-corruption and illiberalism re-emerged in the wake of the country's largest corruption crackdown. Our purpose in this article is to provide an exploratory account of how this came to pass, addressing how anti-corruption, so recently a powerful liberal force in Brazil, came to drive the country in the opposite direction.

We argue that the anti-corruption surge represented by OLJ helped foster an environment that welcomed illiberal forces in Brazil due to two interrelated factors. The first is the delegitimization of political elites. As OLJ tarnished the most relevant political forces until then with corruption, it opened space for the ascent of previously uncompetitive actors who voiced ideologies representing a break from Brazil's recent liberal past. The second is political backlash, whereby both new and established political actors cooperated to curb the powers of oversight institutions, including those that had led the anti-corruption surge. In this sense, we suggest that illiberalism was, to a significant extent, an unanticipated consequence of the anti-corruption surge.

This article proceeds as follows. We first outline our theoretical argument, focusing on exploratory mechanisms linking anti-corruption and illiberalism. We then trace the origins and workings of the anti-corruption surge represented by OLJ. We next show how OLJ paved the way for Brazil's illiberal turn and examine its main features. We conclude with an account of the seemingly divergent paths of anti-corruption and liberalism in Brazil's political institutions after Jair Bolsonaro's failure to get re-elected.

DELEGITIMIZATION AND BACKLASH

This section outlines the two mechanisms—delegitimization of political elites and backlash—that structure our exploration of the Brazilian case and yield broader theoretical insights into the conditions under which anti-corruption can foster illiberalism. We define the *delegitimization* of political elites as a process whereby most established powerful actors in a country come to be severely distrusted by the public at large. The motto of Argentine protestors during the economic crisis of the early

2000s, *iQue se vayan todos!* (All should go!), illustrates this dynamic. Thus it refers to a fall from grace not of a single party, administration, or leader, but of a significant segment of the most relevant political forces in a country, including those in the opposition. Given the central role of political parties in competitive regimes, this process largely overlaps with a “disillusionment with political parties *in general*, not just with the parties in power” (Gold and Mische 2024, 1660, emphasis in the original) in democracies.

Corruption revelations—especially when credible, widespread, and coupled with economic decline or high levels of insecurity—can catalyze elite delegitimization. In Brazil, OLJ epitomized this dynamic: an anti-corruption surge led by independent prosecutors with ample media coverage revealed a vast corruption network that had diverted billions of dollars from public coffers to the benefit of nearly all relevant political forces, for decades, amid severe economic deterioration. Unsurprisingly, this paved the way for what Fuks, Ribeiro, and Borba (2020) called “generalized antipartisanship” in the 2018 presidential elections, which brought far-right Jair Bolsonaro to power after four years of OLJ prosecutions.

In turn, political *backlash* refers to the demobilization of anti-corruption efforts, including changes in key personnel and measures limiting the powers and independence of oversight institutions. Its main purpose is the neutralization of political risks, as perceived by political elites, arising from anti-corruption institutions and actors beyond their control. There is, in fact, a significant literature on how ambitious anti-corruption efforts by autonomous criminal justice systems have led to blowback, including documented episodes in Italy, Indonesia, Peru, and Romania (Butt 2011; della Porta and Vannucci 2007; González-Ocantos et al. 2023; Mungiu-Pippidi 2018).

Both the delegitimization of political elites and political backlash may contribute to rising illiberalism by fueling executive aggrandizement—the first by providing a political opening for populist and anti-establishment actors to seize power in face of disorganized oppositions; the second, by generating incentives to reduce the independence of oversight institutions. Highlighting how backlash can foster illiberalism is crucial because events and variables that are often identifiers of illiberalism, such as curtailing judicial independence and powers, are also key indicators of political backlash.

If this argument is correct, two implications inspired by our exploration of the Brazilian case follow. First, because it often takes broad coalitions to neutralize autonomous anti-corruption agencies, political backlash does not necessarily lead to the weaponization of anti-corruption against an illiberal leader’s opponents. In fact, while Jair Bolsonaro contributed to the pushback against the anti-corruption apparatus, he was never able to properly instrumentalize it to go after his adversaries, as other authoritarian populist leaders did. This was because the political backlash was not only of Bolsonaro’s making; several other political forces contributed. Second, because of political backlash, anti-corruption and illiberalism are expected to diverge once an authoritarian populist leader leaves office. While illiberalism may ebb, anti-corruption may face greater challenges to bouncing back—that is, even if illiberalism recedes, the backlash may continue. Once Bolsonaro left office, anti-corruption did not improve as

other policy areas (such as health care) did, suggesting that the backlash against anti-corruption was more resistant to change than other illiberal policies pursued by his administration.

THE ANTI-CORRUPTION SURGE AND THE DELEGITIMIZATION OF POLITICAL ELITES

Setting the Stage

For the most part, anti-corruption has been a democratic driving force in Brazilian politics since the transition away from authoritarianism in the 1980s. As all presidential administrations engaged in their share of corruption, exposing it has been a strategy ingrained in political competition, for both opponents and coalition partners, that helped hold a powerful executive in check. Also, as civil society and the media prioritized this topic, and various constitutional mandates and international commitments pointed in that same direction, there have been substantive incentives for nearly all administrations to improve the anti-corruption apparatus over the past decades in Brazil (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b; Melo and Pereira 2013).

For instance, in the early 1990s, after two different corruption scandals led to the impeachment of the first democratically elected president since the end of military rule, Fernando Collor de Mello, and to the resignation of 11 congressmembers, a flurry of reforms took place on topics such as administrative improbity, public procurement, and campaign finance (Fleischer 1996). Later, as the center-left Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, PT) became the main opponent to the two presidencies of the center-right Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Brazilian Social Democratic Party, PSDB) between 1995 and 2002, it worked hard to expose corruption in the administration, which then enacted reforms on issues such as money laundering and fiscal transparency. When the PT took the presidency, in 2003, it too was targeted by corruption allegations. In turn, it also contributed to better accountability, by enhancing the autonomy and capacity of oversight institutions such as the federal public prosecutors' office and the federal police, among other measures (Arantes 2011; Da Ros and Taylor 2022b).

These reforms took place despite Brazil's coalitional presidentialism, which is characterized by extreme party fragmentation and the clientelist nature of several of its parties (Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2018). Even though the more programmatic PT and PSDB were the two major contenders in all presidential elections between 1994 and 2014, they never achieved legislative majorities themselves, never presided over the Federal Senate, and only occasionally presided over the Chamber of Deputies. For the most part, these key legislative positions were held by center-right and right-wing yet ideologically malleable parties such as the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (Democratic Brazilian Movement, MDB), União Brasil (Brazil Union, UB) and Progressistas (Progressives, PP).¹ Predictably, many corruption scandals since redemocratization involved coalition management, whereby parties such as MDB, UB, PP and Jair Bolsonaro's current Partido Liberal (Liberal Party, PL) provided legislative support for various presidential administrations in exchange for access to the vast developmental

apparatus of the Brazilian federal government (Bersch, Felix, and Taylor 2023; Da Ros and Taylor 2022b; Taylor 2020).

Still, anti-corruption reforms did occur even in internal congressional matters, including improvements in the transparency of the budgetary process (Praça and Taylor 2014). Likewise, constitutional mandates incentivized numerous new merit-based hires and better wages in the federal bureaucracy, which gradually became more professionalized. Working under the radar and at times in conjunction with international partners, this renewed bureaucracy enacted a variety of small-bore anti-corruption reforms, including new public procurement procedures, the use of digital technologies to detect irregularities in public works, and the establishment of courts specializing in money laundering, among many others (Bersch 2016; Madeira and Geliski 2024; Odilla 2025; Vilaça 2024).

In this process, presidents, congressmembers, and bureaucrats of various ideological leanings helped enact a plethora of major and minor reforms that gradually improved the landscape of corruption control over the 1990s and 2000s in Brazil, improving oversight and the enforcement of anti-corruption policies. Over decades, thousands of public works worth dozens of billions of dollars were audited at the federal level; thousands of federal civil servants were expelled from office for wrongdoing; hundreds of special investigations were undertaken by the federal police; and thousands of civil and criminal cases regarding corruption were brought to the federal courts (Arantes 2011; Londero 2021; Odilla 2020).

As the country entered the 2010s, however, a widespread perception took hold that the national political and economic elites remained impervious to this growing anti-corruption apparatus. Many cases dealt with petty corruption or, at best, with local-level elites. Meanwhile, most grand corruption cases at the federal level moved far too slowly or were dismissed before consequential sanctions were enforced. In effect, despite the recurring nature of the topic, legal sanctions did not credibly deter national elites (Taylor and Buranelli 2007).

This picture changed in the 2010s. While OLJ was surely the main event and represented an anti-corruption surge like never before (or since) in Brazilian history, it was preceded by three preludes.

The first was stronger social mobilization around anti-corruption, as exemplified by a campaign that collected over 1.5 million signatures and led to a 2010 law that expanded the time and conditions under which individuals with prior convictions are banned from running for office (Carmo 2023). It also included the mass street protests of 2013, which, while dispersed in their agendas, criticized overspending in the preparation for upcoming events like the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, and a legislative proposal, eventually defeated, that aimed to curb public prosecutors' investigative powers (Alonso and Mische 2017; Tatagiba and Galvão 2019).

The second prelude was the presidency, starting in 2011, of Dilma Rousseff, who took a hard-line approach to corruption. She dismissed numerous cabinet members accused of wrongdoing, and advanced several reforms that further empowered oversight institutions. This included stronger anti-money-laundering legislation and new laws on access to information, antitrust, and conflict of interest. Also, amid the 2013 street protests,

Rousseff's administration enacted laws on criminal organizations and anti-corruption: the former regulated plea-bargain agreements in Brazilian law, while the later introduced the possibility of leniency agreements for corporations implicated in corruption—both pivotal for OLJ's advances from 2014 on (Araújo, Costa, and Fittipaldi 2016; Rodrigues 2025).

The third prelude was the Mensalão trial (2012–2013), which stemmed from a 2005 scandal during the PT's first presidency in which coalition partners (PP, PL, and others) were found to have traded legislative support for bribes from government officials. While the scandal was itself consequential because it cost the PT much of the anti-corruption halo it had cultivated since its time in the opposition, the trial was perhaps even more so. Since it involved sitting federal authorities (congressmen), the case was tried in the Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal, STF), which for the first time convicted influential politicians, including major PT figures such as former presidential chief of staff José Dirceu, former party president José Genoíno, and former president of the Chamber of Deputies João Paulo Cunha (Michener and Pereira 2016). This was a turning point, signaling that Brazil's top court might be more receptive to anti-corruption cases in the future. OLJ began in early 2014, just as the STF ruled on the last appeals of Mensalão (Trombini 2022).

From Prelude to Surge

To grasp OLJ's impact on Brazilian politics, consider this. Over nearly seven years, task forces prosecuting cases within the scope of the investigation indicted five presidents, five presidents of the Federal Senate, seven presidents of the Chamber of Deputies, three runner-up presidential candidates, seven presidential chiefs of staff, two finance ministers, eleven state governors, and dozens of senators and federal and state representatives, spanning Brazil's three main political parties since the late 1980s (PT, PSDB, and MDB) and various smaller coalition parties (like PP).

In addition to political elites, dozens of business executives were indicted and arrested, especially from construction companies such as Odebrecht, Camargo Corrêa, Andrade Gutierrez, Queiroz Galvão, and OAS, which had taken part in all sorts of public infrastructure projects (roads, hydroelectrical plants, oil refineries, and so on) for decades. Most of these companies had historical ties to the Brazilian state from before the current democratic era, back to the military regime and earlier (Campos 2021). But OLJ also targeted newer construction companies (like UTC, Engevix, and Sete Brasil) that had expanded through generous contracts with state-owned oil company Petrobras, Brazil's largest company and the investigation's central focus. In the early 2010s, massive oil discoveries in the pre-salt layer made Petrobras one of the largest companies (by market capitalization) in the world, allowing it to contract both well-established and new suppliers. In 2015, UTC's president became the first major shareholder to sign a plea bargain with prosecutors, corroborating earlier agreements and testimony that for decades a cartel of construction firms had secured overpriced Petrobras contracts in exchange for bribes and campaign contributions to elected officials and their high-ranking appointees. And because companies such as Odebrecht operated across Latin America, OLJ's evidence

triggered investigations across the region, in some cases resulting in prosecutions as politically consequential as the ones in Brazil (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b; González-Ocantos et al. 2023).

Thus OLJ was a true watershed in Brazilian politics. The scale of corruption it unveiled, affecting seemingly all relevant political forces until then, helped bring anti-corruption to the top of the public agenda. While most previous scandals had revolved around a few facts and actors, OLJ generated years of near-weekly revelations that fostered the perception of corruption as having been integral to the functioning of Brazilian politics for decades. And this was not just any anti-corruption surge but a judicial one. Previous scandals were mainly driven by media and congressional inquiries, making their resolutions predominantly political, but this time the efforts were spearheaded by largely autonomous prosecutors and judges, and some of the possible sanctions were much more severe. By placing criminal law at the forefront of corruption control, OLJ cast an increasingly credible shadow of prison, rather than the mere loss of office, over dozens of public officials, for years (Mota Prado and Machado 2021).

But how did all this come to pass? Given its scale, no single factor accounts for the emergence and development of OLJ over the years in Brazil. Still, addressing this question matters because it helps explain how the investigation eventually led to Brazil's illiberal turn. Building on previous research (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b), we identified three main explanations.

1. Institutional capacity. In addition to various incremental improvements in the anti-corruption apparatus over previous decades, context-specific capacities mattered. Much of this pertains to the place where OLJ started: Curitiba, the capital and most populous city of the relatively prosperous state of Paraná, in south Brazil. There, federal law enforcement agencies had long been building unparalleled expertise and coordination in complex money laundering investigations. Given its condition as a tri-border region, several money laundering cases linked to smuggling, drug trafficking, organized crime, and tax evasion, and of course corruption, were often investigated and tried there before OLJ.

Already in 2001, for instance, the federal police of Paraná were responsible for about half of all money laundering investigations in Brazil. Also, in 2003, the federal court of Curitiba was designated as one of the first in the country to include a judgeship specializing in money laundering crimes. For years, one of the rising stars of a new generation of federal judges specializing in financial crimes, Sergio Moro, worked there. Having overseen money laundering investigations since the 2000s and worked as an assistant judge in the STF during the Mensalão trial, Judge Moro quickly became one of the main public faces of OLJ. From March 2014, he presided over the court where the investigations officially started and handled many of its most consequential cases, including those that led to the convictions of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT) and former Chamber of Deputies president Eduardo Cunha (MDB).

The federal public prosecutors' office in Curitiba had also developed considerable experience in such cases. In the early 2000s, it created one of the first prosecutorial task forces in Brazil to investigate the Banestado money laundering case. Many prosecutors

who worked in this task force would later take part in the OLJ. In 2004, this investigation produced the first known plea bargain in Brazil, with money launderer Alberto Youssef, a recurring figure in various scandals who would also resurface in OLJ.

In addition to the favorable conditions in Curitiba, other relevant capacities were added to the investigation as it unfolded. Soon after the investigation started, for instance, Judge Moro's court was cleared of all other cases to enable an exclusive focus on OLJ. Prosecutorial task forces were formed to work on different branches of the investigation across the country, including in Brasília (focusing on sitting politicians who could only be tried before the STF), Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, alongside the original task force in Curitiba. As a result, about 5% of all Brazilian federal prosecutors participated in an OLJ task force at some point, along with members of other oversight institutions (such as the federal police and the revenue service). Ultimately, because these task forces operated with relative autonomy, differences emerged in their priorities, the pace of their investigations, and the extent of their cooperation with other institutions.

2. Strategy. While these institutional capacities enabled prosecutors and judges to act, their choices mattered just as much. One choice was the legal framing of the investigation. While this is not always acknowledged, OLJ did not start as an investigation into corruption per se but into money laundering, building precisely on the capacities developed for years in Curitiba's federal law enforcement agencies. In fact, it was through the investigation of different groups of money launderers that federal prosecutors came across corruption in early 2014.

While digging into a money laundering scheme involving a money-exchange store at a gas station in Brasília (where, by the way, there was no car wash), a police officer identified the voice of money launderer Alberto Youssef in a wiretap. Through this, the investigators came across former Petrobras director Paulo Roberto Costa. Once arrested, he signed the first of OLJ's plea bargains, detailing how a cartel of construction companies had won decades of billion-dollar Petrobras contracts by bribing bureaucrats, such as himself, and the politicians who had appointed them; the resulting money was laundered by individuals such as Alberto Youssef and later used to illegally finance political campaigns. But Paulo Roberto Costa's plea bargain was just the first of hundreds signed by various branches of the OLJ.

In fact, the aggressive use of plea bargains and leniency agreements was another integral part of the prosecutors' strategy. While plea bargains apply to individuals in criminal cases, leniency agreements involve companies facing potential fines from civil and administrative proceedings. Having been more clearly introduced into Brazilian law in 2013, just a year before OLJ started, they offered favorable conditions to defendants in exchange for evidence that implicated other participants of corruption schemes. Between 2014 and 2018, more than 400 plea bargains were signed within OLJ. In turn, over 30 leniency agreements were signed until 2020, amounting to more than USD 2 billion in restitutions and fines (Pimenta 2020).

As a result of the massive quantity of testimonies and evidence brought about by hundreds of agreements over the years, OLJ progressed through a snowballing effect that

incriminated a seemingly ever-expanding and never-ending set of defendants in various interrelated corruption schemes. Now OLJ no longer investigated only corruption at Petrobras but engulfed many other sectors of the Brazilian economy and state, from Brazil's nuclear program to governmental financial institutions. The fact that new pretrial arrests were made almost on a weekly basis from 2014 through 2016 also incentivized defendants to cooperate with the investigators, which led to new developments—new agreements, arrests, and indictments.

All this was combined with a strategy of ample publicity, whereby various agreements, testimonies, evidence, and police raids were made public. This approach was eagerly embraced by public opinion and the news media, both of which largely supported OLJ during its first years. The strategy also included media appearances, including press interviews, and active use of social media by members of the federal prosecutors' office, most notably the chief prosecutor of Curitiba's task force, Deltan Dallagnol (De Sá e Silva 2022). Unprecedentedly, but unsurprisingly, during most 2015 and 2016, corruption was ranked as the most pressing problem by the Brazilian public (Oliveira 2019). Ultimately, prosecutors launched a campaign, appealing directly to the public, for a legislative reform called 10 Medidas contra a Corrupção (10 Measures against Corruption) that, if enacted, would empower prosecutors even further (Carmo 2023).

3. *No credible opposition to OLJ for much of 2014 through 2016.* While institutional capacity and prosecutorial strategy surely mattered, they could do little if political forces reacted quickly, as they had in previous investigations. In the late 2000s, for instance, two major federal investigations in São Paulo (Satiagraha and Castelo de Areia) came close to opening a Pandora's box similar to the one the OLJ investigators opened. But both were swiftly crippled by a combination of politically driven decisions such as the removal of law enforcement personnel from the investigations and rulings by the high courts (including decisions overturning lower-court orders on pretrial detentions and the admissibility of evidence). OLJ was able to progress as much as it did only because it took place within an unlikely window of opportunity that combined a weak government, political gridlock, a severe economic crisis, intense popular mobilization, and, last but not least, a supportive Supreme Court.

Once OLJ officially began, in March 2014, it drew little attention given its character primarily as a money laundering investigation that seemed only marginally linked to corruption (Prazeres and Tavares 2014). Perhaps because the STF had just completed the Mensalão trial, it did not get involved at that time. This gave the Curitiba prosecutors months to build momentum before their investigation on money launderers led them to investigate Petrobras directors, and from there, the CEOs of major engineering firms and politicians.

In fact, Paulo Roberto Costa's plea bargain, mentioned earlier, was made effective by the courts only in September 2014, a few weeks before the presidential election in which Dilma Rousseff (PT) eventually defeated PSDB candidate Aécio Neves, in a runoff, with what was then the tightest vote margin since redemocratization. For the first time since the end of the military regime, the losing candidate refused to concede: OLJ's revelations

involving political officials had started to become public by then, and Neves filed a case with the electoral court claiming that Dilma Rousseff's ticket should be disqualified, because it had been financed through corruption.

This pending case hung like the sword of Damocles over Rousseff's head when her second presidency had barely begun—but there was a second, even more problematic, complication. In Congress, Eduardo Cunha (MDB) was elected president of the Chamber of Deputies, and, despite belonging to the same party (MDB) as Dilma Rousseff's vice president, Michel Temer, Cunha started to adopt a confrontational stance toward the government. As would become clear later, much of his behavior had to do with his being one of the main targets of OLJ's task force in Brasília, coordinated by prosecutor-general Rodrigo Janot, who had been appointed by Dilma Rousseff back in September 2013 for a two-year term. Once this information became public, in March 2015, Eduardo Cunha turned into an outright opponent of the president. In so doing, he took under his mantle numerous congressmembers who felt increasingly threatened by OLJ's progress, as dozens of politicians had been placed under investigation by Rodrigo Janot. The *lista de Janot* (Janot's list) included 47 investigations authorized by the STF involving federal officials: 32 from the PP, seven from the MDB, six from the PT, one from the PSDB, and one from the smaller Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (Brazilian Labor Party) (Salomão 2015).

As president of the lower house, Eduardo Cunha held significant control over the legislative agenda, including authority over whether impeachment proceedings against the president could advance. He used this control to block projects in the administration's interest, and wielded the threat of impeachment as a bargaining tool to seek protection from the administration in his own pending inquiries. Rousseff never yielded to this pressure, and the political standoff left the country largely adrift amid a third complication, which had long been looming, and eventually reached a boiling point.

The economy, which was already in bad shape before the 2014 elections, plummeted in 2015. There was an economic recession before OLJ came onto the scene, but the government's inability to respond to it amid the legislative gridlock exacerbated the situation. In short, as investment retracted and interest rates soared, the country's GDP shrunk by 3.5% in 2015, and 3.3% in 2016, in the most severe economic crisis in Brazil since the Great Depression (Figure 1). The combination of political turmoil, corruption revelations, and deep recession hit President Rousseff's popularity hard. She was re-elected in October 2014, but by mid-2015 her approval ratings reached historical lows, below 25% (Figure 1). So the "decline of the economy came to be associated with the revelations of Operation Car Wash" (Nunes and Melo 2017:284), but also, many "believed that the economic crisis was caused by the corruption" (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020:28).

Unsurprisingly, people also took to the streets. Various predominantly online right-wing social movements temporarily coalesced under the umbrella of anti-corruption, with organized protests that at times brought hundreds of thousands of Brazilians into the streets and intensified pressure on the government (Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi 2021). Other social forces (business associations, for example) and politicians who opposed the PT (from PSDB members to emerging far-right figures) free-rode on OLJ's efforts, positioning themselves as champions in the fight against corruption. This rare



FIGURE 1. Presidential approval and economic growth in Brazil, 2000–2020.

Note: Data on economic growth come from quarterly year-over-year figures produced by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), and presidential approval rates are drawn from the Executive Approval Database 3.0 (Carlin et al. 2025).

combination of deep popular dissatisfaction with the administration, political gridlock, economic crisis, and social mobilization strengthened OLJ, making attempts to interfere with the investigation unlikely. In fact, even as government approval fell, president Rousseff publicly backed the probe, even reappointing Rodrigo Janot as prosecutor-general for another term in September 2015 (Limongi 2023).

All those factors together provided latitude for OLJ's prosecutors and judges to move forward essentially as they saw fit, and they grew increasingly ambitious. In August 2015, Eduardo Cunha, sitting president of the Chamber of Deputies, was formally indicted by the prosecutor-general. Three months later, Delcídio do Amaral (PT), leader of the government in the Federal Senate, was arrested for obstruction of justice after he was recorded trying to interfere with the plea bargain of another Petrobras director. This was the first time that a sitting senator had been arrested since redemocratization. When the new year arrived, opposition to OLJ was apparently so minimal that the Curitiba task force was emboldened to go after the president who had left office with the highest approval rates in recent history. As of March 2016, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was officially under investigation. That was a bold move on its own, but it was also another sign that OLJ would hardly stop by itself.

In fact, even when interference with the investigation was attempted, OLJ had a vast repertoire of responses that left most politicians on the ropes. This was the case with

Senator Delcídio do Amaral, as noted above, and again in March 2016, when President Rousseff appointed former president Lula as her chief of staff, in an apparent bid to move his case out of Judge Moro's jurisdiction, since cabinet members could only be tried before the STF. On the very day of the appointment, Moro publicly released wiretap recordings of conversations between the former and sitting presidents which suggested that shielding Lula from OLJ was indeed a motivation for his appointment. This release sparked some of the largest street protests ever recorded in Brazil, and the STF eventually barred Lula's appointment.² Now the impeachment proceedings against President Rousseff, which had been simmering in Congress, allegedly over a technicality involving fiscal rule violations, suddenly gained momentum. Within a month, Dilma Rousseff was removed from office, and Vice-President Michel Temer (MDB) became the president.

However, it became apparent shortly after Temer took office that one of the main incentives congressmembers had to impeach Rousseff was her inability or unwillingness to protect political elites from OLJ, including coalition partners in the MDB and even opponents in the PSDB (Limongi 2023). Still, as much as Michel Temer's undeclared government's purpose was to shield allies from OLJ, the new administration quickly proved unable to do so. In fact, some of the evidence that the impeachment had been motivated by the political elite's desire to escape criminal accountability came precisely from wiretaps conducted by the OLJ task force in Brasília. For example, a now-well-known conversation, recorded before the impeachment but made public only after, had Senator Romero Jucá (MDB) and former senator and former director at Petrobras Sergio Machado (PSDB/MDB) discussing the need to "change the government to staunch the bleeding" caused by the investigations.

Despite these pressures, after two years without meaningful obstacles OLJ had built up such momentum that it kept on working largely according to the priorities of its various task forces. As a result, former president Lula was indicted in September 2016 and convicted by Judge Moro in July 2017. Eduardo Cunha, instrumental in Rousseff's impeachment, was arrested in October 2016 and convicted by Moro the following March. In December 2016, Odebrecht and its executives signed the "end of the world agreement" (*delação do fim do mundo*), which placed 98 politicians of 15 different political parties under investigation. These included eight sitting cabinet members of the Temer administration, 39 federal deputies, and 24 senators, among them the newly elected presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate—Rodrigo Maia (UB) and Eunício Oliveira (MDB), respectively—and former PSDB presidential candidate Aécio Neves (Barbosa and Maia 2017). When the list of politicians implicated in Odebrecht's agreements came to light, one congressman remarked, ironically and revealingly: "Anyone who is not on that list is lacking prestige" (quoted in Gama 2017).

By 2017, President Temer himself had been twice indicted by Prosecutor-General Rodrigo Janot, in cases coming out of a spin-off investigation into the fraudulent management of pension funds known as Greenfield, in which prosecutors targeted JBS, the world's largest meat processing corporation. President Temer managed to escape being removed from office only because Congress protected him by halting the cases' progression. Meanwhile, JBS and its executives signed leniency agreements and plea bargains

implicating 167 federal deputies across 19 different political parties (Fabrini, Serapião, and Bulla 2017). These agreements also led to the indictment of senator and former PSDB presidential runner-up Aécio Neves, among others. He had supported OLJ while in the opposition, but later came under investigation in other inquiries and recorded soliciting bribes from JBS executives (Falcão 2017).

As much as the post-impeachment presidency aimed to bring OLJ under its control, it too was wounded by the investigation, further reducing its capacity to contain the prosecutors. When time eventually came for President Temer to appoint a more passive prosecutor-general, in September 2017—something he eventually did, along with twice replacing the head of the federal police—it was too little, too late. Despite signs that the economic downfall had finally ended, Temer's approval ratings fell even lower than his predecessor's, plummeting in the wake of the JBS scandal (May 2017) and continuing to decline into the final year of his administration (Figure 1). The president survived the prosecutions, but the administration was so weakened by its fight for survival that in 2018 it turned to the military for help, putting army generals in charge of tasks such as a federal intervention in the state of Rio de Janeiro's police forces and the resolution of a truckers' strike that blocked roads across the country. This greater participation of the military in government signaled rising illiberalism in Brazil, but it was just a prelude to what came next.

THE ILLIBERAL PRESIDENT AND POLITICAL BACKLASH

As the 2018 presidential elections neared, it is fair to say that the country was hoping for a change. The three main parties that had held the presidency for all but three years since the end of military rule in 1985—MDB, PSDB and PT—had seen most of their leadership relentlessly tarnished with corruption over the four preceding years. After being twice prosecuted, President Temer did not pursue another term in office; he would be temporarily arrested for a few days after stepping down. In turn, Aécio Neves, who had almost won the presidential election just four years earlier, was not chosen by his party to run again, possibly because his reputation had been severely stained by various OLJ proceedings. In fact, he did not even seek re-election as a senator but instead ran for federal representative, which required far fewer votes. As for the PT's most important figure, former president Lula, he had been arrested four months before the October election, after Judge Moro's conviction was upheld by the upper courts. The timing of this decision, which barred his candidacy, prompted vigorous accusations from the left of abuse and political bias in the investigation.

Thus, the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro took off as the legitimacy of most once-powerful elites lay in shambles and corruption had become, by many accounts, the most important topic of the election (Hunter and Power 2019; Rennó 2020). Having been a fringe congressman for various parties (most notably the PP) since the 1990s and having consistently expressed nostalgia for the most repressive years of the military regime, Bolsonaro joined the small Partido Social Liberal (Liberal Social Party) and presented himself as an outsider.³ His long rhetorical commitment to various right-wing and

far-right causes (law and order, nationalism, anti-LGBT, anti-environmentalism) and his controversial, aggressive personality, uniquely positioned him to capture the electorate's latent outrage against political elites.

In effect, Bolsonaro's candidacy—and ultimately his election and government—resulted from a loose alliance around this far-right antiestablishment rhetoric. This included millions of online supporters (already in 2017, Bolsonaro had more followers on social media than other candidates—Gomes 2018), active and retired military (his running mate was a retired army general), Neopentecostal Evangelicals (the fastest-growing religion in Brazil, representing 27% of the population), agribusiness (which accounts for most of the country's exports), advocates of pro-market reforms, and, ultimately, many people for whom corruption was not only problematic in itself but also a heuristic explanation for the recent economic crisis (Nicolau 2020; Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021). Unsurprisingly, after four years of OLJ revelations on the daily news, an analysis of voting behavior in the 2018 elections concluded that the “core Bolsonaro supporter is . . . strongly influenced by views that the country is plagued by corruption” (Rennó 2020:17).

Bolsonaro finished the first round of elections, in early October, with 46% of the votes, well ahead of the other candidates. They included the PT's replacement for Lula, Fernando Haddad, who received 29%, and PSDB candidate and former governor of São Paulo state Geraldo Alckmin, who finished with less than 5%—tragically and predictably, both had been cited in Odebrecht's 2016 agreements with prosecutors as having received off-the-books contributions in previous campaigns. These results marked the end of the PT–PSDB duopoly in presidential elections; the last time these two parties had not been the major contenders for the presidency was in the 1989 elections. They also marked the downfall of the PSDB, as right-wing and far-right forces grouped around Bolsonaro, who got 55% of the votes in the second round of the 2018 elections and became Brazil's president.

The ties between OLJ and Bolsonaro's ascent, however, did not stop with the investigation's delegitimization of his opponents. Soon after the election, OLJ Judge Sergio Moro resigned his position in the federal courts to become Bolsonaro's justice minister. This was a huge win for the new president, because it both aligned with his anti-corruption campaign rhetoric and put one of OLJ's most valuable assets under his control. From the perspective of the growing number of OLJ critics, however, it was further confirmation that the investigation was biased and politically motivated (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b).

Still, the informal alliance between OLJ and Bolsonaro represented by Moro's appointment was short-lived, as the president quickly came to realize that autonomous anti-corruption institutions represented a risk to himself and his allies. Unsurprisingly, once the opportunities presented themselves, Bolsonaro distanced himself from the anti-corruption surge that had helped him ascend to power. The list is long—including Bolsonaro's inaction in face of Congress's butchering of an anticrime bill supported by Moro, and the administration's meddling with the institutional location of Brazil's financial intelligence unit, which led to a significant drop in the number of anti-money laundering reports—but two episodes are worth detailing.

One concerns Moro's resignation from the post of justice minister in April 2020. He publicly stated that this was a response to the president's attempt to interfere in the work of the federal police, subordinate to Moro's ministry, in a case concerning one of the president's sons, Flávio Bolsonaro, then a federal senator. A few months before he took office, Flávio had been placed under investigation by the federal police and by the state prosecutors' office of Rio de Janeiro for corruption and money laundering in schemes allegedly undertaken while he was a state deputy. In later investigations into the president's attempt to interfere with the federal police, a recording of a cabinet meeting became public, in which the president said, "I've already tried to replace our security people in Rio de Janeiro officially, and I couldn't! And that's it. But I'm not going to sit here and wait for my whole family to be fucked, or my friends, because I can't replace some officer at the bottom of the hierarchy. Replace him! If you can't, then replace his boss! If can't you replace his boss? Then replace the minister! And that's the end of it!" (quoted in Victor 2020).

The second episode was possibly the most consequential of Bolsonaro's blows to OLJ. In September 2019, he appointed Augusto Aras as prosecutor-general, a position Aras would hold for the next four years with broad support from the president and from influential congressmembers. Aras was a critic of OLJ and pledged to curb what he viewed as its excesses. And, unlike most of his predecessors, he proved subservient to the president. So, on one front, he behaved passively regarding numerous allegations involving Bolsonaro, effectively shielding him from prosecution regarding the president's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, attacks by the president and his entourage on the courts and the voting system, and claims of corruption involving the president and his cabinet members. On another, in February 2021, after a long tug of war with the rank-and-file prosecutors, Aras closed down all the OLJ task forces, formally ending the most consequential anti-corruption campaign in Brazilian history (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b).

But the end of OLJ was not only the president's doing. The left, and particularly the PT, had criticized the investigation's abuses even before Bolsonaro's election. This was especially true in regard to the case against Lula. After he was convicted by Judge Moro and thus prevented from running in the 2018 presidential elections, so that Moro himself became the justice minister under Lula's main rival, it was hard not to suspect bias in the case and the judge. And for years already, lawyers and legal scholars had been criticizing OLJ's methods, including the use of pretrial detentions to coerce defendants into plea bargains and the prosecution of cases based only on these pleas, potentially violating due process. Plus, in mid-2019 there were news reports that Judge Moro had been exchanging private messages with the chief prosecutor of the Curitiba task force, Deltan Dallagnol, on the topics of public communications and case strategies, reinforcing suspicions of abuse and bias in the investigation. Over the years, in its strategy of ample publicity and its use of moralistic rhetoric, the investigation may have become an instance of what Manzi (2024) called "judicial populism." Thus OLJ's own excesses contributed to the rising illiberalism in Brazil (De Sá e Silva 2020; Kerche and Marona 2022).

In effect, as allegations about abuses and biases in OLJ investigations gradually became more credible, they paved the way for various judicial and legislative measures that simultaneously curbed the investigation's excesses and weakened anti-corruption efforts.

The STF, once supportive of the investigation, increasingly started to throw sand into its gears. This included stripping the jurisdiction of cases involving campaign finance from the federal courts (where money laundering charges are tried), restricting information-sharing by investigative agencies, limiting the use of coercive measures by investigators, and ruling that defendants could only be arrested after all their appeals had been adjudicated (including by the STF itself).

Just as importantly, the STF overturned some prior convictions and annulled some ongoing cases. The most consequential of these decisions was the reversal in early 2021 of the conviction of former president Lula, which led the way to various other overturnings, all justified by the claim that OLJ was abusive and biased. More recently, the agreements signed by Odebrecht and JBS have been annulled, effectively invalidating all the evidence that had been collected and lifting the companies' obligations to pay compensation to the Brazilian state.

Meanwhile, Congress felt it could make its own advances. New legislation severely limited the scope of the administrative improbity law—and criminalized over 30 types of actions by judges and prosecutors. These reforms were supported not only by Bolsonaro and his party but also by the PT in the opposition, and a variety of other parties in Brazil's fragmented legislature (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b; Vieira and Miranda 2024). While this broad-based coalition allowed Bolsonaro to largely neutralize oversight institutions—including in cases that might have implicated himself, his family, and some key allies—it did not permit the weaponization of the anti-corruption apparatus against the president's enemies. Other agencies, such as the intelligence services and the federal highway police, were indeed to some degree weaponized to go after the president's opponents, though not through anti-corruption allegations.

The fact that OLJ's demise was not solely of Bolsonaro's making does not preclude that dismantling anti-corruption played well with his plans of executive aggrandizement. While the investigation came to an end through the joint work of the three branches of government, it was aligned with the president's own incentives to concentrate power. In fact, bringing OLJ under control may have facilitated Bolsonaro's coalition-building in Congress, especially with the PP, the party with the most politicians on the original *lista de Janot* of 2015. In early 2021, for instance, Bolsonaro not only helped elect Arthur Lira (PP) president of the Chamber of Deputies but also appointed Ciro Nogueira (PP) as chief of staff—both had been indicted by OLJ in 2016, and both had their charges dropped by the prosecutor-general in 2022.

Bolsonaro's coalition-building strategy also included a corruption-prone arrangement known as *orçamento secreto* (secret budget), whereby the executive branch, which once exerted rigid control over federal spending, began to allow individual congressmembers to generously amend it, consuming an unprecedented fraction of the government's discretionary expenditure, and to direct these resources to their chosen beneficiaries via opaque channels. This practice had been curtailed by a series of reforms of the budgetary process in the previous decades, but it was resumed with unprecedented force in 2020. Though it has been slightly modified, it remains to this day an important bargaining chip between the presidency and Congress (Da Ros and Taylor 2022b).

With this congressional support, Bolsonaro could consider himself doubly protected: from impeachment proceedings due to his alliance with the president of the Chamber of Deputies, and from criminal inquiries due to his appointment of prosecutor-general Aras. This in turn allowed him to intensify his pressure on autonomous institutions, particularly the STF and the electoral courts. The first became a target because it had launched criminal inquiries into some of the president's closest allies and worked as a bulwark against executive aggrandizement, ruling against the government's plans to interfere with the federal police, to centralize policy measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to abolish civil society participation in public policy councils, among other matters. As for the electoral courts, Bolsonaro raised suspicions that the electronic voting system adopted in Brazil since the 1990s was not reliable, and even mobilized the military to audit the voting machines developed by the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (Electoral Superior Court, TSE), which oversees national elections and is also made up of STF justices (Da Ros and Taylor 2022a).

Confronting the courts allowed Bolsonaro to rally his supporters around his anti-establishment rhetoric, while paving the way for a challenge to the electoral results if he was not re-elected. As the courts remained largely independent from the government and never yielded to the president's pressure, they actually became a focal point of resistance to some of Bolsonaro's most illiberal measures. But the STF in particular was able to play that role only because it had acted strategically, as we have seen, by helping shut down OLJ, as Congress and the president wished. That is, by playing an integral part in the pushback against the anti-corruption investigation, the STF retained the support it would need from Brazil's fragmented Congress to limit the president's attempts to concentrate power (Da Ros and Taylor 2022a).

In October 2022, after testing the limits of Brazil's democratic institutions for four years, Jair Bolsonaro failed to get re-elected, in the closest presidential elections since redemocratization. The final tally showed 50.9% for Lula and 49.1% for Bolsonaro; had the STF not reversed Lula's convictions, or had about a million of Lula's voters cast their votes for Bolsonaro instead, the latter would probably still be the president. Bolsonaro's defeat was largely the product of a loose coalition formed by the PT and its supporters on the left and among the poor, some of its former adversaries (including former PSDB presidential candidate Geraldo Alckmin, who became Lula's running mate), several professional news organizations, and various moderate voters who were horrified by Bolsonaro's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the TSE took a hard line on several attempts by Bolsonaro to manipulate the election in his favor (Hunter and Power 2023). In other words, the coordination of the opposition, along with the strength of key institutions committed to liberal values, has enabled Brazilian democracy to endure—for now.

Even after the polls closed and winners were declared, Bolsonaro refused to concede, and his supporters tried in various ways to incite the military to support a coup. Hundreds of truck drivers blocked several roads across the country, and for weeks thousands of people camped in front of the barracks, entreating the military to intervene. As the military remained mostly passive, some of Bolsonaro's supporters resorted to

extreme measures: attempting to storm the headquarters of the federal police; trying to plant a bomb in Brasília's airport; and a week into the new administration, storming the buildings of the three branches of government. As investigations would later reveal, plans for a *coup d'état* were effectively underway. This included, for instance, the draft of a presidential decree, found at the house of Bolsonaro's justice minister, which would declare a state of emergency, annul the results of the elections, and call for the arrest of some STF justices. Meetings among the president and armed forces commanders, when the president presented his plans, were well documented.

AFTER THE ILLIBERAL PRESIDENT

Dispossessed of the presidential office and with the STF still firmly in charge of various inquiries, Bolsonaro became the first Brazilian president to be sentenced for attempting a coup. His supporters—including his party, which currently has the most seats in the lower house—are doing all they can to reverse the former president's conviction. They have introduced bills to grant him amnesty; and they have even invited interference from the current U.S. administration (Da Ros and Gehrke 2026).

So far, Brazil's institutions have been able to resist illiberalism. Since Bolsonaro's presidency, in fact, other policy areas (such as education, health care, and international relations) have been gradually returning to a more liberal trajectory. This shift has been slow and uneven, but liberalism does seem to be regaining ground in Brazil for the time being.

Yet the backlash against anti-corruption has continued. The Odebrecht and JBS leniency agreements have been annulled by the STF, and the convictions of many politicians have been overturned, under the vague claim that the investigation was abusive and biased. Meanwhile, Congress even discussed a bill that would reintroduce a long-lapsed requirement of congressional authorization for criminal investigations against congressmembers, and it is still working under the opaque budgetary rules inherited from the Bolsonaro administration.

While anti-corruption and liberalism seemed to reinforce each other for most of the democratic experience in Brazil since the 1980s, they seem to have begun parting ways in the mid-2010s. Not only did the anti-corruption surge unleash illiberalism, but also, much of that illiberalism can be interpreted as the product of a "backlash coalition" that aligned itself with an illiberal president to curb anti-corruption efforts. Measures to reduce the powers of the judiciary, for instance, while often seen as illiberal per se, can also be understood as attempts to limit court-led anti-corruption efforts, in reaction to the previous anti-corruption surge.

Take the reform of the administrative improbity law enacted in late 2021, for example. It altered a 1992 law that had been a building block of the prosecutorial anti-corruption toolkit in Brazil for decades, empowering prosecutors to file civil cases against public officials for official misconduct, potentially leading to fines and disqualification from holding public positions. The reform limited the scope of the law and severely reduced the number of cases filed. Although it was enacted during Bolsonaro's administration, it enjoyed broad congressional support, including from Lula's own

political party. That is, this curbing of judicial powers occurred under an illiberal president, but it was not only of his making. And while reforms reducing the powers of the judiciary may easily be labelled illiberal per se, it would be misleading to apply such a broad label to this particular case. Behind this reform was a broad backlash coalition encompassing sectors from the left, right, and center, with varied interests, including the potentially illiberal ones of the president but also, and especially, the wish of most major political parties to avoid further anti-corruption prosecution. Similarly, other potentially illiberal measures adopted during Bolsonaro's administration, including the appointment of Augusto Aras to prosecutor-general and 2019's abuse-of-authority law, can also be partially attributed to the interests of Brazil's political elites in preventing further anti-corruption actions by independent prosecutors and judges.

In the literature on democratic backsliding, limiting the powers of independent institutions such as the courts is often seen as a sign of executive aggrandizement, and hence illiberalism (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Seyis and Munir 2024). But this is not an entirely accurate description of what happened in Brazil over the past decade, if our account of OLJ is correct. True, OLJ contributed to rising illiberalism in Brazil by helping delegitimize elites and paving the way for the election of a potentially autocratic leader who then pushed for various illiberal measures. But it is just as true that the political backlash against OLJ, which produced measures that limited the powers of independent oversight institutions, was supported by most of the country's political elite, including those who opposed the illiberal president.

Neither of the two mechanisms through which the anti-corruption surge contributed to rising illiberalism in Brazil (delegitimization of political elites, and political backlash) seems to have been entirely intended by the prosecutors and judges in charge of OLJ's cases. Yet they could not escape the forces they helped unleash.

The fate of Chief Prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol illustrates this point. In 2021, a year after leaving the OLJ investigation, and after 18 years on the job, he resigned from the public prosecutors' office amid a pending disciplinary inquiry into several alleged instances of abuse during OLJ. He was elected a federal deputy in 2022 but removed the following year by the electoral court, which alleged he had resigned his prosecutor's position to evade disciplinary sanctions that could disqualify him from holding public office. As a consequence, the court also banned him from running for office for eight years. Congress, in turn, made no effort to prevent him from effectively losing his congressional seat in mid-2023. On top of that, the federal audit court hit him with a hefty fine for allegedly mismanaging the funds for an OLJ task force. That these measures were taken by so many institutions against one of the leaders of the anti-corruption surge is revealing. It showcases both the scale of the backlash and how deeply it has been intertwined with rising illiberalism in Brazil since the mid-2010s. ■

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NOTES

1. The parties' names have changed over time; we use the current names.
2. As a result, President Rousseff was eventually indicted by her own appointee, Prosecutor-General Rodrigo Janot, for obstruction of justice, alongside then former president Lula, in a case filed in 2017 and later dismissed.
3. Bolsonaro would leave this party in 2019, remain unaffiliated for two years, and join the Partido Liberal (in 2021).

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