The reelection of Dilma Rousseff as president in October 2014 was accompanied by the election of a record number of 28 parties to the Brazilian National Congress, which was already the most fragmented legislature in the democratic world. A research project at the University of Oxford has explored the consequences of coalitional presidentialism for governmental efficacy and democratic consolidation, which has important implications for President Rousseff’s second term.

Key Findings

- In a cross-regional study that includes over 300 legislators, Brazilian legislators are among the most critical of coalitional presidentialism.
- President Rousseff faces a more difficult legislature than in her first term of office, and so will find it harder to successfully manage coalition politics.
- Securing the president’s policy agenda is likely to require heavier reliance on pork.

Policy conclusion

Facing a much larger opposition in Congress, and lacking the popular backing of her predecessors, President Rousseff is likely to be more hamstrung by the need to form a broad coalition in order to govern. At a time of economic difficulties, major infrastructural challenges, and corruption scandals that have undermined the authority of the country’s political elite, this institutional arrangement presents Rousseff’s new government with significant political obstacles. The president is likely to need to require greater use of pork in order to secure the passage of her legislative agenda, with implications for government spending.
The Prospects for President Rousseff’s Coalition Government in Brazil

Policy context
In emerging democratic systems across the globe, presidential parties lack the majorities that presidents need to dominate legislatures without sharing power with other parties. They have responded by forming coalitions, which have produced an important trade-off. On the one hand, coalitional presidentialism has mitigated the conflicts that might be expected between presidents and assemblies. It has therefore contributed towards political stability in many countries, and has strengthened the policy decisiveness of presidents. Yet, on the other hand, the dominance of presidential coalitions has produced democratic costs, which could create longer-term problems for presidential regimes. In particular, it has undermined the accountability of executives to legislatures.

Overview of project
Researchers from the University of Oxford have conducted the first cross-regional study of coalitional presidentialism. With the assistance of research consultants based in nine countries across three regions – Brazil, Chile, Ecuador (Latin America); Benin, Kenya, Malawi (Africa); Armenia, Russia, Ukraine (Former Soviet Union) – they surveyed and interviewed 350 MPs in government and opposition on their experience of coalitional rule.

Project findings
Coalitional politics was seen to have had negative consequences in Brazil. Despite (or because of) Brazil’s long experience with coalitional presidentialism, Brazilian MPs were among the most critical of the effects of coalitional rule. Brazil was the only case in the study where less than half of MPs considered coalitions to raise the efficacy of the legislative process. Only 35% of respondents either “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that presidential coalitions produced more decisive policy making. This view was shared by coalition and opposition members alike. Similarly, almost half of the MPs we interviewed “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that presidents were a “hostage of coalitions.”

At the same time, Brazilian MPs were among the most critical of the negative consequences of coalitional presidentialism for democratic governance. Less than one-third of Brazilian MPs believed that coalitions enhanced the quality of democracy in the country. Again, this number included both coalition and opposition members. Instead, they saw it as increasing potentially corrupt practices such as the exchange of favours between the ruling party and other members of the legislature.

More Information
For further information on the project, including references to other publications, see www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/presidentialism

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