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To cite this article: Rogério Schlegel (2022): Dynamic de/centralization in Brazil, 1889–2020: The prevalence of punctuated centralization, *Regional & Federal Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2022.2125507](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2125507)


To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2125507>

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 [Published online: 29 Sep 2022.](#)

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Dynamic de/centralization in Brazil, 1889–2020: The prevalence of punctuated centralization

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ABSTRACT

This article employs the methodology of the Why De/Centralization in Federations project to assess dynamic de/centralization with a focus on state autonomy throughout Brazil's republican life (1889–2020). The results reveal diverse patterns for the spheres observed. Institutional autonomy had a trajectory closely associated with regime type, unlike the two other politico-institutional dimensions. Legislative authority over policies and the fiscal dimension experienced an underlying process of centralization, punctuated by waves of decentralization. The administrative dimension of policy autonomy showed the most stable pattern, oscillating around a mean that indicates the dominance of the centre. The evidence contradicts the assumption that cycles of centralization and decentralization offset each other in Brazil. It supports the hypothesis that democratic transitions with increased political autonomy of states at the initial stages lead to broader decentralization. The data also show that regime change made de/centralization moves more frequent, in transitions to or from democracy.

KEYWORDS Brazil; federalism; centralization; democracy; authoritarianism

Introduction

The Federative Republic of Brazil is an illustrative instance of how the interplay between the continua authoritarianism–democracy and centralization–decentralization can be more complex than the presumed close association between democracy, federalism, and decentralization. Brazil is an ideal case to observe these dynamics, due to its republican history marked by more than one authoritarian period and different transitional paths to democracy.

The supposed association of democracy and decentralization has inspired an influential metaphor to describe the trajectory of the Brazilian federation: the alternation of authoritarian and democratic regimes would have generated respectively cycles of centralization and decentralization comparable to the regular ‘systoles and diastoles’ of the cardiac muscle. Either to

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📎 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2022.2125507>.

accept or to contest the hypotheses implied by the metaphor, analysts have lacked a comprehensive and systematic investigation of the vertical distribution of power throughout Brazil's republican history.

This article addresses this gap, assessing the autonomy of the states and the federal district in three politico-institutional dimensions, 22 policy areas, and five fiscal indicators, from 1889 to 2020. Part of the second phase of the *Why De/Centralization in Federations* project (Dardanelli et al. 2019), the study relies on its consolidated criteria to code each time point in a yearly basis. The methodology allows a systematic assessment of static and dynamic de/centralization within and across cases.

The results indicate that the First Republic (1889–1930), the so-called 1946 Democracy (1946–1964), and the ongoing democratic period (1988–) are not perfectly associated with decentralization, just as the two broad authoritarian periods are not exclusively associated with centralization. General trends should not downplay particularities in specific domains. Shifts in the institutional autonomy of the states followed regime changes. Legislative authority over public policies and fiscal autonomy experienced an underlying process of centralization punctuated by waves of decentralization. Administrative policy autonomy was closer to stability, oscillating around a mean that indicates the dominance of the centre.

In the case of Brazil, regime change made de/centralization shifts more frequent. New federal constitutions were the key instruments of change in state autonomy. Transitions with increased political autonomy for the states at the initial stages broadened the subsequent decentralization. Military and civilian authoritarian regimes showed they can be similar in several aspects – in the developmentalist orientation that led to centralism, for instance.

The remaining of the article proceeds as follows. After a brief background section, the article reviews relevant studies on the dynamic de/centralization of the Brazilian federation and discusses theoretical expectations. The next section concentrates on the deployment of the methodology of this project, describing the static de/centralization at the creation of the federation, the dynamics experienced by state autonomy throughout 13 decades, and the levels it led to by 2020. The last two sections offer an interpretation of the observed patterns and reflect on their contribution to the study of federalism.

Background information

Occupying almost half of South America, Brazil has the world's fifth largest territory, with a population of about 211 million in 2020. There were twenty states in 1889. Apart from Acre, a small state in the Amazon region disputed with Bolivia and annexed in 1903, all the new states were created through the partition of previous units: Mato Grosso do Sul (1977), Rondônia

(1982), Amapá, Roraima, and Tocantins (1988). Brasilia replaced Rio de Janeiro as national capital and federal district in 1960.

Today, the federation has twenty-six states, a federal district, and 5,570 municipalities. Constitutionally, these municipalities have been the third order of government in the federation since 1988. The most recent constitution decentralized fiscal resources and the power to implement policies, with particular benefits to local governments. Municipalities were responsible for less than 8% of the public sector expenditure in the 1940s and 1950s (Mahar 1976); in the 2010s, this figure surpassed 20% (Afonso, Lukic, and Castro 2018).¹ Municipalities are full members of the federation, and this means that they are not obliged to cooperate with other levels of government in areas of shared responsibility.

The country is marked by dramatic territorial asymmetries, with wealth and population concentrated in the South and Southeast regions. It is fundamentally mono-national in having a dominant group espousing the national identity but contains considerable cultural diversity due to colonization, slavery, and immigration. The country's population is ethnically diverse, with over 50% of the population declaring themselves as Afro-Brazilian and less than 1% consisting of indigenous peoples.

Keeping the unity of the territory has been a political priority since Brazil was a colony of Portugal. After independence, in 1822, this led to a highly centralized and unitary monarchy, despite the deeply rooted tradition of strong local power. Towards the end of the monarchical period, particularly after 1870, federalist ideas started being associated with republicanism and democracy by those championing regime change (Carvalho 1995). The United States of America was an important inspiration. The republic was created in an initiative similar to a coup as it was led by a restricted group within the army, with limited popular support (Lemos 2011).

Brazil's federation was created following a holding-together model (Stepan 2004). Federalism itself was a way to balance interests as different as those of the economically dynamic South, whose elites campaigned for an ultra-federalist model, the Northeast, highly dependent on the recently freed slave workforce, and the military, deeply centralist (Fausto 1994). The economy depended on agricultural exports and was dominated by São Paulo and a few other states responsible for goods in high demand in international markets, especially coffee. Their original aim was to establish a *laissez-faire* style of governance so that the new central power would not curb the states' economic freedom. These rural oligarchies prevailed in the assembly that produced the first republican constitution in 1891, shaping a rather dual federation. Some analysts have argued that the federation was highly decentralized at its origin (e. g. Love 1982; Fausto 1994) and this is one of the assumptions to be reassessed with our methodology.

Key institutions enshrined in the first republican constitution were inspired by the American model and to some extent expressed Brazil's transition from the British Empire's zone of influence to that of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century (Carvalho 1995). Some enduring features of the Brazilian democratic framework were set then, such as presidentialism, separation of powers in three branches, and elections for chief executives and legislatures. Ever since, the states have been required by constitution to follow this basic federal institutional design, otherwise they risk federal intervention. Nowadays, state constitutions mirror the national one (Couto and Absher-Bellon 2018). Our coding captures this emulation and stability, as will be discussed below.

Brazil has a civil-law system that gives primacy to statutory legislation, with the federal constitution being the starting point in legal matters. National laws prevail over state or local rules in case of conflict and most of the framework legislation is concentrated at the federal level. The Federal Supreme Court (*Supremo Tribunal Federal* or STF) has held the power to judge constitutional issues since the beginning of the republic. It can order compliance by the executive and the legislative branches and by all tiers of government (Arretche 2015; Rodrigues, Lorencini, and Zimmermann 2017).

The conventional periodization of Brazil's republican life identifies five broad phases:

- (1) First Republic (1889-1930), usually defined as an oligarchic regime, with liberal institutions, such as voting and separation of powers, formally in place;
- (2) Vargas Years (1930-1945), named after the civilian leader of the 1930 Revolution, who established the *Estado Novo* dictatorship (1937-1945) in a self-coup with military support;
- (3) the so-called 1946 Democracy (1946-1964), with competitive party politics and populist linkages to a growing mass electorate;
- (4) Military Regime (1964-1985), marked by generals succeeding each other in power with support from civilian sectors;
- (5) the ongoing democratic period, dated from either the comeback of a civilian to the Presidency (1985) or the most recent constitution (1988).

Previous hypotheses about the Brazilian federation

Throughout the ups and downs of democracy, Brazilian federalism has usually been said to have remained in place. However, this raises the question of whether decentralized institutional arrangements fall into the category of façade federations under authoritarian rule. Some analysts have argued that Brazil has been a federation only since 1988 (e. g. Watts 2005), but they are

exceptions. Using an indicator encompassing political, fiscal, and policy autonomy at the state level, Niedzwiecki et al. (2021) found nuanced measures during the Military Dictatorship, which suggests a vertical distribution of authority and intergovernmental relations much more complex than a plain encroachment by the centre.

The national constitutions enacted during dictatorships kept the country as a federal state, despite their promotion of institutional centralization. The *Estado Novo* prohibited subnational symbols and burned state flags in public ceremonies but kept relevant portions of revenues assigned to the states. From 1937 to 1945, states levied 56 per cent of total taxes, with no relevant transfer scheme between the tiers of government (Love 1993). Francisco Campos, the minister who wrote the 1937 constitution inspired by that of fascist Italy, intended the shrinkage of state autonomy to be temporary (Campos 1956, 209). Although the *Estado Novo* replaced elected governors by appointees of the dictator, these federal delegates usually came from the fringes of state elites and represented a compromise with these oligarchic groups (Souza 1976, 87–88).

At its peak, the centralism of the Military Regime led to the ‘quasi death’ of the autonomy of the states, according to Sallum Jr. (1996, 27); yet this analyst believed that federalism was still breathing. Political elites in the states remained relevant, despite their loss of direct access to financial and political resources (Medeiros 1986; Hagopian 1996; Samuels 2004). Their role in the next transition is believed to have decisively shaped the type of federal arrangement and intergovernmental relations that followed (Kugelmans, Sallum Jr., and Graeff 1989; Souza 1997; Falleti 2010).

A long-lasting assumption about the federation is that the dynamics of de/centralisation are like cardiac systoles and diastoles (e.g. Couto e Silva 1981; Camargo 1993; Afonso 1994; Mora and Varsano 2001). Systoles represent the contraction of the cardiac muscle, associated with the centralization that would take place during authoritarian periods; diastoles represent decentralization promoted by democratic regimes. The metaphor implies the hypotheses that de/centralization moves would be spontaneous, periodic, and symmetric.

Critics have presented different arguments to contest this metaphor. Some accept the core concept but question part of its elements. ‘This proposition (...) is formally correct. Nevertheless, the sociological content of each move has been always diverse, which makes too simplistic the association between a centrifugal federation and democracy and a centripetal federation and authoritarianism’, posited Sallum Jr. (1996, 27).² ‘If there is a pendular movement, it does not involve symmetry’, observed Kugelmans and Sola (1999).³

Other analysts question the simultaneity and the causality implied by the metaphor. ‘Changes in the political regime are not a sufficient explanation for

changes in the fiscal system; the centralization of decision-making and the pattern of alliances in each particular [legislative] arena provide better explanations for the variation that takes place', contended Arretche (2005, 263).⁴ 'The tension between centralizing and decentralizing drives is constitutive and always present in the intergovernmental relations of the Brazilian federation and it leads to different outcomes depending on the public policy under scrutiny', asserted Almeida (2005, 39).⁵

Another problematic assumption involves the prevailing dichotomous identification of multifaceted periods either with democracy or authoritarianism. Among other flaws, the First Republic saw the 'beheading' of state representatives, with those not aligned to the federal executive and to hegemonic state oligarchies prevented from having their election acknowledged by the Congress (Lessa 1988; Viscardi 2019). The Vargas Years had a democratic constitutional interlude (1934–1937). The democracy inaugurated in 1946 experienced attempted coups, presidential interruptions, a pragmatic shift to a parliamentary system of government (1961–1963), and it can be described as a rather limited polyarchic regime (Power 2010). Finally, the military dictatorship allowed direct elections for governors in 1965 and from 1982 onwards, and key states were won by the opposition on both periods. Most of the time, the regime kept the Congress and state assemblies operational though under coercion.

Expectations concerning the Brazilian federation

Being established before World War I, Brazil's federation is expected to be depicted by our analysis as less centralized at the outset than federations created after World War II, because the scope for government action was narrower more than a century ago. A growing consensus portrays the current arrangement as a rather cooperative federation, with responsibilities shared in key policy areas under the coordination of the centre (Arretche 2015). Therefore, increased centralization can be assumed as the net result of the comparison between 1889 and 2020. But what would be the trajectory that has led to this net centralization?

The fact that Brazil has experienced authoritarian governments with different features favours a within-case comparison regarding several secondary factors prone to influence the vertical distribution of authority. Military governments tend to engage in politico-institutional centralization, such as replacing states' elected governors with appointees, as discussed in the introductory article of this special issue. Our data can show if and to what extent military governments in Brazil were more likely to abolish subnational elections than civilian authoritarian rulers. They will also allow for an assessment of the static de/centralization of Vargas' *Estado Novo* as compared to the military dictatorship of the 1960s.

Another plausible influence on de/centralization is the orientation of governments in terms of which actor should drive economic development. Regimes inspired by a developmental ideology are considered more likely to concentrate authority than their (neo)liberal counterparts. Developmentalism has prevailed as a national project from 1930 to the beginning of the 1980s (Draibe 2004; Falleti 2010). This leads to a particularly interesting comparison between the democratization that occurred after the *Estado Novo* and that after the Military Regime. Have both processes been accompanied by decentralization and with comparable magnitudes?

Moreover, Falleti (2010) posits that the politico-institutional organization of the state under authoritarian rule matters for the expected subsequent decentralization. The fact that the Military Regime maintained elections for the state legislatures would have favoured political decentralization, which in turn boosted administrative and fiscal decentralization, in Falleti's terms. In the less scrutinized transition to democracy in 1945, subnational actors had less political leverage and the centre managed to enact the rules of the electoral game that would resume that year (Souza 1976; Gomes 2005). Thus, a more modest decentralization at the beginning of the democratic period inaugurated by the 1946 Constitution is expected.

Brazil also provides an opportunity to investigate to what extent the nationalisation of party systems might be associated with de/centralization. The country experienced parties organized exclusively on a state basis (First Republic), a system that mixed nationalized and regionalized parties (1946 Democracy), forced bipartisanship (1966–1979), and the ongoing democratic period, with remarkable differences between presidential and legislative elections in terms of the degree of nationalization. The initial expectation is that the higher the level of party nationalization, the higher the static centralization.

Timing and sequencing are also dimensions to be observed. The attention paid to the wave of decentralization in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s led academics to explore general hypotheses about reforms and their impacts on authority. Mature authoritarian regimes were prone to initiate decentralization to undermine oppositional forces or gain control over the transitional process (Samuels 2004; Falleti 2010). Decentralization was more frequent during democratic transitions than in non-transitional periods, concluded Niedzwiecki and colleagues (2021). However, their analysis was grounded on the observation of Latin American countries in the second half of the twentieth century, mostly transitioning from military to civilian rule. In the case of Brazil, these hypotheses can be assessed for different types of authoritarian regimes and for transitions from democratic to authoritarian rule as well.

Two other expectations refer to broad assumptions already mentioned. We anticipate limited homogeneity regarding dynamic de/centralization

within broad historical periods in the politico-institutional sphere, but also in the policy and fiscal spheres. We also expect features of an operational federation rather than a façade one, particularly in the policy sphere, even under authoritarian rule. This set of assumptions is assessed in the section on explanation for de/centralization below.

Static de/centralization at the outset

We have coded the whole of Brazil's life as a federation, from 1889 to 2020. Nevertheless, the multiple changes in different directions that marked the two years after the birth of the republic make its first constitution a more consistent milestone of the original authority distribution. For comparative purposes, the article takes 1891 as the outset of the federation hereafter. This and the following sections refer to the coding developed by the second phase of the *Why De/Centralization in Federations* project. The scores and their justification are available as a supplementary section, in the [online codebook](#).

All coding refers to seven-point scales. In the politico-institutional dimension, each of the three sub-dimensions is evaluated according to its particular criteria. For instance, states with an elected legislature and elected (directly or via an assembly) chief executive score 7 and those with no legislature and centrally-appointed chief executive are coded 1. In all public policy areas, a score of 7 represents exclusive authority of the states, a score of 1 means exclusive control of the federal government, and a score of 4 is for equally shared authority. We distinguish between legislative autonomy and administrative autonomy in each policy area. In the fiscal dimension, each of the five sub-dimensions is coded following specific criteria. For instance, very high state autonomy for borrowing justifies a score of 7 and very low autonomy is coded as 1.

Regarding static de/centralization, the Brazilian federation started rather centralized in terms of states' politico-institutional autonomy. States' constitutional autonomy is coded as 3 at the end of 1891, because their system of government, such as type of legislature and electoral system, were mandated by the national constitution. The institutional autonomy score is 2 because the first governors and state assemblies were appointed by the national constituent assembly. To some extent, this code is due to a technicality, because in the following year they were directly elected, taking the score to 7. We coded the possibility of manipulation of state elections by the centre as non-applicable because there was no election in 1891.

In relation to public policies, the federal government had most legislative authority, taking into consideration the mean score⁶ of 2.47 displayed by this dimension – below the middle point of the scale (4), which would express responsibilities equally distributed between the centre and the states. The

states were more relevant on the administrative side, with a mean of 3.16, still under the medium point of the scale.

Reflecting features closer to a dual federation, in most of the policy areas (12 out of 22) the administrative and legislative dimensions receive the same score: agriculture, citizenship, currency and money supply, defence, economic regulation and incentives, pre-tertiary education, labour, environmental protection, external affairs, language, finance, and natural resources. Two areas had a higher legislative score than administrative: tertiary education and transport. The administrative score was higher than the legislative in elections, civil and criminal law, and law enforcement. Other areas did not have noticeable activities run by the public sector either in one or both dimensions.

The most decentralized sphere at the outset was the fiscal dimension, reflecting the success of the economically dynamic states in promoting their interests in the constitutional assembly. Two out of three available indicators had the maximum score (7): proportion of states' own-source revenues and borrowing autonomy. Restrictions on the states' own resources was coded 6 because base and rates of state taxes were fixed at the federal level. The two other sub-dimensions were coded 'not applicable' because they refer to conditional transfers, not relevant at the time.

Our systematic account of static de/centralization suggests that the prevailing view over the beginning of the federation needs a reassessment. The autonomy of the states was close to the maximum possible level in the fiscal sphere at the outset. Nevertheless, both the legislative and administrative authority over public policies were below the level indicating responsibilities equally distributed between the states and the federal government, considering their mean score. In politico-institutional terms, the federation had a rather modest decentralization. Therefore, the interpretation that the Brazilian federation was eminently decentralized at its origin must be revised.

Dynamic de/centralization (1891–2020)

This section is organized around the properties of dynamic de/centralization outlined in the conceptual framework of the project. It compares the patterns of dynamic de/centralization emerging from the coding reported in the codebook.

Frequency

The frequency of change in the scores brings another key finding of the study. During the 130 years observed, the politico-institutional autonomy of the states has experienced more frequent shifts than the policy areas or the fiscal dimensions. This suggests that, despite the apparent general instability

brought about by regime changes, there might be a more consistent trajectory regarding public policies and fiscal matters. The three sub-dimensions of politico-institutional autonomy display 19 changes of code⁷, leading to a mean of 4.75 per sub-dimension (Table 1).⁸ Public policies have had 64 shifts (mean of 2.91 per area) and fiscal sub-dimensions counted 18 score changes (mean of 3.6).

Table 1. Dynamic politico-institutional de/centralization, 1891–2020.

	+1	+2	+3/6	Total +	-1	-2	-3/6	Total -	T(-/+)	CDM
I1					1			1	1	-1
I2		1	4	5		1	3	4	9	+5
I3 Exe		1	1	2		1	1	2	4	0
I3 Leg		2	1	3			2	2	5	0
Total	4	4	6	10	1	2	6	9	19	
Mean									4,75	
Mode				3			-3			0

Institutional autonomy dimensions: constitutional autonomy (I1); politico-institutional autonomy (I2); manipulation of subnational elections for the executive branch (I3 Exe) and for the legislative branch (I3 Leg).

Within the politico-institutional sphere, the institutional sub-dimension had the highest frequency of change: 9 occurrences. In the policy sphere, administrative tasks were redistributed more regularly – 37 of the changes are related to the administrative side and 26 to the legislative side. Shifts have been more frequent in economic activity (10), culture (7), and health care (6). The mode is two score changes per sub-dimension (Table 2). In the fiscal sphere, a sub-dimension stands out: proportion of own-source revenues had seven score changes (Table 3).

There is an association between immediate shifts in state autonomy and regime change, irrespective if it refers to a transition to or from democracy. The comparison between ordinary years and the period of five years after events marking the replacement of regimes shows that the latter concentrates score changes.⁹ Each ordinary year experienced a mean of 0.38 score change, while a year after a transition to democracy had 2.30 score changes and a year after a transition to authoritarianism presented 2.21 score changes on average. For the politico-institutional autonomy sub-dimensions, the means are 0.11 score change per ordinary year compared to 0.26 shifts per year after a regime replacement – either to or from democracy. For public policy areas, 0.12 against 1.44. For fiscal dimensions, 0.09 against 0.3. Thus, changes in state autonomy took place more often following a regime change throughout the life of the federation, mirroring the effect Niedzwiecki and colleagues (2021) observed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Direction

The data points to an underlying centralizing trend, particularly pronounced in the fiscal sphere and in the legislative dimension of public policies. Scores

Table 2. Dynamic policy de/centralization, 1891–2020.

	Total L+A	Legislative						Administrative									
		+1	+2	+3/6	-1	-2	-3/6	Total	CDM	+1	+2	+3/6	-1	-2	-3/6	Total	CDM
P1	5				2	1		3	-4				1	1		2	-3
P2	3					1		1	-2				2			1	-2
P3	7		1	1		1		3	3	2	1				4	0	
P4	0							0	0						0	0	
P5	0							0	0						0	0	
P6	10	3			1	1		5	0	3			1	1	5	-1	
P7	2							1	-4				1		1	-1	
P8	2							0	0	2					2	2	
P9	0							0	0						0	0	
P10	2				1			1	-1				1		1	-1	
P11	4	1			1			2	0	1			1		2	0	
P12	1							0	0	1					1	1	
P13	2							0	-2	1			1		2	0	
P14	6	2			2			4	0	2					2	2	
P15	1							0	0	1					1	1	
P16	2							0	0		1			1	2	0	
P17	2							0	0		1			1	2	0	
P18	2							1	-3				1		1	-1	
P19	3					1		1	-2	1				1	2	-1	
P20	2				1			1	-1				1		1	-1	
P21	4	1						1	1	2			1		3	1	
P22	4		1		1			2	1	2					2	2	
Total	64	7	2	1	9	5	2	26		18	3	0	11	5	0	37	
Mean	2.91							1.18								1.68	
Mode	2							0	0						2	0	

Policy areas: agriculture (P1); citizenship and immigration (P2); culture (P3); currency and monetary supply (P4); defence (P5); economic activity (P6); education – pre-school to secondary (P7); education – tertiary (P8); elections and voting (P9); employment relations (P10); environmental protection (P11); external affairs (P12); finance and securities (P13); health care (P14); language (P15); law – civil (P16); law – criminal (P17); law enforcement (P18); media (P19); natural resources (P20); social welfare (P21); and transport (P22).

Table 3. Dynamic fiscal de/centralization, 1891–2020.

	+1	+2	+3/6	T+	-1	-2	-3/6	T-	Total (+-)	CDM
F1	3			3	4			4	7	-1
F2	1	1		2	2		1	3	5	-2
F3									0	0
F4	1			1					1	+1
F5	2			2		2	1	3	5	-6
Total	7	1		8	6	2	2	10	18	
Mean									3.6	3.6
Mode	+1								5	void

Fiscal dimensions: proportion of own-source revenues (F1); restrictions on own-source revenues (F2); proportion of conditional transfers (F3); degree of conditionality of conditional transfers (F4); borrowing autonomy (F5).

in fiscal dimensions decreased on 10 occasions and rose on 8. Regarding legislative authority over policies, 16 code changes registered centralizing moves and 10 moved in the opposite direction.

The administrative dimension experienced more occasions with decentralization (21) than with centralization (16). This partially explains the detachment of the means of the two dimensions of policy authority throughout the period observed.

A clear direction of change is less evident in states' politico-institutional autonomy. Indicators of the former rose on 10 occasions and decreased on 9, with changes concentrated in the institutional dimension.

Magnitude

Each of the three spheres shows a particular pattern regarding magnitude. Politico-institutional autonomy experienced some dramatic changes, suggesting critical junctures related to regime replacement. The constitutional autonomy of the states changed 1 point at one time point only. On 7 out of 9 occasions, institutional autonomy shifted 3 or more points. The manipulation of state elections experienced five changes of 3 or more points (Table 1).

In the 22 policy areas, shifts occurred rather through gradual steps, indicating the predominance of incremental changes (Table 2). Only on three occasions was there a shift of 3 or more points in a single year. Both involved the legislative sphere. In the legislative dimension, the mode is a shift of -1 point in the score, registered nine times. In the administrative dimension, shifts of +1 point were the most frequent, with 18 occurrences.

In general, the pattern for the fiscal sphere consists of incremental changes to decentralize, but sharper moves to centralize (Table 3). The mode is a 1-point increase in the score, registered on seven occasions. On two occasions there was centralization of 3 or more points, each one in a different dimension – restrictions on the states' own resources and borrowing autonomy.

Pace and sequence

In the politico-institutional sphere, each dimension displays a singular trajectory. Constitutional autonomy and manipulation of state elections by the centre show a path rather independent of regime type. The former has remained quite stable throughout Brazil's republican life; the only centralizing change – regulation of the state's civil service – was introduced by a directly elected constitutional assembly in 1934 (Figure 1). Manipulation of state elections intensified in 1911–1912, during the First Republic, and 1965–1978, marking the lowest scores of this sub-dimension (Figure 3).

The institutional autonomy scores (Figure 2) show a general association with regime type. Additionally, the broader picture involves substantial state autonomy during periods with liberal institutions in place and more restricted state autonomy during authoritarian periods. In this way, the score 7 assigned to most of the oligarchic First Republic was replaced by

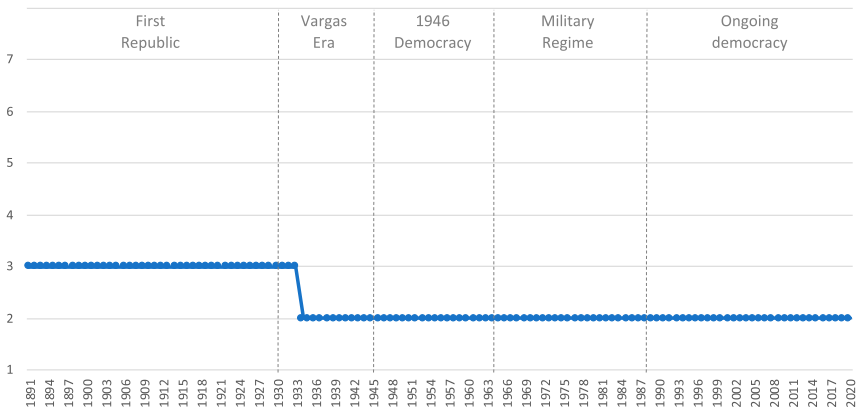


Figure 1. Constitutional autonomy, 1891–2020.

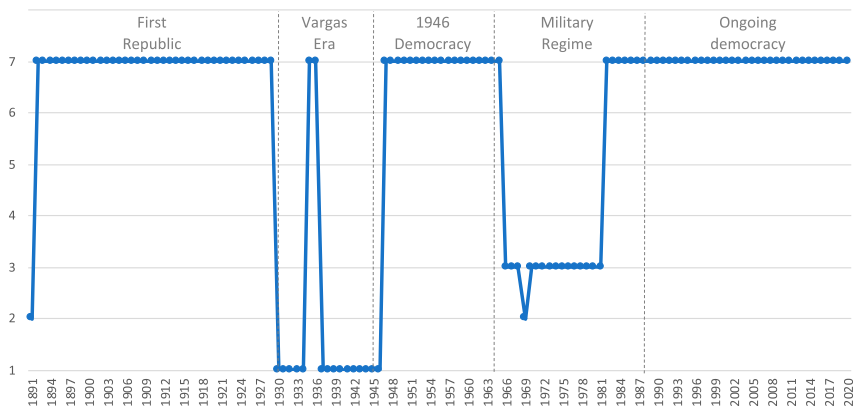


Figure 2. Institutional autonomy, 1891–2020.

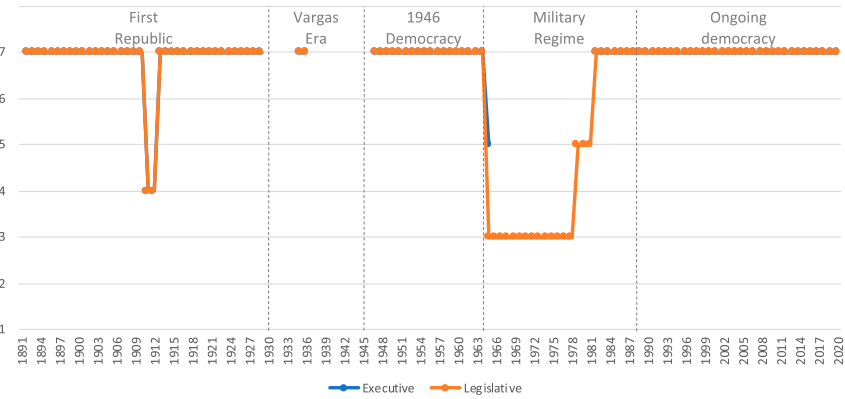


Figure 3. Manipulation of state elections, 1891–2020.

the score 1 during the Vargas Years – just punctuated by the constitutional interlude of 1934–1937, which temporarily brought back more state institutional autonomy. The 1964 military coup curtailed part of the constituent units’ autonomy granted by the 1946 Democracy, but the reduction did not come with the same intensity as during the *Estado Novo*. Elected state legislatures remained in place, although they were purged and forced to acquiesce to candidates appointed by the federal executive and indirectly elected as governors, justifying a coding of 3. In 1969, state legislatures representing roughly half of the Brazilian population were closed, taking the score to 1 in these subnational units.¹⁰ In 1982, as a sign of opposition growth and as part of the military effort to control the transition to democracy, governors started being directly elected.

As for the policy areas, the central tendency for the legislative and administrative dimensions reveals a loose relationship between state autonomy and regime type (Figure 4). Regarding the legislative authority to decide policies,

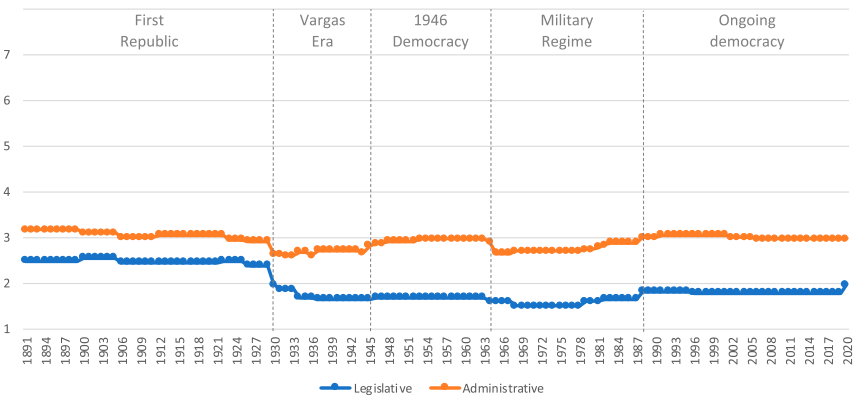


Figure 4. Mean score for policy de/centralization, 1891–2020.

the most pronounced and large-scale centralization started when Vargas seized power in 1930. In 1929 the mean for all policy areas was 2.38, which fell to 1.64 in 1937. The end of Vargas' dictatorship in 1945 was accompanied by an almost imperceptible decentralization – the mean increased to 1.68 in 1946, a level sustained during the following democratic period. The 1964 coup inaugurated another phase of centralization, rather slight, with the mean dropping from 1.68 in the previous year to 1.5 in 1968.

A new wave of policy decentralization began in 1979 and lasted for ten years, with the mean reaching 1.82 just after the enactment of the 1988 constitution. At the end of the 1990s, under democracy, some recentralization brought the legislative mean to 1.77. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the regulation of three areas (health care, transport and economic activity), raising the mean to 1.95 in 2020. This is the highest mean of the second half of the twentieth century.

The changes in mean scores in the administrative dimension roughly mirror those in the legislative dimension, with an expected delay because a shift in the competence over a policy usually takes some time to produce its effects in the provision of goods and services. However, the range of each curve is quite diverse, as will be further discussed below. The first centralization move was much less pronounced than in the legislative dimension and started during the First Republic. Between 1922 and 1932, the mean dropped from 3.05 to 2.59 (Figure 4). It oscillated around this level during the Vargas Years and recovered to close to 3 points some years after the democratization of 1945.

A pronounced decline after the 1964 military coup took the mean to its lowest level in the second half of the twentieth century: 2.65. Then the administrative autonomy of the states remained rather stable for thirteen years. In 1979, still under military rule, a new phase of decentralization was initiated. Several rises took the mean to 3.05, three years after the 1998 Constitution has been enacted. This trend started being reversed in 2002, with centralizing reforms under democracy. The plateau of 2.95 points, which is close to the score expressing predominant authority of the centre, was established in 2006 and was not changed by the Covid-19 pandemic – which substantively affected the regulation of some policies, but not the responsibilities regarding the provision of services.

Finally, in the fiscal sphere, each sub-dimension follows a singular trajectory (Figures 5–9). Proportion of own-source revenues and conditional transfers display a higher level of state autonomy. Other two sub-dimensions, namely restrictions on states' own-source revenues and degree of transfers' conditionality, have in common dynamic centralization moves during the military dictatorship followed by an increase in state autonomy in the years following the 1988 Constitution. Restrictions on states' own sources were tightened by the 1934 Constitution, taking the score down abruptly. Except

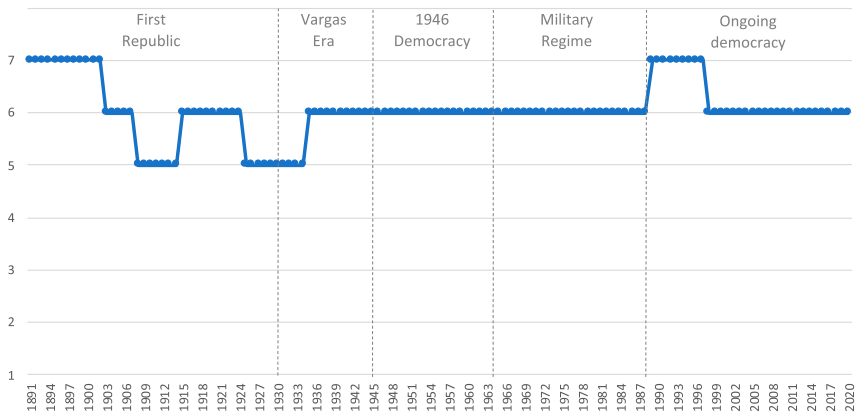


Figure 5. Proportion of own-source revenues, 1891–2020.

for three years during the *Estado Novo*, this quite high level of restrictions remained until 1967, when the Military Regime’s new rules tightened the constraints on state autonomy further. From 1967 to 1988, the coding for this dimension was kept at 2, the lowest in the republican times. The 1988 constitution partially reversed the overall centralization process, allowing the restrictions on states own-source revenues to reach a medium level (4).

The curve for the degree of conditionality of transfers is much simpler. Conditional transfers were negligible until the 1946 Constitution created a fiscal system heavily based on vertical transfers. This provision was put in force in 1948, inaugurating a succession of schemes with tight strings attached to conditional transfers, justifying an enduring score of 1. Ongoing schemes to cooperatively fund national education (Fundeb) and health (SUS) systems explain the maintenance of high conditionalities, but with looser strings attached to the transfers.

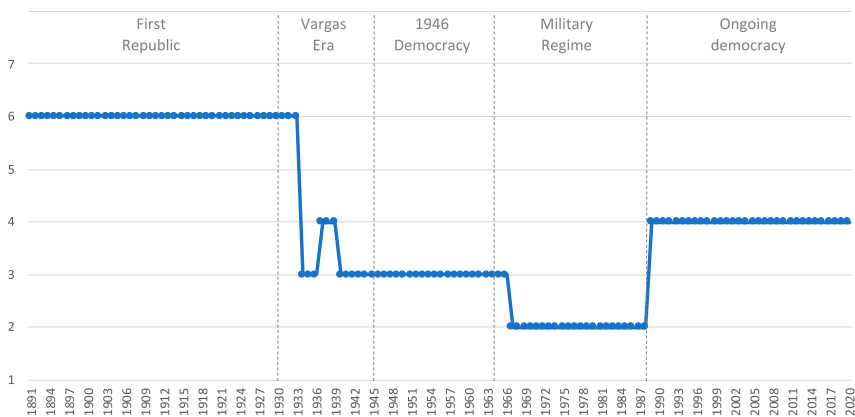


Figure 6. Restrictions on own-source revenues, 1891–2020.

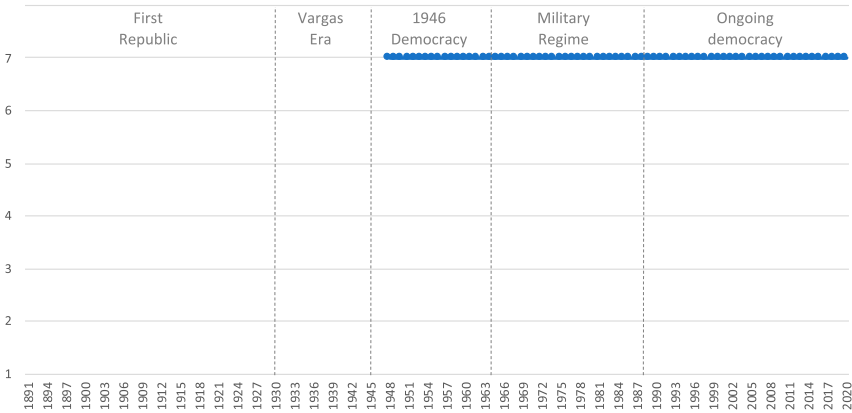


Figure 7. Proportion of conditional transfers out of total revenues, 1891–2020.

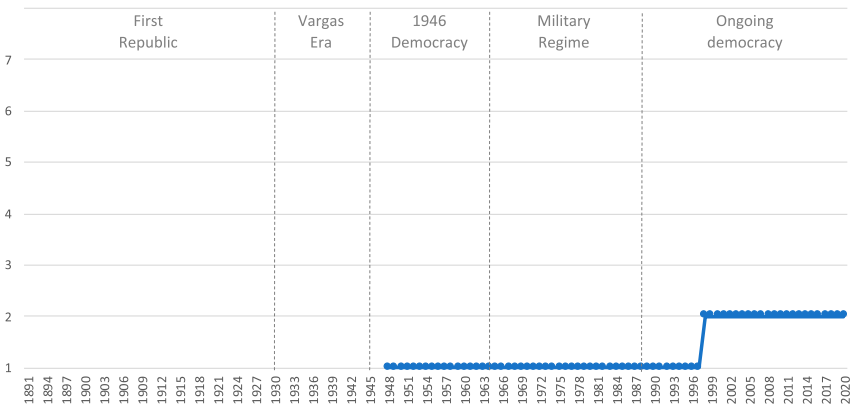


Figure 8. Degree of conditionality of transfers, 1891–2020.

States’ borrowing autonomy shows a stark centralization at the beginning of the Vargas’ Era, with score dropping from 7 to 1. The 1946 Democracy experienced two decentralization moves: when it was established and at the beginning of the 1960s. The Military Regime kept this dimension of autonomy at a quite low level (3) and only centralized authority in 1984 – one year after the inauguration of elected governors. A new centralization move took place in 2000, when the Fiscal Responsibility Act shrank states’ borrowing autonomy to a level as low as that of the *Estado Novo*.

Form

Overall, the study has revealed an underlying trend of centralizing power in the Brazilian federation, a pattern more noticeable in the fiscal sphere and in

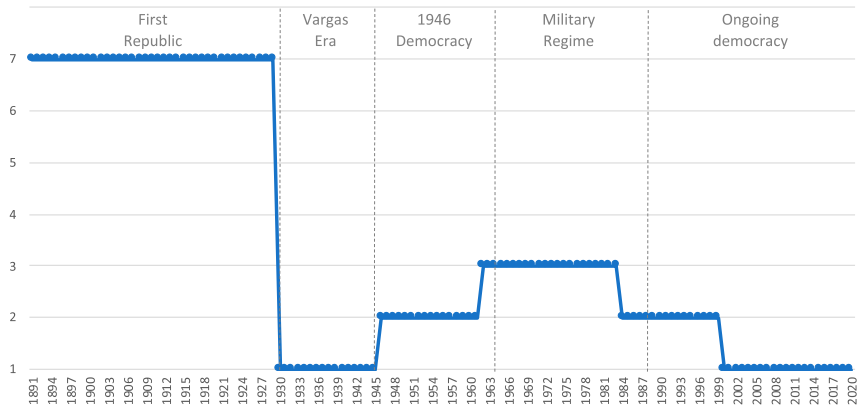


Figure 9. Borrowing autonomy, 1891–2020.

the regulation of policies than in the politico-institutional sphere and the administrative dimension of policies.

Apart from constitutional autonomy, which had a modest centralization at one point in time, the other three facets of politico-institutional autonomy have followed a rather dichotomous trajectory. Institutional autonomy and manipulation of elections for chief state executives and for state assemblies experienced perceptible ups and downs, although not necessarily associated with regime type.

Regarding policies, [Figure 10](#) shows that the legislative and the administrative means were closer in the first republican decades, revealing an institutional design more similar to a dual federation. [Figure 10](#) shows the gradual separation of the power to decide and the power to act (Braun 2000) that took place between 1925 and 1953, when the distance between the means rose from 0.48 to 1.27. This suggests that from the

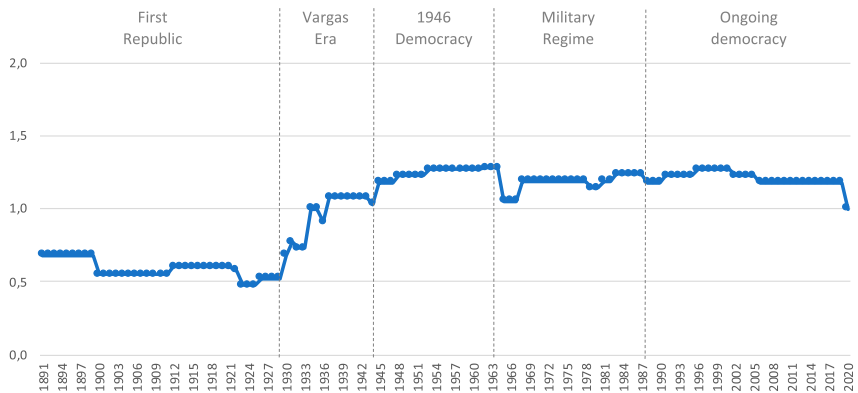


Figure 10. Mean administrative-legislative deviation, 1891–2020.

end of the First Republic until the first years of the 1946 Democracy the federation moved towards an administrative model in terms of policy making. The Covid-19 pandemic decreased the administrative-legislative deviation due to judicial rulings empowering states to decide over policy areas where they were already responsible for the implementation.

The fiscal sphere has one dimension with evident centralization (degree of transfers' conditionality), two with prevalent centralization (restrictions on own-source revenues and borrowing autonomy), and two with predominant stability (proportion of own-source revenues and proportion of conditional transfers). Combined in a mean score, the five dimensions generate a curve that reveals three distinct periods: a plateau expressing a highly decentralized fiscal structure until 1930; an abrupt centralization in the beginning of the Vargas Years; a lasting period of relative stability, from the middle of the twentieth century on, with the score oscillating around the medium point of our 7-point scale (Figure 11). This fluctuation near the score 4 is not associated with regime change – the 1946 democracy displays mean scores close to most of the Military Regime, for instance.

Instruments

New constitutions have been the most clear-cut instrument for dynamic de/centralization in Brazil. All the regime changes experienced by the country have been followed by the enactment of a new set of fundamental rules with impacts on states' autonomy: 1891 (establishment of the republic and the federation), 1934 (after the 1930 Revolution), 1937 (granted by Vargas, after the inauguration of the *Estado Novo*), 1946 (democratization after World War II), 1967 (granted by the Military Regime), and 1988 (most recent democratization). It is plausible that this trend has contributed to the impression of pendular moves between centralization and decentralization, regardless of the content of each constitutional reform. As new constitutions demand new fine-grained regulation, ordinary legislation also played a role as an instrument of change. Particularly in the case of public policies, new legislation frequently took place in the years following the enactment of constitutions.

Authoritarian governments have also relied on legislation with an exceptional – and frequently unclear – status to change the legal order without declaring the constitution void. Vargas' decrees after the 1930 Revolution and the powerful institutional acts enacted by the Military Regime before and after the 1967 constitution illustrate this pattern. In both cases, the legislation was not subjected to judicial review, although formally Brazil has relied on a constitutional court since 1891.

The succession of constitutions also posed new questions regarding their interpretation, so it could be expected that the constitutional court would

have had a relevant role in shaping Brazilian federalism, in line with cases like that of the U.S. (Kincaid 2019). This is less true in Brazil, though. There was only one time point where a change of state autonomy could be attributed to a ruling of the Federal Supreme Court (STF). Historically, the court has been more effective as a guardian of centralized constitutional arrangements than protecting states' competences and interests (Rodrigues, Lorencini, and Zimmermann 2017). In authoritarian periods, a recurrent mechanism to align the courts with the interest of the regime has been the compulsory retirement of hostile judges and their replacement by colleagues closer to the executive, as seen in the *Estado Novo* (Rosenfield 2020).

The exception to the general trend is 2020 and involves the Covid-19 pandemic. In the year the pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization, President Jair Bolsonaro's administration asked the Brazilian Supreme Court for a ruling against the lockdown adopted by several states and municipalities. The federal executive claimed that the competence to regulate economic activities and curfews lies with the federal government. The constitutional court ruling in the Direct Unconstitutionality Suits n. 6,341 and 6,343 acknowledged the concurrent powers of sub-national health authorities and public administrators in the confrontation of Covid-19 (Vazquez and Schlegel 2022). The decision diverged from the usual pattern of STF's rulings. Its impact was strong enough to change the scores of state autonomy in the legislative dimension of three policy areas: health care, transport, and economic activity, as detailed in the [online appendix](#).¹¹

Static de/centralization in 2020

The last time point observed in the study is 2020. It displays a quite different level of state autonomy as compared to 1891. Scores are lower for the public policy and the fiscal spheres. In 2020, Brazil was experiencing a level of static decentralization comparable to that of the 1946 Democracy and lower than in the aftermath of the 1988 Constitution.

In terms of politico-institutional autonomy, the score reached 23 points against 5 in 1891, pointing to net decentralization (Table 4). Three sub-dimensions display the highest possible score in 2020: institutional autonomy and

Table 4. Static politico-institutional decentralization, 1891 and 2020.

	1891	2020	Diff
I1 Constitutional autonomy	3	2	-1
I2 Institutional autonomy	2	7	5
I3 Manipulation of elections	n/a	7/7	0/0
Total	5	23	4
Mode	2;3	7	
Mean	2.5	5.8	1.0

(lack of) manipulation of state elections, either for the executive or for the legislative. In these sub-dimensions, the comparison with the outset would indicate net centralization if 1892 instead of 1891 was considered as the birth of the federation. The first republican election for governors and state assemblies took place in the year following the proclamation of the 1891 constitution, taking the institutional autonomy score from 2 to 7 and the scores for manipulation to 7 (executive) and 7 (legislature). This adds 19 points to the total of 1892, which would reach 24 points. Regarding the third sub-dimension, constitutional autonomy, 2020 shows a score one point lower than 1891 (from 3 to 2).

The legislative mean of 1.95 expresses a significant net centralization of policy-making authority as compared to the outset of the federation (mean of 2.09). The administrative dimension behaved the opposite way: 2.64 in 1891 against 2.95 in 2020 – a net decentralization (Table 5). This indicates that in general both dimensions remained predominantly centralized, when one considers that the means are under the medium score of the scale (4), representing competences equally distributed between the federal government and the states.

The fiscal sphere shows centralization in three sub-dimensions as compared to 1891: proportion of states' own-source revenues, restrictions on

Table 5. Static policy de/centralization, 1891 and 2020.

	1891			2020			Differences	
	Leg(a)	Adm(b)	L-A	Leg(c)	Adm(d)	L-A	c-a	d-b
P1 Agriculture	6	6	0	2	3	-1	-4	-3
P2 Citizenship and immigration	3	3	0	1	1	0	-2	-2
P3 Culture	n/a	n/a	0	4	4	0	4	4
P4 Currency and money supply	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
P5 Defence	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
P6 Economic activity	4	4	0	4	3	1	0	-1
P7 Education – pre-tertiary	6	6	2	2	5	-3	-4	1
P8 Education – tertiary	2	1	1	2	3	-1	0	2
P9 Elections and voting	1	5	-4	1	5	-4	0	0
P10 Employment relations	2	2	0	1	1	0	-1	-1
P11 Environmental protection	4	4	0	4	4	0	0	0
P12 External affairs	1	1	0	1	2	-1	0	1
P13 Finance and securities	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
P14 Health care	n/a	n/a	0	4	4	0	4	4
P15 Language	1	1	0	1	2	-1	0	1
P16 Law – civil	1	4	-3	1	4	-3	0	0
P17 Law – criminal	1	4	-3	1	4	-3	0	0
P18 Law enforcement	4	6	-2	1	5	-4	-3	-1
P19 Media	n/a	4	-4	1	3	-2	1	-1
P20 Natural resources	4	4	0	3	3	0	-1	-1
P21 Social welfare	1	n/a	0	2	2	0	2	2
P22 Transport	3	2	1	4	4	0	1	2
Total	47	60		43	65		2	7
Mode	1	4	0	1	4	0		
Mean	2.47	3.16		1.95	2.95		0.09	0.32

Table 6. Static fiscal de/centralization, 1891 and 2020.

	1891	2020	Diff
F1 Proportion of own-source revenues	7	6	-1
F2 Restrictions on own-source revenues	6	4	-2
F3 Proportion of conditional transfers	n/a	7	n/a
F4 Conditionality of transfers	n/a	2	n/a
F5 Borrowing autonomy	7	1	-6
Total	20	20	0
Mode	7		
Mean	6.7	4	-2.7

these revenues, and borrowing autonomy (Table 6). One of these indicators displays the lowest possible level in 2020 (score 1 for borrowing autonomy), and another represents limited autonomy (2 points for the degree of transfers' conditionality). The indicator for the proportion of conditional transfers out of total revenues was not available in 1891, because no vertical transfer scheme was at play before the 1946 Constitution. In 2020, the score for this sub-dimension was at its highest due to the limited relevance of conditional transfers to states' finances, below 10% of their total revenues.

Explaining the prevalence of centripetal forces

The results of this study reveal telling patterns. The most evident is the remarkable independence between spheres. Politico-institutional power, public policy autonomy, and fiscal indicators behaved differently in static and dynamic terms in Brazil's federation history. Another key finding is that general trends should not downplay particularities in specific dimensions.

A sound account of de/centralization in a federation ought to consider differences between short-term and long-term trends. This helps to distinguish between what Streek and Thelen (2005) call the *process* of change – either incremental or abrupt – and the *result* of change – which may amount to either institutional continuity or discontinuity. Among other benefits, this approach prevents one from overlooking considerable continuity through and despite historical turning points.

This approach is particularly valuable in the analysis of the Brazilian case. Our data reveals that a punctuated centralization prevailed in several dimensions between 1891 and 2020. A long-term process of loss of state autonomy has been repeatedly interrupted by waves of decentralization. In these dimensions, short-term cycles of centralization and decentralization have not offset each other, and the net result has been a static arrangement more centralized in 2020 than at the outset of the federation. This is particularly true for legislative authority over policies and fiscal autonomy, as seen in Figures 4 and 11.

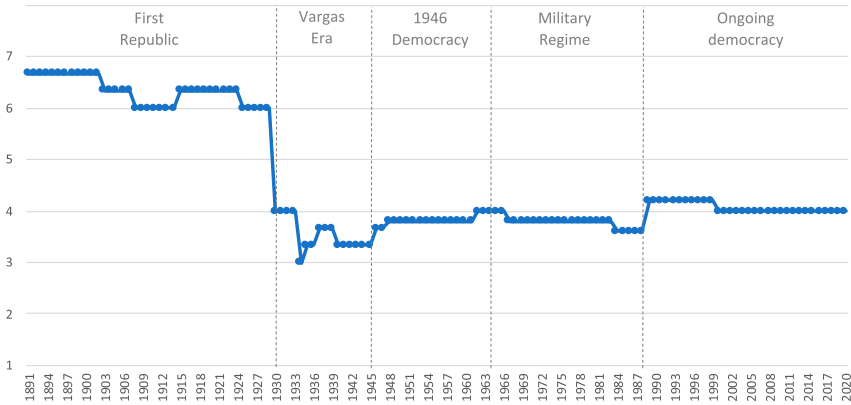


Figure 11. Mean fiscal autonomy, 1891–2020.

Regarding the short term, regime changes have been frequently associated with de/centralization reforms. Institutional ruptures, such as the 1930 Revolution, the fall of Vargas' dictatorship, and the 1964 military coup, had potential to be critical junctures, not only in the sense that they were moments open to change, but also that they could sow what would come ahead. At these points, the federation was to some extent reformed.

At face value, these potential critical junctures may offer partial support to the systoles-diastoles metaphor. It has not been uncommon that authoritarian eras were succeeded by pacts aiming to democratize the country and decentralize the federation. In this sense, the struggle for democracy can be seen as a partial explanation for decentralization, as well as authoritarianism for centralization.

This study brings evidence that this is only part of the story, and for several reasons. Two aspects stand out. First, institutional reforms have not always coincided with deep-rooted socio-political processes. There were enduring trends, such as the espousing of developmentalism or the territorial logic of elite organization, which persisted from one politico-institutional era to the following. These and other factors may prevent institutional reforms from fulfilling their potential to redirect institutional development over the long run. Second, general trends have impacted distinctively each autonomy sphere, to the point that there have been policy-specific dynamics and effects. The explanatory power of regime change and type varies enormously between sub-dimensions of autonomy.

A short-term expectation to be assessed concerns the sequencing of decentralization. How does the democratization of the 1940s compare to that of the 1980s? In the transition after World War II, governors were elected in 1947, after a new constitution had already regulated public policies and fiscal matters. In the previous 1945 federal election, two out of the three

most relevant newly established parties had been created under Vargas' inspiration. He and a dozen of his closer allies were elected to the Congress at that point (Souza 1976).¹² The evidence suggests that the hypothesis of Falleti (2010) for the 1980s travels well through time. In the public policy sphere, the transition brought no substantial decentralization, even in the legislative dimension, which had gone through stark centralization in the Vargas Years. As for fiscal sub-dimensions, the signs are mixed: restrictions on the states' borrowing autonomy were relaxed, but the constraints on own-source revenues were not reversed, and the expansion of federal transfers was accompanied by tight conditionalities. The high proportion of the states' own-source revenues remained largely untouched. If these features are taken as a far-from-dramatic shift in state autonomy, the lack of elected governors and other influential state players to push decentralization further at the 1946 constituent assembly can be pointed out as a contributing factor to the timid increase in autonomy.

Regarding the long term, the punctuated dynamic centralization observed in some dimensions requires deeper explanations. Developmentalism is a prominent centripetal force. From 1930 to at least the end of the 1970s, faith in state-led economic development informed the action of governments regardless of regime. The goal of centralizing planning, resources, and instruments for market intervention accompanied this ideology and prevailed in public sector initiatives for decades (Souza 1997; Falleti 2010). In the case of Brazil, the 1988 Constitution represented a revitalisation of federalism also registered in other Latin American countries in the late twentieth century. This trend is attributed by some authors to a change of economic paradigm – from developmentalism to neoliberalism – rather than to democratization (Gibson 2004).

Another centripetal drive is the coincidence between the acceleration of the national state-building process and a period of prominence of centralist ideas, particularly after the 1930 Revolution. The authoritarian ideology that flourished in Brazil in the 1920s and the 1930s associated centralism with national state building and to a major extent came to be represented by the *Estado Novo*. As the path-dependence literature reminds us, sequencing matters. The prevalence of centralism at a decisive stage of the state-building process in Brazil may have left an indelible mark (Draibe 2004).

The pronounced territorial inequalities, in terms of wealth, population, and political power, have favoured centralization providing preferential allies for elites occupying the federal government. Political and social elites from poorer and less influential states have repeatedly joined pro-centralization coalitions as a form of counterbalancing the richer states' power and accessing more resources from the centre (Fausto 1994). This led to an enduring feature of the electoral system: São Paulo and other economically strong states have been under-represented in the lower chamber of the Congress

since the Electoral Code of 1932. Adopted after a successful revolution against the hegemonic oligarchies of key states, this kind of malapportionment survived two transitions to democracy (Nicolau 1997). It has been combined with rather symmetric powers to the Senate, where all the states and the federal district have had the same number of representatives, boosting the leverage of smaller states' interests.

Another influential group championing centralism has been the military. It is beyond the scope of this section to recapitulate in detail the century-long and multicausal process that led the armed forces and particularly the army to be key political players in Brazil. During most of the twentieth century, the military claimed a moderator role in Brazilian politics and were mobilized to intervene by civilian forces in moments of low cohesion among elites. This role changed in 1964, when they started sponsoring their own project for the country, with the help of civilian sectors (Stepan 1971). Their reasons to advocate centralism were continuously transformed and reinforced: territorial integrity and influence of Auguste Comte's positivism during the monarchy; association between industrialization and national security during the *Estado Novo*; anticommunism and developmentalism in the 1960s (Carvalho 2005). Once in power, generals concentrated authority, despite the concessions required to co-opt regional elites with patronage in exchange for some consent and electoral support (Medeiros 1986). Centralization was the 'plan A' until the pressure for opening the regime led to a pragmatic overhaul of this underpinning principle.

Other factors that contributed to centralization drives could be investigated, such as public attitudes. Brazilians largely support the cooperative way the federation works today, with legislative authority over most policies concentrated in the centre. They prefer territorial homogeneity in policies and a plurality of citizens identify themselves with the nation as much as with their state (Schlegel, Ferrari, and Arretche 2021). There are reasons to believe that citizens associate the federal government with the expansion of social rights since Vargas centralized welfare policies in the 1930s and 1940s.¹³

On the other hand, what explains decentralization moves? The most prominent factor has been the widespread creed that democracy goes hand in hand with decentralization, as already stated. However, the relevance of state elites and interests, as well as the need to accommodate their demands and conflicts, can be considered another key centrifugal force (Medeiros 1986; Hagopian 1996; Souza 1997; Codato 2015). The trajectory of the party system, fundamentally characterized by territorial fragmentation, might help to understand this process. Nationalized parties tend to favour centralization. As the electoral districts have coincided with states' boundaries for most of the Brazilian republican history, regionalized parties might have worked as vectors for interests fundamentally organized at the state level.

In the First Republic, after a brief period of consolidation, the usual arrangement involved a single party dominating each state's politics and no party operating beyond the limits of its original state (Nicolau 2012).¹⁴ In the 1930s, the short-lived experience of competitive elections did not allow any national partisan force to consolidate. The three major parties of the 1946 Democracy were considered nationalized, but the evidence to support this statement remains controversial (Lima Jr. 1983; Santos 1987; Nicolau 2012; Santos 2004).¹⁵ Vasselai (2015) claims that, in terms of electoral supply, demand, and outcomes, the Brazilian party system was less nationalized between 1946 and 1964 than in the 2010s; only in terms of organization some parties could be taken as nationalized.

The military junta extinguished the previous parties in 1965 and created by law a two-party system that lasted for almost two decades. Arena supported the regime and MDB gathered the moderate opposition tolerated by the government. The electoral law allowed up to three candidates of the same party running for the Senate or municipalities. Arena benefited from this accommodating scheme, known as *sublegenda*, in the elections for the Senate in 1966, 1978, and 1982 (Nicolau 2012).

The two-party system was abolished in 1979. To what extent the following parties have been nationalized is still a controversial topic. Samuels (1998), Mainwaring (1999), and Ames (2001) posited that Brazil did not have nationalized parties in terms of distribution of votes at the turning of the century; in organizational terms, they would be rather federations of state parties. More recently, Braga (2006) and Speck and Campos (2014) argued that the level of nationalization experienced a marked increase from the 1990s onwards.

Based on a four-fold analysis, Vasselai (2015, 50) concluded that at the middle of the 2010s the system was 'almost perfectly nationalized' regarding party presence and organization, but one of the least nationalized in comparative terms regarding electoral outcomes for the lower chamber of the Congress. The author depicted a highly nationalized offer by political elites but a low capacity of these elites to appeal homogeneously to the electorate over the country. Although the direction of causality can be disputed (Colomer 2005), the association between an ordinarily non-nationalized party system and drives for decentralization remains plausible.

The size of the territory and population, and the potential managerial benefits that decentralization could have brought, are less evident factors that might have played a role below the surface, as comparative studies suggest (e.g. Lijphart 1999; Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010). At face value, the most dramatic decentralization of fiscal resources, promoted by the 1988 Constitution, could not be seen as part of a broader economic plan (Afonso and Lobo 1996; Kugelmas and Sola 1999). According to influential analysts, the transfer of fiscal resources and policy responsibilities did not aim at raising the efficiency or rationalizing

expenses in Brazil, in contrast to most of the decentralization experienced by Latin American countries in the 1980s and 1990s. 'The rationale for increasing economic and political resources in the hands of local and middle-level governments was to weaken the central government and thus disfavour future centralizing or authoritarian governments', argued Afonso and Lobo (1996, 10).¹⁶

On the other hand, the quest for macroeconomic stability was one of the key incentives to re-centralization in Latin America and particularly in Brazil at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s (Eaton and Dickovick 2004). Endowing state governors with greater authority over revenues and expenditures – borrowing included – made it more difficult for national politicians to perform a function which cannot be devolved: halting inflation. In a certain sense, governors thrived on Brazil's inflationary crisis, as it served as a veil for uncontrolled expenses and unsustainable debts. When the 1988 Constitution was enacted, the debt of all subnational governments accounted for less than 6% of the total GDP; ten years later, it reached over 14% (Rodden 2003). Eaton and Dickovick (2004, 99) persuasively argued that re-centralization in Brazil did not follow an economic crisis but precisely the opposite. It was the elimination of hyperinflation in 1994 that created support for re-centralizing reforms, such as the enactment of the Fiscal Responsibility Law, in 2000.

Conclusion

The systematic investigation of static and dynamic de/centralization with a focus on state autonomy has showed a net centralization between 1891 and 2020 in several dimensions in Brazil. This prevailing trend should not downplay particularities in specific domains. The federation experienced a rather punctuated dynamic centralization in the legislative side of policy making and in fiscal matters. The administrative dimension of policy autonomy displayed the most stable pattern, with its mean score oscillating around a level that indicates dominance of the federal government. Only one sub-dimension of the politico-institutional sphere followed a trajectory closer to regime change.

Overall, the assumption that in Brazil phases of decentralization have offset centralization waves in a pendular fashion proved to be an oversimplification. The same applies to the notion of a close association between federalism, democracy, and decentralization. Short-term intervals experienced dynamic decentralization in authoritarian regimes and democratic governments promoted centralizing reforms. The assumption that authoritarian periods 'turn off' federalism deserves a thorough reassessment, taking the Brazilian case into account.

The study also highlights the relevance of sequencing for the outcome of transitions. Governors directly elected in 1982 pushed for broader fiscal and

policy autonomy in the national constitutional assembly of 1987-1988. Broad decentralization in different dimensions followed. Our data indicates that the decay of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship was accompanied by a rather limited decentralization, suggesting that the timing of the election for governors, when a new constitution was already in force, may have influenced that outcome. The 1940s transition also represents an admonition for those investigating the effects of regime change: discontinuity cannot be assumed from institutional reforms. 'Near-miss' critical junctures – when change is possible, considered, sought after, but narrowly fails to materialize (Capoccia 2015) – are also a possible outcome of this kind of unsettled times.

It follows that federal arrangements under authoritarian rule deserve a thorough inspection before being categorized as façade federations. Not only does subnational autonomy vary substantially in the absence of democracy, but the nature of future democratic governance may heavily depend on previous authoritarian regime's territorial dynamics as well. Brazilian regional elites played a relevant role supporting authoritarian governments and acted as a background factor shaping what would come after.

The case of Brazil suggests that military and civilian authoritarian regimes can be similar in several aspects. Elections for governor and state assemblies have been suspended by civilian and military governments alike. Until the 1980s, both variants primarily followed a developmentalist orientation and centralism in many domains. Both ruled based on new constitutions and exceptional legislation not subject to judicial review.

Finally, we must acknowledge that our methodology concentrates on self-rule and focuses on the autonomy of the intermediary level of the Brazilian federation. Further research on shared-rule aspects and including municipalities would be much welcomed in the case of Brazil, due to the particularities of its institutional arrangements.

Notes

1. The *Why De/Centralization in Federations* project focuses on states/provinces/cantons because they constitute the most common institutional arrangements in federations. Following the general framework, this article concentrates on the federal government-states relationship.
2. Original in Portuguese, English translation by the author.
3. Original in Portuguese, English translation by the author.
4. Original in Portuguese, English translation by the author.
5. Original in Portuguese, English translation by the author.
6. Data points with no score – due to lack of information or public activities in a given area – are not considered in the calculation of means.
7. Time points with no score, such as those related to electoral manipulation when there was no election, were ignored in this counting. If they are considered, the frequency of change would be higher.

8. Manipulation of elections involves two subdimensions, as it applies for the executive and for legislatures. Thus this mean was calculated with 4 as the denominator.
9. These years were considered as following transitions to authoritarianism: 1930-1933; 1937-1941; 1964-1968. Years following transitions to democracy: 1934-1936; 1946-1950; 1985-1989.
10. This asymmetry is captured by the coding and detailed in the codebook. The resulting net score for the year 1969 in this sub-dimension is 2.
11. The score shifts relied on what Thelen (2004) and Mahoney and Thelen (2015), among other authors, describe as 'conversion': (re)interpretation of existing rules that represent actual institutional change – in this case, constitutional rules.
12. Vargas was ousted at the end of 1945 but kept his political rights and was admitted as a candidate in the election of that year.
13. Vargas was directly elected as president in 1950 and during the public ceremonies after he committed suicide inside the presidential palace in 1954 thousands of people took to the streets of Rio de Janeiro (Fausto 1994). His social policies are said to be related to the nickname 'Father of the Poor' and to the passive citizenship some analysts attribute to Brazilians citizens (Carvalho 1995).
14. Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo became apparent exceptions to this rule, with the opposition organizing secondary parties (still within state's limits) in 1892 and 1926, respectively (Ramos 2022). Other states experienced interludes of multipartyism, such as Bahia (Quadros 1973), but the general trend was to accommodate conflicts among elite factions within the single party of each state.
15. Together PSD, PTB, and UDN gathered more than three-quarters of the votes for the lower chamber of the Congress in four out of five elections from 1945 to 1962 (Nicolau 2004). The roots of this performance should be traced back to 1945, when democratization seemed inevitable, and the Vargas administration was able to regulate the coming elections. Among the rules forged to benefit the dictator and his allies, parties were obliged to be organized in at least five states, creating an incentive for nationalization (Souza 1976).
16. Original in Portuguese, English translation by the author.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Sandra Cristina Gomes and Daniel Arias Vazquez, whose insightful comments at different phases of the project contributed to its improvement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Sao Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) [Grant Number 2018/00381-8, 2018/10358-3, 2021/08773-5], the Leverhulme Trust [Grant

Number IN-2013-044], the James Madison Charitable Trust, and the Forum of Federations.

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