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***Laranjas* Candidates, Gender Inequality and Democracy
Perception in Brazil**

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Abstract

Brazil has experienced political and institutional instability since the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. Society was marked by polarization, economic uncertainty, declining confidence in political institutions, and growing challenges to democracy. These developments intensified during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency and resulted in attacks on Brazil's democratic institutions on January 8, 2023. In this context, this study examines whether the country's political crises and anti-democratic attacks are associated with changes in citizens' satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions. One of the sources of citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy is dissatisfaction with representation, that is, the people who occupy elected office. On gender, even after almost 30 years of Brazil's gender quotas in politics, women represent only about 18% of the 513 members of the Chamber of Deputies following the most recent elections in 2022. This study highlights growth in women's formal participation in Brazilian politics but questions how much this progress translates into effective political representation. This paper argues that formal compliance with gender quotas is followed by informal practices that limit women's representation. These practices include so-called fictitious candidacies (*laranjas*), in which a person is registered as a candidate to meet legal gender requirements without necessarily receiving effective party support or financial resources.

Keywords: *Brazil, politics, gender, laranjas, elections, women's representation, democracy*

Introduction

Over the past decade, Brazilian democracy suffered political polarization, economic instability, and growing skepticism toward democratic institutions, particularly following the political crisis that ended in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the events that followed. Dilma's removal from office brought to a close a 14-year cycle of Workers' Party (PT) administrations at the federal level. In the following years, Jair Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency in 2018 deepened tensions within the political system. During his term, conflicts between the federal government and other democratic institutions, such as the National Congress, were the central topic of the public debate on democratic stability.

The challenge to the results of the 2022 elections, in which Bolsonaro lost to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, intensified this climate of instability, which was later marked by anti-democratic attacks in Brasília on January 8, 2023. These events highlighted significant tensions around political representation, institutional legitimacy, and Brazilian society's satisfaction with democracy. That's why understanding transformations in Brazilian democracy requires examining how the population perceives democracy, its institutions, and its mechanisms of representation.^[1] This perception of democratic institutions is closely tied to the question of who is and who is not represented within them, a gap that becomes especially visible when considering gender inequality in political representation.

Political representation is, therefore, a key factor in understanding the quality and legitimacy of contemporary democracies. Although democracy presupposes citizens' participation in choosing their representatives, this representation does not occur uniformly across different social groups. The persistent underrepresentation of women in positions of power is one of the most evident examples of this inequality. For these reasons, affirmative action policies such as gender quotas have been developed to reduce historical male dominance in politics and expand women's access to electoral contests and representative offices.^[7] However, a quota alone does not guarantee effective implementation. The literature shows that electoral and party systems, as well as formal and informal rules within parties, can limit these policies' effects and hinder women's genuine political representation.^[10]

Thus, while quotas may increase women's participation in elections, their outcomes also depend on how

parties interpret and apply these rules in practice. It is precisely in this gap between the formal rule and its implementation that mechanisms may emerge that allow parties to meet the gender requirement without necessarily guaranteeing women real and equal opportunities for electoral participation. In an international context in which gender quotas have contributed to a significant increase in women's representation in legislative bodies, Brazil stands out as a particularly troubling or ambiguous case. Implemented in national and state legislative elections beginning in 1998, Brazil's quota policy has yielded very limited results in expanding women's representation. For this reason, Brazilian legislation has been described as a "law that exists only on paper." [8]

The Edge of Democracy

A woman president suspended from office. A vice president taking office amid allegations of corruption. Street protests and economic instability. This was Brazil's political situation in 2016. President Dilma Rousseff was temporarily suspended from office on May 12, 2016, following the initiation of the impeachment process. The Federal Senate subsequently removed her from office on August 31. Vice President Michel Temer took over the presidency until the end of the term in 2018, a period marked by protests, low approval ratings, and corruption accusations. Dilma's removal ended a political cycle for the Workers' Party (PT), which had held federal power for 14 years. In Brazilian society, there was a growing hunger for new candidates and different parties. In other words, a desire for a drastic change in power. [5]

In this context, the unlikely presidential candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro, a federal deputy, was considered a possible solution. Bolsonaro was known for statements considered radical, including speeches in favor of the Brazilian military dictatorship and torture. During Dilma's impeachment, Bolsonaro earned widespread attention when, in his vote in the Chamber of Deputies, he paid tribute to Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, who was responsible for serious human rights violations during the military dictatorship, according to the National Truth Commission. Bolsonaro's campaign stood out for its use of social media and for a political communication style marked by radical and, at times, aggressive postures. This strategy allowed the candidate to reach dissatisfied voters with traditional parties and those who advocated for a break with the existing political model. In 2018, Bolsonaro was elected President of the Republic, defeating Fernando Haddad, the Workers' Party candidate.

Throughout his term, conflicts increased between the Federal Government and other democratic institutions, particularly the National Congress, the Federal Supreme Court, and the Superior Electoral Court. At the same time, digital networks, websites, blogs, and channels associated with the far right gained greater visibility; they spread information aimed at delegitimizing institutions and, at certain times, called for the closure of Congress and the Federal Supreme Court. The Federal Police revealed organized schemes to destabilize democracy. The president's personal involvement helped escalate tensions. The episodes that marked the administration were demonstrations in front of military barracks calling for intervention by the Armed Forces, systematic attacks on the Electoral Court, questions about the security of electronic voting machines, a parade of armored vehicles in the area around Praça dos Três Poderes, and recurring conflicts involving the appointment and replacement of Federal Police officials. As a result, society began to feel institutional distrust and to challenge democratic norms. [9]

However, in the 2022 elections, Jair Bolsonaro was defeated by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who returned to the presidential race after being barred from running in 2018 due to a criminal conviction on appeal, which, at the time, made him ineligible under the Clean Record Law. Following the results, Bolsonaro's supporters organized protests and set up encampments in front of military barracks across Brazil. They questioned the legitimacy of the election results and called for an intervention by the Armed Forces to prevent the

president-elect from taking office. This led to the January 8, 2023 attacks. A few days after Lula's inauguration, thousands of protesters stormed and vandalized the headquarters of the National Congress, the Federal Supreme Court, and the Planalto Palace in Brasília. The incident represented the greatest attack on Brazil's democratic institutions since the country's return to democracy.

Therefore, this research asks whether the anti-democratic attacks and political crises observed in Brazil may be linked to significant changes in the public's perception of democracy. However, rather than assuming this period led to a decline in support for democracy, this study asks whether any increase in dissatisfaction reflects a recent change or was already part of a prior trend. From this perspective, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: From 2013 to 2024, the majority of the Brazilian population displays dissatisfaction with democracy.

H2: From 2013 to 2024, the majority of the Brazilian population disagrees or strongly disagrees that democracy is the best system of government.

H3: From 2013 to 2024, the Brazilian population does not trust the National Congress.

Gender and *Laranjas* Candidates in Brazilian Politics

Although it was one of the first countries in Latin America to adopt gender quotas, Brazil continues to show slow growth in women's political representation, even after electing and reelecting a woman as president. Brazilian politics established gender quotas through Law No. 9,100/1995, which set a minimum of 20% for female candidates in the 1996 municipal elections; this was later increased to 30% by Law No. 9,504/1997 (Elections Law), effective in the 1998 election. Nevertheless, in practice, quotas have had limited impact on women's actual representation.

The Brazilian National Congress consists of two chambers: the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate. At the state level, elections are also held for the Legislative Assemblies. These races are marked by intense competition, with expensive, highly personality-driven campaigns that intensify competition within parties and favor candidates who can build their own political and electoral networks. This context also helps sustain traditional parties and candidates, making it difficult for women to enter and remain in politics. As a result, women remain underrepresented among party leaders, candidates, and elected officials. This research focuses on races for the Chamber of Deputies and the role of the federal deputy.

The gender quota applies to elections for the Chamber of Deputies, state legislative assemblies, and municipal councils. Currently, the Chamber of Deputies has 513 seats, distributed among the 26 states and the Federal District. However, the policy's initial design itself created obstacles to its effective implementation.^[6] In the 1990s, the legislation allowed parties to submit lists containing up to 150 percent of the available seats and required them only to "reserve" a portion of candidacies for women. In practice, this let parties formally comply with the law without necessarily fielding women as candidates. As a result, some seats set aside for women could remain unfilled. In 2009, a minor electoral reform changed the law's wording from "reserve" to "fill." Starting with the 2010 elections, parties were required to fill at least 30% of candidate slots with women, rather than merely reserving those slots. Even so, enforcement remained limited in the first few years and became effective only in the 2014 elections.

The strengthening of gender quotas has also been followed by informal practices that can circumvent these policies' objectives. One example is the use of women as "scapegoats" or the registration of fictitious candidates, known in Brazil as "*laranjas* candidates". These candidacies can vary in terms of intent and

legality, and not all individuals involved are necessarily women. What they have in common is that they are candidates only on paper, without campaigning.[11] In some cases, the candidate herself may not even know she has been registered. In other cases, the candidate knowingly participates in the scheme and allows her name to be used to help the party meet legal requirements, possibly hoping to receive greater support in future campaigns.

In this study, a potential “*laranja* candidate” is defined by using two indicators: votes and campaign financial resources. A candidacy is a potential “*laranja* candidate” based on votes if it received less than 1% of the votes obtained by the last candidate elected to the same office, in the same year, and in the same state. Similarly, a candidacy is a potential “*laranja* candidate” based on campaign financial resources if it received less than 1% of the campaign financial resources of the last candidate elected to the same office, in the same year, and in the same state. This definition is used as a quantitative criterion to identify candidacies with exceptionally low electoral performance or campaign resources.

It is important to note that these criteria do not determine that a candidacy is a “*laranja* candidate.” They merely identify “potential *laranjas*” based on characteristics in the electoral data. Therefore, throughout this study, the term “potential *laranja*” will be used to refer to candidacies that meet the vote or financial resources criteria defined above. From this perspective, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H4: Since the 2002 elections, despite the increase in women’s political participation, there is a limited increase in the proportion of elected female candidates.

H5: Since the 2002 elections, the proportion of female candidates identified as potential “*laranjas* candidates”, based on both income and vote counts, is lower than the proportion of male candidates identified as potential “*laranjas* candidates”.

H6: Since the 2002 elections, the proportion of female candidates identified as potential “*laranjas* candidates”, on both income and vote counts, within each gender group is higher than the proportion of male candidates identified as potential “*laranjas* candidates”.

Data Collection

The data used to test hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 come from Latinobarómetro, a public opinion survey that conducts approximately 20,000 interviews annually in 18 Latin American countries.[4] The study tracks various aspects of the region’s political, economic, and social life, using public opinion indicators to measure the population’s attitudes, values, and behaviors regarding issues such as democracy and the economy. For this study, a set of questions was curated from all editions of the Latinobarómetro based on their relevance to politics, democracy, and sociodemographics. In addition, the responses were standardized and organized to ensure consistent comparisons across years. This process produced a dataset of 229 variables. However, for this analysis, 5 variables were selected (Country, Year, Satisfaction with Democracy, Churchill Quote about Democracy, Confidence in Congress) directly related to the hypotheses. The variable “Country” was filtered to Brazil. A major limitation of the dataset is how often questions are asked. Not all questions appear in every year of the survey, creating gaps in the time series. Responses with blanks, “No Answer,” or “Don’t know” were removed. Nevertheless, the dataset allows tracking significant changes in Brazilians’ perceptions across different political moments. In total, 27,787 responses were identified from individuals in Brazil across the available editions of Latinobarómetro since 1995; however, the number analyzed differs for each table because of the factors mentioned earlier. For this reason, Tables 1, 2, and 3 present the number of responses

analyzed for each situation.

Year	Total
1995	1133
1996	1052
1997	940
1998	978
2000	962
2001	870
2002	869
2003	1130
2004	1107
2005	1109
2006	1138
2007	1131
2008	1154
2009	1136
2010	1122
2011	1146
2013	1146
2015	1167
2016	1160
2017	1130
2018	1176
2020	1165
2023	1165
2024	1166
Total	26252

Table 1: Total Data Collected for Satisfaction with Democracy in Brazil, 1995–2024

Year	Total
2002	857
2003	1078
2004	1060
2005	1030
2006	1077
2007	1103
2008	1135
2009	1138
2010	1131
2011	1135
2013	1119
2015	1134
2016	1125
2017	1081
2018	1134
2020	1139
2023	1164
2024	1145
Total	19785

Table 2: Total Data Collected for Brazilian Opinion about “Democracy may have problems but it is still the best form of government” (Churchill’s Quote), 2002–2024

Year	Total
1995	1148
1996	1060
1997	975
1998	977
2000	963
2001	939
2002	947
2003	1157
2004	1149
2005	1152
2006	1135
2007	1158
2008	1162
2009	1161
2010	1156
2011	1172
2013	1166
2015	1193
2016	1160
2017	1163
2018	1165
2020	1167
2023	1160
2024	1149
Total	26734

Table 3: Total Data Collected for The Brazilian Public’s Trust in Congress, 1995–2024

The data used to analyze hypotheses H4, H5, and H6 came from the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court (TSE) open data website[3] and were supplemented by the Base dos Dados platform,[2] which organizes, standardizes, and structures information from TSE public databases. Together, these sources formed a database better suited to temporal analysis of women’s participation in Brazilian elections. The data were organized by aspects of the electoral process, including election year, office, gender, election results, votes, campaign financial resources and expenses, and, when available, candidates’ sociodemographic characteristics. The data were filtered to cover the years 2002 through 2022 and the office of federal deputy. This study focuses on gender, election results, votes, and campaign financial resources. For the purposes of presenting and interpreting the results, the term “N” will be used to represent the number of observations. The quantity and distribution of the collected data, with a specific focus on candidacies and election results for federal deputy, will be presented in the following section since it provides the necessary context for understanding the evolution of women’s participation, its translation into electoral representation, and the possible differences between men and women over the study period.

Results

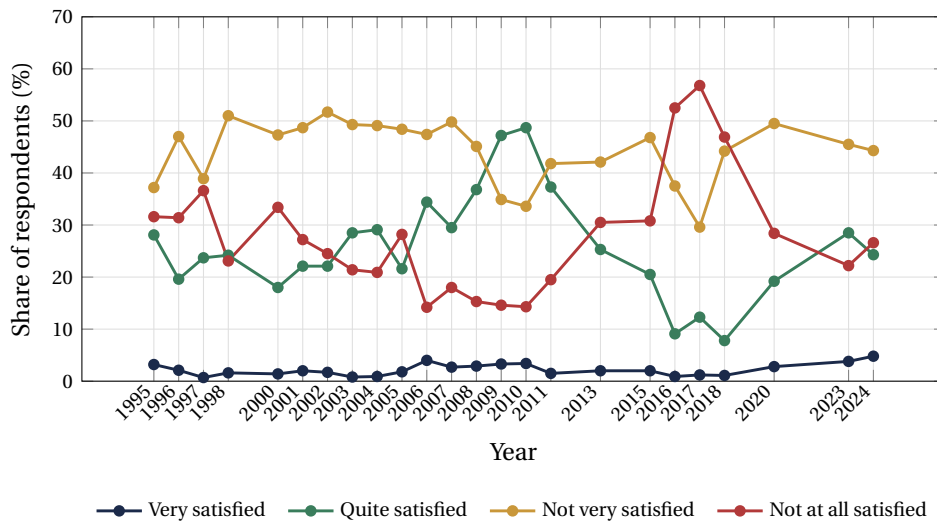


Figure 1: Satisfaction with democracy in Brazil, 1995–2024

Figure 1 shows that dissatisfaction with democracy is not recent. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, satisfaction was already relatively low and quite unstable, with a notable decrease in 2000–2001. Between 2003 and 2010, however, satisfaction clearly improved, especially between 2006 and 2010, when the proportion of satisfied citizens rose and dissatisfaction fell. From 2011 to 2013, this trend reversed. Satisfaction began to decline, reaching the lowest levels in 2016–2018, during the severe economic and political crisis marked by Dilma Rousseff's impeachment and the subsequent election of Jair Bolsonaro. Starting in 2019, extreme dissatisfaction gradually decreased, although it remained predominant; in 2023–2024, satisfaction recovered somewhat, even amid the anti-democratic attacks of 2023. Based on the graph, **there is support for H1**, given that dissatisfaction remains the largest proportion during the period.

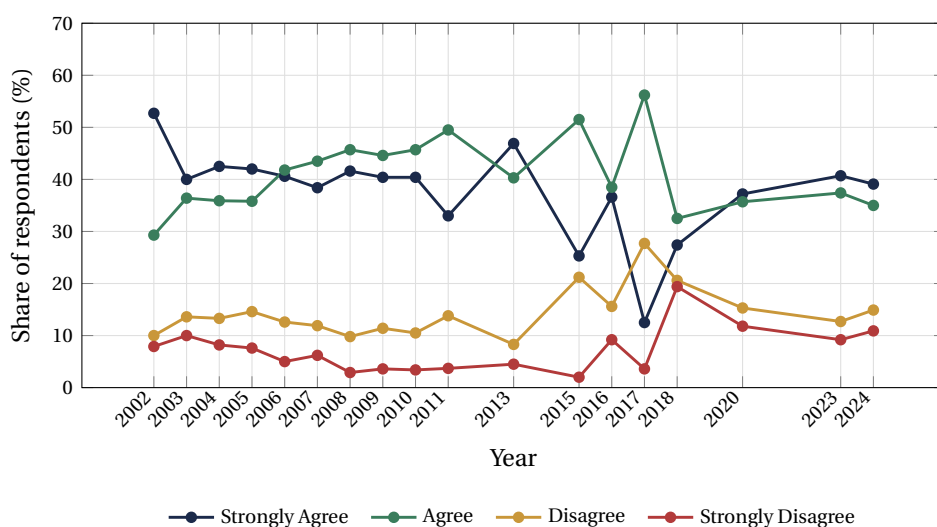


Figure 2: Brazilian Opinion about "Democracy may have problems but it is still the best form of government" (Churchil's Quote), 2002–2024

Figure 2 shows that the perception that democracy is the best form of government remained, in general, predominant. In 2002, 53% of respondents strongly agreed and 29% agreed while only 18% expressed some level of disagreement. During the following years, strong agreement gradually declined, while agreement increased, reaching 49% in 2011. From 2013 onward, support for democracy remained strong. 47% strongly

agreed and 40% agreed in 2013, while disagreement accounted for only 13%. The most significant change occurred around 2017–2018, amid the political consequences of Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment and the 2018 presidential election. In 2018, disagreement reached its highest level in the series, with 21% disagreeing and 20% strongly disagreeing (41% combined). Nevertheless, agreement still represented 59% of respondents. Although the political and economic crisis that intensified after 2016 contributed to a noticeable increase in disagreement, it did not undermine overall support for democracy. After this period of political tension, support for democracy recovered reaching 73% in 2020, 79% in 2023, and 74% in 2024. Thus, **there is no support for H2**.

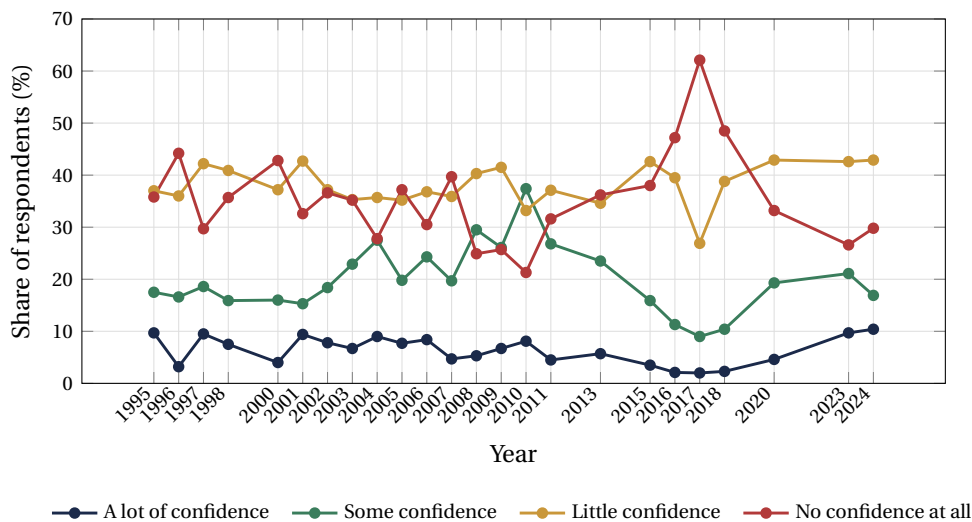


Figure 3: The Brazilian Public’s Trust in Congress, 1995–2024

Figure 3 shows that trust in the Brazilian Congress has always been relatively low, but this distrust became excessive starting in 2013. In previous years, although “little confidence” and “no confidence at all” already accounted for a significant share, there were periods of greater trust, especially between 2008 and 2011. From 2013 onward, however, the share of respondents reporting “no confidence at all” increased, while “a lot of confidence” and “some confidence” declined. This trend intensified from 2015 to 2018. In 2017, for example, the lack of trust reached its highest level in the series, exceeding 60%. After 2018, trust partially recovered, especially between 2020 and 2024, but it remained limited: in 2023, only about 30% reported having “a lot” or “some” confidence in Congress, compared to approximately 67% who had little or no confidence. In 2024, other evidence continues to point to relatively low confidence in the legislature, with only 26% of Brazilians stating they are confident about Congress. Therefore, based on the graph, **there is support for H3**, given that distrust was the major proportion during the period analyzed.

Year	Male Candidates	% Male	Female Candidates	% Female	No Gender Data	% No Gender Data	Total
2002	3831	87.95	501	11.50	24	0.55	4356
2006	4586	87.34	665	12.66	0	0.00	5251
2010	4624	77.85	1316	22.15	0	0.00	5940
2014	4832	68.31	2240	31.67	2	0.03	7074
2018	5790	67.59	2758	32.19	19	0.22	8567
2022	6822	65.01	3664	34.92	8	0.08	10494

Table 4: Candidacies for Federal Deputy by sex, 2002–2022

Year	Elected Male	Percentage of Male	Elected Female	Percentage of Female	Total
2002	471	91.81	42	8.19	513
2006	468	91.23	45	8.77	513
2010	468	91.23	45	8.77	513
2014	462	90.06	51	9.94	513
2018	436	84.99	77	15.01	513
2022	422	82.26	91	17.74	513

Table 5: Elected Federal Deputies by sex, 2002–2022

Tables 4 and 5 highlight a disconnect between the increase in women's participation as candidates and their parliamentary representation. The electoral legislation established a minimum quota of 20% of candidacies for women in 1996; it was later raised to 30% in 1998. However, the data show that these legally mandated quotas were not complied with for many years. The data show that this percentage was not reached in 2002 (11.50 percent) and 2006 (12.66 percent) elections. Subsequently, after the mini reform in 2009, the share of female candidates also remained below the minimum in 2010, when it stood at 22.15%. It was not until 2014 that female participation formally exceeded 30%. Despite this expansion, the increase in female candidates was not matched by a proportional rise in parliamentary representation. Between 2002 and 2022, the proportion of women elected rose from 8.19% to 17.74%, an increase of less than 10% over two decades. In contrast, female participation among candidates grew by nearly 25%, rising from 11.50% to 34.92%. These results indicate that **there is support for H4**, since the quotas contributed to expanding women's presence in the electoral process, but compliance with the minimum percentages came late and did not translate proportionally into institutional representation.

Year	Total “Laranjas”		Female “Laranjas”			Male “Laranjas”			No Gender Data	
	N	% of Total Candidates	N	% of Total Candidates	% of Female Candidates	N	% of Total Candidates	% of Male Candidates	N	% of Total Candidates
2002	497	11.41	88	2.02	17.56	409	9.39	10.68	0	0.00
2006	600	11.43	112	2.13	16.84	488	9.29	10.64	0	0.00
2010	966	16.26	362	6.09	27.51	604	10.17	13.06	0	0.00
2014	1698	24.00	903	12.77	40.31	793	11.21	16.41	2	0.03
2018	1375	16.05	751	8.77	27.23	620	7.24	10.71	4	0.05
2022	3062	29.18	1366	13.02	37.28	1693	16.13	24.82	3	0.03

Table 6: Potential *Laranjas* Candidates based on Votes for Federal Deputy candidacies, 2002–2022.

Year	Total “Laranjas”		Female “Laranjas”			Male “Laranjas”		
	N	% of Total Candidates	N	% of Total Candidates	% of Female Candidates	N	% of Total Candidates	% of Male Candidates
2002	234	5.40	29	0.67	5.79	205	4.73	5.35
2006	668	12.72	97	1.85	14.59	571	10.87	12.45
2010	1102	18.55	261	4.39	19.83	841	14.16	18.19
2014	1817	25.69	782	11.06	34.91	1035	14.63	21.42
2018	2360	27.61	805	9.42	29.19	1555	18.19	26.86
2022	2455	23.41	789	7.52	21.53	1666	15.89	24.42

Table 7: Potential *Laranjas* Candidates based on Campaign Financial Resources for Federal Deputy candidacies, 2002–2022.

Tables 6 and 7 show that although men account for the largest share of potential *laranjas* candidates in absolute numbers (**supporting H5**), the relationship is reversed when the analysis considers the proportion within each gender group (**supporting H6**). The 2014 election is particularly relevant, as it marked the first one in which the minimum gender quota of 30% was effectively met. Based on votes, about four out of ten female candidates were classified as potential *laranjas* candidates, compared to 16.41% of male candidates. The same pattern happens in the financial aspect: 34.91% of women versus 21.42% of men were identified as potential *laranjas* candidates. Across all elections analyzed, the female percentage was higher than the male percentage within each gender group based on vote counts, with only one exception in 2024 based on campaign financial resources. These results suggest that expanding women's participation after implementing the gender quota was not necessarily accompanied by equivalent conditions of electoral competitiveness and access to resources. Instead, women's presence on candidate lists has coexisted with informal practices that limited their substantive participation, keeping some candidacies largely on paper without electoral or financial support.

Conclusion

Brazilian democracy has revealed a structural fragility that predates the most critical episodes in its recent history and helps to explain them. Distrust of the National Congress and dissatisfaction with the democratic system are not recent phenomena, but processes observable to varying degrees since the early 2000s, creating a context conducive to the deepening of the subsequent institutional crisis. However, during the 2016–2017 biennium, this skepticism peaked: satisfaction with democracy fell to its lowest level in the entire historical series, and distrust of Congress exceeded 60% in 2017, the highest recorded during the period analyzed. This period coincided with the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the rise of a discourse calling for a break with the existing political system, which led to the election of Jair Bolsonaro. The attacks of January 8, 2023, despite their greater visibility and international repercussions, occurred during a partial recovery in institutional trust, suggesting that the lowest point in the relationship between the Brazilian population and its democratic institutions had already been reached six years earlier.

This pattern allows us to interpret the Brazilian democratic crisis as a crisis of confidence in the institutions responsible for implementing democracy, rather than a crisis of adherence to democratic values as such. Even during the 2016–2017 biennium, when Congress had its lowest institutional credibility in the entire data series, most Brazilians still recognized democracy, despite its limitations, as the best available system of government. The observed decline, therefore, reflects not the legitimacy of the democratic model itself, but the trust placed in the actors and institutions tasked with its implementation. Consequently, overcoming this crisis depends not only on reaffirming the commitment to democracy, but also on rebuilding trust in the institutions responsible for its day-to-day functioning in Brazilian society.

On the other hand, nearly three decades after the introduction of gender quotas in Brazil, the data reveal that the quotas' effectiveness has been slow to materialize and still requires more action. The 2009 reform, which replaced the requirement to "reserve" seats with the requirement to "fill" them, only had a practical effect starting in 2014, the election in which the proportion of female candidates exceeded 30% for the first time and, not coincidentally, the year in which the proportion of potential "*laranjas* candidates" among women reached its historic peak, with four out of every ten female candidates classified as such based on vote counts and 34% based on campaign financial resources. This finding suggests that formal compliance with the quota, far from representing an achievement, triggered an adaptive response from the parties. They faced a legal obligation to fill the slots and, as a consequence, the number of female candidates registered increased without them being guaranteed the same investment of time, infrastructure, or financial resources allocated to male candidates. The quota, in this sense, was circumvented.

These results point to the need to shift the debate on gender representation in Brazil from the strictly legal realm (the quota system) to the realm of informal party practices that operate in parallel with the law and undermine it. The "*laranja* candidate" is a strategic, rational response by parties to a legal requirement that lacks effective oversight of how parties distribute resources and political support internally. Understanding this as an informal practice deliberately employed by parties is a necessary step so future electoral reforms in Brazil can target not only the proportion of names on the ballot but also the actual distribution of campaign support and funding within the parties themselves.

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