DEMOCRATIZING URBAN BRAZIL: VOTERS, REFORMERS, AND THE PURSUIT OF POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

by

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The main object of this study is to explain why the quality of democratic political life in Brazil continues to vary so much from one community to the next nearly three decades after the country’s democratic transition in the 1980s. My efforts to tackle this intriguing question have consumed a higher percentage of the last decade than I care to admit. Developing a doable and fundable research plan, conducting 16 months of predissertation and dissertation fieldwork, and writing the present manuscript have left me immensely indebted to many individuals and institutions.

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My time as a graduate student at the University of Texas deeply influenced the development of this project, and it has been impossible to attribute proper ownership to many of ideas, insights, and arguments that appear in this thesis under my name but whose genesis more accurately rests in observations made by UT colleagues in graduate seminars, hallway conversations, and heated debates with my officemates. I am nonetheless quite certain as to the origins of much of my thinking on the relevance of local politics to the deepening of democracy, the value of combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, and the ability of empowered voters to effectively demand change at the ballot box. For these insights and much more, Rodolfo de la Garza has my deepest gratitude.

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This study tackles a question of longstanding and central interest to political scientists: why have democratic transitions in some developing societies provoked profound transformations in mass and elite political behaviors, while the adoption of competitive elections elsewhere has done little to enhance democratic accountability?

Most recent scholarship focuses almost exclusively on formal institutional arrangements in trying to answer this question. In contrast, I contend that the deepening of democratic practices in developing countries depends as much on these societies’ distributions of socioeconomic and social capital resources as it does on the design of their macropolitical institutions. In settings where most individuals lack the resources to knowledgeably evaluate candidates for political office on the basis of policy proposals or incumbent voting records, voters largely cast their ballots for politicians who provide private goods and benefits.

Drawing from rational choice and collective action theories, my central line of reasoning is that social resource contexts decisively influence the extent to which individuals obtain the basic political information needed to hold politicians accountable in elections. Voter sophistication, in turn, shapes formal and informal political behaviors, and in doing so influences the campaign and governance
strategies of elected public officials. The pursuit of political accountability in developing settings thus hinges critically on the resources and political sophistication of voters.

I test my argument by examining various elite and mass political behaviors in three mid-sized state capital cities that collectively represent a cross-section of Brazil’s urban population. By investigating multiple subnational cases from a single country, I am able to hold fully constant institutional factors so that non-institutional variables that shape subnational democratization can be systematically examined. Three distinct modes of inquiry—in-depth case studies, medium-n statistical analyses of city-regional data, and large-n statistical modeling that incorporates individual-level data—all confirm my main theoretical expectation: despite sharing identical party, electoral, and governance systems, dramatically different patterns of subnational governance have emerged across and within Brazil’s socially-diverse urban centers since the military left power in the 1980s.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements**......................................................................................................................... iv  

**Abstract**........................................................................................................................................ viii  

**Table of Contents**............................................................................................................................ x  

**List of Tables**..................................................................................................................................... xiii  

**List of Figures**...................................................................................................................................... xv  

**Chapter 1  Introduction: Democratizing Urban Brazil**.............................................................. 1  
  Accountability Problems and Democratic Consolidation......................................................... 2  
  The Puzzle of Accountability in Brazil...................................................................................... 3  
  The Argument.............................................................................................................................. 4  
  The Study of Subnational Governance and Comparative Democratization............................. 7  
  The Brazilian Case......................................................................................................................... 9  
  Study Methodology....................................................................................................................... 12  
  Overview of the Dissertation......................................................................................................... 16  

**Chapter 2  Democratic Political Accountability in Urban Brazil: A Framework for Analysis**............... 20  
  Conceptualizing Democratic Accountability.............................................................................. 21  
  Assessing Accountability.............................................................................................................. 24  
  The Explanatory Framework of Democratic Accountability: Institutions, Voter Resources, and Support for Political Reformers................................................................. 33  
  Aggregate Measures of Economic and Social Capital Resources in Three Brazilian Cities............................................. 52  
  Conclusions................................................................................................................................. 57
Chapter 3  The Evolution of Urban Power and Local Democracy

Local Power and Democracy in Brazil Prior to Redemocratization ................................................................. 63
Local Power and the Making of a Democratic Constitution ............................................................................. 77
Conclusions ...................................................................................................................................................... 97

Chapter 4  Continuity and Change in Three Brazilian Cities......................................................... 103
Salvador’s Traditional Politics: Before and After Democratization .................................................................. 105
Continuity and Change: Political Life in Belo Horizonte ............................................................................. 119
Porto Alegre’s Political Transformation ........................................................................................................ 127
Three Alternative Explanations for Variations in Accountability ..................................................................... 136
Conclusions ...................................................................................................................................................... 144

Chapter 5  What Urban Brazilians Know About Politics and Why it Matters ....................................................... 148
The Acquisition of Political Knowledge and Democratic Theory .................................................................. 150
The State of Political Knowledge among Urban Brazilians ........................................................................... 152
The Determinants of Political Knowledge and its Acquisition: Data and Evidence From Three Cities’ Regions ......................................................................................................................... 158
The Determinants of Political Knowledge and its Acquisition: Individual-Level Data and Evidence .................. 172
Conclusions ...................................................................................................................................................... 181

Chapter 6  Elections and Political Participation in Urban Brazil ........................................................................... 183
Electoral Accountability in Brazil: The Institutional Problem .......................................................................... 183
Accountability, Clientelism, and Voter Responses To Brazil’s Electoral System .................................................... 193
Political Participation Strategy I: Non-voting ..................................................................................................... 197
List of Tables

Table 2.1. Assorted Economic and Education Indicators: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................51

Table 2.2. Participation in Civic Organizations and Social Trust: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................52

Table 3.1. After-transfer Revenues by Level of Government, 1960-1985 (in percentages) ..................................................................................69

Table 3.2. ARENA Representation in the National Legislature by Country Region, 1966-1978 ..................................................................................74

Table 3.3. Regional Share of Seats in the National Constituent Assembly vs. Regional Population ..................................................................................82

Table 3.4. Distribution of National Constituent Assembly Seats by Country Region, Ideological Block, and Party ..........................................................83

Table 3.5. *Folha do São Paulo* Ideological Placement of Delegates by Party Affiliation in the National Constituent Assembly (in percentages) ........................................85

Table 3.6. After-transfer Revenues by Level of Government, 1985-2000 (in percentages) ..................................................................................91

Table 3.7. Number of Municipalities by Region, 1988-1997 .................................................................95

Table 4.1. Party Identification: Urban Brazil in March of 1964 .........................107

Table 4.2. Political Ideology in Urban Brazil Prior to the Military Regime ........ 108

Table 4.3. Employment Rates in Industry in Urban Brazil, 1960-1980 .............110

Table 4.4. Class Differences in Political Attitudes and Support for Military Rule: Urban Brazil, 1982 ............................................................................111


Table 4.6. Local Social Policy Performance: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre in the Early 1980s vs. the Late 1990s ..............................................135

Table 4.7. Issue Cleavages on Highly Divisive Social Questions: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................137

Table 4.8. Issue Cleavages on the State’s Role in the Economy: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................138
Table 4.9. Voter Priorities in Urban Brazil: Categorization of the Electorate’s Top-Three “Areas of Concern” .................................140

Table 4.10. Issue Positions on the Value of Democracy and Politician Honesty: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................143

Table 5.1. Political Knowledge and the Source of Political and Electoral Information: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................154

Table 5.2. City Dummy, Social Capital, Socioeconomic, and Regional Sophistication Indicators on Political Sophistication (OLS Regression) .........................................................177

Table 5.3. Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre: Social Capital, Socioeconomics, and Regional Political Sophistication on Individual Political Sophistication (OLS Regression) .........................................................180

Table 6.1. Ratio of Candidates to City Council Seats: Urban Brazil 1996-2000 ....................................................................................................................190

Table 6.2. The Fragmentation of the Vote in Urban Brazil’s 2000 City Council Elections ........................................................................................................192

Table 6.3. Non-electoral Political Participation: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................................................201

Table 6.4. Political Sophistication, Social Capital, and Socio-Economics on Nonelectoral Political Participation (Logistic Regression) .........................................................204

Table 6.5. Political Sophistication, Social Capital, and Socio-Economics on Party Attachment (Logistic Regression) ........................................................211

Table 6.6. Regional Political Sophistication, Social Capital, Education, and Income on Mayoral-Legislative Turnout Gap (Pearson Correlation) .................................................................................................................................220

Table 7.1. Mid-term Partyswitching in City Legislatures by Ideology: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................259

Table 7.2. Incumbent Partyswitching by Ideology: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................................................261

Table 7.3. The Extent and Nature of Legislative Activity in Urban Brazil: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .................................................................264

Table 7.4. Budget Expenditures by Local Executives .................................................................................................................................272
List of Figures

Figure 2.1. The Hypothesized Interaction between Electoral Accountability, Horizontal Accountability and Governmental Policy Performance........................................................................................................ 32

Figure 2.2. A Model of Political Accountability (with study variables operationalized) ......................................................................................................................... 57

Figure 4.1. Map of Brazil: States and Major Urban Areas ........................................... 104
Figure 4.2. Salvador: Right, Left, and Center Vote Share in First Round Mayoral and Gubernatorial Elections (1982-2000) ............................................................... 117
Figure 4.3. Belo Horizonte: Right, Left, and Center Vote Share in First Round Mayoral and Gubernatorial Elections (1985-2000) .................................................... 125
Figure 4.4. Porto Alegre: Right, Left, and Center Vote Share in First Round Mayoral and Gubernatorial Elections (1982-2000) .................................................. 134

Figure 5.1. The Distribution of City Residents by Their Political Sophistication Index Score .................................................................................................................. 157
Figure 5.2. Map of Salvador and its Regions by Income Level ................................ 164
Figure 5.3. Map of Belo Horizonte and its Regions by Income Level .................... 165
Figure 5.4. Map of Porto Alegre and its Regions by Income Level ....................... 166

Figure 5.5. City-Regional Political Sophistication Index Scores by Rate of Extreme Poverty: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre ............................................. 168
Figure 5.6. City-Regional Political Sophistication Index Scores by Rate of Secondary Education: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre ................................ 169
Figure 5.7. City-Regional Political Sophistication Index Scores by Social Capital Index Scores: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .............................. 170

Figure 6.1. City-Regional Political Sophistication Index Scores by Turnout Rates for Legislative Elections: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre .......................... 199
Figure 6.2. Non-electoral Political Participation by Level of Political Sophistication: Salvador, Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre ......................................................... 201
Figure 6.3. The Effect of Political Sophistication on Nonelectoral Political participation (logistic regression, controlling for educational attainment, income, trust, and civic participation) ............................................ 206
Figure 6.4. Partisan Attachments by Level of Political Sophistication: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre ................................................................. 210
Figure 6.5. The Effect of Political Sophistication on Partisan Attachment
(logistic regression, controlling for educational attainment, income, trust, and civic participation)................................................................. 212

Figure 6.6. City-Regional Political Sophistication Index Scores by Turnout Rates for Mayoral Elections: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre ............................................................................. 216

Figure 6.7. City-Regional Political Sophistication Index Scores by Turnout Differences in Mayoral and City Council Elections: Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and Porto Alegre ............................................................... 218

Figure 7.1 City-Regional Vote for Leftist Candidates by City-Regional Political Sophistication Index Scores: Salvador and Belo Horizonte............ 250

Figure AC.1. Salvador: Wealth, Education, Support for the Left, and Social Capital Indicators by Region .......................................................... 304

Figure AC.2. Belo Horizonte: Wealth, Education, Support for the Left, and Social Capital Indicators by Region ......................................................... 306

Figure AC.3. Porto Alegre: Wealth, Education, Support for the Left, and Social Capital Indicators by Region ........................................................... 307