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The Right to Take Rights Away: Brazil's 1964 & 2016 Coups

Abstract

Leigh Payne's right-against-rights framework describes deliberate tactics employed by the Right Wing to undermine, attack, and destroy democracy in defence of the status quo. Working under the assertion that both Brazil's 1964 military coup and 2016 presidential impeachment were coups perpetrated by the Right Wing, this investigation serves to connect both events via this singular framework to demonstrate how they were both specifically "right-against-rights coups," analyse the fragility of Brazilian democracy in the face of the Right Wing, and discern the future of Brazil's democracy.

Keywords: democracy; coups; Right Wing; Brazil; anti-communism; rights; dictatorship

Resumo

A estrutura teórica ("framework") do right-against-rights desenvolvido por Leigh Payne descreve táticas deliberadas utilizadas pela extrema direita para minar, atacar e destruir a democracia em defesa do status quo. Partindo da premissa de que tanto o golpe militar de 1964 quanto o impeachment presidencial de 2016 no Brasil constituíram golpes perpetrados pela direita, esta investigação busca conectar ambos os eventos por meio desse framework, demonstrando como ambos se configuraram especificamente como "golpes de direita contra os direitos", analisar a fragilidade da democracia brasileira diante da atuação da direita e investigar os possíveis futuros da democracia no país.

Palavras-chave: democracia; golpe; extrema direita; Brasil; anticomunismo; direitos; ditadura

Introduction

Although they are separated by more than 52 years, both João Goulart's military overthrow and Dilma Rousseff's impeachment share many of the same actors, reasons, and actions, and ultimately, are both right-wing-led coups. Proponents of both coups hid behind anti-communism and Christian morality to roll back social and economic progress made under each leader — what Leigh Payne labels "the right against rights" (2023). Aided by a reactionary conservative media, coup plotters undermined the strength of Brazil's democracy and dealt a strong blow to the outspoken representation of the poor and marginalized. Goulart's ousting led to 21 years of military rule with little accountability for the suffering caused. Similarly, Dilma's removal saw supporters of the dictatorship, including Jair Bolsonaro, vote for her impeachment and subsequently elect him president (Jalalzai et al., 2022). In Brazil, history may not repeat itself, but it certainly rhymes.

While scholars noted similarities with Goulart's coup during Dilma's impeachment, none explicitly linked the two, let alone through any one framework. This investigation closes this analytical gap by demonstrating how both were "right-against-rights" coups, and is valuable for two reasons. First, it makes an original contribution to the literature on Brazilian history and politics, and democracy overall. Using the right-against-rights framework complicates Brazil's democratic narrative, challenges its resilience against the Right, and redefines what a coup is. In a nation that has failed to deal with the legacy of its dictatorship, challenging these narratives is crucial, as complacency and indifference towards democracy are what enable right-wing domination and destruction of democracy.

Second, as historian Ollie Johnson III wrote, studying Goulart's coup is of "contemporary importance because the authoritarian rulers that followed denied social justice to millions and failed to address poverty and social inequality in a meaningful way, which makes the struggle continue today" (2001, p. 2). The Workers' Party (PT) efforts to combat social justice issues in the 2000s were aggressively challenged by the Right in 2016, coinciding with a global rise of economically backed right-wing movements the likes many nations have not seen before—but Brazil has. Brazil's history serves as a stark warning: the protection of capital veiled as a fight for Christian morality and anti-communism continues to threaten democracy. Understanding these patterns allows scholars and the public to defend democracy before it is undone. As Adam Przeworski reminds us, 'Vigilance in defence of democracy…is a never-ending task' (2024).

This investigation will demonstrate how a legal impeachment resembles a coup, define 'the Right' and their reasons for attacking democracy in 1964 and 2016, and explain why they viewed the expansion of rights as a threat. The paper is structured into four sections: Methodology and overview of Payne's framework, existing literature on the coups, a comparative analysis of the coups through Payne's framework, and an assessment of their impact and legacy on Brazil's current political situation.

Section 1: Methodology

The Right

For this investigation, 'The Right', or right wing, in Brazil is defined by its concerns for preserving the economic interests of landowners, capital holders, and the financial elite of the country (Johnson, 2001). They have largely controlled Brazilian politics since the founding of the Republic in 1889 and have historically demonstrated broad ambivalence towards democracy when its interests were threatened. By the 1960s, having found that their electoral prospects were unfavourable and "based on the assumption that the maintenance of democracy would imperil their interest by leading to eventual power for reformists… [they] promoted a pre-emptive coup" (Johnson, 2001, p. 25).

Following the return of democracy with the 1988 constitution, and 14 years of PT rule from 2002, a more socially conservative Right emerged, exemplified by the "Beef, Bible, Bullets" caucus, headed by evangelical extremists in Congress (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 25).[1] While still economically driven, this modern Right is extremely socially conservative and actively opposes progress in areas of gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and social programs for the poor (Ansell, 2018; Payne, 2023). Ideologically, they believe rights should be earned, not univer-

sal, and thus oppose the social progress of the Left and their attempts to expand rights (Payne, 2023).

Thus, the Right can be identified as socially and economically conservative, ambivalent towards democracy, and concerned with prioritizing its own interests over those of the country at large. They are made up of many in the financial elite, upper and upper-middle classes, anti-communists, and Christian extremists.

The Right-Against-Rights

While the similarities between the coups are evident, analytically, Payne's work shows a clear thread that ties the two together. Writing primarily about the late 2000s to late 2010s, Payne defines the right-against-rights as a "collective extra-institutional and institutional mobilization to check, rollback, or reverse specific rights promoted by previously marginalized groups and communities...to restore, promote, or advance a status quo ante of traditional, political, social, economic, and cultural rights" (2023, p. 3). In other words, the right-against-rights are the ways the Right undoes the advances of others to promote their own gains and supremacy.

Payne describes six distinct tactics employed by the Right: Framing, creating moral panics by targeting specific 'villains'; Legitimating Myths, blaming enemies with lies to appeal to diverse constituencies; Leadership and Organization, involving central figures and key organizations to mobilize and support their actions/rhetoric; Double Militancy, working both within and outside political institutions to win a wide range of support; Transnational Advocacy, seeking external (international) allies; and Visibility and Disruptive Action, using protests and misinformation to gain attention and support (Payne, 2023, pp. 37–45). This framework is essential for demonstrating how both coups represent 'right-against-rights' actions.

This Investigation

The use of Payne's right-against-rights is deliberate to connect two distinct, historically significant events through one singular framework. The qualitative information gathered from primary and secondary sources through digital and archival research was filtered through this investigation's research questions for relevancy and applicability to the framework. While an investigation into this topic could theoretically be conducted through several theories and criteria, for example, analysing each president's economy as the cause of the coup, this investigation worked to identify similarities through Payne's framework. Works that identified Brazil's right wing during both time periods, that spoke of the coups as coups rather than "interventions," and that explained the interactions between the government and its adversaries through legal and extra-legal means were pivotal for this investigation. However, even sources that argued on the contrary were important and read against the grain to better understand the thinking of those who perpetrated or supported the coup.

While research on Dilma Rousseff's ousting was more abundant due to its recency, collecting information on João Goulart's presidency and the 1964 coup presented challenges due to limited digital and frequently superficial discussions, which meant a reliance on mid-to-late 20th-century printed literature. For both periods, a critical discourse analysis (Dunn & Neumann, 2016) was employed to identify the inherent biases and intentions hidden behind the words of authors and actors involved in the coups and the ways they tried to naturalize concepts that would otherwise be foreign or contradictory to observers' opinions. Recognizing that media and

other actors are not neutral (Payne, 2023; Pimentel & Marques, 2021), this approach was crucial to identify inherent biases, intentionality, and how language was used to shape perceptions and legitimize actions surrounding the coups.

Section 2: The Coups

> Bankers, industrialists, landowners, the rich and privileged, the parasites, and all those who thrive on exploitation celebrated their victory. But not the workers. They had been defeated. (Bandeira, 1977, p. 186)

At the heart of each coup was an economic crisis, exacerbated by the media and political opponents who turned the middle class against the government under the guise of Christianity and anti-communism. The Right was more concerned with protecting their interests than protecting democracy, and so facilitated and perpetrated each coup. This section will provide a brief but detailed summary of each coup to provide the necessary context for the rest of this investigation.

Goulart

When President João Goulart took office in 1961, Brazil effectively entered a state of political crisis that would proliferate until 1964 and define his presidency. First governing under a limited parliamentary system, when presidential powers were finally restored to him, the Right did everything it could to get him out of power until, on April 1st, 1964, they were successful.

A wealthy landowner from Rio Grande do Sul, João Goulart was a political protégé of Getúlio Vargas, inheriting his mentor's connection with Brazil's urban working class and becoming a powerful union ally and broker between the working class and the often-distant government (Bandeira, 1977, p. 26) Leading the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB), he transformed it into a major political force, emphasizing reform to supersede Brazil's social structure and elevate education, productivity, and consumerism (Bandeira, 1977, p. 41; Johnson, 2001). As such, he declared the PTB "a party of the left, of the masses, and a party willing to democratically transform Brazil's societal structure" (Bandeira, 1977, p. 41). This was a fundamental turning point in Goulart's political career and one that would define his approach to politics and solidify his support base, but also his opposition.

From 1955 to 1960, Goulart served as vice president to Juscelino Kubitschek of the centrist Social Democratic Party (PSD) (Bandeira, 1977, p. 35).[2] His vice-presidency was marked by engagement with labour movements and unions, and facilitating a leftward shift in Brazil's main political parties: the PTB, PSD, and the UDN (National Democratic Union). Progressive branches from the PSD and even from the right-leaning UDN emerged to form a progressive faction called the Nationalist Parliamentary Front (FPN) alongside the PTB, and their policies would become key to the reforms Goulart would attempt during his time in office (Johnson, 2001, p. 14). By the end of Kubitschek's presidency, Goulart had established himself as the central figure in the Brazilian progressive cause.

In 1960, Goulart won vice presidential re-election under Jânio Quadros, who pursued a "non-aligned" foreign policy but elsewhere didn't really break from the more capitalist-friendly politics of his predecessors (Parker, 1979, p. 12). When Quadros abruptly resigned in 1961 in a miscalculated move to garner support for constitutional reforms he wanted, Goulart, his vice

president, prepared to take over as president. However, his leftist ideology alarmed the Right and prompted Congress, on the orders of military leaders, to undemocratically alter the constitution and restructure the presidency into a weakened parliamentary system (Parker, 1979, p. 6). With this new system in place, Goulart was sworn in.

Goulart's first two years as president were spent fighting the parliamentary system and reining in the unfolding economic crisis through a three-year plan centred on his *reformas de base*, or basic reforms (Bandeira, 1977).[3] His tenure also saw growing tensions with the United States. Nationalization efforts, his continuation of non-aligned foreign policy, accusation of communist sympathies, and Kennedy's refusal to fund his economic recovery program all contributed to tense US-Brazil relations (Bandeira, 1977; Johnson, 2001; Loureiro, 2017). So, as domestic coup conspiracies grew, so did the United States' involvement.

In 1963, Goulart supporters took to the streets to demand a plebiscite to restore his presidential powers (Bandeira, 1977, p. 58). In what Goulart declared his "real election," the people voted almost unanimously to restore his presidential powers — a massive show of strength for Goulart and his policies — and emboldened him to pass his reforms (Bandeira, 1977, p. 88). For the next year, his *reformas de base* became the basis of his presidential platform and dictated much of the policy he and his congressional allies tried to pass. Among these policies were tax reform, education reform, and most significantly, agrarian reform (Loureiro, 2017). While all reforms challenged the interests of the Right, agrarian reform is what most drew opposition because of its direct attack on the elite classes of Brazil and its association with communism. It also challenged foreign business interests, especially those of American companies, who were quick to denounce Goulart as a communist land grabber (Bandeira, 1977, p. 149). Moniz Bandeira, in his work on Goulart's government and policies before the coup, writes not only about the massive support these reforms had with the public, but also the vehement opposition with which the Right defied the reforms to the very end (Bandeira, 1977).

It is against this backdrop that, in early 1964, coup conspiracies came into full bloom. Organized by the military, funded by the wealthy, propelled by the media, and aided by the Americans, the first three months of 1964 served to weaken Goulart, attempt to tarnish his image, garner support against him from the population, and then, finally, oust him (Bandeira, 1977; Johnson, 2001; Parker, 1979). In this, the Right was largely successful. Thousands from the upper middle class took to the streets to protest him in mid-March, while conservative media forces worked tirelessly to call his presidential capacities into question (Bandeira, 1977; Cestari, 2022). Members of the UDN, working with the American government, ensured that loans and foreign aid were denied, and reforms and policies blocked, choking the Brazilian economy and sending it into free fall (Bandeira, 1977; Loureiro, 2017). With the aid of the CIA, Brazilian military leaders began planning an offensive to take on Goulart and march toward Rio and then Brasilia. Thus, by late March, when military forces began marching towards Rio, there was little Goulart could do if he wanted to avoid bloodshed. As he did not want to risk civil war by staging his own intervention, Goulart fled Brasilia and then Brazil altogether (Parker, 1979). On April 1st, 1964, Congress illegally declared the presidency vacant and ushered in 21 years of repressive, harsh, anti-democratic military rule.

Dilma

President Dilma Rousseff entered Brazilian politics as a direct result of Goulart's ousting and the subsequent military dictatorship and made the fight against the Right a centrepiece of her political career.

In the mid-1970s, Dilma was arrested and tortured by the military dictatorship for her involvement with a left-wing militant opposition group (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 13). This episode forced her to take a step back from political action, and only after the dictatorship ended did she re-enter politics. First joining the centre-left PDT, she eventually joined the Workers' Party (PT) and rapidly rose through its ranks to work closely with President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva (Lula), positioning herself for an eventual presidential run (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, pp. 76–77).

Lula was arguably Brazil's most popular and successful president in the nation's history, leaving office with an approval rating of nearly 90% in 2012. Benefiting from a "tripod" of factors, as Peter Prengaman puts it, where "a commodities boom paid for more social inclusion, [which] fostered internal consumption," he had managed to grow Brazil's economy by nearly 4 percent every year and lift millions out of poverty (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021). Dilma joined Lula's team as his incumbent energy minister in 2001, and, despite her relative inexperience in the federal government, proved to be an important voice in his cabinet (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 77). After a corruption scandal known as the Mensalão broke out among top PT officials, including many in Lula's administration, Lula promoted Dilma to Chief of Staff in 2005 to distance himself from those affiliated with the scandal (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 15).[4] The first woman to hold this position in Brazil's history, Dilma's time as Chief of Staff gave Lula and the rest of the PT higher-ups the confidence to select her as the 2010 candidate for the presidency, which she won with a second-round victory of 56% of the votes (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 16).

Dilma's first term largely built off the PT's eight years of success. While Brazil initially weathered the 2008 financial crisis unscathed, the end of China's commodities boom by 2012 led to an economic downturn. To maintain government social programs afloat, Dilma began encroaching on Brazil's economic elite (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 53). This marked a departure from Lula's strategy, which had allowed the rich to prosper while helping the poor. Brazil's conservative economic forces had been happy to feign support for the PT so long as the country's economy continued growing and their interests left untouched (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 53). When this became unsustainable, Dilma's government intervened in sectors, pressured the financial system to reduce interest rates, and increased public investment and subsidized loans (Saad Filho, 2016). These measures alienated Brazil's financial elite, marking a critical divergence from Lula's path and weakening Dilma's support.

Conservatives initially lacked a major movement to rally against Dilma until the 2013 "Free Pass" movement. Driven by anger over infrastructure, World Cup/Olympics spending, and rising transportation costs, this initially left-wing protest, championing LGBT, indigenous rights, and an end to police brutality, was co-opted by right-wing protestors, who gradually displaced its original organizers (Ansell, 2018, pp. 314–315; Payne, 2023) Amid these evolving protests, Brazil's 2014 elections were held. Dilma, running for re-election, faced off against the centre-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) opposition leader Aécio Neves (Van Dijk, 2017, p. 201). Dilma won by a narrow margin, 51.64% to 48.36%, and faced immediate accusations of

electoral fraud (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 22). The courts were quick to throw out these baseless accusations, but they were a sign of things to come. Neves began fuelling outrage over the election, asking supporters to take to the streets to protest the allegedly "fraudulent" results, while others on the Right even advocated for military intervention (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 22). Despite these protests, Dilma attended her second inauguration in January 2015 with the hope she would be able to continue the job she was elected to do.

By early 2015, the original Free Pass protest movement had amalgamated into a general conservative counter-protest positioned against the Left, the PT, and especially Dilma (Ansell, 2018; Prengaman & Savarese, 2021). At the movement's core were accusations of corruption stemming from the Operation *Lava Jato* (Car Wash) investigation. The *Lava Jato*operation, led by Curitiba judge Sergio Moro, was a massive investigation looking into business executives and politicians of all political parties involved in a scheme where "top executives at multi-national construction companies like Odebrecht, OAS, Andrade Gutierez, etc. formed a cartel that decided who would get multibillion-dollar building contracts doled out at various levels of government" (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 25). Implicated in the scandal was also former president Lula, among several other high-ranking PT officials (Van Dijk, 2017, p. 201). However, never had the PT, and especially not Dilma herself, stepped in to block the investigation, nor did she ever face any corruption charges relating to *Lava Jato*— unlike the 1/3 of the Chamber of Deputies under investigation by Sergio Moro (Ansell, 2018). So, with a massive corruption scandal unfolding in the background, Aécio Neves, working with Chamber president Eduardo Cunha — who was also being investigated on corruption charges — opened impeachment proceedings against Dilma in December 2015. Ironically, the actual accusations Dilma faced had nothing to do with *Lava Jato* or infrastructure spending. Instead, she faced accusations of *pedaladas fiscais* or deceptive budgetary measures. Suggestive of the illegality of these proceedings, both former presidents Lula and Fernando Henrique Cardoso had done similar *pedaladas fiscais* and had not faced punishment (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 59).

In April 2016, the Chamber of Deputies voted overwhelmingly (367-167) to bring impeachment proceedings to the Senate (Ansell, 2018, p. 319). Notably, almost no deputies cited *pedaladas fiscais* in their speeches, instead invoking God, families, and pets, often with a jubilant and misogynistic tone, using phrases like 'tchau querida' (goodbye dear) to belittle Dilma. Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's future far-right president, famously dedicated his vote to Dilma's torturer, Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, directly linking the impeachment to the 1964 coup and thus highlighting the Right's continued effort to undermine democracy; "They lost in '64 and they lost now in 2016!" (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 139). Despite widespread protests and support from progressives, the Senate voted 55-22 to suspend Dilma, confirming her impeachment four months later in August 2016, and officially removing her from office. While his analysis of Dilma's impeachment is very neutral, Peter Prengaman asks a pivotal question about the decision to impeach Dilma: If the president had committed crimes so grave that she deserved to be removed from office, should she not also be barred from seeking other political posts? Or even jailed? (2021, p. 204). Prengaman's question perfectly captures the hypocrisy and arbitrariness of Dilma's removal. Like Goulart, Dilma was a victim of right-wing political persecution for challenging the interests of the Right, who, as punishment, attacked democracy to protect their interests.

The following section will dive into the details of the coups and their conspirators and explicitly demonstrate how these coups constitute right-against-rights coups.

Section 3: Tactics of the Right

> On the impact of the religious appeal and anti-communist propaganda, promoted by the reactionary media, considerable sects of the middle class, punished by high inflation, moved to the right and aided the anti-government fight. (Bandeira, 1977, p. 166)

Framing: Moral Panic and Anti-Communism

Framing is one of the most important tactics used by the Right Wing in its fight against rights. At its core, this tactic is used to create moral and/or national panic, targeting perceived 'villains' with extreme language, often through sexism, racism, or homophobia (Payne, 2023, p. 38). This panic is then co-opted to justify undemocratic actions and reduce disapproval of coups. This is an abundantly clear tactic in the case of both Goulart and Dilma, and in very similar ways. The Right framed both leaders' governments and persons as being morally corrupt and failing the country because of communist tendencies/sympathies, their radical ideals, and inept leadership. Furthermore, in the case of Dilma, the Right took further liberties to attack her gender. This was an especially effective tactic against her because they were able to play into misogynistic stereotypes already present against female leaders (Jalalzai et al., 2022). Thus, with both presidents, the Right framed their struggle as one against powerful negative forces threatening the very way of life of the nation.

Members of the media portrayed Goulart as a weak ruler and a puppet of the unions who were using him to undermine the Brazilian state (Cestari, 2022, p. 303). Foreign governments, especially the United States, further contributed to this image: the US ambassador to Brazil, Lincoln Gordon, believed Goulart to be "incompetent" and relayed this information to the American president and members of the State Department (Parker, 1979, p. 11). This portrayal of Goulart as incompetent has been refuted by scholars like Bandeira and Johnson, who have instead labeled him as "pragmatic" and an "experienced progressive politician, well-prepared to lead" (Bandeira, 1977, p. 43; Johnson, 2001, p. 4). His alleged radicalism, stemming from his staunch support of his *reformas de base*, was a deliberate mischaracterization by his political enemies who wanted to undermine his popular reform program, which directly challenged elite control of the economy (Johnson, 2001, pp. 4–6). His alleged radical nature relates to his "communist beliefs." Often working in tandem, the Right used his "radical" persona to frame his presidency as one working to create a syndicalist revolution that would harm Brazilians and transform the nation into a Soviet puppet state (Bandeira, 1977, p. 33). While most Brazilians supported his *reformas de base*, the Right was able to convince many that the reforms that threatened them—land and tax reform—also threatened the everyday Brazilian. They framed what was an opportunity for greater equality and democracy as a national threat, legitimizing the need for military takeover. This anti-reformist campaign was so effective that in 2016, the same exact language and attacks were used.

Dilma, like her predecessor, was portrayed as a "communist radical" threatening to mount a "Soviet style" takeover of Brazil (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 109). The extent to which Dilma's opponents truly believed in the threat of her alleged communist tendencies is debatable,

but what is not debatable is the efficacy of this rhetoric (Ansell, 2018; Prengaman & Savarese, 2021; Van Dijk, 2017). Like with Goulart, these attacks were used to frame her as the villain of a national crisis that only opponents could resolve — even through military intervention — but the most significant use of framing against Dilma targeted her gender. Female leaders disproportionately face more hateful scrutiny than male leaders, especially regarding corruption (Jalalzai et al., 2022, p. 2). Dilma endured violent misogynistic attacks, including rumours, perpetuated by the media, of her secret lesbianism, having nervous explosions, and emotional instability, while others used violent gendered imagery to "protest" her (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021; Sattler, 2023). Ultimately, her removal came not from any actual crimes but from a fabricated moral failing of the country (Ansell, 2018; Pimentel & Marques, 2021). The rhetoric from politicians, media, and protestors alike was religious, nationalist, and anti-leftist, but never legal or constitutionalist. Legislator's post-impeachment speeches said nothing about her alleged crimes but, instead, "justified their votes in religiously inflected moral rhetoric, citing 'God' and 'Family' " framing her ousting as a moral necessity to curtail PT's progressive achievements (Ansell, 2018, p. 320).

Legitimating Myths: Military Nostalgia and Fracturing Support

Legitimating myth tactic sought to provide a rhetorical alternative to the current government only the Right could deliver. Dilma and Goulart represented symptoms of a failing system which, under previous right-wing rule, had not existed. The Right fabricated the necessity for a coup and invoked an idyllic past while creating divides in progressive movements and weakening the Left's support, making the Right seem strong and united.

This tactic is especially interesting to analyse in Brazil because of how rhetorically interconnected both coups are. Dilma's ousters directly reference the military past that followed Goulart's ousting as the idyllic one to return to (Chavarro et al., 2016). Bolsonaro's pro-dictatorship remark during the impeachment proceedings aside, several protestors and politicians actively called for military intervention and, more directly, the *return* of military rule (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021). Additionally, the justification for ousting the two leaders based on a communist threat is equally pervasive. Under Goulart, the Right referenced a coup that occurred under Getúlio Vargas in the mid-1930s against an alleged imminent communist takeover, which led to an eight-year dictatorship (Bevins, 2022). In the 1960s, they claimed Goulart had to be removed to avoid a similar, imminent communist threat, which again did not exist (Parker, 1979, p. 58). Likewise, Dilma's removal and calls for the return of military rule were fuelled by another "communist threat" (Ansell, 2018, p. 316). These calls for a return to military rule are important in understanding how these two coups constitute right-against-rights coups because they directly correlate to Payne's framework and the importance of rhetoric in staging these coups. As this paper has repeatedly emphasized, convincing large swaths of the population to support an action that contradicts their interests is crucial to these movements. Despite widespread historical agreement on the benefits of Goulart's reforms, the Right successfully fabricated a scenario to justify an extremely anti-democratic shift that favoured the few (Bandeira, 1977; Johnson, 2001; Loureiro et al., 2015).

Rhetoric, however, is not sufficient to oust a president, so while the creation of this image is necessary, it must also be accompanied by more tangible actions. This is where the creation of divides among progressive factions becomes important. Under Goulart, the Right propped

up several CIA and privately funded right-leaning think tanks and organizations to change public opinion and foster support for right-wing causes (Bandeira, 1977; Cestari, 2022). Many groups attempted to infiltrate typically left-wing circles like universities, peasant groups, and unions to weaken Goulart's support. Many organizations used anti-communist rhetoric to urge these groups to denounce Goulart, but they were mostly unsuccessful (Bandeira, 1977, p. 124). Nevertheless, the existence of this internal countermovement demonstrates the extent to which the Right had been able to spread its influence and how powerful, having the CIA fund these groups, the Right was.

Against Dilma, the Right was more successful at creating divisions among supporters as, by this point, the Right's efforts in splitting supporters had become a key component in their anti-progressive efforts (Corredor, 2019; Payne, 2023). As the Free Pass movement demonstrated, dissatisfaction from the Left toward the government already existed in a tangible form. However, by co-opting the movement, the Right excluded the original left-wing protestors and maintained the façade of the protest being a unified anti-Dilma movement. Furthermore, via more traditional political avenues, the Right successfully split many Brazilians, including those on the Left, on social issues like abortion, homosexuality, and gender, simultaneously attacking Dilma's platform and positioning her as more radical (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021; Van Dijk, 2017). Thus, powerful rhetorical attacks and imagery, partnered with the fracturing of traditional support bases, allowed the Right to infiltrate, weaken, and antagonize both governments, not only facilitating their removals but also justifying it.

Organization: Globo and Journalistic Manipulation

Leadership plays an important role in staging a right-against-rights coup, but perhaps not as important as the organizational forces that worked behind the scenes to solidify their efforts (Payne, 2023). Figures like Jair Bolsonaro and Sergio Moro or Carlos Lacerda and Castelo Branco were important for each coup, but the media, the "movement entrepreneurs," as Payne labels them, played an especially pivotal role in legitimizing both coups, downplaying accusations of a coup, and creating discontent among the public (Payne, 2023, p. 43; Pimentel & Marques, 2021, p. 277). As such, this section explores the media's crucial organizational and legitimizing role in the coups.

Several of the same newspapers that supported the military coup against Goulart actively supported removing Dilma in 2016 (NPC, 2017). No media company, however, was more involved in both coups than Globo. Globo is Brazil's largest and most viewed media company and has by far the most sway on public opinion (Van Dijk, 2017, p. 204). Following the coup in 1964, they established the Jornal Nacional, a nightly news program that effectively became the dictatorship's mouthpiece and has remained the nation's most viewed news program to this day (Memórias da Ditadura, 2024). This same Jornal Nacional was responsible for blasting Dilma throughout her presidency, blaming her for the country's deteriorating economic, moral, and social state (Van Dijk, 2017). Pimentel and Marques, citing scholars like Cook (2011), Firmstone (2008), and Pérez-Liñan, demonstrate that media organizations, especially in Latin America, function as strategic political actors with deliberate motives (Pimentel & Marques, 2021). The media profoundly shapes political agendas, rather than simply reporting on them, and rarely ever act as independent entities.

Within this understanding, Pimentel and Marques argue that Globo intentionally deconstructed narratives of Dilma's impeachment being a coup during her removal (2021). In 2016 40 of Globo's 49 editorials attempted to refute coup claims, associating the word "coup" with terms like "farse" and "propaganda," while framing the impeachment as an economic necessity (Pimentel & Marques, 2021, p. 285). Van Dijk similarly argues that Globo, representing the conservative middle class and "right wing oligarchy", had spent years fighting so that the "PT [did] not win" and that one of its main strategies was emphasizing the legitimacy and constitutionality of the impeachment (2017, pp. 200–204). Therefore, if the media simultaneously was denouncing claims of a coup while propagating the legitimacy of the impeachment, then Globo, and the rest of the conservative media conglomerates in Brazil were manipulating viewers and readers against the government. This claim is further substantiated by Globo's publication titles. Van Dijk shows that 45 of the 60 main front page Globo headlines of March and April 2016 were about Dilma, Lula, PT, or impeachment, and that these articles contained biased or false assertions and presuppositions in ways that readers could not or would not readily check (Van Dijk, 2017, pp. 210–212). Globo's coverage of the *Lava Jato* investigation was massively disproportionate when it concerned Dilma compared to the rest of the investigation; This intentional bias served to exaggerate public discontent and Dilma's alleged corruption, while minimizing her support, thus ensuring public condemnation (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021).

Van Dijk concludes her argument by suggesting that "the very notion of the impeachment being a coup provoked furious reactions from Globo, because it also reminds readers of Globo's association with the coup and military dictatorship of 1964" (2017). Globo was one of the first newspapers to come out announcing the victory over Goulart on April 2nd (O Globo, n.d.). The days that followed, headlines celebrated the "Resurgence of Democracy," the "Hope of the Military," and plans for "Decommunizing the Nation" (O Globo, n.d.). They were not the only media company that aided in ousting Goulart, however.

Larissa Cestari's work explores a "counter-newspaper" called *Notícias Populares* (Popular News) that was specifically created to oppose the PTB and Goulart's government (Cestari, 2022, p. 297). Its two principal goals were to take away readers from the more left-leaning, widely read *Útlima Hora* (Latest Hour) newspaper, and, second, to "depoliticize" the working class (2022, p. 295). As Pimentel and Marques demonstrate, the media plays an important role in shaping political agendas and facilitating the diffusion of certain ideas; *Notícias Populares* wanted to restrict the working class's access to political information to limit the PTB and Goulart's growing support (Cestari, 2022, p. 305). The Right, fearing the growing expansion of democracy, used *Notícias Populares* to "dumb down" the newspaper scene and include only "sex, crime, and sports," using political mentions only to denounce the "communists and amoral activities" of the Goulart regime and promote the political campaigns of those on the Right, especially Carlos Lacerda (Cestari, 2022, p. 312). When the coup ousted Goulart, *Notícias Populares'* owner Herbert Levy lost all interest in the newspaper and let it fade into relative obscurity, his job having been done.

The examples of both Globo and *Notícias Populares* show the anti-politics or negative partisanship the Right constructs when fighting their opponents; their opposition to allowing free and fair discussions and conversations to occur; and how they use the media to hide their intentions while attacking the Left.[5] The media will always be political, but the way that the Right

has monopolized the Brazilian media shows the limitations of Brazil's democracy both in 1964 and in 2016 and explains how they were able to co-opt so much public support.

Transnational Advocacy: The CIA, the USA, and Think Tanks

In a right-against-rights coup, the Right builds far-reaching networks to amplify their demands and garner international support from like-minded billionaires, governments, think tanks, or other organizations (Payne, 2023, p. 44). Against Goulart, this was important because of the American government's desire to remove him and the CIA's support of the Brazilian Right. Dilma's removal was aided by right-wing think tanks and the Right's online media presence, which helped intensify dissatisfaction and weaken her support (Ansell, 2018, pp. 315–316). The goal for members of these transnational actors was to protect their interests and capital invested in Brazil, as well as to provide more straightforward ideological support.

The largest protest held against Goulart, the "March for Family, with God, For Liberty," was organized by right-wing groups directly funded by the CIA and were intellectually aligned with the most extreme American Cold War hawks (Bandeira, 1977, p. 166). Similarly, between 2014 and 2016, many anti-Dilma protest groups received resources and intellectual support from US-based organizations like "The Atlas Network," a right-wing think tank (Ansell, 2018, p. 315). The Atlas Network created hundreds of grants across Latin America to support right-wing groups and was an adamant supporter of the Free Brazil Movement, one of the many right-wing online movements in Brazil at the time (Ansell, 2018, p. 315). They used anti-leftist, anti-PT, and anti-Dilma narratives online and frequently invoked authoritarian messaging and calls for military coups (Ansell, 2018; Payne, 2023). The Atlas Network's support was critical to fund and expand the Free Brazil Movement's reach and message.

The United States' role in 1964 goes beyond funding protest groups, however. Bandeira claims that the US had installed over 5000 Green Berets in the northeast of the country, both to help feed information to the military from the ground as well as to prepare for any potential invasion to oust Goulart by force (1977, p. 138). Millions were spent on city to gubernatorial campaigns to weaken the PTB and Goulart, with a key target being Leonel Brizola, governor of Rio Grande do Sul and a strong ally of Goulart who had nationalized an American company (Bandeira, 1977; Parker, 1979). Finally, the only reason the US did not put boots on the ground to remove Goulart was that they did not need to (Parker, 1979, p. 104). They were fully ready to send a small army to invade Brazil, had already provided intelligence and logistics to the Brazilian military, and had been actively cutting loans and credit so Goulart's economy would be severely weakened (Parker, 1979). This dominating alliance with the Brazilian Right remained strong throughout the military dictatorship and continues today.

Double Militancy: Disruptive Action, Protestors, and Politicians

Payne distinguishes between what she labels "double militancy" and "visibility and disruptive action" as two distinct tactics in the right-against-rights (Payne, 2023, pp. 43–45).[6] Ultimately, this distinction is unnecessary. Double militancy involves a mixture of standard institutional tactics, like working with like-minded political partners, lobbying, or campaigning/running for political office, with an engagement in extra-institutional actions like disruptive street mobilizations (Payne, 2023, p. 43). Therefore, combining the two tactics allows for a more comprehensive

explanation of how the Right uses both institutional and extra-institutional manoeuvres to challenge rights and oust leaders.

While seemingly contradictory, double militancy allows for a war of two fronts to be waged: a public, media-captured popular revolt against the government and "the system," and another, private but tactical one through "the system" itself. This contradiction is clear in both Dilma's and Goulart's coup, where street protestors were adamantly anti-government and attacked the nation's democratic institutions, but also had as primary supporters and proponents of the coup the very lawmakers and politicians they claimed to oppose. Both coups thus exemplify the middle ground on the double militancy spectrum.

Disruptive Action

The co-opted Free Pass Movement in 2015 and 2016, and the "March for Family, with God, For Liberty" which numbered more than 200,000 mostly women protesting the Goulart government, are the strongest examples of Payne's disruptive action (Ansell, 2018; Bandeira, 1977; Payne, 2023). In both instances, hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets with signs and chants that demonstrated their anger towards the government, their moral opposition to the leaders, and the need for a change in government (Parker, 1979; Prengaman & Savarese, 2021). Part of the efficacy of the anti-Goulart marches was the crowd itself. The marches, led primarily by women of the middle and upper classes, deliberately showcased elite dissatisfaction with the government (Parker, 1979, p. 63). Banners were explicitly anti-communist and pro-Christianity, warning about Brazil becoming "another Cuba," while also pleading for the return of a "Christian government" (Parker, 1979, p. 63). This framing deliberately positioned the coup as a moral and legal necessity, portraying Goulart as the source of the nation's troubles, and the "everyday women" marching gave the protests the façade of a popular revolt. The anti-Dilma protests follow a similar pattern.

Clad in green and yellow, protestors, again primarily from the middle and upper classes, took to the streets of Brazil's major cities in opposition to Dilma's government, corruption, and presidency specifically (Ansell, 2018, p. 317). Even though much of the Chamber of Deputies was under investigation for corruption charges, Dilma was singled out as the centre of an ambiguous "corruption" she seemed to embody. Protestors, mirroring the media, exhibited the "negative partisanship" that had plagued Brazil by this point, not calling for any specific, democratic change, but simply Dilma and the PT's ousting (Ansell, 2018, p. 326). Blow-up dolls of her and Lula in prison clothing were floated down Avenida Paulista, big crosses were held by Evangelical protestors in the crowds, and Globo televised it all (Van Dijk, 2017, p. 203). All this noise gave the feeling that the entirety of Brazil was against her, drowning out the counterprotests the Left held, and preparing the country for what seemed like the only natural next step: removing Dilma. However, as Bandeira wrote of 1964, these protests featured the "obviously limited participation of the lower classes" (1977, p. 185). The poor and marginalized, like in 1964, seeing their rights publicly and celebratorily being stripped away, did not join the waves of green and yellow.

Institutional Effort

The impeachment votes conducted by Congress, as well as the *Lava Jato* investigation carried out by Sergio Moro, represent the institutional efforts carried out against Dilma, while the po-

litical and economic friction intentionally created by Lacerda and the UDN demonstrate the institutional work carried out against Goulart.

Dilma's removal —a parliamentary or constitutionalist coup — highlighted the effective, tactical use of "legalist" means to remove her by politicians (Pitts et al., 2016). Congress granted itself full authority to condemn Dilma for the crimes they claimed she committed, both legal and moral (Ansell, 2018; Prengaman & Savarese, 2021). Eduardo Cunha, president of the Chamber of Deputies, was committed to removing Dilma because of the several corruption charges he faced and wished would go away with her (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 27). Far-right politicians wanted her removed because of her commitment to the PT's social programs as well as gender and LGBTQ rights. And Sergio Moro, leader of the *Lava Jato* investigation, wanted her removed because of his commitment to the anti-PT cause, like many other traditional right-wingers (Van Dijk, 2017, p. 201). These various right-wing forces joined together to push through the "impeachment" legislation, garner public support for it, manufacture legal justifications, and swiftly oust her.

Government insiders also destabilized Goulart's administration. Carlos Lacerda, UDN leader and vehement Goulart opposer, worked tirelessly to stagnate Goulart's government from within. He and the UDN were the primary opposition to all of Goulart's *reformas de base*, making it so that none of banking regulation, administrative reform, tax reform, agrarian reform, and constitutional reform ever passed (Johnson, 2001, p. 101). They not only blocked these reforms but also generated economic instability, rejecting several of Goulart's economic recovery plans. This effort was strengthened by JFK and LBJ rejecting Goulart's request for financial aid (Loureiro, 2017). The UDN successfully fabricated the idea that Goulart's government was inefficient and harmful and advocated for his removal. This was especially tactical because those hurt by economic stagnation were the middle and upper classes, the strongest supporters of the coup. Lacerda and the UDN embraced the military coup, confirming their anti-democratic convictions and "selective support for civilian rule," and tactically using the government to oust the president (Johnson, 2001, p. 112).

Section 4: Conclusion

A right-against-rights coup occurs when the Right successfully removes a democratically elected leader to protect its own interests at the expense of the poor, marginalized, and democracy itself. This investigation demonstrated that João Goulart's 1964 removal is a right-against-rights coup, not simply a military coup, because he was illegally ousted for attempting progressive, redistributive reform that directly challenged the Right's interests. Similarly, Dilma Rousseff's 2016 ousting is a right-against-rights coup, not an impeachment, not only because she was removed without being charged with a crime, but specifically because her "impeachment" was spurred by her attempts at protecting social programs and the advancement of the rights of the marginalized. While both presidencies had their challenges, their illegal removals, driven by the Right's desire to "restore, promote or advance a status quo ante of traditional, political, social, economic, and cultural rights," fundamentally undermined democracy. And if democracy is no longer present, the culprits of its removal must be named — in this case, the Right.

This investigation employed Payne's right-against-rights tactics to show how the Right staged each coup in Brazil. Through Framing and Legitimating Myths, the Right fabricated negative images of both Goulart and Dilma, positioning themselves as the only alternative

to the presidencies and ultimately, democracy. Organization, particularly through media, played the key role of legitimizing both coups and promoting a one-sided perspective. Transnational Advocacy allowed the coups to garner international support, funding, and legitimacy, especially with CIA involvement in removing Goulart. Finally, Double Militancy enabled a two-front war where anti-government street mobilizations were supported by the very government they claimed to oppose. These tactics definitively illustrate how both presidents suffered a right-against-rights coup.

Did the Right achieve their goals by ousting the presidents then? Goulart ran on a platform of major reforms aimed at greater equity and expanding Brazil's democracy. Dilma sought to continue the work carried out by the PT, lifting millions out of extreme poverty and advancing social rights for the marginalized. Neither president was able to fulfil their goals, and the reaction following their ousting was an aggressive undoing of these policies and reforms. The military dictatorship cemented the inequities Goulart tried to tackle and halted any attempt at further progress. In 2018, Bolsonaro effectively returned the military to the presidency and began a campaign to strip away the rights of the many. Therefore, the answer to this question is a definitive yes. Brazilian politics has historically always been elitist, and unfortunately, it largely remains so to this day (Johnson, 2001, p. 15).

The legacy of these coups continues to shape a complex outlook for 2025. Lula's narrow reelection campaign in 2022 seemed to signal a return of PT politics. However, an insurrection similar to that of the United States in 2021 took place on January 8th, 2023, in Brasilia, later revealed to be part of a broader unsuccessful coup plot put in place by former president Bolsonaro allies, which included the assassination of Lula, his vice-president, Geraldo Alckmin, and the head of Brazil's Supreme Court, Alexandre de Moraes (Al Jazeera, 2025). Nearing the end of 2025, Bolsonaro is heading to prison for his crimes, yet the Brazilian Right remains committed as ever to his ideals and hateful politics. Simultaneously, the Chamber of Deputies has become dominated by the Right and passed increasingly right-wing legislation (Sales, 2025). Furthermore, the judiciary branch's power has steadily grown in recent years and, with the growing power of the Chamber of Deputies, seems to threaten the very authority of the presidency, reminiscent of the situation Goulart found himself in when he first took office.

Thus, 2025 paints an interesting picture. While a coup attempt was thwarted, and its proponents heading to jail, the power of Brazil's government seems to be increasingly moving away from the president and into the hands of Brazil's Congress, which remains heavily right-leaning and unwilling to make the reforms the nation has been attempting since the 1960s. If Goulart and Dilma's coups' legacy served to warn Brazil of the threat of the Right's anti-democratic intentions, then it appears the country has not learned from its past. But if the coups serve to help prevent future direct attacks on democracy, then perhaps something has been learned, if only just.

Leigh Payne's right-against-rights framework describes deliberate tactics employed by the Right Wing to undermine, attack, and destroy democracy in defence of the status quo. Working under the assertion that both Brazil's 1964 military coup and 2016 presidential impeachment were coups perpetrated by the Right Wing, this investigation serves to connect both events via this singular framework to demonstrate how they were both specifically "right-against-rights coups," analyse the fragility of Brazilian democracy in the face of the Right Wing, and discern the future of Brazil's democracy.

[1] The "BBB" is made up of evangelical politicians (Bible), politicians who defend gun rights (Bullet), and politicians who defend the interests of agriculturalists/landowners (Bull). They are among the most conservative politicians in Brazil's congress (Pessoa Cavalcanti, 2023)

[2] At the time, Brazilians could elect presidents and vice presidents from different tickets, and Goulart was elected with more votes than Kubitschek (Bandeira, 1977, p. 35).

[3] Devised by famed economist Celso Furtado, the plan sought to decrease rising levels of inflation and reverse external disequilibria without compromising growth through foreign aid, especially from the US. It also defended the need for structural reforms, particularly land and tax reforms, to tackle Brazil's deep-rooted poverty and income inequality (Loureiro, 2017, p. 62)

[4] The Mensalão scandal was an unconventional corruption scandal where opposition members in the Chamber of Deputies would receive payments from state-owned companies to help pass legislation supported by the PT, much of which became the celebrated cornerstones of the Lula administration (Prengaman & Savarese, 2021, p. 113)

[5] Political behavior characterized less by support for one's own party than by intensifying antipathy to one's perceived opponents (Pierson, 2017, p. 109).

[6] Taking to the streets to protest with provocative signs and slogans to challenge the "political elite" and represent the "popular sector." Unconventional street politics also capture media attention (Payne, 2023, p. 45).

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