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Historical narratives of Brazil's regime change: a time-centered framework*

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ABSTRACT

Historical narratives of Brazil's regime change: a time-centered framework: This article presents a time-centered framework for analyzing institutional change, focusing on the interplay of trends, routines, and events to construct causal narratives that respect the temporal dynamics of historical processes. Using Brazil's national regime changes as case studies, the framework demonstrates how temporal concepts can unravel multicausal processes, structure them coherently, and reveal their temporal causalities. By accounting for variations in duration, pace, and trajectory, the framework offers a robust tool for understanding macro-outcomes while emphasizing temporal and causal heterogeneity. It contributes to the study of institutional change by facilitating comparative analysis and enhancing the validity of explanations through time-sensitive historical reconstruction.

Keywords: institutional change, temporality, causal narratives, historical reconstruction, Brazil

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Introduction

Institutional change happens *in* time and *through* time. Time is both the vector in which the change unfolds and the trace or "outcome" of it. It can either be seen as the cause of the macro-mechanisms (e.g., the timing of the outbreak of a *coup* determines the course of it) but also the consequence of the micro-mechanisms (e.g., the decision of starting a *coup* is affected by the *coup* plotters' perception of time). It can be used to explain history, meanwhile, it also needs to be explained by history (Aminzade 1992; Griffin 1992; Abbott 2001; Thelen 2000; Büthe 2002; Pierson 2004; Mahoney 2007; Grzymala-Busse 2010; Clark 2019).

That being said, the significance of time has often been downplayed or left implicit in the studies of institutional change (Pierson 2004, 1-3). Inductive reasoning, often used in comparing institutions across history, typically treats time as just a backdrop—markers to frame broader conclusions. On the other hand, deductive reasoning, often used in the rational choice approach to institutional change, usually treats time as a stand-in for factors like the discount rate, which are hard to pinpoint in complex models. More often than not, the unity of time is sacrificed for the purposes of drawing comparisons and testing hypotheses (Skocpol 1984, 383). However, treating two closely linked events in time as independent in a causal analysis denies any temporal causation, essentially dismissing the role of time as either a significant factor or a variable in its own right (Griffin 1992).

This tendency of overlooking the temporalities of institutional change is reflected in the typological approach, which classifies cases of change using broad labels that suggest either gradual or abrupt transitions, such as *evolution* vs. *revolution*, *bridging* vs. *breakage*, or *transaction* vs. *collapse*. On one hand, there are the theories of gradual institutional change accounting for smooth, incremental, and progressive processes of institutional change, characterized by functionality, consistency, and longevity (North 1990; Arthur 1994, 112; Ostrom 1991; March and Olsen 1989, 126; Douglas 1986; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). On the other hand, other theories are crafted to better explain sudden, unexpected, and comprehensive institutional changes by emphasizing the role of historical contingencies (Pierson 1996, 2000, 2004;

Thelen 1999; Mahoney 2000, 2007; Slater and Simmons 2010). It seems that institutionalists are comfortable selecting tools that best suit their cases, often without ensuring that their explanations correspond with the actual temporalities (i.e., duration, sequence, and timing) of the historical events that drove the institutional changes over time.

This article is an attempt to adjust the typological approach to institutional change towards a more time-sensitive framework for historical narratives. The first section will briefly discuss the drawbacks of the typological approach, highlighting how the oversimplification of temporal causalities could lead to incomplete if not problematic conclusions about how and why institutions change. Then, the second section will explore the usefulness of temporal concepts such as *trends*, *routines*, and *events* in depicting the "timescape" of a macro-process, laying the foundation for a time-centered narrative framework by which the historical sequence of institutional change can be analyzed and compared. The final section will apply this framework to an empirical analysis of four cases of Brazil's national regime change as a clear demonstration of how comprehensive, valid, and visualizable narratives can be structured from it.

The perils of the typological approach to institutional change

The use of typological characterization to describe, analyze, and explain institutional change based on the "speed of action" of the agents is almost instinctive. It is seemingly beyond criticism for scholars to assume that the dramatic, instantaneous French Revolution should be discussed separately from the gradual, subtle transformation of the British House of Lords, for example. Nevertheless, this typological approach to institutional change could obstruct valid causal inference in many ways.

To begin with, the typological approach presumes that the processes of institutional change can be sorted into two or more types according to their "morphological characteristics" as simple as "short" or "long", "fast-moving" or "slow-moving", "sudden" or "gradual" (Roland, 2004). However, this distinction is often unfounded or even presumptuous for two cases that appear to take place within a similar period of time might involve completely

different causal mechanisms (Gerschewski 2021). As a result, "analytical dualism" may solidify into "ontological dualism", leading to a one-sided, fragmented, and overly simplistic view of institutional change (Hay 2002, 123).

Second, the typological approach often resorts to type-based explanations, utilizing distinct, often dualist causes (eg., institutional stasis/institutional flux; structure/agency; path dependence/critical juncture) alternately to explain the time-related variations of institutional change (Krasner 1984; Callinicos 1988; Mahoney and Snyder 1999; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). However, this strategy can be seriously flawed, if not misleading, in disassembling complex macro-processes such as national regime change. For example, Brazil moved from a quasi-democracy to an autocracy between 1930 and 1937. This process began with a rebellion, which soon settled into a well-functioning provisional democratic rule. Subsequently, a series of social unrests erupted, culminating in a constitutional *coup* initiated by the president-elect himself. Was it a slow-moving or fast-moving change? Was the regime stable or in flux? At what point and why did it transform? The answers depend heavily on how researchers initially break down, categorize, and piece together this sequence of events? Certainly, the answers are highly reliant on how researchers disassemble, categorize, and reconstruct this chronological process in the first place. As a result, the typological approach frequently falls into a tautological error, where the cause is used to define the type, and the type is then used to explain the cause (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

Lastly, unlike natural processes such as tornado formation, which can be predicted using measurable parameters, institutional change arises from the constantly evolving interactions, negotiations, and confrontations among actors who have diverse and dynamic perceptions of time. A leader of an opposition movement may choose to rush for a lightning attack due to unrelated factors, triggering abrupt institutional change. Conversely, their peers may be just as likely to decide to push for compromise, leading to gradual institutional change. Thus, time cannot be used simply as a measurement or a classifier for selecting cases if any credit is given to subjectivity. On the contrary, the more the borderline between objectivity and subjectivity blurs, the more time-related analytical tools like "timing", "sequencing" and "critical juncture" start to pay off (Tilly 1984, 14; Pierson,

2004, 54-55; Collier and Collier 1991; Grzymala-Busse 2010; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Capoccia 2016).

Beyond the typological thinking of institutional change: bringing temporality in

Time should not be viewed as a mere burden or a secondary effect in research on institutional change. Rather, it should be recognized as the fundamental framework within which the dynamics of change are initiated, evolve, and ultimately take shape. Furthermore, it should also provide the foundation for case-based historical narratives that are suitable for making multicausal inferences and comparisons. With these goals in mind, this article seeks to develop a practical framework that addresses temporality in institutional change research. This framework aims not only to enhance the consistency and clarity of historical narratives by integrating a temporal structure into each case but also to serve as "scaffolding" for deeper inferences through cross-case comparisons.

Social scientists do not lack temporal concepts that are useful for analyzing institutional evolution. Abbott (1983) developed a series of analytical tools to describe the temporal features of social processes, such as *rapidity*, *frequency*, *duration*, *direction*, *malleability*, *repeatability*, etc. Thereafter, Aminzade (1992) aggregated the causal power of events into four temporal concepts: *duration*, *pace*, *trajectory,* and *cycle*. These concepts are valuable in the field of institutional change research because they capture the temporal dynamics of what appears to be a single historical sequence. They also highlight the essential temporal and causal heterogeneity needed for describing, explaining, and analyzing institutional change (see Table 1).

Once we recognize the causal power of time, explaining institutional change involves not only determining the combination of variables that lead to a particular state of change, but also identifying the patterns of temporal connections among them. The real challenge, therefore, lies in *applying* time to institutional change research. At first glance, this may seem impossible, as time is often viewed as fixed, irreversible, and beyond manipulation. However, the ubiquitous nature of time actually allows us to measure,

evaluate, code, and validate the mechanisms and processes involved in a given case based on its temporal characteristics. By doing so, we can establish a theoretical link between temporal causes and effects, thereby forming a model of temporal dynamics. This model can then be used to create a time-centered narrative for analyzing specific social phenomena in the empirical world (Büthe, 2002).

Table 1: A Comparison between Typological and Temporal Approaches to Institutional Change

	TYPOLOGICAL		TEMPORAL	
Analytical Focus	state of institution	stasis vs. flux	institutional change processes	structural relations between temporal forms
Independent Variables	dualist causes	structure & agency, path dependence & critical juncture...	temporal causes	trends, routines, events...
Dependent Variables	types of institutional change	continuous vs. discontinuous	temporal effects	duration, pace, trajectory...

A time-centered approach sees institutional change as a complex historical process in which causality comes in a variety of temporal orderings – strict *sequence*, *overlap*, or *simultaneity* – and in a variety of structural relations – *linear*, *branching*, *"dead ends"*, and *loops*, producing wildly different episodes of change (Griffin, 1992). It might adopt a Braudelian style of storytelling based on three different scales of duration, i.e., the *structural history*, the *conjunctural history*, and the *eventful history*, to explain the course through which a change takes its complete form (Braudel, 1972). In one way or another, it should be able to uncover the undercurrents surging at different periods of time and in different directions under the seemingly continuous and coherent macroscopic history (Abbott, 1990).

In this section, the endeavor to build a time-centered framework for institutional change embarks from discussing three conceptual apparatus commonly employed by historians when choosing their storytelling strategy:

trends, *routines*, and *events*.

According to Sewell's (2005, 273) definition, *trends* are "directional changes in social relations, the sort of temporalities that historians typically mark by terms like 'rise'; 'fall'; 'decline'; 'stagnation'; and the like". For example, the rise of information technology is a *trend* that reflects significant directional changes in societal interaction and evolution. *Routines* refer to those "more or less taken for granted activities that tend, other things being equal, to be repeated indefinitely in unchanged ways" and, in this vein, institutions can also be seen as powerful machines that produce and maintain routines; for instance, the daily opening of markets at a set time is a routine. *Events*, where lie the core of Sewell's theory-building, represent the "temporally concentrated sequences of actions that transform structures". An example of this could be the fall of the Berlin Wall, a pivotal event that drastically altered political and social structures. According to Sewell, events stand out among other happenings dismissible in causal narratives in that they tend to replace routines and reorient trends.[1)]

These three concepts—trends, routines, and events—are valuable for explaining the temporal outcomes of institutional change. They help distinguish different levels of causation, including preexisting structural conditions, conjectural conditions, and contingent actions. Additionally, they are inherently connected to ideational factors, effectively bridging the gap between objectivity and subjectivity. Here, time is considered the key to alleviating the tension found in the dualistic explanations common in the typological approach to institutional change, as the same objective variables can be weighted differently according to the actors' subjective perception of time.[2)]

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1 In this article, the use of these concepts closely follows Sewell's original definitions, with two minor adjustments tailored to highlight the characteristics of Brazilian cases: For "trends", long-term demographic and geographic factors, which F. Braudel (1972) considered crucial in explaining social changes, are set aside because the timeframe of the Brazilian cases is too brief for their effects to manifest. As for "routines", the analysis excludes nonpolitical activities, focusing instead on how the dissolution of old political institutions and the emergence of new ones have driven national regime changes in each case.

2 As Peter Hall (1984) puts it, "every concrete social action has a temporal structure embodied in the acts of remembrance and anticipation in the actor's stream of consciousness".

By categorizing the explanatory variables into these three temporal groups, the initiative of the subject is revealed as a crucial factor that accounts for variations in the decision-making process related to institutional change. *Trends*, with their long-term trajectory, are typically perceived as unchangeable and exogenous, unless their imminent shift alters the temporal horizon. *Routines*, tied to the steady rhythm of everyday practices, are often unnoticed or assumed stable until they are abruptly thrust into focus, disrupting the temporal flow and prompting their replacement. These routines act as temporal barriers, discouraging action when change is perceived as ineffective or not worthwhile. *Events*, concentrated in time, mark critical junctures when actors possess the temporal clarity and determination to effect change, either by challenging trends or routines, or, in extreme circumstances, both. In this way, the temporal dimensions of historical processes interact with and are shaped by actors, creating a dynamic "timescape" where actions drive the course of history (Clark, 2019, 1-2).

To develop a time-centered narrative of a historical sequence of institutional change, it is essential to articulate and categorize the macro-outcomes of actions for change in terms of their temporal dynamics. This approach stands in contrast to typological methods, which often reduce these outcomes to abstract and composite dependent variables, such as 'the democratization of political processes' or 'the recentralization of state power', typically measured by single actions like holding an election or adopting a new constitution. These measurements, using historical "markers" to identify and pinpoint moments of institutional change, rarely captures the convergence of different temporal trajectories, nor does it adequately account for the conjunctural interactions of processes initially determined independently.

Our method proposes viewing the outcomes of each case of institutional change according to their temporal qualities, such as *duration*, *pace*, and *trajectory*. These qualities make up the main body of theoretical inquiry of social temporality and are discussed by Aminzade (1992), who defines *duration* as "the amount of time elapsed for a given event or sequence of events", *pace* as "the number of similar events in a given amount of time", and *trajectory* as "a cumulative sequence of linked events, suggesting a certain directionality". Our methodology builds on Aminzade's perspective with a slight modification to the third quality, recognizing that the trajectory of

institutional change often follows discernible patterns[3]. By framing this final category with a more structured conception that reflects the possible pathways linking the decisions of key actors to the evolution of institutions, we create space for meaningful comparison. This comparison is not intended to assert the inevitability of presumed causal relationships but to enrich our understanding of a conceptually defined process by critically extending narratives from one case to others.

By situating both the causes (*trends*, *routines*, and *events*) and the outcomes (*duration*, *pace*, and *trajectory*) of institutional change within a matrix of temporal dimensions, we can now outline a framework that guides our narratives toward a time-sensitive explanation of how institutional change unfolded historically and why it occurred in that specific way. This framework begins by identifying the temporal causalities of change—whether driven by trends, the unsustainability of routines, or the occurrence of events—and concludes by linking these causalities to the temporal outcomes of change, such as the duration, pace, and trajectory of the process.

It is important to recognize that, like narratives of any sort, time-centered narratives are inherently reconstructions of facts, influenced by researchers' intellectual interests and analytical priorities. As a result, this framework itself does not dictate the relative importance or "weighting" of each causality, leaving the selection, organization, and presentation of evidence to the discretion of individual narrators. However, researchers who identify the same set of principal causes can—and should—compare and validate each other's narratives to enhance the robustness and coherence of their analyses.

Applying temporality to a cross-period comparative narrative on Brazil's national regime changes

Why Brazil's Regime Changes?

Regime change is a rare but profoundly impactful form of institutional change, serving as a "magnified" and thus more observable representation

3 For instance, it can be "accidental"—without any "linking lines" from one event to another, "ephemeral"—an extremely short line with a dead end, or "cyclical"—a long close-ended curve, etc (Mahoney, 2000).

of a country's broader institutional evolution. It provides an excellent example to demonstrate how complex phenomena, which resist simple classification through typological labels, can be effectively analyzed and compared when temporality is placed at the forefront.

Brazil experienced a series of regime change in the twentieth century: from quasi-democracy[4] to authoritarianism during 1930-1937; from authoritarianism to democracy in 1945; from democracy to authoritarianism in 1964; and from authoritarianism to democracy during 1979-1985.[5] The first and last cases spanned a relatively long duration, whereas the other two were swift coups that occurred overnight and came to an end almost immediately. The first and last cases unfolded at a varied—while the process of change showed signs of deepening over time, its "locally deterministic directionality" (Hirschman, 2020) was intermittently interrupted or even reversed. In contrast, the other two cases were fast-paced and unidirectional, leaving little room for reversal. In terms of trajectory, the four cases present distinct features: the first appears to be an accumulative process driven by a series of built-up events; the second resembles a "dead-end" scenario; the third involves a prolonged period of vacillation culminating in a violent conclusion; and the last follows a multi-staged, cyclical pattern marked by the rise and fall of regime legitimacy.

The significant morphological variations among the four regime change cases within a short timeframe cannot be adequately explained using the typological approach to institutional change. Variables such as class conflicts, foreign intervention, economic depression, and civil-military relations fail to account for the dramatically different outcomes of these historical processes

4 From 1889 to 1930, Brazil's political regime can be described as a "competitive oligarchy" in which the two major states of Sao Paulo and Minas Gerais alternately nominated presidential candidates. Under this system, Brazil held elections on a regular basis, but the universal suffrage and the number of competing parties was extremely limited. Therefore, it is categorized as a "quasi-democracy" according to Polity IV's criteria.

5 The periodization of the four cases in this article follows that of the mainstream Brazilian historians, such as Boris Fausto (in *História do Brasil*) and M. Y. Linhares (in *História geral do Brasil*, published by Elsevier in 2016). Admittedly, any periodization involves some arbitrary elements because its appropriateness depends on the analytical frameworks applied to explain specific research problems. Considering that periodization isn't a key concern in the proposed narrative, the period of time considered relevant in each case is duly enlarged.

when their temporal dimensions are disregarded. In other words, the Brazilian cases provide an excellent window for us to separate and evaluate the substantial causal power of the structural relations between different temporalities.

As the following paragraphs will demonstrate, the variations of these cases in terms of duration, pace, and trajectory can only be accounted for if a multilayered narrative of trends, routines and events is in place.

First Case: The De-democratization from 1930 to 1937

a. Trends: the fall of liberalism and the rise of authoritarianism as an ideal form of government

The first wave of de-democratization in Brazil unfolded within an international context of profound power shifts. The golden era of Lockean liberalism effectively ended with the outbreak of World War I, and by the 1920s, the global system's center of gravity was gradually shifting toward newly emerging poles: the communist Soviet Union in the East and Nazi Germany in the West. As anti-liberal ideologies began to dominate the European zeitgeist, major Latin American countries, including Brazil, abandoned their democratic experiments and shifted toward a dictatorship.

This global trend began in 1917 with the February and October Revolutions, which marked the demise of the Russian Empire and catalyzed the spread of Bolshevism across Europe and beyond. In Brazil, these ideological shifts were echoed domestically. That same year, general strikes erupted in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. On March 25, 1922, the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) was founded. By March 1935, Brazilian communists and leftist sympathizers had formed the National Liberation Alliance (ANL), supported by cadres from the Third Communist International to prepare for a proletarian revolution (Fausto, 2005, 208).

On the other hand, the rise of fascism in Western Europe and Japan inspired new aspirations within the Brazilian army, particularly among low-ranking officers who envisioned a strong, centralized state. By 1934, Nazi Germany had replaced the United States as Brazil's largest trading partner, garnering admiration among segments of the Brazilian elite. Fascist ideology

began to take root in the late 1920s, with small fascist organizations emerging across the country. This movement gained significant momentum in October 1932, when Plínio Salgado founded the far-right Brazilian Integralism Movement (*Ação Integralista Brasileira*) (Fausto, 2005, 203-205, 221).

Although the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were ideological adversaries, both had established nondemocratic regimes and achieved notable records of economic growth and military expansion. This global trend provided Brazilian political actors with the motivation, justification, and favorable external conditions to pursue the establishment of an authoritarian regime.

b. Routines: the decline of the coffee economy and the expansion of the state led by the thirst for industrialization

Two interconnected routines dominated Brazil until the early twentieth century. The first was economic, i.e., an archaic colonial system driven solely by agricultural exports. The second was political, i.e., the fragmentation of state power, primarily concentrated between the two major states, São Paulo and Minas Gerais. These long-standing routines persisted for decades but were ultimately disrupted when Brazil faced a severe financial crisis following the Great Depression.

Up until the 1920s, Brazil's economy had been heavily reliant on the export of single agricultural products, with its national economy being carried forward by a series of economic cycles (*ciclos econômicos*) pumped by the export of timber, sugar, cotton, gold, and coffee. However, the Great Depression drastically reduced demand from North America and Europe, leaving Brazil unable to sustain its traditional export-driven economy. Planters faced bankruptcy, commercial and financial activities came to a standstill, and unemployment and poverty plagued the country's major cities. The two-tier oligarchy descended into internal conflict, inadvertently empowering a third force—an alliance swiftly formed between the army and local industrial elites led by Getúlio Vargas (Fausto, 2005, 187-193).

In October 1930, Vargas seized the opportunity to mobilize military forces stationed along the southern frontier and marched into the capital, overthrowing the sitting president and taking control of the central government. Months later, he officially assumed the presidency through

indirect elections. Backed by the military lieutenants and the Catholic Church, Vargas dissolved the Brazilian Congress and local councils, consolidating administrative and legislative power and marking the beginning of the Vargas Era. New routines emerged with the establishment of the New State *(Estado Novo)*, defined by a centralized power structure and a national push for industrialization.

c. Events: the genius and the ingenuity of a charismatic dictator

Shortly after the 1930 revolution, Vargas declared himself an opponent of oligarchy and advocated for national unity through fairer elections. However, by 1934, he began to reveal his brilliance as a charismatic dictator, fervently pursuing "state supremacy" and tirelessly rallying supporters around him (Fausto, 2005, 217). While Vargas' shift in rhetoric was undoubtedly driven by personal ambition, it also aligned with the prevailing trends and established routines of the time.

By the end of his term, amid escalating tensions between the left and right wings, the conditions for a *coup d'état* had fully ripened. On July 5, 1935, the ANL called for the overthrow of the "hateful Vargas government", to which Vargas immediately responded by banning the organization and imprisoning several of its leaders. Later, on November 23, the PCB initiated an uprising in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, triggering broader suppression and an escalation of violence (Fausto, 2005, 208). In September 1937, just before the scheduled election, an officer from the Department of War was caught printing what was claimed to be a communist riot conspiracy, known as the 'Cohen Plan.' However, evidence suggests that the officer may have intended to be arrested (Fausto, 2005, 210). By November, as fears of revolution escalated into a nationwide concern,[6] Vargas declared a state of emergency and announced over national radio the

6 Despite the Constitution of 1934 trying to restore the core values of republicanism, the Constitution of 1937 claimed, in its preamble, that the dictatorship was "not only necessary but also legitimate", given that "the political and social peace was deeply disturbed by known factors of disorder, resulting from the growing aggravation of party disputes, the notorious demagogic propagandas that attempt to denature the class struggle, and the radicalization of ideological conflicts." See: Constitution of the United States of Brazil, November 10th, 1937.
http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao37.htm

establishment of a new authoritarian government called "the New State" *(O Estado Novo)*. The name, identical to that of the Portuguese dictatorship founded by António de Oliveira Salazar in 1933, serves as circumstantial evidence of the prevailing trend toward authoritarianism within the Luso-Brazilian world.

It is important to note that the constitutional *coup* of 1937 was not a singular event driven solely by the spontaneity of its plotters. As early as September 1937, members of the Brazilian Congress had begun lobbying state governors for support, a motion widely welcomed, especially in the North. Despite its dramatic impact, the "Cohen Plan" episode merely caused Vargas to bring forward his announcement by five days (Fausto, 2005, 210–211). Ultimately, Vargas' declaration marked the realization of an ideal: a centralized government supported by the military, the Catholic Church, industrial elites, and Vargas himself. With the competitive oligarchy no longer viable, a new political routine was poised to begin.

In summary, under the convergence of anti-liberal trends in the international arena, the drive for greater centralization of state power to replace outdated political routines tied to economic stagnation, and the events showcasing the calculated tactics of the dictator himself, Brazil embarked on the path to an authoritarian regime. As illustrated in Figure 1, the global shift toward authoritarian ideologies created the conditions for abandoning democracy, while the breakdown of routines, such as the coffee-based economy and the political status quo, provided key actors with both motivation and pressure for change. Finally, Vargas executed a sophisticated plan through a series of deliberate or incidental events. These processes, representing three distinct temporalities, unfolded not simultaneously but as a chain of interconnected events with varying durations, paces, and trajectories dispersed over time. Consequently, this regime change evolved into a lengthy, phased, and cumulative transition.

Second Case: The Democratization in 1945

a. Trends: Changing Fortunes in WWII

The *Estado Novo* maintained its dominance in Brazil until the outbreak

of World War II. From 1941 onwards, the tide on the battlefields began to shift. By late 1942, the Soviet army had delivered a decisive blow to Hitler by annihilating the main corps of the Sixth Army in the Stalingrad region, marking a critical turning point for the Axis powers (Roberts, 2002).

Simultaneously, beginning in early 1942, South American countries, including Brazil, faced mounting pressure from Great Britain, which blockaded waterways between Brazil and Europe, cutting off trade with Germany, and from the United States, which had joined the Allies in December 1941. Confronted with these shifting international trends, Vargas was compelled to choose a side. His decision to align with the democratic nations initiated a chain of events that undermined the legitimacy of his dictatorship, which was increasingly compared to the fascist regimes of the time (Fausto, 2005, 203–205).

b. Routines: the good omen of Pan-Americanism

Since the ascension of Vargas, Brazil had been trying to channel concentrated state power into a new economic model centered on industrialization. However, the country faced a severe shortage of funds and relied heavily on trade to finance its rapidly developing emerging industries. By late 1938, as the United States renewed its foreign policy by promoting Pan-Americanism in Latin America to secure material, military, and moral support from the region, the Brazilian business sector and armed forces were compelled to sever ties with the Axis powers. This shift marked the replacement of Brazil's old routine of diplomatic neutrality with a new US-Brazil alliance, signaling the beginning of a period of significant American influence in Brazil.

The US-Brazil alliance reshaped Brazil's role in World War II. In August 1942, Brazil declared war on the Axis powers. By 1944, Vargas had sent an expeditionary force of over 20,000 troops to fight on the front lines in Italy, aiming to enhance Brazil's international prestige and secure a competitive edge in accessing American loans among South American countries (Fausto, 2005, 221–224).

c. Events: troops sent out for victory, returned with enthusiasm for

democracy

The war cost the lives of 454 Brazilian soldiers in Italy, provoking widespread public condemnation of fascism and its domestic representation in the Estado Novo regime and Vargas's dictatorship (Diniz, 1981). In May 1945, the return of these national heroes signaled the demise of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship. The newly established "Pan-American brotherhood" provided strong momentum for pro-democracy movements in the country (Burns, 1993: 259). Amid this wave of democratic optimism, Vargas hastily declared the resumption of democratic elections but was deposed shortly before Brazil held its first direct presidential election (Fausto, 2005, 228).

Why did Brazil's democratization in 1945 unfold so rapidly, almost hastily? As illustrated in Figure 2, the trends shifted in favor of the Allies only by the end of 1941, and within just three and a half years, the war concluded with a decisive victory for Brazil and its powerful allies. During this time, the optimism surrounding Pan-American cooperation—forming the basis of Brazil's new routines of strengthening economic ties with the United States from late 1942 to 1945—aligned with the enthusiasm for democracy brought back by returning Brazilian soldiers, an unforeseen event even beyond Vargas's expectations. This rapid regime change can therefore be attributed to the cumulative and intersecting effects of wartime repercussions across the three temporal scales.

Third Case: The De-democratization in 1964

a. Trends: the spreading of the Cold War and the increasing ideological conflict in Brazil

By the early 1950s, communism had begun to permeate Latin America, coinciding with the flourishing of the Brazilian labor movement. In 1956, an internal split between Khrushchev and Stalinist factions led to the division of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and the emergence of a more fundamentalist faction, the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB). Soon after, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 propelled Brazil's left-leaning political climate to its zenith (Fausto, 2005, 244).

At the same time, the rise of McCarthyism in the United States hardened U.S. policy toward Latin America.[7] In 1960, Jânio Quadros was elected President of Brazil and introduced a dramatic shift in the country's diplomatic course. By meeting Fidel Castro and awarding Che Guevara the "Southern Cross Medal" (*Ordem Nacional do Cruzeiro do Sul*), Brazil's highest honor for a foreigner, Quadros signaled his commitment to an "independent foreign policy," a provocative challenge to Brazil's alliance with the United States (Fausto, 2005, 256). This intensifying ideological confrontation defined the era as an overwhelming trend.

When the Berlin Wall's was erected in 1961, the U.S. government tightened its national defense strategies, increasing its influence over Latin American allies. Brazil's Superior War College (*Escola Superior da Guerra*), established in 1949 under the guidance of French and American military consultants, began fostering the "Brazilian National Security Doctrine." This doctrine quickly gained traction among Brazilian soldiers and high-ranking civilian officials, many of whom would later play pivotal roles in consolidating the bureaucratic-authoritarian alliance (Fausto, 2005, 256, 265). The labor movement, later joined by rural activists, was identified as the 'internal enemy,' accused of destabilizing the social order and paving the way for a Cuba-style revolution.[8]

b. Routines: the impasse between the Presidency and Congress under the threat of American divestment

The rise of populism exacerbated the institutional deadlock between the administrative and legislative branches, disrupted the routine of functional governance after 1960. Quadros, who entered the presidency as an "outsider", quickly found his authority undermined by Congress. On August 25, 1961,

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7 President Harry S. Truman made anti-communism a prerequisite for U.S. foreign investment and aid, and his successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, escalated the anti-communist campaign into a "crusade" across Latin America (Fausto, 2005, 240)

8 Rapid and chaotic urbanization worsened the shortage of agricultural products and inflated land values, heightening tensions between landowners and landless farmers. Farmers' Associations gained significant traction around 1955, and widespread migration narrowed the divide between workers and farmers. This escalation of class conflicts and the political mobilization of the masses emerged as a key concern for the army (Fausto, 2005, 258–259, 294).

he threatened to resign, expecting to strengthen his position. Instead, Congress accepted his resignation and, albeit reluctantly, appointed Vice President and former labor leader João Goulart as his successor (Burns, 1993, 424–432).

Goulart assumed office under a provisional constitution that significantly curtailed his powers. Tensions continued to escalate, and the political deadlock worsened. By 1963, multiple attempts at compromise had failed, leaving the Brazilian cabinet in disarray. In October 1963, Goulart, in a desperate move, ordered Congress to take a 30-day recess under the pretext of "curbing rural riots". However, Congress rejected and overturned his directive, further deepening the crisis.

In early 1964, Goulart, along with his brother-in-law Lionel Brizola, a fervent communist activist, organized a series of mass demonstrations to promote land reform in Brazil. Tensions escalated as both farmers and manor owners began arming themselves. Propaganda advocating for the legalization of the Communist Party appeared on television, while rumors of civil war spread within the army (Burns, 1993, 432; Fausto, 2005, 268).

Amid this volatile climate, foreign investors began withdrawing from the Brazilian market, leading to a sharp rise in inflation, which doubled from 26.3% at the end of 1960 to 54.8% in 1962. Although Goulart sought to engage foreign creditors to stabilize the economy, his delegation was met with a frosty reception in Washington. By 1963, as Brazil sank into a deep recession, a consensus emerged among congressmen and the Armed Forces that intervention was necessary.

The broken routines of political functionality, combined with the shift from Brazil's previously established neutral diplomatic stance, destabilized the political and social order, paving the way for regime change.

c. Events: reckless presidents and disastrous decisions

Faced with opposition from Congress, Goulart misjudged the situation and made high-stakes decisions without adequate information about the underlying tensions within the political system. His land reform agenda alienated moderates who had initially opposed military intervention, driving them to side with his opponents (Burns, 1993, 432). Whether intentional

or not, his imprudent actions paved the way for Brazil's bureaucratic and military elites—staunch opponents of populism—to justify a supposedly "urgent and necessary" *coup d'état* aimed at resolving the country's crisis (O'Donnell, 1973; Burns, 1993, 432; Fausto, 2005, 268–269).

As Figure 3 illustrates, the de-democratization of Brazil in 1964 marked the collision of crises: the impasse between the Presidency and Congress, the class conflicts between the masses and elites, and the ideological confrontation between progressives and conservatives, all reflecting broader trends, such as escalating Cold War tensions and the rise of mass political mobilization. From 1961 to early 1964, broken routines—including the erosion of political functionality and economic stability—exacerbated the situation. Unwieldy mass mobilization, suspicions of collusion between the President and revolutionaries, panic triggered by American divestment, and fears of economic collapse created a volatile environment. These culminated in decisive events, such as the armed actions of generals who, under the pretext of restoring order and stability, executed a *coup* that abruptly ended Brazil's democratic regime.

Fourth Case: The Democratization from 1979 to 1985

a. Trends: The Third Wave of democratization and the revitalization of the Brazilian civil society

During the first half of the twentieth century, the global *zeitgeist* was marked by a fierce competition between democratic and non-democratic ideologies. By the late 1970s, however, democratization had emerged as the dominant trend. In the 15 years following Portugal's Carnation Revolution in 1974, more than 30 authoritarian regimes worldwide embarked on democratic transitions. Unsurprisingly, this shift rendered Brazil's military rule increasingly unpopular both at home and abroad, particularly after U.S. President Jimmy Carter launched his "human rights diplomacy" initiative in 1977.[9)]

9 During the infamous "Years of Lead" *(Anos de Chumbo)* in Brazil, from 1968 to 1974, thousands of dissidents were persecuted, tortured, and murdered, while artists and intellectuals were forced into exile, leaving a harrowing legacy of human rights violations.

The international wave of democratization had significant repercussions on Brazil's domestic politics. Since 1974, Brazil had been governed by soft-liner presidents who pursued a gradual and controlled relaxation (*distensão*) of societal tensions and a cautious political opening (*abertura*). After 1979, popular movements began to resurface, and a broad pro-democracy alliance emerged, uniting party leaders, intellectuals, businessmen, and industrial workers in major cities. Opposition candidates, once largely symbolic, started gaining traction in local elections, with their defeats often sparking protests and strikes (Fausto, 2005, 288). At the same time, the gradual revitalization of civil society was accompanied by the reorganization of political parties, which became the foundation of Brazil's democratic institutions.[10)]

In a world where liberal democracy and popular participation had emerged as dominant trends, the Brazilian authoritarian government faced growing challenges in retaining power. This irreversible shift steadily undermined military rule throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

b. Routines: the end of industrial expansion brought by the foreign debt crisis

The Brazilian military regime relied heavily on economic performance, which was sustained by a massive influx of American loans from 1969 to 1973. U.S. investments poured into Brazil's automobile industry, which became the cornerstone of its industrialization, achieving an annual growth rate of over 30%. However, this development path had two major flaws: it left Brazil highly vulnerable to fluctuations in international oil prices; and it directed public investment into large-scale infrastructure projects which were costly and barely profitable in the short run (Fausto, 2005, 285–287).

The oil crises dealt a severe blow to Brazil's automobile industry, leading

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These actions deepened the rift between the U.S. government and the Brazilian military regime (Burns, 1993, 464).

10 The Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) expanded its electorate by transitioning into the more inclusive Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB). The Labor Party (PT), emerging from industrial workers' unions, began to serve as a stronghold for the middle class seeking a greater political voice. Meanwhile, formerly radical leftist groups like the Democratic Labor Party (PDT) underwent a process of deradicalization, broadening their electoral appeal (Fausto, 2005, 299–302).

to a doubling of foreign debt between 1975 and 1978 and exposing deep structural economic imbalances (Fausto, 2005, 291–293). As the auto industry declined, key political actors began to recognize that economic growth fueled by short-term, high-interest loans was unsustainable. Calls for a freer market grew louder, and political democratization became increasingly appealing (Fausto, 2005, 296–298).

In 1980, under pressure from foreign creditors, the military government introduced austerity measures, leading to a three-year recession. Shrinking wages, hyperinflation, and rising unemployment fractured the routine of the corporatist pact, alienating the middle class. When Brazil declared technical bankruptcy in February 1983, following Mexico's lead, the IMF rejected its request for an extension on interest payments, dashing the military government's final hope of resolving the economic crisis through external assistance (Fausto, 2005, 296–297).

c. Events: the exit of the military rule, the unfortunate death of the president-elect, and the carefully handled transition of power

After the oil shocks ended Brazil's economic expansion, President João Figueiredo, who assumed office in 1979, announced a political amnesty and enacted a party reform bill, enabling multiple opposition parties to participate in the presidential election. Alongside ongoing economic and political challenges, the military regime's internal weaknesses became increasingly apparent. The national security doctrine that had initially justified military rule lost its relevance as a significant faction within the army showed growing concerned about the erosion of the army's autonomy, professionalism, and unity caused by politicization. However, this also gave the military the proactivity to control the pace of reforms (Linz and Stepan, 1996, 168).

In 1983, a pivotal moment arrived with the emergence of *Diretas Já*, a popular campaign advocating for an earlier direct presidential election. In January 1984, the movement organized a rally in São Paulo that drew 200,000 participants, including several future presidents-elect (Fausto, 2005, 300). Eventually, the military government conceded to a free and contestable, though still indirect, election. The two largest opposition parties united to nominate Tancredo de Almeida Neves as their presidential candidate. While

Neves secured the presidency in January 1985, he tragically passed away during an emergency surgical operation before his inauguration (Fausto, 2005, 301, 304).

While the country was immersed in agony, José Sarney, the vice-president-elect, took oath as President of Brazil. Once a high-ranking official during the military rule, Sarney was picked to relieve the concerns of the hard-liners within the Brazilian Army. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise for it guaranteed a smooth handover of power from the military to the civil government, reestablishing democracy in Brazil in 1985.[11)]

The Brazilian military regime experienced a full cycle of legitimacy—typical of military rule—before reaching a point of exhaustion (Imerman, 2018). As shown in Figure 4, the redemocratization process reflects this cyclical downturn, driven by trends such as the international pro-democracy *zeitgeist* and the revitalization of Brazilian civil society. The process was further accelerated by the break in routines, notably the decline of auto industry prosperity following the oil crises of the 1970s and the subsequent external debt crisis of the 1980s. However, the transition unfolded as a series of events marked by lengthiness, irregularity, and contingency, emphasizing the slow, intermittent, and non-linear nature of Brazil's journey toward democracy.

Conclusions

This article proposes a time-centered approach to structuring causal narratives for explaining the macro-outcomes of institutional change. By introducing a practical framework composed of trends, routines, and events, it provides a valuable tool for constructing narratives that respect the temporal dimensions of historical processes. Using Brazilian national regime changes as illustrative cases, our method demonstrates how temporal concepts can be employed to disentangle multicausal processes and facilitate clear, comprehensive, visualizable and robust explanations of the sequential

11 In the language of counterfactual analysis, this unforeseen event might have prevented further repercussions within the army which would have complicated Brazil's democratic transition (Mainwaring, 1989).

dynamics underlying institutional change.

This framework also offers empirical insights into explaining the temporal variations of institutional change in terms of duration, pace, and trajectory. As illustrated by the Brazilian cases, when trends are unidirectional (as in the first and fourth cases), they tend to drive a gradual shift in routines, with sporadic events having minimal impact. This results in a lengthy, slowly unfolding process of change, which may be either accumulative or cyclical. Conversely, when trends sharply reverse (as in the second case) or when opposing trends coexist (as in the third case), the change in routines is primarily triggered and propelled by eventful factors, such as key political leaders' decisions, leading to a much shorter and more abrupt pattern of change, either contingent or interruptive.

Furthermore, the temporal alignment of these variables—whether they cluster closely or are dispersed over time—significantly influences the pace at which causal effects unfold. When changes in trends and routines occur simultaneously, the process accelerates, producing rapid outcomes. In contrast, when unidirectional trends and the gradual erosion of old routines set the stage for a sequential chain of events over an extended period, the process slows down, reflecting a more protracted and phased temporal pattern.

This framework is not limited to the Brazilian cases and can be applied to analyze institutional changes in other contexts. By identifying and categorizing trends, routines, and events within a given historical sequence, researchers can use this method to disentangle the complex interplay of causal factors of different temporal dimensions.

The framework's flexibility allows it to be adapted to various temporal scales and types of institutional change, emphasizing the temporal and causal heterogeneity inherent in any historical sequence. Rather than competing with other variable-based explanations, which often sacrifice the coherence of the timeline for the abstraction of causal relationships—achieved by freezing, splicing, and rearranging the timeline—this framework serves as a complementary approach. It is compatible with existing explanations and functions as a practical tool for summarizing, reorganizing, and testing their validity through a more time-sensitive reconstruction of history.

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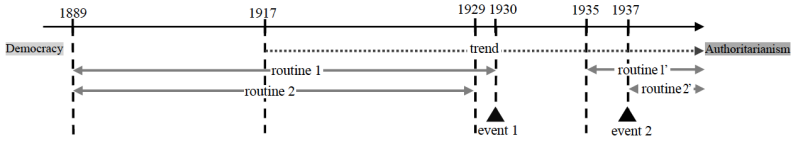
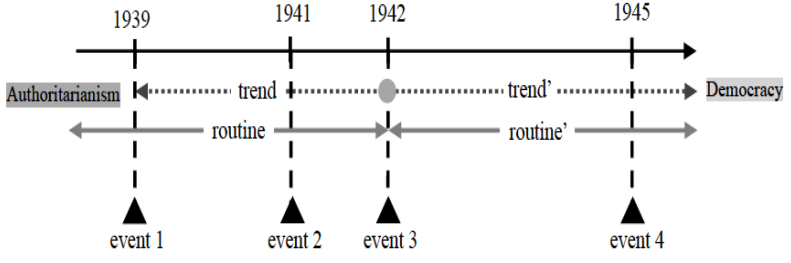
Figure captions



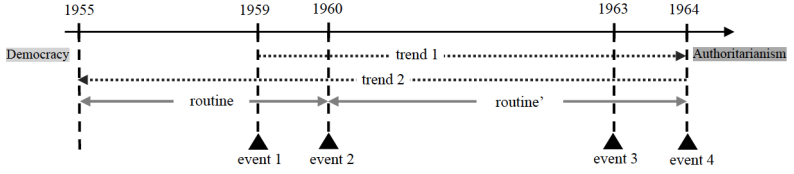
trend	anti-liberalism *zeitgeist* in Europe and in Latin America
routine 1	fragmentation of state power between Sao Paulo and Minas Geras
routine 1'	centralization of state power
routine 2	coffee cycle (ciclo do café)
routine 2'	state-led industralization
event 1	the 1930 Revolution
event 2	the constitutional coup of Estado Novo

Figure 1. Timeline of the de-democratization of Brazil (1930-1937)



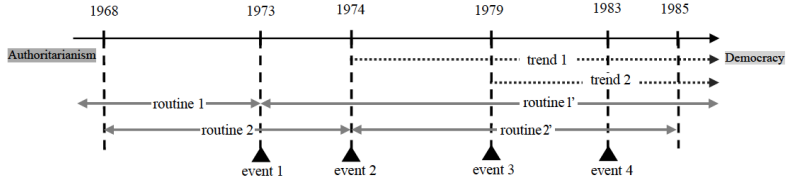
trend	relative advantage for the Axis powers in the battlefields of WWII
trend'	relative advantage for the Allies in the battlefields of WWII
routine	Brazilian diplomacy of neutrality and pragmatism
routine'	Pan-American alliance
event 1	Hitler invades Poland starting the WWII
event 2	U.S. declares war against the Axis Powers
event 3	Brazil declares war against the Axis Powers and sends troops to Italy
event 4	pro-democracy Brazilian soldiers return as heroes to Brazil

Figure 2. Timeline of the democratization of Brazil (1945)



trend 1	escalation of the ideological conflicts amid the Cold War
trend 2	grassroots mobilization in Brazil
routine	compromise between the Brazilian Presidency and Congress
routine'	impasse between the Brazilian Presidency and Congress
event 1	Cuba Revolution
event 2	Quadros resigns
event 3	Goulart orders a recess of the Brazilian Congress
event 4	Goulart announces a land reform plan

Figure 3. Timeline of the de-democratization of Brazil (1964)



trend 1	the Third Wave of democratization
trend 2	revitalization of the Brazilian civil society
routine 1	high economic growth pumped by FDI
routine 1'	economic difficulties due to debt risks
routine 2	hard-liners' rule
routine 2'	soft-liners' rule
event 1	The first Oil Shock
event 2	Carnation Revolution in Portugal
event 3	political amnesty and Party Reform Bill
event 4	rally of Diretas Já in Sao Paulo

Figure 4. Timeline of the redemocratization of Brazil (1979-1985)

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