Like Trump, Bolsonaro Waged War on Democratic Institutions—but in Brazil, the Institutions Are Winning

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In the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I argued in *Foreign Affairs* that Donald Trump's ascent to power represented the "Latin-Americanization of U.S. politics" and the entrenchment of caudillismo in the United States. Deriving from the word *caudillo*, or strongman, caudillismo is a quintessential Latin American political phenomenon. It embodies a self-glorifying leadership that leans on charisma and emotion rather than ideology and policy to create a bond between the leader and the public. It is also inherently authoritarian.

Latin America's early caudillos were men on horseback who appealed to notions of their own and their nation's *grandeza* (greatness) as they attempted to forge nation-states out of the chaos left behind by the wars of independence against Spain. Mid-twentieth-century prototypes, particularly Argentina's Juan Domingo Perón, used populist-nationalist rhetoric to mobilize a growing urban working class and to justify crushing the political opposition, and especially the free press. Early twenty-first-century examples, beginning with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, have used social media to create cults of personality that bypass traditional political parties. They have also exploited popular disillusionment with globalization and neoliberalism, promising to bring back economic nationalism and protectionism.

In the United States, the unusual persona and governing style of President-elect Donald Trump arguably reflect caudillismo more than European fascism, despite the many comparisons made about him to the latter throughout his rise to power. The phenomenon of caudillismo is often ascribed to cultural tendencies within Iberian Latin American societies—especially corporatism, machismo, and a propensity for strong leaders. But it is also rooted in factors that transcend culture, especially social and economic inequality. Caudillos are keen to exploit the grievances created by widespread inequality, which make many citizens more susceptible to the kind of political messaging that these kinds of leaders excel at, such as the claim that only they can fix intractable problems.
In fact, during his first term in office, Trump in many ways aligned U.S. politics with the Latin American caudillismo tradition. His administration, and that of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a self-styled twenty-first-century caudilloelected into office in 2018 and often referred to as the "Trump of the Tropics," became mirror images of each other. Their shared approach to power included attacking the press, undermining judicial independence, promoting Christian nationalism, persecuting political foes, sowing doubts about the legitimacy of the electoral system, and attempting to stay in office by undemocratic means. Taking direct inspiration from the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters, Bolsonaro's hardcore followers staged their own attempted coup a year later, storming government buildings in Brasília on January 8, 2022, in an effort to prevent the peaceful transfer of power to Brazil's current president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known as Lula.

But far less noted is how much the United States and Brazil have differed in their response to these threats. Four years after refusing to acknowledge his loss to Joe Biden, Trump was reelected by a comfortable margin, and is set to return to the White House without facing any consequences for his political malfeasance. Although a grand jury indicted Trump in 2023 for his attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election, the trial had not begun when Trump won the November 2024 election. A few weeks later, Special Prosecutor Jack Smith filed to drop all federal criminal cases against Trump, on the grounds that the Constitution forbids the indictment and prosecution of a sitting president. As a pointed reminder of the failure to hold Trump accountable, Smith's final report concluded that, were it not for Trump's imminent return to the presidency, "the admissible evidence was sufficient to obtain and sustain a conviction at trial."This decision stands against the background of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision last summer to grant Trump broad

presidential immunity from prosecution, which could make it even harder to hold him to account for transgressions in his second term.

By contrast, Bolsonaro has already been convicted of spreading election misinformation and banned from running for public office for eight years, a sentence that will likely end his political career. In November 2024, he was also charged by the police with plotting a coup to stay in power after 2022, and he remains under investigation for mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic and for illegally keeping gifts that he received while president.All this makes a Bolsonaro comeback highly unlikely, even as the threat to democracy in Brazil posed by the ultra-right remains real. That said, a silver lining of the federal police report on the 2022 coup attempt—the product of a robust two-year investigation—is to have exposed the large web of political forces, mobilized by Bolsonaro, that were willing to entertain dismantling democracy.

There are many reasons why political institutions in Brazil were able to respond to democratic threats with greater resolve and efficiency than their counterparts in the United States. But one explanation towers above the rest: the need to protect democracy is felt much more deeply. In the United States, a broad swath of voters and politicians appear unconcerned by the threat that a caudillista leader poses to democracy. But in Brazil there is a keen sense of what it means for a country to lose its democracy. Between 1964 and 1985, the country endured a military dictatorship. The collective memory of that brutal regime has made it difficult for Bolsonaro to stage a political comeback. It has motivated politicians and lawmakers to make it an urgent priority to uphold and strengthen democratic institutions and norms. Just as important, if not more so, has been the robust civic response to Bolsonaro's democratic threats and the possibility of his comeback. It stands in striking contrast to the tepid interest of the American public, during the 2024 election campaign, about the threat to democracy posed by Trump's return to power.

ACCOUNTABILITY CHECK

The most apparent factor dictating the contrasting political fates of Trump and Bolsonaro is that, despite being a relatively new democracy, Brazil has a strong history of holding its political leaders to account. This tradition has allowed Brazil's institutions to seek legal remedies against its leaders without raising the concerns commonly heard in the United States that prosecuting a former president could destabilize the whole political system.

In 1992, President Fernando Collor de Mello was impeached by the Chamber of Deputies for taking money from companies doing business with the government. Facing conviction by the Senate, he resigned from office. In 2016, President Dilma Rousseff was impeached and removed from office after being charged with moving funds between government budgets during her reelection campaign, a violation of Brazilian law. Although it should be noted that previous presidents had also manipulated the budget without facing any consequences, giving the impression that Rousseff, Brazil's first female president, was being held to a higher and different standard.

In 2018, Lula was sentenced to 12 years in prison for accepting bribes and engaging in money laundering during his first two terms as president, which lasted from 2003 to 2011. Lula's prosecution was part of Operation Car Wash, Brazil's biggest-ever anticorruption dragnet. It snared dozens of people, including former presidents, top business executives, members of congress, and other public officials. After serving 18 months in jail, Lula was released; in 2021, the Federal Supreme Court annulled his sentence on technical grounds. That decision cleared the way for his reelection in 2022. Lula's annulment differs significantly from Trump's legal travails. His prosecution actually prevented him from running for office in 2018, and he also won his annulment on appeal, and only after being prosecuted, sentenced, and serving time in jail.

The United States and Brazil also provide starkly different political environments for prosecuting former leaders because of the two-party system in the United States. Trump's attacks on democracy were enabled by the Republican Party—one of just two major political parties in the U.S. Congress. Trump was impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives two separate times, but both times the Republican-controlled Senate declined to convict him, including for his role in inciting the January 6 insurrection. Since Trump left office in 2020, the Republican Party has also been instrumental in enabling the Stop the Steal movement, devoted to keeping alive the falsehood that Biden did not win the 2020 election.

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Bolsonaro has no comparable party structure offering unconditional support for his political malfeasance. His current party, the center-right Liberal Party (PL in its Portuguese acronym), is an umbrella organization without any coherent political ideology, and Bolsonaro joined just before the 2022 elections after being without a

party since 2019. Shifting political parties is something of a habit for Bolsonaro. The PL is the ninth party that he has been a member of in his three-decade political career.

Moreover, the PL, one of dozens of parties represented in the Brazilian Congress, controlled less than ten percent of the seats of the Chamber of Deputies when Bolsonaro left office in 2023. Lacking the strong backing of a powerful party, Bolsonaro's attempt to create a movement akin to Stop the Steal went nowhere. Unlike the many Republican senators and representatives that have endorsed Trump's falsehoods about the 2020 election, no major Brazilian political figure is on record asserting that Bolsonaro defeated Lula in 2022. All this helps explain the eagerness by many on the Brazilian right to move on from Bolsonaro. Their hope is to create *Bolsonarismo sem Bolsonaro*—Bolsonaro-style politics without Bolsonaro at the helm.

Brazil is also better equipped than the United States to confront threats to its democracy, in no small measure because the country enacted a new constitution in 1988 that specifically protects its institutions from figures like Bolsonaro. The 1988 constitution abolished the Electoral College (which had been in place since the nineteenth century), introduced the direct election of the president, and added a runoff election in the event that no candidate wins at least 50 percent of the vote. Among other things, these reforms mean that the country's elections are certified without having to first count and approve electoral votes. In 1996, an electronic voting system replaced a paper ballot system that was notoriously susceptible to corruption and outright fraud. The fact that there has never been any credible report of fraud or irregularities works to boost citizens' confidence in the elections. This history also makes it easier to fight misinformation.

Of course, in 2024, Trump won a clear majority of both the popular vote and the Electoral College. But as with the 2020 election, the process was marred by a campaign of disinformation by Trump and his supporters. Although neither the 2020 nor the 2024 presidential elections suffered from any verifiable voter fraud, Trump and his supporters continually claimed that the system had been rigged against him. In 2020, even though dozens of legal challenges to the election results filed by Trump and his supporters ultimately failed in court, 147 Republican members of Congress voted to object to certifying the election results in one or more states won by Biden. Four years later, this narrative of fraud led many Trump voters to believe that they were protecting democracy with their vote.

In recent years Brazil has also strengthened its judiciary. In 2004, the country enacted a constitutional amendment to protect judicial independence by creating a National Justice Council. Chaired by the Chief Justice of the Federal Supreme Court, the Council has complete control over the financing and management of the court system, which helps to prevent political interference in the judiciary. Brazil has also expanded the prosecutorial capacities of the Federal Supreme Court. For example, the judiciary has vast powers over the electoral system, including the Electoral Court, the body that found Bolsonaro guilty of peddling electoral misinformation.

Not surprisingly, according to *The New York Times*, Brazil's Federal Supreme Court is "one of the most powerful top courts in the world." As might be expected, this status is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it is because of institutions such as the Electoral Court that Brazil was able and ready to prosecute Bolsonaro from the minute he left office. At the same time, there are legitimate concerns that the Brazilian judiciary has become too powerful for the country's own good, and in so doing posing its own threat to democracy. Brazil, too, faces the risk that the judiciary might in the future become politicized. As in the United States, Brazil's Supreme Court Justices are appointed by the president, although they face mandatory retirement at age 75.

USE IT OR LOSE IT

A decidedly less apparent element behind Brazil's success in holding its former leader to account is the pervasive view among the general public that democracy must be protected—and that Bolsonaro was a threat to its survival. Brazil is not alone in this respect. In recent years, candidates running for office in France, Germany, and Spain have successfully used the rhetoric of protecting democracy to push back against illiberal or antidemocratic political movements. But for Vice President Kamala Harris, such rhetoric often fell flat among voters. This was not for lack of trying. Harris crisscrossed the United States warning that Trump posed a unique threat to democracy. When asked in a CNNtown hall, days before the election, whether she thought Trump was a fascist, she responded, "Yes, I do." Although a majority of voters in the United States agree that democracy is at risk, they disagree on where the threat is coming from. For Democrats, Trump and the Republican Party that twice refused to convict him after his impeachments embody that threat. To many Republicans, it is Trump who stands against the things that many of his supporters deem threats to democracy, such as abortion, "woke-ism,"

“fake news,” transgender rights, the “deep state,” the FBI—and supposedly stolen elections. According to a 2023 CNN poll,69 percent of Republicans and those leaning Republican say that Joe Biden’s election win was not legitimate.

An increasing number of Americans have also begun to question the value of democracy in general. Skepticism about the country’s democratic institutions is especially widespread among young people, who have shown in opinion polls that they do not believe that American democracy is working. In May 2024, for example, a NextGen/Forward 100 poll found that only 54 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 40 agreed with the statement “Democracy has potential as an effective form of government.” At Bard College, where I teach, many students note the persistence of undemocratic features in the U.S. election system, such as the Electoral College, gerrymandering, and restrictions on the right to vote. For those who see American democracy as deeply flawed, it may not be clear why it is worth protecting in the first place.

But the rhetoric of protecting democracy ultimately fails in the United States because most Americans cannot fathom what it would mean for their democracy to wither or die. The United States has never experienced the kind of gradual disassembling of democracy that took place in Spain, Italy, and Germany during the interwar years, or a military coup like the one that abruptly ended democracy in Brazil in 1964 and launched two decades of brutal military dictatorship. The collective memory of these events has lent a sense of urgency to protecting democracy in Brazil, despite its imperfections. It has been cemented in the Comissão Nacional da Verdade, or the National Truth Commission, which in a 2014 report chronicled thousands of cases of torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances that took place in Brazil during the dictatorship. The memory of these events was recently revived by the success of the 2024 film *I’m Still Here*, which features an upper-class family in Rio de Janeiro that was shattered by the violence of military rule.

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The collective memory of Brazil’s dark political past has contributed to a strong civic response to Bolsonaro’s democratic threats. In the run-up to Bolsonaro’s run for reelection in 2022, business, religious, educational, and legal associations rushed to defend democracy, especially the electoral system, when it came under attack. In letters published online and in the national press, civic groups stressed the need to take a side when one candidate promises to uphold democracy and another one

threatens it. Since the revelation of Bolsonaro's attempt to stage a coup to stay in power came to light, the civic response to democratic threats has strengthened. One notable defense of democracy came in December 2024 from a conservative stalwart: the Brazilian Conference of Bishops. A statement from the organization urged the nation to "hold all perpetrators of violence against the Democratic State of Law legally, rigorously, and exemplarily accountable, so that coup attempts against the Brazilian people are never articulated again in this country."

Such responses stand in striking contrast to the relatively muted concerns in the United States to Trump's run for reelection in 2024. Many civic and religious groups, such as the United States Conference of Bishops, stayed silent, and others, including the Evangelical community, actively and enthusiastically endorsed him. After the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters in January 2021, many business corporations pledged to halt donations to candidates who voted against certifying the 2020 presidential elections. But many of them gradually went back on their promise. Some, especially in the tech sector, have actively courted Trump since his election victory.

It is hard to avoid the depressing conclusion that for a country to truly value democracy it must first have to lose it. A more positive reading of the Brazilian experience, however, would regard it as a cautionary tale about taking democracy for granted. Brazil's political environment before the 1964 military coup was eerily similar to the United States' now, featuring a high degree of political polarization, intense partisanship, and leaders promising quick fixes for seemingly intractable structural problems. But there is still hope.

Brazil's post-dictatorship experience also suggests that democratic threats can be effectively managed with farsighted political reforms intended to protect democracy. What worked in Brazil may not work in the United States. It is difficult to imagine, now or in the future, the United States getting rid of its Electoral College, as Brazil did in 1988,when the country reinvented democracy from scratch after two decades of authoritarian rule. But none of these obstacles negate the case for political reform in the United States. The complexity of and contention around counting votes, which causes bipartisan angst across the United States, stands out as an institution in dire need of both strengthening and renewed popular faith. In Brazil, it was the voting system's sterling reputation that made Bolsonaro's allegations of electoral fraud so outrageous and spurred politicians and civil society into action to protect democracy.

The January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol should have been a wake-up call for the United States, as its counterpart was for Brazil. But Trump's reelection showed that not to be the case. In his second term, surrounded by loyalists and with sweeping presidential immunity from prosecution, a more powerful Trump could face fewer obstacles in attempts to subvert U.S. democracy. Thus, one can only hope for the United States that, as Brazil has shown, democracies are not always defenseless when confronting internal threats. Even under extreme duress they can find a way to fight back and even to regain their vibrancy.