

# Collectivizing political mandates: A discursive approach to the *Bancada Ativista*'s campaign in the 2018 elections

Politics

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## Abstract

This article analyses the political campaign of the rather under-researched *Bancada Ativista*, a prefigurative progressive experience comprised of nine co-candidates running for a single seat in the State Chamber of Sao Paulo during the 2018 Brazilian elections. The political experience brought about by the *Bancada Ativista* stands as a prolific effort in its aim to transform legislative action, responding to the challenges posed by the contemporary crisis of representative democracy. By taking the Essex School's discourse theory standpoint, this article critically explores the discursive composition of the *Bancada*'s political campaign and the significance of its electoral success in light of crisis-driven Brazilian politics.

## Keywords

Brazil, collective action, discourse, political parties, social movements, square protests

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## Introduction

Brazilian politics have been subject to much attention lately. Scholars, pundits, and commentators have devoted ample interest to the rise of what they consider to be a conspicuous menace to democracy. As vividly described by Anderson (2019), '[t]he

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teratology of the contemporary political imagination – plentiful enough: Trump, Le Pen, Salvini, Orbán, Kaczyński, ogres galore – has acquired a new monster’. This monster is none other than Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro’s homophobic, misogynist, and racist allegations, his peremptory disavowal of the COVID pandemic and the ongoing ecocide in the Amazon rainforest have been effusively picked up by the national and international public and media. For its part, the academic realm has widely depicted Bolsonaro’s electoral success as a conclusive seizure of power by conservative forces that made use of the social discontent to take over the presidency.

This article does not disregard the fact that Bolsonaro’s former Social Liberal Party (PSL)<sup>1</sup> expresses a notorious break with Brazil’s electoral trends or that its irruption onto the political scene is worthy of attention. Instead, it considers that an over-deterministic image of Brazil’s political and social conjuncture, which focusses solely on its strong personalistic nature rather than critically engaging with its overarching aspects, neglects highly significant elements which problematize Brazil’s social and political milieu beyond Bolsonaro himself.

Indeed, the previous elections in Brazil presented many significant changes, seeing the proliferation of new and stimulating political phenomena, most of which have been subject to weak journalistic repercussions and obtained virtually no scholarly attention. We consider the *Bancada Ativista*’s irruption in the electoral scene as the most compelling of these under-researched ventures.

The *Bancada Ativista* was publicly launched in the 2018 elections as a common platform constituted by nine co-candidates to a single seat in the State Chamber of Sao Paulo. As members of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), the *Bancada Ativista* obtained a total amount of 149,844 votes, becoming the 10th highest voted position in the Sao Paulo State Elections – the largest electoral college in Brazil. Never a collective mandate had reached office in Brazilian politics.

For its novel and intriguing characters, this collective electoral experience compels researchers to delve deep into processes of social signification, and the discourse theory approach allows for a more involved analysis of this pioneering initiative.

This article aims to comprehend how the protests of June 2013 in Brazil generated new forms of political identification, ushering in unique discursive formations and social practices that can account for the articulation of the *Bancada Ativista*. As such, we seek to problematize the objects of enquiry through their genealogical construction, making it possible to critically engage in an analysis of the predominant discursive logics enclosed in this collective campaign (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 41–46).

Furthermore, we believe that the study of this experience can provide productive insights not only in the Brazilian context but also to the study of politics. Strands of literature from the fields of political institutions and social movements have signalled a crisis in current forms of democratic representation. By problematizing the prominent ‘personalized hypothesis’ in political science (Garzia, 2019), this case study will approach institutional crisis and political representation from a perspective of meaning-making.

## **Institutions, crisis, and personalization**

The existing literature on political institutions addresses crucial aspects for understanding electoral structures in moments of disruption (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Mair et al., 2004). Through a broad diagnosis of the existence of a worldwide crisis in

political institutions and forms of democratic representation (Mair, 2013; Streeck, 2014), compelling scholastic efforts have been addressing the personalistic character of elections and its adverse effects on the accountability of democratic institutions and political mandates (Berz, 2020; Mughan, 2000; Thomassen, 2005).

The increasing weight of a (single) political actor over the role played by parties, coalitions, and even institutions depicts a pervasive tension between persuasive personalistic appeals, electoral disruption, and lack of institutional accountability (Garzia, 2019). It is precisely this tension which has over-determined the current academic analysis of the Brazilian 2018 elections, solely focusing on Bolsonaro's victory and the threat it supposes to Brazilian democracy (see, for example, Cravo, 2019; Hunter and Power, 2019).

As a long-standing measure for assessing the propensity towards personalistic elections, scholars have relied on the nature of the institutional framework (McAllister, 2007). The Brazilian electoral system, for instance, with plebiscitary majoritarian elections and an open-list d'Hondt proportional representation system, is taken as one which indeed highly favours personalism (Nicolau, 2011: 56). Yet, as the growing appeal of strong (individual) personalities is observed in both parliamentary and presidential systems, personalization is allegedly becoming a salient condition of the democratic process proper (Garzia, 2019).

Critical strands of literature draw attention over a 'hyped' logic in the way key enunciators and scholars have been over-investing in the irruption of individual personalities in the political arena. As Glynos and Mondon (2016: 3) have noted, 'This logic tends to marginalize meaningful debate about the way democracy tends to operate, that is, as an electoral democracy that installs and reinforces alienating tendencies'. Furthermore, excessive attention to individual personalities might distract us from comprehending other vital dimensions in a moment of electoral and social disruption. While there is no doubt that personalization constitutes a crucial factor in contemporary politics, an analysis of the *Bancada Ativista* might argue for the need to carefully reflect on whether personalism is as central as we assume it to be.

The literature related to social movements, on the contrary, has offered productive advances towards a broader analysis, by interconnecting questions of collective action and new forms of political participation, and stressing the creative political character enclosed within social agencies and grassroots communing in contexts of crises (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; Flesher, 2014; Prentoulis and Thomassen, 2013). These advances are particularly insightful when approaching collective organizations arising from social mobilization in a crisis-driven context, as is the case of the *Bancada Ativista*. Nevertheless, there is room to expand academic understandings of experiences that attempted to innovate, through social movements, forms of formal democratic representation.

The emergence of a collective candidacy provides grounds for analysing vital elements at stake in a moment of political and social crisis. It can also offer valuable insights into the recomposition processes of political institutions, as well as their interconnection with social collective action.

## **Approaching the *Bancada***

Mainstream literature addressing institutional crises has focussed on the relationship between institutional systems and their propensity towards personalization when assessing moments of institutional- and party-system disruption. However, analyses that focus mainly on the salient influence of political personalities reach a limit at the point in which this characteristic itself overflows and redetermines institutional arrangements and

party-system structures (Garzia, 2019). The limitations of these models become more evident when one aims to tackle the electoral success of a collective candidacy that seeks to challenge the personalization of democratic representation from within an electoral system that mainly favours individual personalities.

We believe that mainstream models of institutional crises do not adequately address the fundamental relationship between power and meaning, as they tend to assume that institutions constitute objective and stable structures, which produce coherent and observable outputs. One might have to immerse oneself on the peculiar dynamics of political disputes to extract meaningful practices in a moment when institutional representation seems rather devious.

As Panizza and Miorelli (2013) have noted, ‘politics plays a more autonomous role when institutional systems are in crisis and human agency can usually (but not always) more easily free itself from institutional constraints’. The Essex School of Discourse Analysis – hereinafter referred to as discourse theory – argues that institutions contain a plurality of repressed and contested meanings and practices. The fact that ‘these practices can be reactivated to disrupt the institutional order is an important insight into processes of change in highly institutionalized societies’ (Panizza and Miorelli, 2013: 315). Thus, discourse theory offers an insightful strategy for analysing the electoral success of the *Bancada Ativista*.

## Research strategy

### *The discourse theory approach to politics*

Discourse theory has laid robust theoretical foundations to constitute a field in its own right. As formulated by the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, discourse theory has shifted its attention from the categories which delimit social objects as materially (pre) existing ones, rather focusing on the underlying logics and conditions which make their existence possible (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

As grounded on the ontological assumption that meaning is constitutive to human existence, the Essex School postulates that any form of meaning depends on contingent relations of articulation with ‘no necessary correspondence’ (Laclau, 1990: 35). Glynos and Howarth (2007: 2–4) have aptly noted that discourse theory deviates from the causal law paradigm, constituting a truly post-positivist style of reasoning to the study of politics. This is to say, discourse theory, rather than empirically test, seeks to critically explain (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 49).

By discourse, we refer to ‘a social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing positions with which social agents can identify’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 3). Put differently, *discursivity* denotes ‘a horizon of meaningful practices and significant differences’ which enable subjects to provisionally reach an understanding of themselves and the social world which they are part (Howarth, 2000: 9).

Yet, if social reality is said to be a discursive construct, one can certainly speak about a plurality of discourses and study them in less abstract terms. Not only does the Essex School foreground a novel theoretical standpoint, but it provides the grammar to engage with social and political developments in an analytically productive way.

As one can only reach an image of the self by identifying with some elements while marking a rigid boundary with others, difference and equivalence constitute vital

functions in the formation of any discursive structure. The fixation of these relational structures results from the privileging of signifiers, which give order to the signifying chain. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 112) refer to these central discursive elements as *nodal points*. So nodal analysis consists of identifying the central signifying elements, which, through *differential* and *equivalential* logics, manage to structure signifying chains.

However, if social representation supposes a partial effort to construct the society, then every social discourse is always susceptible to being challenged. So antagonism, as a challenge to the imperative (hegemonic) understandings of social reality, is ‘the ultimate source of social dislocation’ (Marchart, 2018: 25). In a strict sense, subjects become political agents when they dis-identify with the governing structures, articulating, from pre-existing meaningful elements, new discursive formations from where they can feel, once again, represented (Howarth, 2013: 161). *Antagonism* and *dislocation* thus render the critical relation between crisis and (re)politicization.

Discourse theory provides a conceptual toolbox consistent with its theoretical foundations (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Our strategy will aim to identify, by analysing the campaign of the *Bancada Ativista*, discursive *nodal points* and understand how, through them, signifying chains of political representation are established, offering novel *subject positions* therein. The functions of *difference* and *equivalence* will be central to understanding how the *Bancada Ativista* particularly articulates signifying chains. This initial comprehension will provide a formal discursive structure to comprehend how *antagonism* (as a concrete structuring of a discursive difference) is here conveyed in light of a process of social *displacement*.

By analysing the campaign process of the *Bancada Ativista*, we seek to understand how this collective formation successfully articulated new discursive venues for political representation in the 2018 elections. Furthermore, we aim to explore the significance of the *Bancada Ativista* phenomenon in light of a widely noted crisis of institutional representation.

In a nutshell, our conceptual toolbox is chiefly constituted by *nodal points*, *difference*, *equivalence*, *subject positions*, *antagonism*, and *dislocation*. As of the analysis, the following questions will guide its conduction: What are the *nodal points* of the *Bancada Ativista*’s discourse? What *subject positions* does this discursive structure provide to its followers? Does the *Bancada* offer *something* new to its constituents? Who appears as the *Bancada*’s opponent? How is this opponent preventing that *something* that the *Bancada* offers from happening?

## **Materials and method**

Since discourse theory takes the articulation of meaning as the primary terrain in which the social is constituted, it is said to be a macro-linguistic approach to the study of politics (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007). It certainly shares various elements with other productive approaches to macro-textual analysis, as is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The acknowledgement on the functions of ‘genre chains’ and ‘equivalence and difference’ by CDA profoundly resonates with some elements of our conceptual toolbox (Fairclough, 2003). Yet, CDA takes discourse as a field restricted to (mainly textual and written) language, on constrained settings (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007: 277). This assumes limitations from micro-linguistic approaches for considering discursive implications in the structuring of (political) identities *tout court* (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 146), whereas

discourse theory provides a framework of discursivity to ‘describe the way in which social identity is constructed’ (Marchart, 2018: 19).

The endeavours of the present article encompass a macro-contextual setting, and our analysis will predominantly pursue a macro-textual one, for which the discourse theory approach displays a good fit. This is not to say the CDA has no productive strategies to offer. By relying on written and spoken sources, we will focus on how vocabulary is used to articulate descriptions in specific ways, helping us to further analyse how the functions of ‘difference and equivalence’ are rhetorically employed in *contrastive* and *additive* semantic relations (Fairclough, 2003: 88). This more constrained micro-contextual setting will refer to a semi-structured interview conducted at the end of the electoral campaign to one of the nine co-deputies of the *Bancada Ativista*: Anne Rami.

Applying discourse theory initially ‘involves constructing theoretical and empirical objects of investigation’, as only then can the analyst (*de*)construct the discursive functions, which sustain the phenomenon under scrutiny (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 11). For this purpose, we will broadly rely on the Brazilian canonical literature on political parties and social movements, together with the semi-structured interview, for constructing the campaign of the *Bancada Ativista*. Through it, we will analyse the discursive construction of the campaign from a discourse theory approach (discourse-as-representation), relying on a macro-contextual analysis altogether with our conceptual toolbox. Jointly, we will rely on a micro-textual analysis of open coding (discourse-as-language), identifying contrastive (i.e. ‘but’, ‘however’, ‘yet’) and additive textual patterns (i.e. ‘and’, ‘with’, ‘also’) taken as a critical layer in the overall analysis. The global analysis of the *Bancada Ativista*’s discourse will allow us to further assess the significance of this study in light of the broader fields of political representation and institutional crisis.

## The aftermath of the 2018 elections

The 2018 Brazilian elections brought significant changes to the politico-partisan configuration of the Federal legislative houses and the State Legislatures – this was mostly the case in the election to the Legislative Assembly of the State of Sao Paulo (ALESEP). The first change that should be acknowledged is the reduction of the number of parliamentarians elected by the mainstream Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), falling from 19 to 8 state representatives in office. In the opposite direction, PSL became the dominant political force therein.

It is worth mentioning that, until the 2018 elections, PSL had no significant national representation, virtually absent in the State of Sao Paulo. Still, while having no territorial capillarity or party structure, it managed to increase the number of legislative seats by chiefly relying on the figure of Bolsonaro. PSDB, on the contrary, is one of Brazil’s leading parties, having disputed the second presidential rounds with the Workers’ Party (PT) since 1994 with two victories and four defeats. Both parties emerged in the wake of the re-democratization of Brazil, PSDB being a typical party of cadres and PT a party of masses (Limongi and Guarneri, 2014).

In the state context, PSDB (centre-right in the ideological spectrum) has governed the State of Sao Paulo since 1994, leading the state’s government with an outstanding base support that assists it for approving its bills. Even though they managed to elect João Dória (PSDB) as governor of Sao Paulo, PSDB now lacks its usual legislative strength. Considering the electoral results in relation to the state legislature and the office of governor, the *right-wing* candidate João Doria (PSDB) obtained 31.77% of the valid votes;



Márcio França from the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), in the centre of the ideological spectrum, obtained 21.53%; and, in the centre-right, Paulo Skaf from the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), 21.09%. Therefore, Doria and França disputed the second round, where Doria won with 51.75% of the valid votes.

As Fleischer (2007: 312) explains, since 1998, Brazil has lived through what can be called a bi-polarized pluri-partisanship, which profoundly resonates with the nature of Brazil's proportional elections. However, the existing bipolar opposition between PT and PSDB, which had been characteristic of the Brazilian political system at the national level since 1989, gained different contours after 2018 with the rise of the PSL and the victory of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency – a candidate identified with the extreme-right in the party spectrum. PSL also won a historic victory in the State of Sao Paulo, becoming the leading political force after 2018, by electing 15 representatives.

While PT lost five parliamentarians when compared with the previous elections (15 representatives in 2014), they still managed to obtain the second largest number of seats (10 representatives), followed by PSB and then PSDB with eight representatives each. The Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) bench doubled in number, from two to four seats, one of which is held by the *Bancada Ativista*. Interestingly enough, the two poles within the ideological spectrum of the Brazilian political party constellation were the only ones that managed to grow (where PSL is at the 'far-right' and PSOL is in the 'radical left').

These were the two poles that influenced the discursive operations during the second round of the elections. França sought to distance himself from PT, specifically, but also from the ideological spectrum of the left generally speaking. However, Doria adopted a much more radical discourse: he systematically attacked PT, criminalized the left for its positions and policies, and developed a strategy of rapprochement with future president Bolsonaro (as evidenced by the 'Bolso-Doria' catchphrase that soon sprung up). Neither PSL nor PT participated directly in the second round of the elections for governor of Sao Paulo. Yet, they were fundamental for understanding the disputes that took place, and the coalitions formed therein.

## Democracy and the lack of representation

The so-called collective mandates in Brazil present prefigurative electoral alternatives for the renewal of party cadres, broadening the permeability of the political system to the demands of its constituents, falling within the scope of the disruptive mass mobilizations whose turning point can be found in June 2013.

In 2013, social tides arose in Brazil. The June Days began with demonstrations initially mobilized by the Free Fees Movement (MPL) in the city of Sao Paulo, opposing the sudden increase in the public transportation fees from R\$ 3.00 to R\$ 3.20. In one of the protests (13 June), the police were violently unleashed against the demonstrators, leaving around 150 people injured and igniting the fuse of social resentment. From that day onwards, the mobilizations expanded and gained the support of thousands of people, who were outraged by the brutal repression undertaken by the police (Alonso, 2017).

Protests began to take place in other states of the country, composing the biggest social mobilizations in Brazil's democracy. The diversity of patterns and the growth of the participation of demonstrators were accompanied by a plethora of identity expressions as the protests grew and ushered in the arrival of heterogeneous social groups. Although the increase in public transportation fees had initially triggered the social movements, these

had quickly spread out, starting to transform themselves and channel a series of broader dissatisfactions with the federal government. Indeed, the protesters initially forged an antagonistic frontier with Rousseff's administration, even if the federal administration had no agency in relation to the municipal and state public transportation fees (which are set at state and municipal levels).

While the protests had been initiated by an 'autonomist' left-wing cluster (which assumed an equivalence initially through the slogan, 'It is not only for 20 cents [of the transportation fees]!'), from 2014 onwards they diffused into a tremendous flow of popular energy, with many apparent and often contradicting facets (Singer, 2013).

While Chauí (2013) foresaw a symbiosis between the demonstrations and the mainstream media's conservative ideological language, stressing an equivalential link between the dispersed demands and a peculiar understanding of 'corruption', Souza (2016), through a much bolder assertion, pointed towards 2013 as the formal point after which the articulation, by the elites, of the parliamentary coup against Rousseff was possible (through the disciplined judicial and political persecution of the PT and its undisputed leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva).

The dispersed and isolated demands of June started, from 2014 onwards, to outline two *antagonizing* poles of immediate identification: the *petismo* – of those represented by PT's overall political project – and the *anti-petismo* – which mainly identified the Workers' Party as the core nucleus of a systemic corruption scheme (Almeida, 2018). In 2016, Dilma Rousseff was impeached, and, in 2018, Lula – the most prominent popular figure in Brazilian politics and the favourite candidate for the 2018 presidential elections – was imprisoned.

The political action groups and social movements that emerged from this crisis-driven context were characterized by a radical critique of the predominant forms of leadership, political organizations, and existing democratic institutions such as parliament and the executive branch. This was cumulated with popular opposition against systemic forms of corruption.

Such a miscellany of indignities relates to the broader problem of representative democracy, seen by these groups as being incapable of meeting the demands of social movements and broadening the forms of political participation. Prentoulis and Thomassen (2013) aptly recognize how new communal identities and forms of organization articulate themselves through collective action in moments of crisis. As expressed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), social structures are always incomplete, enclosing a multiplicity of *repressed* possibilities. It is in times of crisis (dislocation) that repressed forms of meaning are reactivated (see Laclau, 1990). This condition is of pivotal importance in the shift from social engagement to politico-institutional activism, as the systemic displacement of the political structures open venues of novel forms of social identification. In the Brazilian context, an imperative necessity for the creation of new forms of representation with the critical capacity to impact the activities of formal institutions was deemed palpable. In Anne Rammi's words:

What would the impact of people that have been effectively participating in street-politics be within the political-institutional field if they are leading such disputes within that field instead of traditional politicians with formal mandates?

The *petism/anti-petism* polarization structured, throughout the mass mobilizations, a broad left–right antagonist frontier, thus expressed in terms of a horizontal discursive mode. This presented a key structure for Bolsonaro's PSL electoral strategy, as it was



formulated as a severe reaction to the PT legacy (interpreted as the core nucleus of the mainstream left-wing party spectrum). However, the appeal to collectivize political mandates as a form of revitalizing the prominent forms of political representation dealt with such a broad differential logic in quite a particular way. While, as Anne stresses, the *Bancada Ativista* located itself ‘within the progressive field’, its members comprehended ‘the risk in the macro scenario of assuming the “leftist” slogan, which spent the last 15 years receiving an occupation in the popular imagination of being a bad thing, a threat’.

Thus, the composition of the *Bancada Ativista* appears discursively as a form to escape the predominant antagonistic frontiers stressed by the PT/anti-PT differential structure. The establishment of an equivalential camp by heterogeneous underrepresented subjects – as will be further noted – structures itself around the node ‘collective’. Discursively, equivalence is reached by two main differential functions: horizontally, in opposition (antagonism) to ‘conservatives and people who dominate power within a more patriarchal camp’, and vertically, differentiating themselves from ‘political leaders who make politics for themselves’. Within Anne’s interview, the term ‘collective’ keeps its distance in relation to the signifier ‘left’. Correspondingly, other signifiers associated with the *leftist camp* in Brazilian politics (as ‘PT’ or ‘PSOL’) assume, rhetorically, a subsidiary – at times even antagonizing – role. On the contrary, ‘collective’ adopts a tight equivalential relation with signifiers such as ‘new’, ‘feminine’, and ‘minorities’. Let us explore this discursive structure further.

## The nine members of the *Bancada Ativista*

As seen, one of PSOL’s seats in the Sao Paulo State legislature was organized around the *Bancada Ativista* in the 2018 elections. The *Bancada* is composed of nine members, stemming from a series of social movements in Brazil. One of its members is Anne Rammi, a ‘woman with no direct party affiliations’ and ‘a mother of four’ children. As she described, ‘motherhood is at the core’ of her activism and encompasses the struggle for humanized childbirth and for breastfeeding, all of which were fostered by an early experience of obstetric violence from which she suffered. Anne incorporates into her intersectional vindication as a ‘mother’ and a ‘woman’ ‘the condition of being a child in the world’, which, in her terms, are constrained by ‘a model of domination’.

In addition to Anne, Jesus dos Santos is the second member of the *Bancada*. He is the Municipal Councillor of *Vila Maria* and a ‘militant in the black movement’. As a representative of the Afro-Brazilian community from the Northeast of Brazil, Jesus has obtained vast experience in the current discussions around the public budget of the State of Sao Paulo.

Another member of the *Bancada*, who is also from the most impoverished region of Brazil (the Northeast), is Chirley Pankará. As ‘an indigenous woman’ formally affiliated to the PSOL, she has been actively involved in the struggle for the demarcation of indigenous lands and historic reparations to her people. Likewise, Chirley serves as the director of the ‘Ceci Jaraguá’ School – a pedagogic facility that works with the indigenous community – where she has ‘striven to make indigenous culture a pivotal part of the scholastic curriculum’, integrating knowledge from traditional communities with the formal educational frameworks of Brazilian public schools.

From those officially affiliated to the PSOL, Erika Hilton is the member of the *Bancada* who is more directly associated with the LGBTQI movement. She is ‘a black and trans woman’ from the countryside of Sao Paulo. Her gender transition a key biographical event in the articulation of her political identity. In addition to Erika, Monica Seixas is

also a ‘black, female member’ of the *Bancada*, who also came from Sao Paulo’s countryside and is an actively engaged member of PSOL. She identifies her political identity through the signifier ‘eco-socialism’, a political (subject) position she took on through her resistance against the water crisis in the city of *Itu* in 2016.

Paula Aparecida, also from Sao Paulo, is another member of the *Bancada* collective. She is a public school teacher and leader of the Public School Teachers’ Union of the State of Sao Paulo. As a member of PSOL, she ‘holds Marxist/Trotskyist ideological affiliations’ and has experience organizing ‘working-class’ movements and vindicating the rights of public school workers.

Another member of the *Bancada* is Raquel Marques. She is a ‘woman’, a ‘mother’, and – together with Chirley, Erika, Monica, and Paula – an affiliated member of PSOL. Raquel is also an activist for humanized childbirth and the director of Artemis, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) where she acts as a legal advocate committed to the ‘struggle for gender equality’. In addition to Raquel, Cláudia Visoni is the eighth member of the *Bancada*: she is ‘essentially an anarchist woman’ affiliated to the political party Rede. In Anne’s words, Cláudia is ‘deeply involved in the occupation of urban spaces and in turning waste into useful things, absolutely committed to the environmental causes’. Finally, the last member of the *Bancada* is Fernando Ferrari, a ‘black man active in peripheral cultural movements’. In Anne’s words, Fernando, since he comes from precarious ecclesial communities, ‘has a long trajectory resisting against the ongoing genocide of black, poor and peripheral populations in Brazil’.

Anne’s own description is here taken literally to introduce the members of the *Bancada*, and this is not fortuitous. It is worth remembering a principle recurrently stressed by the discourse theory standpoint: identity formation is constructed within relational structures, which are shaped by political struggles. The dislocation of pre-existing identity structures – as, for instance, those generated by the water crisis in the city of *Itu* in 2016 or Anne’s experience of obstetric violence – creates the need to redefine those identity positions, making it possible to deal with the new situations. As Howarth (2013: 252) stresses, ‘it is precisely in this context that new forms of political agency are likely to arise, as subjects construct and identify newly constructed and available discourses’. The identities of every member of the *Bancada*, as conceived by them, are traversed by a series of critical biographical cleavages, emerging precisely in moments of crisis, through which they have all found new ways to identify politically. Hence, their (re)politicization and the articulation of their demands find common grounds in a broader crisis-driven context of political representation – dislocation serving as a means for articulating new affective subject positions (Ronderos, 2020).

The specific way in which each one of the members of the *Bancada* identifies with – as will be further examined – is preserved within their electoral discursive structure. Yet, the ‘collective’ springs as a common signifier through which the plurality of demands expressed by each one of the members are *articulated* through an *equivalential chain* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Indeed, discourse theory has widely noted how the structuring of meaning relies on *nodal points* – which, *prima facie*, we identify the ‘collective’ to be such a privileged signifier within the *Bancada*’s discursive structure.

Yet, the relational component in the production of meaning presumes that *equivalence* can only be articulated in as far as *difference* is established (Laclau, 1996: 43). This is to say, without properly identifying the limits of *who we are* (through the construction of an *other*), an idea of *us* as a political subject can never be reached, as ‘equivalence is only

effectuated vis-à-vis a common negative outside' (Marchart, 2018: 115). Here, the implicit antagonism with *personalism* (frequently assuming a metonymic function for 'political parties' in Anne's interview) as a 'pervasive form of politics' brings to the fore an initial binary distinction between 'personalism' (them) and 'collectivity' (us). Such a general opposition provides a wide-ranging structure for where we seek further to instigate the electoral discursive articulation of the *Bancada Ativista*.

## Articulating the campaign

The choice for articulating a platform of nine co-representatives made use, since 2016, of the strategies of politically curating and mapping by grassroots-activists scattered in informal spaces. At first, 60 names were included in the *Bancada*'s preliminary list based on activism around three core pillars: reduction of inequalities, human rights, and radical democracy.

The loss of centrality of the party in the collective candidacy relates to the desire of fostering an independent platform, as a means of elaborating an alternative for political renewal. Anne, who participated of this process at an early stage, stresses how 'the *Bancada* came to be related to the Party [PSOL] only as means to formalize its candidacy', but was genuinely forged since the beginning as 'a multi-party movement, independent of Party lines, with multiple worldviews'.

Two central legal and normative issues arose during the composition of the *Bancada*: the impossibility of launching candidates without formal party affiliations and the need to choose a single individual to appear on the ballot box. As to the latter, the *Bancada* was quite critical, identifying the Brazilian electoral system as a 'hegemony of [traditional] parties which favour personalism', leaving little space for 'ordinary citizens'. Thus, by trying to maintain their multi-party character, the *Bancada*, after numerous 'sociocratic' processes (a tool for 'seeking progressive consensus' through 'a series of quasi-exhaustive dialogues'), finally delimited the spectrum of the party affiliation of their members to two political parties: PSOL and Rede.

Regarding the second normative issue, while there is a bill that intends to regulate collective mandates for legislative positions under discussion in the Federal Chamber of Deputies, there are still no legal provisions that could (1) officially include the names of all members of a collective candidacy in the ballot box, (2) grant collective candidates express access to the local legislature, nor (3) ensure parliamentary accountability to more than a single candidate.

Putting the lack of formal-legal provisions for symmetric enrolment and accountability of the mandate aside, the members of the *Bancada Ativista* understand that obtaining 'absolute consensus-reaching is impossible'. Yet, they commit to 'the idea of confluence [equivalence] as an engine, as the generator of this movement towards political renewal' as explained by Anne.

Note that the signifier 'independent' enters into the scene as means of representing opposition to the 'present forms of politics', which are here to be directly associated with the formal party structure and politicians. Thus, the differential discursive logic of the *Bancada* relies on the nodal point 'personalism', which provides an order to the *signifying chain* of the *opposing* camp, highly associated with the traditional parties, seen as those who promote politics in *dependent* terms. We can thus say that the *Bancada Ativista* encloses an anti-personalist discourse.

Yet, the nodal signifier 'collective' is discursively a much more central one, since it displays the predominance of equivalential logics within the campaigning discourse of the *Bancada*. The signifiers 'feminine', 'activist', 'new', 'diversity', 'multiplicity',

‘particularity’, and ‘confluence’ are often identified in additive relation to ‘collective’ in Anne’s description of the *Bancada*’s campaign. We had previously elaborated that the core antagonism in the discursive composition of the *Bancada* rests on the differential function between ‘personalism’ and ‘collectivity’. Interestingly enough, ‘personalism’ is discursively structured in opposition/antagonism to ‘particularity’. Whereas the former encloses an additive relationality with political parties and politicians (deficient passive-representation), the latter assumes a vital signifying function in the *Bancada*’s composition (efficient active-representation).

Thus, the nodal signifier ‘collective’ is referred to as an expression which results from a sort of unity (confluence) out of a difference (particularity), rather than the mere aggregation of homogeneous elements or the homogenization of individual subjects. Indeed, ‘[i]f it is asserted that all particular groups have the right to respect of their own particularity, this means that they are equal to each other in some ways’ (Laclau, 1996: 49). This is the sort of bond that the *Bancada Ativista*’s campaign brought about.

The apprehension of *confluence* as the key engine for political *renewal* from the *Bancada*’s perspective can be reached via ‘sociocracy’. As Anne further explains, it was after a series of ‘sociocratic’ discussions that the head of the *Bancada* in parliament was elected:

[Monica], as a person, has a little bit of each one of us in her. She is a mother and a black woman from the periphery. She is an environmentalist and participates in that struggle as well. She is, therefore, a right image of the representative who takes into account and embraces all the core elements [of the *Bancada*].

The election of Monica to formally representing the *Bancada* in parliament is assumed as the equivalence of the core identities which the composition seeks to represent. Thus, the subject positions of ‘motherhood’, ‘black’, ‘woman’, and ‘environmentalist’, as ‘peripheral’ (excluded) ones, are presumed not only to be underrepresented but also that the explicit striving for their (collective/common) representation embeds the promise of political renewal. As Anne explicitly posits:

[The collective campaign] is self-regulating, as in a wall, preventing us from becoming [. . .] a tale of ourselves; it prevents power from rising to our heads. This collective desire occupies a much more privileged place than that of a [single] political leader.

In the course of a ‘Vote for 1, Take 9 [representatives]’ campaign, the members of the *Bancada* sought to combine traditional political communication with street activism. Pamphleting, lengthy public collective deliberations and digital communication aimed at producing a decentralized and network-oriented campaign. On the face of it, the communicative strategy of the campaign maintained a double focus, through the use of digital networks, in which the nine co-representatives already had a presence through their political/social activism and street mobilization. Face-to-face communication (key in so-called grassroots communing) is taken as a return to the essence of the organization of social movements and is used for constructing an electoral platform from different segments of the population.

The close link shared with grassroots-communing strategies sought to bridge the streets and the institutions, ‘actively constructing the campaign’ with ‘normal citizens’.

Activism thus encloses an embrace of the public spaces as where politics can be adequately rehabilitated:

The activist is that person who is on the street floor. Ordinary. I can speak for myself: I am a user of all public systems. I do not have a car, I use public transportation, [ . . . ] public schools, public health care. That is the difference [an activist shares] with a deputy, with a political leader.

From the discursive composition of their communication strategy, a salient signifier assumed a strong equivalential relation with the node 'collective', as its use, when referring to the campaign, enforces the form of representation that the collective presumably embeds: 'feminine'.

The *Bancada Ativista* shows the way towards another means of doing politics, linked to the values of collaboration, solidarity and communal care. In a dichotomous world, these elements would most expectedly be found in the feminine field.

For Anne, the success of the *Bancada* is based on the ability to present 'solutions linked to that which is proper of unity, such as affection, solidarity and caring for each other, including all the values enclosed in the concept of motherhood'.

It is clear that, discursively, the rhetorical constructions in the description of the *Bancada*'s campaign are strongly related to Anne's own individual form of identifying, and how that subjective identification resonates with a broader political subject (i.e. the *Bancada Ativista* as a collective composition). If 'feminine' is to be found as a salient signifier in the campaigning strategy of the *Bancada*, it assumes a much more predominant role through Anne's words. Nevertheless, from the identity positions the *Bancada Ativista* offers to its followers, 'female representation' is a key one, accompanied by 'black' and 'people who identify with diverse gender roles'.

Thus, the *Bancada* provides the promise of a political renewal by the equivalence of excluded singularities. The core opposition with political parties presumes that such a renewal derives from the underrepresented ordinary citizens, scattered informally and independently articulated to challenge the passive form of politics the formal parliamentary protocols convey.

The collective articulation of the *Bancada Ativista* sought to offer a series of subject positions, derived from the identities in crisis that the PT/anti-PT opposition failed to represent. The *Bancada Ativista*, laying its composition within the progressive field, has assumed a noticeable distance with the Workers' Party, managing to articulate diverse identity expressions that have assumed an antagonistic relation with Bolsonaro's PSL and a differential one with Lula's PT.

## Conclusion

By constructing and problematizing a complex crisis-driven Brazilian context, this article has showcased the most meaningful elements from the June 2013 social mobilizations and how their articulation resulted in the formal composition of the *Bancada Ativista*. The underlying logics which have given way to the electoral success of this collective venture display a set of repressed identities from the pre-existing representational party structure.

The study of the campaign process of the *Bancada Ativista* has provided novel insights for assessing the electoral disruption of the Brazilian 2018 State Elections from a meaning-making perspective. Yet, this case study not only offers valuable elements to the study of Brazilian politics.

Institutional crisis presupposes a displacement in the imperative forms of social representation, where the interconnection between social movements and political institutions is presented here as a fundamental one. The bridging of these two fields embeds promising advances for comprehending the party structures in moments of crisis, as of problematizing the substantial elements at stake in a setting where persuasive personal appeals tend to take over the political (*and* scholar) agenda.

Furthermore, the discourse analysis conducted to the articulation of the *Bancada Ativista's* campaign draws attention to the prominent role assumed by the local/regional elections for comprehending party-system changes. Brazil forecloses a system of representation which highly favours mainstream parties and prominent personalist figures. Yet, even in such a scenario, the local state electoral dynamics provide substantial critical elements for comprehending macro-contextual electoral disruptions. Thus, detailed case studies of novel local-electoral phenomena enclose significant inputs for problematizing macro-contextual changes.

Finally, the interconnection presented between social movements and institutional (electoral) politics signals the contingent nature that embeds any social structure, as is the case with a political institution or party system. As such, *change* must be recognized as a constitutive feature of any form of institution or organization, expressed by a failure in the predominant forms of representation. This compels researchers in the field of political institutions to instigate the conditions that enable a particular type of political organization to operate, and academics in the field of social movements to question the implications that arise from social mobilizations to the changes that are complicit with formal forms of institutional representation.

A note of caution is in order here, as the success of a collective campaign cannot be directly translated into the merits of a collective mandate. We have conducted a discursive analysis to understand the political significance of the *Bancada's* campaign in the light of the crisis of representation and a substantial shift in the party-system structure. Yet, further investigation is required to assess the proper prospects of novel forms of political representation within parliamentary action and their impacts regarding social representation and political accountability.

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## Note

1. Months after winning the 2018 elections, Bolsonaro decides to part ways with the PSL, organizing his movement through his personal figure. This took place on 19 November 2019.

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