

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

**Institutional Theories, Societal Realities,
and Party Politics in Brazil**

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2001

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In this thesis I build and test a theory that combines societal explanations of politics with rational choice institutional models. By definition, every theory or model of democratic institutions includes assumptions about voters. I claim that these assumptions should be made explicit and, when appropriate, relaxed to encompass the diverse realities across political systems. A central idea is that institutions can work differently in different societal settings.

I focus on explanations of a single political phenomenon: political parties. I argue that voters' relative preferences for private and public goods make different informational demands on the political system and, in so doing, change politicians' incentives to create cohesive parties. Where voters prefer private goods, evaluating candidates is easy and does not require party labels. Consequently, there are fewer incentives for politicians to create parties. Where voters prefer public goods, evaluating candidates' platforms is difficult without meaningful parties, so politicians have more incentives to create disciplined parties.

I test my theory by examining seven legislative systems in Brazil: the Senate,

Chamber of Deputies, and five state assemblies. I compare roll-call and party switching patterns. Comparing state assemblies controls for institutional variables and tests the relationship between voters' preferences and party strength. Comparing the Senate and Chamber holds constituent preferences constant and isolates the impact of electoral rules. Comparing national and state parties tests the mechanisms and impact of federalism on parties.

The analysis confirms my hypothesis: voters' preferences for private or public goods are correlated with party strength. Party cohesion on roll call votes and patterns of party switching suggest more developed parties where voters' assign greater utility to public goods. In addition, my analysis confirms some and discredits other arguments about Brazil's current institutional framework. Brazil's electoral rules do not have the centrifugal forces suggested by the literature. Brazilian federalism does weaken parties through several mechanisms, though less than prior work has suggested.

This thesis contributes to understanding of the Brazilian party system, provides the first look at the Brazilian Senate, and the first cross-state comparison of roll-call votes and party-switching in Brazil. More broadly, I argue that scholars should integrate societal characteristics into rational choice institutional models.