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**The Politics of Geography:  
Explaining the decay of oligarchic enclaves in an unequal federation**

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## **The Politics of Geography: Explaining the decay of oligarchic enclaves in an unequal federation**

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Brazil is undoubtedly a case of “robust” federalism, in which subnational actors and institutions have been able to play an important role in national political coalition-making and in the implementation of a wide range of social and economic policies (Mainwaring, 1997). Following the 1988 constitution, political and financial decentralization empowered local and, especially, state governments, transforming Brazil into one of the most decentralized federations in the world. State governors emerged as powerful political brokers during the return to democracy in the 1980s, as the decentralized organization of national political parties allowed subnational rulers to rely on their increased power over policy-making to strengthen regional party machines and maximize their autonomy from central actors and institutions.

Analyzing the electoral dimensions of subnational power is crucial if one is to understand the politics of continent-sized and regionally unequal federations such as Brazil, due to the spatial unevenness of democratic practices and institutions within a nation’s territory. Scholars have been arguing that democratization cannot be treated as a linear, spatially homogeneous process, as the nature and the workings of democratic institutions are likely to vary both horizontally, across jurisdictions and policy arenas, and vertically, across levels of government (Heller, 2000; O'Donnell, 1993). In the socially heterogeneous federations of the developing world, one may find diverse subnational political “regimes” coexisting within the same constitutional framework (Behrend, 2009; Fox, 1994; Gibson, 2004; Snyder, 1999). Some of these subnational regimes are characterized by structures of political representation and decision-making organized in ways that secure that reproduction of a small clique of political bosses and prevent the exercise of effective opposition, though they are not necessarily authoritarian.

This is certainly the case of Brazil’s powerful and enduring regional political machines, whose influence has shaped democratic politics to a great extent (Hagopian, 1996). State bosses have sought to parochialize power at their home states and at the same time increase their leverage over national political actors (Ames, 2001; Bonfim,

2002; Costa, 1997; Dantas Neto, 2006; Spinelli, 2006), not different from subnational authoritarian elites in Mexico and Argentina.

Notwithstanding the resilience of less-than-democratic structures in Brazil's peripheral states, there is evidence that state elections are becoming more competitive in the last years, in parallel to the rapid decay of political bosses. It is noticeable that these trends have been developing in places previously considered to be bastions of oligarchism and clientelism. The old political structures suffered a serious blow in the 2002 and 2006 gubernatorial elections, when the political elites and parties that had for long dominated politics in low development states such as Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, Bahia, Pará, Maranhão and Ceará were defeated by left and centre-left opposition forces, which were, until then, mostly excluded from access to executive posts in these states. Since 1998, the political left has rapidly increased its vote in both majoritarian and proportional state elections in the North and Northeast regions, which concentrate the bulk of the Brazilian poor and have been for long the stronghold of conservative party machines controlled by state political families (Borges, 2007; Montero, 2009).

The article seeks to further an understanding of the changes in the electoral landscape of Brazil's backward regions. The main argument is that subnational rulers' ability to construct and maintain dominant electoral coalitions is constrained by vertical competition among the state, and the federal and local spheres of government. Opposition politicians occupying executive posts in the federal government and/or the mayoralty of capital cities may rely on their authority over policy-making to mobilize statewide/metropolitan constituencies, thus weakening incumbent governors' party machines. The paper explores the interlinking of national and subnational electoral dynamics by developing correlation and regression analysis for the territorial distribution of the left-wing vote in state elections. Further, it relies on electoral data on mayoral and gubernatorial elections, and it analyses the case of the state of Rio Grande do Norte, in Northeast Brazil, to trace the connections between state and metropolitan politics in contexts of low political pluralism.

## **1. The politics of uneven development: vertical competition and oligarchic rule in the Brazilian federation**

Post-democratization state politics in Brazil been characterized, to some extent, by political continuity from authoritarian to democratic politics, as to the consolidation of a pattern of political decision-making characterized by an excessively powerful executive, weak parties and pervasive clientelism (Abrucio, 1998; Ames, 2001; Hagopian, 1996). Recent comparative research has demonstrated, however, that the performance of democratic institutions has differed widely across state political systems. Whereas some states have been characterized by the consolidation of a restricted political arena, under control of a few political families, others have witnessed the rise of more pluralistic and fragmented patterns of competition and decision-making in the post-democratization period (Desposato, 2001; Schneider, 2001; Souza e Dantas Neto, 2006).

As a general rule, political bosses have been stronger in the least-developed states of the North and Northeast regions, where a substantial part of the population is employed in the urban informal sector, and in low-productivity primary activities. Brazil's South, Southeast and Centre-West regions display higher rates of urbanization and income, and lower levels of poverty relatively to the North and Northeast (see table below)<sup>1</sup>:

**Table 1: Selected social and economic indicators of the Brazilian regions**

	<b>Urbanization</b>	<b>Poverty</b>	<b>GDP per capita (R\$)</b>
<b>North</b>	69.83	49.60	5,050
<b>Northeast</b>	69.04	56.93	3,891
<b>Centre-West</b>	86.74	25.51	10,565
<b>Southeast</b>	90.52	19.78	11,140
<b>South</b>	80.54	20.53	9,615

Source: 2000 National Census; Regional macroeconomic accounts, 2002

The states of the South and Southeast concentrate the bulk of the country's industrial production and are home to the majority of the urban middle classes. Electoral politics has been more fragmented and competitive in these regions, which reflects the presence of stronger left-wing parties and organized groups, as well as the (relative) weakness of political families (even though the latter may still play a significant role at the local level). The Centre-West developed more recently due to expansion of

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that GDP per capita figures estimated for the Centre-West region are distorted due to the extremely high incomes of the population of the Federal District, a city-state which concentrates the federal bureaucracy and its military and civil personnel.

mechanized agriculture, and it responds for a significant share of Brazil's agricultural exports. Even though the region has higher per capita incomes as compared to the North and Northeast, political competition has been characterized by the perennial dominance of rural and conservative interests<sup>2</sup>. Hence, some of the Centre-West polities have displayed political traits similar to those observed in the North/Northeast: a feeble political left and a political arena dominated by conservative elites and political organizations<sup>3</sup>.

### **1.1 – Hybrid regimes and oligarchic rule in democratic Brazil**

The territorial unevenness of democratic institutions and practices in contemporary Brazil raises questions on the conceptualization of subnational political systems. Recent comparative research on subnational democratization has sometimes employed the concept of “subnational authoritarianism” to refer to undemocratic enclaves within nationally democratized (or democratizing) countries. Authoritarian provinces are usually characterized by the systematic employment of formal and informal resources by government incumbents to create an uncompetitive political arena and prevent effective contestation by opposition forces (Fox, 1994; Gibson, 2005; Snyder, 1999). In spite of the important empirical and analytical contributions made by this literature, the concept of subnational authoritarianism lacks a precise definition, and it is not always clear where should one trace the boundaries that separate unquestionably authoritarian provinces from more ambiguous cases of low political pluralism. These conceptual ambiguities are especially evident in countries where subnational units are embedded in a national democratic framework and subnational elites face significant institutional and political constraints on their rule. As argued by Behrend (2009), in countries like Brazil or Argentina it makes more sense to speak of “authoritarian practices” – e.g., police violence, human rights violations – rather than “authoritarian regimes” at the subnational level, as no specific subgroups of citizens are

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<sup>2</sup> With this I do not intend to argue that the boundaries of the oligarchic states necessarily coincide with regional boundaries (though this may be often the case). I have developed a measure of electoral dominance that provides more precise criteria to classify state political systems and which is presented in the following sections.

<sup>3</sup> Part of the territory of the Centre-West integrates the Amazon region, together with the Northern states. Hence, some of the centre-western states displayed structural features similar to those prevailing in the North region and they benefited from regional development policies in the 1960s and 1970s.

prevented from political participation or office-holding by legally defined or informal rules.

Considering these aspects, the less democratic states in contemporary Brazil might be better understood as cases of “hybrid regimes” that combine elements of both democracy and authoritarianism. The literature on hybrid regimes argues that a growing number of countries that adopt the form of electoral democracy, with regular, competitive, multiparty elections, fail to meet even a minimum set of substantive criteria of democratic rule (Diamond, 2002). These polities are strong on participation but weak on contestation; that is, even though citizens are allowed to vote and express their preferences, there are constraints on liberal components of democracy that make elections essentially uncompetitive (McMann, 2006). This latter definition applies well to instances of “competitive authoritarianism”, a situation in which “(...) elections are regularly held and are generally free of massive fraud, but incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results” (Levitsky e Way, 2002, p. 53). What makes competitive authoritarian regimes hybrid is the fact that, despite the systematic violation of basic rules of the democratic game, the persistence of democratic institutions creates opportunities for the mobilization of opposition forces, which may (and often do) represent a challenge to incumbent governments.

Diamond (2002) classifies hybrid regimes in two main categories: competitive authoritarian, following Levitsky and Way’s (2002) formulation, and the hegemonic authoritarian, a situation in which a single party rules almost unchallenged, and elections are largely an authoritarian façade. The main difference between the hegemonic and competitive authoritarian regime subtypes is that the latter are characterized by the existence of a significant parliamentary opposition, which is largely absent in the former. This differentiation is important in that the hegemonic authoritarian cases lie closer to the authoritarian pole in authoritarian-democratic continuum.

In Brazil’s multiparty, fragmented democracy, one will hardly find clear-cut cases of hegemonic party rule at the subnational level. Most, if not all of the less democratic states seem to fit better the definition of competitive authoritarianism, but even that is disputable due to the fact that subnational rulers confront large and autonomous business classes and civil societies (Montero, 2007). Different from the

hybrid regimes analyzed by McMann (2006) in Russia and Kryzighstan, where state-owned companies operated by provincial governments represent a substantial share of regional GDP, subnational authorities in Brazil control only a very small share of the economy and, for that reason, they have a much lower capacity to coerce citizens by denying them access to jobs and business opportunities.

The less democratic subnational units in contemporary Brazil also differ from the cases of hegemonic party rule analyzed by Gibson (2005) in Mexico and Argentina. Autocratic governors in these countries have taken advantage of relatively strong party organizations to regularly engineer electoral majorities and institutionalize territorial strategies of political control aimed at restricting effective contestation by opposition forces. Further, provincial governments in both Mexico and Argentina are allowed to redesign electoral districts, which has favored the perpetuation of authoritarian elites by enabling them to create electoral rules that over-represent the less populated and more rural districts (Gibson, 2005).

Brazilian state governors lack such formal resources of power. First, the country has a long history of party system underdevelopment, and it has adopted an open-list proportional system that weakens party leadership and promotes factionalism. Second, all subnational units are submitted to the same electoral laws and rules, which divide the country in large multimember electoral districts which are the states themselves. Even though it is true that governors have substantial influence on the creation of “informal” electoral districts within which state and federal deputies actually campaign (Ames, 2001), they cannot change electoral rules to favor themselves and their allies.

Subnational hybrid regimes in Brazil may be understood as cases of poorly institutionalized, weak competitive authoritarianisms that depend mostly on informal resources of power – such as the distribution of patronage resources among the governor’s allies – for their survival. In more specific terms, what differentiates the cases of low political pluralism at the state level is the fact that informal processes and practices create a pro-incumbent bias that greatly reduces the potential for effective opposition. I employ the concept of “oligarchic rule” to refer to these subnational political systems, which are characterized by the domination of representative and government institutions and processes by a very restricted clique of political elites (which may or may not be part of one or more political families). The political market in these settings is oligopolistic in the sense that control exerted by a small clique of state elites over access to top executive positions, the judiciary and state legislatures, not

to speak of the indirect or direct control over business activities and the media prevents effective political contestation by opposition forces. In these settings, political bosses are likely to develop and implement strategies of boundary control aimed at restricting electoral competition by minimizing outside involvement in local politics. One key element of such strategies is the monopolization of national-subnational linkages: regional elites will seek to occupy or control important national arenas to maximize local incumbents' leverage vis-à-vis the federal government, and yet prevent the local opposition from obtaining support of national actors and organizations (Gibson 2005).

Another defining characteristic of the politics of the peripheral states is the central role played by right-wing and centre-right political coalitions in the organization of oligarchic rule. According to Montero (2009), there is a very close relationship between the strength of the right at the subnational level and the parochialization of power. Today's right-wing political organizations are direct descendents of the party created by the military regime (1964-1985), the ARENA<sup>4</sup>. During the last years of the regime, the ARENA maintained high levels of electoral support in the rural states of the North, Northeast and Centre-West, and subnational elites took advantage of generous patronage resources and development projects provided by the military rulers to fortify their own, personally-controlled party machines. In many cases, the political elites affiliated to the local ARENA machines continued to play a dominant role after the return to democracy, though under different party labels such as the Liberal Front Party (PFL), the Popular Party (PP) and Liberal Party (PL). There were also cases in which conservatives migrated massively to centre parties, such as the catch-all PMDB, which reflected conservatives' lack of concern about the construction of more disciplined and ideological organizations (Power, 2000).<sup>5</sup>

The wide variation in the workings of democratic institutions across regions reflects, to some extent, Brazil's deep and persisting regional inequalities. Until the 1960s, when a series of regional development strategies were put in place by the military regime, the North and Northeast regions benefited very little from state-led industrialization, and its economies remained heavily dependent on low productivity

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<sup>4</sup> Brazil's bureaucratic-authoritarian regime was peculiar in that the military decided to maintain a façade of political pluralism, by creating a two-party system formed by the ARENA, which represented the authoritarian government, and the opposition MDB. Needless to say that institutional rules were heavily biased in favor of the pro-military ARENA.

<sup>5</sup> Even though the PMDB emerged from the opposition to the military, organized within the MDB, it became home to several ex-authoritarians following the return to democracy. This reveals the weakness and fluidity of party organizations in Brazilian democracy.

primary activities. Authoritarian modernization of Brazil's peripheral regions in the 1960s and 1970s relied on a combination of public investments, cheap credit and tax and fiscal incentives to boost private investment and promote industrial activities and commercial agriculture. Though regional development policies did integrate the least developed economies to Brazil's economic dynamo, the Southeast, they left untouched previous patterns of unequal access to land tenure. The development of commercial agriculture was accompanied by the persistence of old forms of social domination, as large land owners over-exploited rural tenants and sharecroppers {Bernardes, 2007 #60;Bursztyn, 1984 #13;IANNI, 1979 #65;Martins, 1999 #62}.

Another distinctive feature of conservative modernization in the North and Northeast was the fact that the new industries created were intended to serve the final domestic consumer markets located in the South and Southeast and provide industrial inputs to other firms located in those same regions. A substantial share of state-supported industrial projects was concentrated within and around state capitals, leading to explosive urban growth and deepening rural/urban inequalities. Also, industrialization was often marked by the creation of "enclave economies", with little or no connection with the remainder of regional economies (Araújo, 1995; Nascimento e Lima, 2005).

State bosses were able to extract political gain from regional development programs by intermediating the distribution of federal resources and shaping policy implementation to their own favor. In the context of regulated political competition of the authoritarian regime, conservative forces found themselves in a privileged position to monopolize access to top government positions and secure almost absolute control over patronage resources (Hagopian, 1996). In several instances, pro-military political families succeeded in constructing powerful political machines, whose influence would persist for decades, shaping the transition to and the consolidation of democratic rule.

In some other aspects, however, authoritarian modernization proved to be a double-edged sword for subnational conservative elites in Brazil's peripheral states. Industrialization and the capitalist reorganization of agriculture resulted in massive migration and rapid urbanization. For instance, in 1970 over half (57%) of the population of the North region lived in rural areas. By 1991, the proportions had inverted, as 43% and 57% of the population lived in rural and urban areas, respectively. A similar process occurred in the Northeast. Urban growth has been significant in the Centre-West as well, though the region started with significantly higher urbanization

rates in the 1970s (see table 2, below). The trend of rapid urban growth continued throughout the 1990s, as the largest cities and metropolitan areas grew in size and complexity:

**Table 2 : Distribution of the population by rural and urban areas, North, Northeast and Centre-West regions (1970-2000)**

	1980	1991	2000
<b>North</b>			
Urban population (%)	50.23	57.83	69.83
Rural population (%)	49.77	42.17	30.17
<b>Northeast</b>			
Urban population (%)	50.71	60.64	69.04
Rural population (%)	49.29	39.36	30.96
<b>Centre-West</b>			
Urban population (%)	70.68	81.26	86.73
Rural population (%)	29.32	18.74	13.27

Source: IBGE/ National censuses

As elsewhere in Brazil, rapid urbanization of the peripheral regions has tended to increase the costs of clientelistic control. Where a substantial share of the electorate lives in rural areas and small municipalities, governors may count on a wide network of local brokers to mobilize voters and engineer electoral majorities. In more urbanized and populated regions, in contrast, politics is an activity that occurs under conditions of relative anonymity and local intermediaries play a less important role in voters' choice (Desposato, 2001; Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2003; Stokes, 2005; Stokes e Medina, 2002). For these reasons, politics in the largest urban areas is likely to be more competitive and volatile, and less subject to control by state bosses.

Since the return to democracy, as a matter of fact, the opposition to conservative rulers has been stronger in state capitals and in the largest cities, as compared to small, rural municipalities. The electorate of the capitals of the North, Northeast and Centre-West has often voted for left-wing mayors, notwithstanding the hegemony of conservative forces at the state level<sup>6</sup>. In the poor and rural countryside, one may observe exactly opposite trends, due to voters' dependence on local intermediaries, low levels of education and the weight of public administration in the local economy. Students of both state and national politics have observed that voters in small-sized and

<sup>6</sup> Section three of the paper presents some evidence on this point.

poor cities are more likely to vote for incumbents, regardless of their party affiliation (Bonfim, 1999; Hagopian, 1996; Zucco, 2008).

Considering the social and economic gap separating the metropolitan core of regional economies from the backward countryside, one should expect subnational conservative rulers to rely heavily on the support of small and underdeveloped municipalities to obtain consistent majorities and yet develop a series of preemptive strategies to undermine the growth of opposition forces in the metropolitan core. The growth of large cities – which is itself a function of the territorial unevenness of economic development – is likely to increase the potential instability and volatility of electoral results, as well as the political value of “safe” electoral districts in the backward areas. Thus, one may assume that rapid demographic change should produce more competitive patterns of political competition. I discuss these issues in greater detail in sections three and four of the paper, in connection with post-1990 trends of local government empowerment.

## **1.2 – Electoral change in the oligarchic states: a brief overview**

As a proximate measure of state bosses’ ability to control the electoral arena, I have developed an electoral dominance index to rank order all 27 Brazilian states (Borges, 2007). The index is composed of three main variables: the governor’s party share of the total vote in the first round, the share of seats controlled by the governor’s party, and a political continuity index that measures governors’ ability to obtain reelection or elect a party fellow throughout time. All the measures were calculated as averages for the 1982-1998 period, except for the political continuity index<sup>7</sup>. Given the occurrence of moderately high levels of inter-correlation, I relied on factor analysis to reduce all three variables to a single index of electoral dominance. The distribution of index scores was then employed to classify the states in four groups of electoral dominance: high dominance (4<sup>th</sup> quartile of the distribution), low dominance (1<sup>st</sup> quartile) and two intermediate groups (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quartiles).

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<sup>7</sup> The index of political continuity was calculated by dividing the amount of times the governor succeeded in gaining re-election or electing a candidate from the same party by the number of elections held between 1978 and 1998. The interpretation is rather straightforward, as an index of 100 means that the governor succeeded all the times, whereas an index of 0 implies that the governor and his party were defeated in all elections.

The absolute majority of the states located within the high dominance group - Bahia, Ceará, Goiás, Paraíba, Maranhão, Amazonas and Tocantins - were low development states located in the North and Northeast regions (the only exception was Goiás, a centre-western state). Five out of the seven cases (Bahia, Ceará, Goiás, Paraíba and Maranhão) were characterized by the dominance of a single party for a period equal or superior to three elections between 1982 and 1998. Also, two of the cases (Bahia and Maranhão) were paradigmatic examples of political continuity from authoritarian to civilian rule, as right-wing political families born and bred during the military regime succeeded in maintaining their political clout throughout most of the recent democratic period (Costa, 1997; Dantas Neto, 2006).

The low dominance group was integrated mainly by Brazil's most developed states of the South and Southeast, where left wing parties are usually stronger, whereas political families play a less important role in statewide political alliances. These categories also included a set of Northern states characterized by highly volatile patterns of electoral competition (Rondônia, Roraima) and, sometimes, a relatively strong political left (Acre).

The analysis of the evolution of left-wing vote in subnational elections by levels of electoral dominance revealed rapid and significant changes from 2002 (the tables are presented in the annex). The average vote obtained by left parties in gubernatorial elections increased from 8% in 1994 to 25% in 2006, following a peak of 32% in 2002 (see table 1 of the annex). The average share of seats controlled by the left in state assemblies almost doubled in the same period, from 13% to 25%. Also the gap between the extremes of the distribution (high and low dominance groups) decreased from 17% in 1998 to approximately 9% in 2006 (table 2 of the annex).

Overall, the results indicate that left-wing parties were able to expand their penetration in the high-dominance states, where state elites had demonstrated greater ability to control the supply of political representation. It is also noticeable that the highest rates of growth of the left vote coincide with the election of president Lula in 2002, which allowed the left to control the national executive for the first time in Brazilian history<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the growth of the left in the oligarchic states, see Borges BEHREND, J. The Unevenness of Democracy at the Sub-National Level: Provincial closed games in Argentina. In. *21st World Congress of Political Science, IPSA*. Santiago, Chile, July 12-16, 2009.. I discuss some conceptual and methodological issues involved in the empirical operationalization of electoral dominance in Borges (2007).

### 1.3 – Vertical competition and electoral change: the argument

How can one explain the strengthening of the left in previous bastions of oligarchic rule? I argue that electoral change must be understood in the context of national political shifts that have substantially altered the patterns of cooperation and competition among national and subnational political coalitions. As a matter of fact, Lula's victory in 2002 represented a serious blow for state bosses in many of the least-competitive, least-developed states, as they were pushed into the ranks of the opposition. At the same time, the regional sections of the PT and its left-wing allies were strengthened by gaining access to federal posts and resources that had long been monopolized by their centre-right adversaries.

Though I agree with most scholars in that state elections do not follow a national logic, due to the decentralized character of national parties, I assume that access to national government plays a very important role in subnational political struggles. In Brazilian presidentialism, the national executive is an extremely powerful institution, whose capacity to formulate macroeconomic and social policies, distribute budget resources and nominate thousands of political appointees greatly affects the career prospects of subnational officials<sup>9</sup>.

One must note that in a federal democracy state bosses must deal not only with horizontal competition (among political parties) but also with the threat of vertical competition (among distinct government spheres). That is, the central and subnational governments compete for a similar "pool" of voters as they provide public services within a given territory. For instance, when state and local governments rely on social spending to buy voters' support, they must compete with similar policies supplied by the federal government (Migué, 1997).

Whenever vertical competition increases, patron-client networks laboriously constructed by subnational political bosses tend to become more unstable and subject to a breakdown. This is because the long term survival of clientelistic relationships depends to a great extent, on patrons being able to maximize control over access to patronage resources. (Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2003; Fox, 1994; Stokes e Medina, 2002).

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<sup>9</sup> On the centrality of the federal executive in Brazilian presidentialism, see Amorim Neto AMORIM NETO, O. O Poder Executivo, centro de gravidade do Sistema Político Brasileiro. In: L Avelar, AO Cintra, eds. *O Sistema Político Brasileiro*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp; Fundação Konrad-Adenauer, 2007..

Vertical competition weakens patrons at the state level, as the latter must deal with opposition leaders occupying executive posts at lower or upper levels of government with control over resources that may be employed to mobilize voters. It is for that reason that the consolidation of oligarchic rule necessarily requires minimizing the threat of vertical competition.

In the least developed states, where dominant political machines are more likely to flourish, both political elites and voters are extremely dependent on federal resources. In these settings, presidents may take advantage of their control over federal social policies and bureaucratic appointments to help their favored candidates in state elections. It is no wonder, as noted by Zucco (2008), that incumbent presidents from F. H. Cardoso (1995-2002) to Lula have been able to rely on federal social policies to mobilize a consistently pro-government electorate in the poorest regions of the country.

During Lula's first term, indeed, the federal government succeeded in mobilizing the support of poor constituencies by significantly expanding basic income policies. Targeted poverty alleviation policies first implemented by the Cardoso government were expanded and centralized within a special agency — the Ministry of Social Development (MDS). The centrepiece of Lula's poverty alleviation strategy was a conditional cash transfer program, the Bolsa Família (Family Grant) that unified several pre-existing federal policies and initiatives under a single label and a single budget. The program targeted families with an income below R\$ 120 a month and conditioned transfers on school attendance for students aged 6 to 15. By 2006, the Bolsa Família covered practically all the population below the poverty line: 11 million families or an estimated 40 million people<sup>10</sup>. The program was a key factor behind Lula's victory against the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) in 2006, as it allowed the president to compensate for the losses suffered in the most developed and industrialized states with a much stronger electoral performance in the poorest regions of the country (Hunter e Power, 2007; Zucco, 2009; Zucco, 2008).<sup>11</sup>

State governments face not only the threat of top-down vertical competition, from adversary coalitions at the federal level, but they must also deal with bottom-up competitive pressures. State governors and the mayors of state capitals and large cities

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<sup>10</sup> Data obtained from the Ministry of Social Development website: <http://www.mds.gov.br> .

<sup>11</sup> Even though the Bolsa Família has generated substantial electoral returns for president Lula and the PT, the program cannot be considered an instance of clientelism, for the selection of beneficiaries is based on universalistic criteria (mainly per capita income).

belonging to an opposition coalition should compete for the support of urban and metropolitan constituencies<sup>12</sup>. This is mainly because the demographic and social features of state capital cities create greater opportunities for political pluralism and for the representation of opposition forces in contexts of oligarchic rule. Besides, capital cities and the surrounding metropolitan areas often concentrate a substantial share of the state electorate, which increases the political value of the mayoral office.

## **2 – Top-down vertical competition: the rise of the left to national government and its implications**

One implication of the argument on vertical competition is that state bosses are more likely to be successful in their machine-building strategies in settings characterized by a persistent coincidence between the parties/coalitions occupying at the same time the federal and state governments. Once state bosses obtain persistent access to federal patronage over time, participating of national coalitions, they will find themselves in a more comfortable position to prevent the local opposition from establishing alliances with national actors and mounting feasible alternative coalitions.

These are important issues to understand electoral change in the least competitive states, given the systematic association between electoral dominance at the state level and the hegemony of a similar pool of centre and right-wing political parties at the national level. Four out of five states where there existed a dominant party until 1998 were governed by political parties that participated, with few exceptions, of all national coalitions formed from 1985 to 2002: the PFL (Liberal Party) governed the states of Bahia and Maranhão, and the PMDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement) governed the states of Goiás and Paraíba. The state of Ceará was dominated by a "centrist" machine organized within the PSDB (Brazilian Social Democratic Party). The PSDB played a key role during the interim government of Itamar Franco (1992-1994) and it governed the country during the eight years that followed.

A similar picture emerges when one looks at other states classified in the high-intermediate electoral dominance group (3<sup>rd</sup> quartile of the distribution). In states such as Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, Tocantins and Mato Grosso, centre and right-wing organizations dominant at the national level have been home to the dominant political

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<sup>12</sup> Evidence in this regard is the fact that popular capital mayors often become aspirants to the governorship.

families and factions. These include not only the PMDB, the PSDB and PFL, but also a number of right-wing organizations, including the PTB (Brazilian Labor Party) and the PP (Progressive Party), all of which have participated of national governments throughout the 1990s.

Arguably, state bosses' ability to participate of national government and gain access to federal patronage resulted in the weakening of potential opposition groups and thus reinforced the dominant coalitions' quasi-monopolistic control over the state political arena. One can say, thus, that the endurance of a similar pool of centre-right forces in national government from 1985 to 2002 created the conditions necessary for the construction and maintenance of regional political projects of control and restriction of the electoral arena

Employing an analogous reasoning, one should expect that the rise of the political left to national power would allow it to benefit from incumbency, producing rapid electoral changes in the peripheral states. As a matter of fact, access to federal resources and bureaucratic jobs has had a very rapid and significant impact on left-wing parties' territorial patterns of voting. While in opposition to national government, the left had been strongest in the most industrialized, wealthy and urbanized municipalities. Following Lula's election in 2002, however, these patterns changed radically. I ran simple correlations to evaluate the impact of social, economic and demographic factors on the left-wing vote at the municipal level, in all of Brazil's 5500 municipalities. The correlations were calculated for a composite variable – *left support* – that includes the 1<sup>st</sup> round vote in gubernatorial elections plus the vote in state proportional contest for all the left parties that integrated Lula's coalition in 2002: the Worker's Party (PT), the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), the Green Party (PV), the Communist Party (PC do B) and the Democratic Labour Party (PDT)<sup>13</sup>.

The *left support* variable was correlated with measures of municipal population, GDP per capita, rural population (%), percentage of the population below the poverty line (*poverty*) and the contribution of industrial activities to the municipality's GDP (*industrial GDP*). To account for the geographic concentration of the left-wing vote in state capitals and the surrounding metropolitan areas, which concentrate the bulk of

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<sup>13</sup> Because the purpose here was to look at the impact of national incumbency on the territorial distribution of the vote, the variable did not include the left parties that did not join the coalition led by the PT, such as the Party of Socialism and Liberty (P-Sol), the Urban Workers' Socialist Party (PSTU) and the Popular Socialist Party (PPS). It is also worth noticing that, with the exception of the PPS, these are "dwarf" parties that count on the support of a very tiny portion of the electorate.

modern economic activities, I included a measure of the municipality's distance (in kilometers) to the state capital (*distance*)<sup>14</sup>. The variables *population*, *distance* and *GDP per capita* were logged to correct distribution asymmetries. The correlations for the elections of 2002 and 2006 are below:

**Table 4: Correlations for left support in subnational elections, 2002 and 2006**

		left support 2002	left support 2006
population (log)	<b>Pearson</b>	,370(**)	,263(**)
	<b>Sig.</b>	0	0
	<b>N</b>	5491	5461
distance (log)	<b>Pearson</b>	-,119(**)	-0.002
	<b>Sig.</b>	0	0.878
	<b>N</b>	5491	5461
rural population (%)	<b>Pearson</b>	-,193(**)	-0.008
	<b>Sig.</b>	0	0.56
	<b>N</b>	5491	5461
GDP per capita (%)	<b>Pearson</b>	,158(**)	-,099(**)
	<b>Sig.</b>	0	0
	<b>N</b>	5491	5461
industrial GDP (%)	<b>Pearson</b>	,179(**)	,048(**)
	<b>Sig.</b>	0	0
	<b>N</b>	5544	5514
poverty	<b>Pearson</b>	-,213(**)	,087(**)
	<b>Sig.</b>	0	0
	<b>N</b>	5491	5461

\* p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01

As seen in the table, in the year 2002, when the PT and its left-wing allies were in opposition to the national government, support for the left was strongly and positively correlated with GDP per capita and industrial GDP, and negatively correlated with poverty, rural population and distance to the state capital. In the following election, however, the correlation coefficients obtained for distance and rural population were weak and insignificant. Further, the signs for the variables poverty and GDP per capita inverted, which indicates that national incumbency pushed left-wing parties away from their original electoral base and toward the poorest regions, previously controlled by centre-right party machines.

<sup>14</sup> All the data was obtained from the IPEA database, available at <http://www.ipeadata.gov.br>. Figures are from the 2000 national census, with the exception of GDP per capita and industrial GDP, both calculated for the year 2006.

Could these results be attributed to the centrepiece of the federal government's poverty reduction strategy, the Bolsa Família? To test this hypothesis I ran a simple OLS regression for the left support variable in the year 2006 (left support in 2002 was used as a control variable). I included the same municipal indicators employed in the correlations above, plus a measure of the impact of the Bolsa Família at the municipal level - *scope of the Bolsa Família* - which indicates the percentage of families enrolled in the program a few months before the election (July 2006).

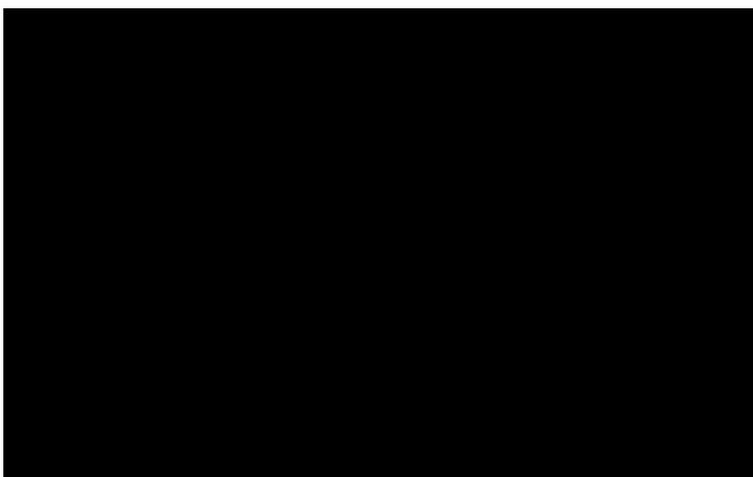
The model also included two dummies that indicate the ideological orientation of incumbent governors: *left incumbent* and *right incumbent*. The left incumbent dummy was intended to assess potential incumbency effects on left-wing parties' electoral performance. The dummy for right-wing governors was introduced to test whether the PT and its allies in national government have been able to "invade" previous right-wing strongholds, moving away from their original electoral base. I expected both variables to display positive coefficients<sup>15</sup>.

Because the measures of poverty and GDP per capita were highly collinear among themselves and yet strongly correlated with the Bolsa Família variables, they were excluded from the main model. As a matter of fact, once the measure of the scope of the Bolsa Família program was included in the regression, the poverty and GDP per capita variables added very little or nothing to the explanation. The results of the core model are below:

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<sup>15</sup> I present an alternative model with a different specification of the Bolsa Família variable and a more detailed discussion of the statistical results in a recent, unpublished work BORGES, A. The Swan Song of Political Bosses: Vertical competition in Brazilian federalism. In. *Paper prepared for delivery at the 7th Meeting of ABCP, Recife, Brazil, 2010.*

**Table 5: Regression model for left support in 2006**



\* p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01

As expected, the scope of the Bolsa Família at the municipal level has a strong and positive impact on the left support dependent. Further, the model confirms the hypothesis that the PT and its coalition partners have been able to grow in areas previously governed by right-wing parties: the coefficient for the *right incumbent* dummy is positive and significant in both models. It also seems to be the case that left parties have benefited from state incumbency, as indicated by the *left incumbent* dummy.

Even though the data indicates that the territorial distribution of the left vote at the subnational level has substantially changed between 2002 and 2006, it does not authorize one to conclude that left-wing organizations have lost the support of its more traditional constituencies. The fact that the lagged dependent has a highly significant and elastic coefficient suggests that there has been some continuity in the patterns of left vote, notwithstanding electoral growth in Brazil's peripheral areas. Still, it is out of question that federal social expenditure has produced palpable electoral returns for the PT and its left-wing allies, allowing the latter to grow in the state bosses' traditional strongholds, as predicted by the hypothesis on vertical competition.

### **3 – Metropolitan politics and bottom-up vertical competition**

Competitive pressures suffered by oligarchic rulers in the peripheral states have increased not only due to national electoral shifts following Lula's election in 2002, but also due to a set of changes in Brazilian federalism that have contributed for the relative

weakening of state governments vis-à-vis the central and the local governments. Following macroeconomic adjustment in the 1990s, the federal government partly succeeded in recentralizing fiscal resources and disciplining state government's capacity to issue bonds and rely on state bank loans to fund budget deficits. Since the approval of the Fiscal Responsibility Law (LRF) in 2000, state and local governments cannot commit their primary receipts with payroll expenses and public debt beyond a certain limit (Afonso e Melo, 2000; Almeida, 2005; Souza, 2002).

Post-1990 changes to Brazilian fiscal federalism have decreased the resources available to the states, whereas local governments have been strengthened by the decentralization of greater authority over policy-making and fiscal resources. By the year 2000, local governments responded for approximately 15% of total government expenditure, compared to 11% in 1985:

**Table 6: Brazil – Share of total spending by level of government, 1985-2000**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Share of Total Expenditure</b>		
	<b>Central</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Local</b>
<b>1985</b>	62.7	26.2	11.1
<b>1990</b>	57.1	28	14.9
<b>1995</b>	56.3	27.5	16.2
<b>2000</b>	59.9	25.1	15

Source: Samuels, 2003, p. 161

As seen in the table above, state governments were the main losers of fiscal recentralization in the 1990s. Whereas local governments maintained their share of the fiscal pie around 15% from 1990 to 2000, state expenditure declined from 28% to 25% in that same period. The table indicates that the central government partly recentralized resources at the expense of the states.

I argue that the combination of stronger local governments and the trend of rapid urbanization in the least developed regions (discussed in section one of the paper), has intensified the potential for bottom-up vertical competition in Brazil's oligarchic enclaves. Due to local governments' greater role in the provision of social services and growing spending capacity, mayors' ability to cultivate a following of their own and adopt an assertive role toward incumbent governors should increase accordingly. Hence, the mayors of capital cities should compete more often with governors to mobilize metropolitan constituencies. On the other hand, the growth of capital cities and

surrounding metropolitan areas necessarily increases the weight of the metropolitan vote as well as the political value of mayoral office.

Even though the connections between state and metropolitan politics are hard to trace in the absence of comparative case study evidence, a simple analysis of mayoral elections will suffice to demonstrate the role of capital cities as key sites for the political contestation in contexts of low pluralism. The analysis focuses on a selected a group of 12 states that match best the definition of oligarchic rule. To define the boundaries of the oligarchic states, I relied on both quantitative and qualitative criteria. First, I relied on the electoral dominance index to select a group of 14 states with scores below the median. Following this initial selection, I looked at available case study evidence and electoral data to check whether the states with scores close to the nationwide median fitted the definition of oligarchic rule. The final list was integrated by the following states: Amazonas, Bahia, Ceará, Goiás, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Pará, Paraíba, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, Sergipe and Tocantins.

The table below presents data on the party affiliation of the mayors of state capitals elected from 1996 to 2004 in the selected group of states. It also indicates the percentage of the statewide electorate that lived in the capital city in the year 2002. This latter figure varied from 12% in the agricultural state of Tocantins to 55% in Amazonas, with the majority of the cases (8 out of 12) ranging from 20% to 27% of the total electorate:

**Table 7: Party affiliation of elected mayors (1996-2004) and percentage of state's electorate living in the capital city (2002), selected states**

State	Capital	Election year			% of state electorate in capital city (2002)
		1996	2000	2004	
Amazonas	Manaus	PPB	PL	PSB	55.41
Bahia	Salvador	PFL	PFL	PDT	17.65
Ceará	Fortaleza	PMDB	PMDB	PT	26.27
Goiás	Goiânia	PSDB	PT	PMDB	22.70
Maranhão	São Luís	PDT	PDT	PDT	16.10
Mato Grosso	Cuiabá	PSDB	PSDB	PSDB	20.14
Pará	Belém	PT	PT	PTB	23.76
Paraíba	João Pessoa	PMDB	PMDB	PSB	16.23
Piauí	Teresina	PSDB	PSDB	PSDB	23.38
R. G. do Norte	Natal	PSB	PSB	PSB	23.57
Sergipe	Aracaju	PMDB	PT	PT	27.14
Tocantins	Palmas	PPB	PFL	PT	12.90

Source: TSE / IPEADATA ([www.ipeadata.gov.br](http://www.ipeadata.gov.br))

As one can see in the table, the performance of left-wing parties – the PT, the PDT and the PSB – experienced a consistent and significant improvement from 1996 to 2004. It is also noticeable that the political left was victorious in mayoral elections in five out of 12 state capitals in the year 2000, when the PT, the PDT and the PSB were in the opposition to both the federal and the state government in all of the cases. When one considers the mayors that defeated candidates supported by incumbent governors, the pro-opposition tendencies of capital city voters becomes even more evident. The table below clearly indicates that elections to the government of capital cities have created significant opportunities for the representation of opposition forces in states characterized by low levels of political pluralism<sup>16</sup> :

**Table 8: Percentage of state capitals governed by left-wing and opposition parties, selected states (1996-2004)**

	% of capitals governed by left parties	% of capitals governed by opposition parties
<b>1996</b>	25	50
<b>2000</b>	41.67	58.33
<b>2004</b>	66.67	66.67

Source: Table 7

The role of capital politics in electoral change in Brazil's oligarchic states becomes clearer when one analyses the career trajectories of left-wing governors elected in 2002 and 2006. Left-wing parties elected the governor in 4 states in 2002 and in 8 states in 2006 (out of the group of 12 states selected for analysis). Because there were three cases of reelection in 2006, the total number of leftist governors was actually reduced to nine. Four out of these nine governors (Vilma Faria, Jackson Lago, Marcelo Déda and Cid Gomes) had occupied mayoral posts before being elected. Cid Gomes was the only of these four who had not governed the capital city of his home state – he had been mayor of Sobral, Ceará's fifth largest city. Vilma Faria was the mayor of Natal from 1997 to 2002, when she left the post to run for governor; Marcelo Déda was elected mayor of Aracaju in 2000 and reelected in 2004 (he resigned the post to run for governor in 2006); and Jackson Lago governed São Luis for two and a half terms: 1989-

<sup>16</sup> Mayors were coded as part of the opposition if they were not affiliated to or allied with the governors' party in mayoral elections, and if their party did not join the governing coalition in state elections.

1992; 1997-2000 and 2001-2002 (he left the mayoralty to dispute the 2002 gubernatorial election, when he lost to the local PFL machine; he defeated the PFL candidate in 2006). The governor of Pará, Ana Júlia Carepa of the Worker's Party (PT), was never actually elected mayor of the state's capital city, Belém, but she had strong roots in capital politics as well. Ana Júlia was deputy mayor of Belém from 1997 to 2000, and she was the best voted for candidate in the 2000 elections for local councilmen. Further, she disputed the mayoral election in 2004, when she lost the runoff to the centre-right coalition led by Duciomar Costa. It is also worth noticing that Ana Júlia's party, the PT, had governed Belém for eight years (1997-2004) before her election to the governorship in 2006.

The fact that the government of capital cities has allowed opposition politicians to mobilize urban constituencies and challenge incumbent parties in gubernatorial elections is an indication of the growing importance of capital politics in the electoral dynamics of Brazil's oligarchic states. In the following section, I explore in greater detail the connection between local and state political dynamics by analyzing electoral change in the northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte. I demonstrate how demographic and political factors interacted to transform the government of the capital city, Natal, into a strategic post in state politics, thus allowing the capital mayor, Vilma Faria, to play a key role in the demise of the once dominant political families, the Maia and the Alves.

#### **4 – The case of Rio Grande do Norte**

Rio Grande do Norte was a typical case of familistic and oligarchic politics in the Northeast of Brazil. Factional rivalries opposing the major political families were a persistent feature of state politics at least since the First Republic (1889-1930), and political identity and behavior followed mostly from voters' and politicians' allegiance to family-based political clans (Alcântara, 2001; Andrade, 1997; Trindade, 2003). Different from the most populous states of the Northeast region, such as Bahia and Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte benefited little from state led industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s, and its economy relied heavily on oil production, textiles and food processing, tourism and public administration. By the year 2000, over half of the state's population (55%) was below the poverty line and GDP per capita represented about 48% of national average.

Since the military regime, politics in Rio Grande do Norte was marked by the hegemony of two competing political families: the Maia and the Alves. The Maia family gained importance in state politics after the nomination of federal deputy Tarcízio Maia to the governorship in 1975. The governor was a skilful politician, who succeeded in creating his own political group. Thanks to his friendship with key military figures, he was able to secure the nomination of his nephew and state secretary of health, Lavoisier Maia to the governorship in 1978. In the following year, Tarcízio's son, José Agripino Maia, was appointed as mayor of the state capital city, Natal (Andrade, 1997; Machado, 1995). Not different from conservative political families elsewhere in the Brazil, the Maia took advantage of their control over the local section of the ARENA, the party of the military regime, to cultivate a solid electoral base in the state's rural and backward countryside, which would allow them to play a crucial role in democratic politics

The Alves family had a somewhat older story in state politics. The patriarch of the clan, Aluízio, had started his career as a journalist and businessmen - he was the founder of one of the major state news diaries, the *Tribuna do Norte*. Initially, Aluízio Alves was a protégé of Dinarte Mariz, a direct descendent of the state's rural oligarchies to whom he owed his election to the federal chamber in 1946. However, as it is often the case in Brazilian politics, the creature soon became bigger than his creator, as deputy Alves emerged as a key figure within the conservative National Democratic Union (UDN). In 1962, then governor Dinarte Mariz did not support Alves' candidacy to the governorship, which led him to abandon the UDN to dispute the election by the opposition PSD. Following his victory in the 1962 gubernatorial election, Aluízio succeeded in creating an enduring political machine under firm control of his family (Trindade, 2003).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Maia and the Alves families consolidated their position as the dominant forces in *potiguar* politics. José Agripino Maia was elected governor in 1982 and 1990, whereas the Alves clan was victorious in the 1986, 1994 and 1998 gubernatorial contests. The Maia political machine was organized within the right-wing PFL. The Alves group took hold of the local PMDB (Spinelli, 2006).

Until very recently, opposition groups were small and represented no threat to the hegemony of Alves and Maia families. The political left performed rather poorly in state

elections, even in comparison with right-wing strongholds such as Bahia and Sergipe<sup>17</sup>. As the PMDB and the PFL machines benefited from patron-client networks solidified by their privileged access to the state and federal governments, the opportunities for meaningful opposition were severely restricted. For instance, from 1982 to 1998, the PMDB-PFL party oligopoly never controlled less than 6 of the 8 state seats in the federal chamber, which allowed party bosses to maximize their leverage at the national level.

#### **4.1 – The rise of Vilma Faria: how a mayor became governor**

The decay of the Rio Grande do Norte's political families coincides with the meteoric political trajectory of a former mayor of the state capital city, who succeeded in beating state bosses in the last two gubernatorial elections (2002 and 2006). Even though she was initially connected with the Maia clan, to which she owed her first steps in electoral politics, Vilma Faria soon succeeded in gaining autonomy from her old allies, creating her own political group. She started her political career as state secretary of Social Assistance in the early 1980s, during the governorship of her husband's cousin, José Agripino Maia<sup>18</sup>. At the end of her term, Vilma Faria (then called Vilma Maia) was a highly popular figure in the poor neighbourhoods of Natal, thanks to the implementation of a large-scale housing program funded by the federal government (Almeida, 2006; Almeida, 2001). With such a strong support in the peripheral areas of the state capital, the secretary soon emerged as a potential mayoral candidate. She disputed and lost the 1985 local electoral contest to Garibaldi Alves Filho, notwithstanding the governor's support. In the following year, Vilma was elected federal deputy by the PDS (Social Democratic Party). In 1988, she decided to leave the PDS for the centre-left Democratic Labour Party (PDT) to run for mayor of Natal again<sup>19</sup>. This time, she defeated the Alves family, represented by the federal deputy Henrique Alves.

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<sup>17</sup> On average, left-wing parties controlled less than 10% of state legislative seats in Rio Grande do Norte from 1990 to 1998. The averages estimated for the states of Bahia and Sergipe were 17% and 18% respectively. (Calculations made by the author).

<sup>18</sup> She was married to Lavoisier Maia, who was appointed governor in 1978 and who happened to be Tarcísio Maia's nephew.

<sup>19</sup> During her term as federal deputy in the legislature responsible for drafting Brazil's democratic constitution (1986-1990), Vilma Faria sided with left-wing parties in key issues, in spite of her affiliation

Vilma's first term as mayor of Natal represented a clear watershed in her political career. By occupying one of the most important executive posts in state politics – second only to the governorship – she was able to develop and cultivate her own basis of support, independent from her family liaisons to the Maia family. It is symptomatic of this change her decision to use her single name in electoral campaigns – Vilma Faria – after she divorced from Lavoisier Maia in the early 1990s (Almeida, 2001).

In 1992, Vilma was able to elect her successor, Aldo Tinoco, to the Natal mayoralty. At that time, she was affiliated to the leftist PSB (Brazilian Socialist Party) and no longer followed the lead of her ex-husband, Lavoisier, and his cousin, José Agripino. Vilma was elected mayor again in 1996 and reelected in 2000, thanks to high popularity levels in the state capital. Because of her electoral strength in the most populous and politically important city of Rio Grande Norte, she soon emerged as an important player in state politics. Candidates to the governorship would often dispute the mayor's support, which allowed Vilma to take advantage of the rivalries between the Maia and Alves.

Cleverly, the mayor of Natal adopted an independent position relatively to the dominant political groups of the state, changing her political alignments solely according to strategic considerations. In 1996, for instance, she counted on the support of José Agripino Maia to defeat the PT candidate in mayoral elections. Later on, after the defeat of the PFL to governor Garibaldi Alves Filho in the 1998 state elections, Vilma abandoned the Maia group to develop a “strategic partnership” with the gubernatorial administration of the PMDB {Lacerda, 2005 #83; Spinelli, 2009 #81}.

Demographic factors are certainly important in the explanation of the political weight of Natal – and the surrounding metropolitan area – in state politics. By the year 2002, the state capital was inhabited by 23% of the state's electorate. The Natal metropolitan region, which includes the state's second largest city, Parnamirim, represented 37% of the total electorate. One must note that policies implemented by the mayor of Natal in areas such as public transportation, education, health, etc., strongly affects the lives of citizens inhabiting the metropolitan belt, for a sizable part of the latter tend to work in the capital city and/or rely on services offered by the capital's mayoralty.

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to the Maia's right-wing party machine (Spinelli, 2009). Hence, her decision to leave the PDS in 1988 cannot be credited solely to political opportunism.

In the year 2002, as the major political parties were preparing to dispute the gubernatorial election, Vilma Faria emerged in the polls as a potential candidate to the governorship. At the time, the PMDB of the Alves faced serious factional disputes, as the clan's godfather, Aluísio, tried to impose the name of his son, the federal deputy Henrique Eduardo Alves, as the PMDB gubernatorial candidate. Because Aluísio's son lacked support within the PMDB, the wide electoral coalition mounted by the party's leaders soon started to fall apart, and significant defections helped to strengthen the PFL's gubernatorial project. Cleverly, the mayor of Natal took advantage of the political vacuum created by the lack of a strong PMDB candidate to launch her gubernatorial candidacy as a "third way", alternative to the Alves and Maia groups {Barreto, 2004 #71;Lacerda, 2005 #83}.

Without the support of local political machines who had always aligned with either the Maia or the Alves political clans, and yet relying on a dwarf party, Vilma Faria surprised political analysts as she defeated both the Alves the Maia candidates, obtaining 37% of the vote in the first round of the gubernatorial election. It is out of question that the mayor's electoral strength in the metropolitan region contributed a great deal to her astounding performance: Vilma Faria obtained 51% of the metropolitan vote, which amounted to 53% of the absolute number of votes she obtained statewide. On the other hand, as noted by Barreto (2004), the PSB gubernatorial candidate benefited from persistent media exposure throughout the six years she served as mayor of the state capital (from 1997 to 2002).

In the second round of the gubernatorial election, Vilma Faria relied on a broad (and ideologically bizarre) political coalition to beat the candidate of the Alves family, the vice-governor Fernando Freire. She obtained the support of both the right-wing PFL and the left-wing PT. Thanks to the alliance with the PT, she could take advantage of the "Lula wave" that swept over the country and secured the PT's victory in the presidential election runoff. By its turn, the support of the PFL machine strengthened her candidacy in the poor and rural countryside of Rio Grande do Norte, where the PSB was either too weak or non-existent. The election results are presented on table 3 of the annex.

Notwithstanding Vilma Faria's family liaisons to José Agripino Maia and the latter's support to her candidacy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, the governor elected soon distanced herself from her former political patron, and a series of political disagreements over the definition of the mayoral candidates in the 2000 local elections, led the PFL to abandon

the governor's coalition. Throughout her administration, Vilma Faria worked hard to build her own, personally-controlled political machine, relying on the distribution of government favors and jobs to strengthen the governing PSB. Further, the governor and her party invested in the consolidation of the alliance with the PT, which reproduced the national PT-PSB alliance.

Vilma Faria was reelected in 2006, with the support of president Lula's PT. This time, the Alves and Maia political families sealed an alliance in support of the gubernatorial candidacy of Garibaldi Alves. (The election results are presented in the annex, table 4). The PSB and its left-wing allies (the PT and the PDT) elected four federal deputies in 2006, whereas the PMDB and the PFL lost two seats each. In the state assembly, the PSB doubled its representation, electing four deputies. The PFL lost one seat, electing three deputies. The PMN (Party of the National Mobilization), a catch-all party under control of the governor's allies, elected the largest delegation – five deputies – demonstrating once again that access to patronage resources controlled by the chief executive makes a critical difference in the electoral arena.

The fact the centre-left coalition led by the governor defeated an alliance among the two political machines that had dominated state politics for decades had a clear symbolic meaning. The party oligopoly built by the Maia and Alves groups had finally lost its capacity to control and restrict the electoral arena, in the wake of the emergence of a third, independent force, in *potiguar* politics.

#### **4.2 – Understanding the demise of the Maia and Alves families: the geography of the vote**

The meteoric ascension of the PSB and governor Vilma Faria in state politics is certainly related to the rapid shift in the party's territorial patterns of voting, which is analyzed in this section. While in opposition, the PSB concentrated its voting in the state's most populous and developed regions. However, once the governor's party enjoyed the benefits of state incumbency, its representation in the poor and backward countryside increased rapidly.

The table below show simple correlations for the PSB vote in the 2002 (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round) and 2006 gubernatorial elections, and set of selected social and demographic indicators of Rio Grande do Norte's municipalities:

**Table 9: Correlations for the PSB gubernatorial vote, 2002-2006**

	PSB 2002 1st round	PSB 2002 run-off	PSB 2006 1st round	PSB 2006 run-off
<b>Poverty</b>	-0.085	.189**	0.047	.195**
<b>Rural populaltion</b>	0.011	0.098	0.028	.142*
<b>Population</b>	.265***	0.07	-0.018	-0.074
<b>Distance</b>	-.222***	0.009	0.131*	.236***

\*p<0.10; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01

The correlation coefficients for the variables *distance* and *population* in 2002 (1<sup>st</sup> round) reinforce the argument that the ascension of the PSB in state politics resulted, to some extent, from Vilma Faria’s popularity in the capital city and its surrounding metropolitan area. The PSB gubernatorial candidate performed best in the most populous municipalities, whereas it had much lower electoral support in the municipalities farther away from the capital city (negative coefficient for *distance*). In the following elections, the PSB increased its penetration in the state’s countryside and, thus, the coefficients for the variable *population* were no longer significant. In the 2006 elections, the relationship between the variable *distance* and the PSB vote was inverted, indicating that the party has rapidly moved away from its original urban and metropolitan constituency. Note also the positive and significant coefficients obtained for the municipal measure of *poverty* in the 2002 and 2006 runoffs.

The shift in the PSB’s territorial patterns of voting is further analyzed in a series of electoral maps produced with the help of GIS software TerraView. Before analyzing the maps, though, I present a brief overview of the main regions of Rio Grande do Norte and the role they have played in state politics:

**Figure 1: Rio Grande do Norte – Selected Regions**



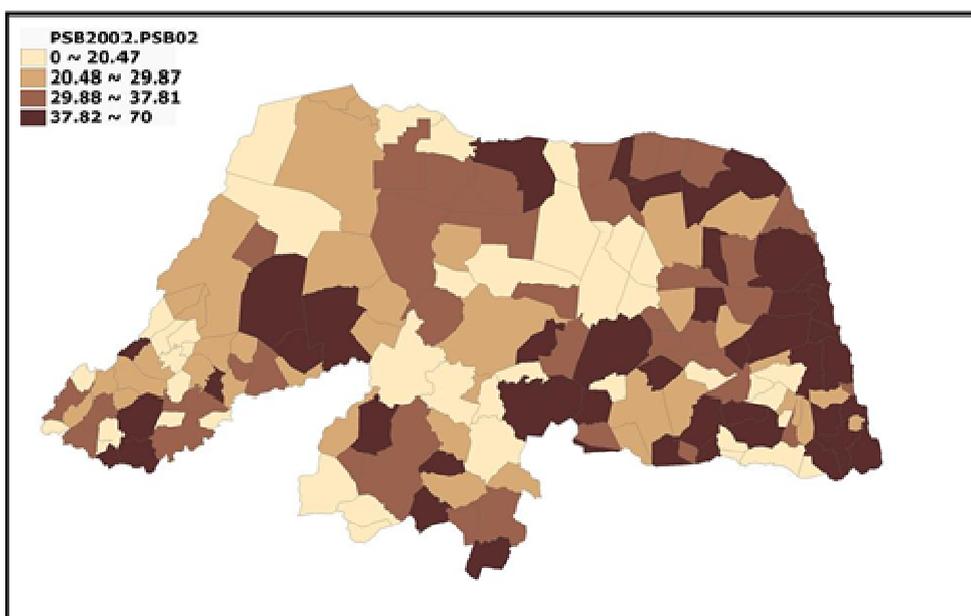
Regions 12 and 13 (Natal and Macaíba) correspond to the capital and its metropolitan region, and concentrate a significant share of the state's population and GDP. The Mossoró region (number 6 in the map, top of the “elephant's head”) is home to the homonymous city, an important commercial and industrial centre, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city of Rio Grande do Norte, after Natal and Paranamirim. The city of Mossoró is also the political (berço) of the Rosado oligarchy, whose political allegiance has oscillated among Alves and Maia families. The state's far west (regions located in the “elephant trunk”) is one of the poorest and least populated bits of the state. The Maia family has developed strong roots in these areas, due to their ties to local oligarchies. The Seridó region (numbers 7 and 8) is where Rio Grande do Norte's cotton plantations developed throughout the XIX and early XX centuries. It is also the birthplace of former governor Dinarte Mariz, who was the leader of an enduring political dynasty in the 1940s and 1950s. The Maia family has historical connections to the Mariz group, which probably explains the good showing of the PFL in this part of the state<sup>20</sup>. The Angicos region (number 9) is the political home of the Alves<sup>21</sup>. The PMDB has obtained some of its best performances in state elections in Angicos and surrounding regions, which reflects the Alves' ties to local political machines that have dominated these areas for long.

<sup>20</sup> Tarcízio Maia was a follower of Dinarte Mariz, to whom he owed his nomination to the governorship in the 1970s. Students of local politics have argued that the Maia's party machine inherited the spoils of the Mariz group, as it lost force in state politics (Alcântara, 2000; Machado, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Aluizio Alves was born in the municipality of Angicos, which lends its name to the region.

The figure below shows the electoral map of the PSB vote in the 1<sup>st</sup> round of the 2002 election. The color scale follows the distribution of votes by quartile: the darkest colors indicate the municipalities belonging to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quartiles.

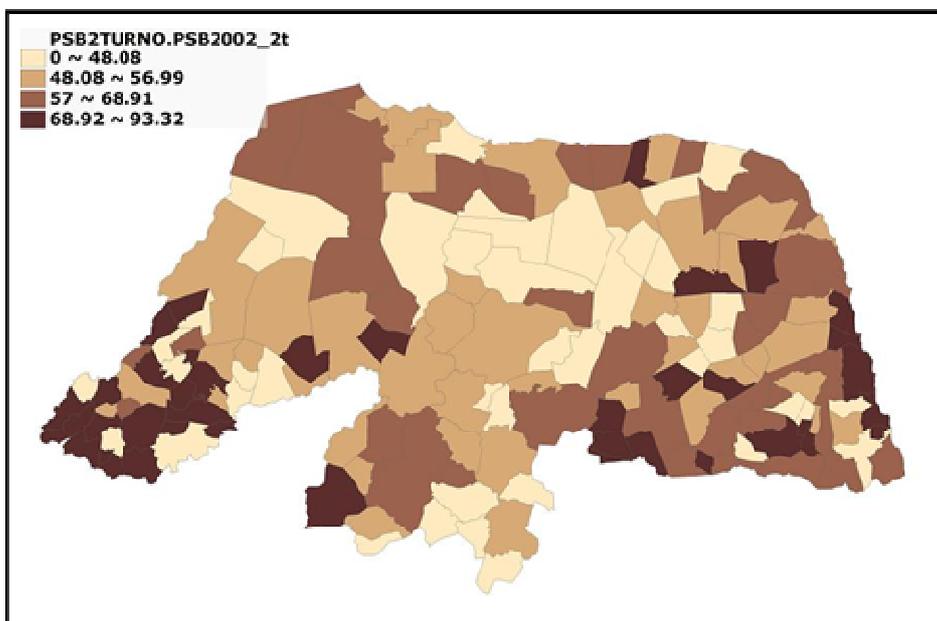
**Figure 2 – Rio Grande do Norte: Electoral map for the PSB, 1<sup>st</sup> round of the 2002 gubernatorial elections**



The large dark area in the east portion of the state (right-hand side of the map) clearly reveals the concentration of the PSB vote in Natal and its metropolitan region. The lightest areas, in the central region of the state correspond to the Angicos region, the stronghold of the PMDB machine. Moran's I for the PSB vote in 2002 is 0.20 ( $p < 0.01$ ), which indicates a moderate level of spatial autocorrelation.

The territorial distribution of the vote changed significantly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, as the PSB gained the support of the right-wing coalition led by José Agripino Maia. As expected, Vilma Faria increased her voting in the countryside and, especially, in traditional PFL strongholds.

**Figure 3: Rio Grande do Norte: Electoral map for the PSB, 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the 2002 gubernatorial elections**



When one compares figures 2 and 3, it is evident the electoral growth experienced by the PSB in the far west of Rio Grande do Norte, a region where local political machines have developed strong ties to the Maia family. In some municipalities located in the “elephant’s trunk”, the PSB obtained over 80% of the total vote. The support of the PFL machine allowed the PSB gubernatorial candidate to improve her performance in other two regions: Mossoró (at the time, the Rosado family was aligned with the Maia’s PFL), and the Seridó region.

The regression model below intends to further demonstrate the impact of the PFL’s support on Vilma Faria’s vote in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the 2002 election. The model includes a set of social and demographic indicators (distance to the state capital, poverty and rural population), two dummies for local mayors’ party affiliation (PMDB / PFL), and the percentage of the municipal vote obtained by the Maia’s candidate, Fernando Bezerra, in the 1<sup>st</sup> round. I also added a variable that measures the Euclidean distance from the the municipality of Angicos (Dist\_Angicos), as a rough indicator of the territorial concentration of the Alves’ vote in the central region of the state<sup>22</sup>. To estimate the electoral effects of the PSB-PT alliance, I included a measure of president

<sup>22</sup> The reader should remember that Vilma Faria disputed the runoff against the PMDB candidate.

Lula's vote in the presidential election runoff. The PSB gubernatorial vote in the 1<sup>st</sup> round was used as a control variable.

**Table 10 - Regression model for the PSB vote, 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the 2002 gubernatorial elections**

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	Std. Error	P	B	Std. Error	P
(Constant)	5.154	11.723	0.661	24.1	10.849	0.028
Distance (log)	-1.284	3.342	0.701	-3.255	3.418	0.342
Poverty	0.124	0.121	0.307	0.150	0.125	0.234
Rural_population	0.048	0.065	0.463	0.027	0.067	0.683
Dist.Angicos	**10.404	2.468	0.000	**8.946	2.525	0.001
PMDB_mayor	** -7.311	2.429	0.003	** -7.692	2.517	0.003
PFL_mayor	0.621	2.991	0.836	4.472	2.895	0.124
Bezerra_1st_round	**0.331	0.092	0.000	-	-	-
Faria_1st_round	**0.271	0.101	0.008	0.123	0.095	0.199
Lula_runoff	**0.306	0.115	0.009	*0.266	0.119	0.026
	R <sup>2</sup>	N		R <sup>2</sup>	N	
	0.262	167		0.206	167	

As expected, there is a positive and strong association between the PSB vote and Fernando Bezerra's electoral performance in the 1<sup>st</sup> round, which indicates that the Maia party machine succeeded in transferring votes to Vilma Faria (Model 1). The measure of Lula's municipal vote has a positive coefficient as well, though the effect is slightly weaker as compared to the impact estimated for Fernando Bezerra's vote. The *PMDB\_mayor* dummy has a negative and very strong effect, suggesting that local political machines remained loyal to the Alves' candidate. Also, the positive effect estimated for the variable *dist.Angicos* is congruent with hypothetical expectations, as the PSB vote was higher, on average, in municipalities' farther away from the core of the Alves' electoral fortress. None of municipal demographic and social indicators had a significant impact on Vilma Faria's gubernatorial vote, which is evidence of the rapid change of the territorial patterns of voting of the PSB in relation to its original urban and metropolitan constituency.

A second model was estimated without the measure of Fernando Bezerra's vote. As one would expect, this alternative model has a much poorer fit in relation to the first. It is also worth noticing that the effect of the *PFL\_mayor* dummy is much stronger (though not significant) in the second regression, probably due to the fact that dummy is positively correlated with the variable that measures the electoral strength of the Maia's gubernatorial candidate at the local level (and which is absent in the second model).

In the 2006 gubernatorial elections, as already seen, Vilma Faria obtained reelection by imposing a historical defeat on the PMDB-PFL coalition. This last election marked a more significant and profound change of the PSB's territorial patterns of voting, as the party was able to grow in areas previously controlled by the Maia and Alves political families.

To understand these changes, it is important to mention the exponential growth of the PSB's representation at the local level during Vilma Faria's first term. The total number of mayors elected by the party was multiplied by eight between 2000 and 2004: the PSB elected 48 mayors in 2004, as compared to six in the previous local elections. The graph below shows the evolution of the number of mayors elected by the PMDB, the PFL and the PSB, from 1996 to 2004:

**Table 11: Rio Grande do Norte, evolution of the total number of mayors elected, PSB, PMDB and PFL, 1996-2004**

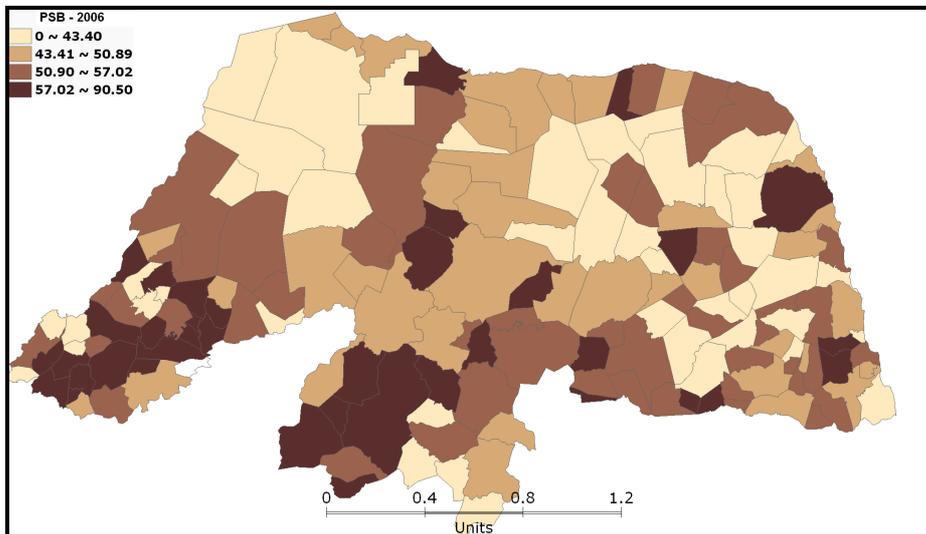
	1996	2000	2004
<b>PSB</b>	1	6	48
<b>PMDB</b>	49	55	35
<b>PFL</b>	42	35	32

It is worth noticing that of the total 48 mayors elected by the governing PSB in 2004, at least one-fourth had been previously affiliated to other parties, mostly the PMDB and the PFL. Because the data on the partisan affiliation of mayors is incomplete, these figures may actually underestimate the role of party switching in the PSB growth in 2004. This type of migration between the opposition and government fields is hardly uncommon in Brazilian democracy, as mayors – especially those governing small, poor localities – have strong incentives to seek an alignment with the state and/or the federal executive and thus obtain access to additional budgetary resources.

The PSB benefited not only from state incumbency and the patronage resources at the governor's disposition, but also from its participation in the national political coalition that supported president Lula. Vilma's reelection campaign was supported by the president and by the local section of the PT, whereas the Alves and Maia families were in opposition to the national government. Combined, these factors had a powerful effect on the PSB's electoral performance in 2006, as the party grew rapidly in the

poorest areas of the state. Below is the electoral map for the PSB gubernatorial vote in 2006:

**Figure 4: Rio Grande do Norte: Electoral map for the PSB, 2006 gubernatorial elections, 1<sup>st</sup> round**



The map above evidentiates the growth of the PSB in Rio Grande do Norte's far west and in the Seridó region, traditional strongholds of the PFL. The party obtained advances, though to a lesser extent, in part of the central region of the state, where the Alves machine had been hegemonic during most of the recent democratic period. Overall, the PSB performed best in some of the poorest regions of the state – Seridó and “elephant's trunk” – inverting the pattern observed in the 1<sup>st</sup> round of the 2002 election.

The case of Rio Grande do Norte is a clear example of the role played by bottom up vertical competition in the decay of oligarchic enclaves. Governor Vilma Faria took advantage of her three terms as mayor of the state's capital city to mobilize the metropolitan electorate and gradually gain autonomy from the state's top political bosses. The case study also demonstrates that local political machines are still of great importance in the mobilization of voters in the rural and backward countryside. In poor states such as Rio Grande do Norte, left-wing parties tend to be weak or non-existent outside the largest cities and, for that reason, the support of more conservative political organizations will often prove crucial to secure an electoral majority. As a matter of fact, while in opposition to the state government, Vilma Faria's PSB had to rely on the support of the PFL party machine to defeat the incumbent party in gubernatorial elections.

## **Final remarks**

The empirical evidence presented in this paper indicates that the decay of state political machines in Brazil's oligarchic enclaves resulted from the intensification of vertical competition from above, by the federal government, and from below, by the mayors of state capitals. Recent changes of Brazilian fiscal federalism, rapid urbanization of the least developed regions and national political shifts all contributed for the weakening of oligarchic rule, generating cross pressures that severely limited state bosses' ability to maintain a gate-keeping control over the electoral arena.

The theoretical and empirical analyses presented here thus suggest that economic explanations of electoral change in the poorest regions must be put into context. Montero's (2009) work claims that the key factor behind the erosion of support for oligarchic forces was the formalization of the labor market in the North and Northeast, which resulted from the relatively higher rates of economic growth experienced by these regions from 2000 to 2006. Because workers in the formal sector enjoy higher levels of social protection, as well as expectations of sustainable earnings, they should have longer time horizons when making political decisions as voters.

I argue that the analysis of the electoral consequences of economic growth is incomplete in that it does not give due attention to the fact that voters tend to reward the national government (and its allies at the subnational level) for improvements in their life chances resulting from macroeconomic change. It is worth noticing that the social and economic changes that resulted from redistributive economic growth have coincided with national political shifts following the PT's victories in the 2002 and 2006 presidential elections. The available data suggests that the major decreases in poverty and inequality levels occurred throughout president Lula's first term (2003-2006). These changes may be partially attributed to the expansion of federal cash income transfer programs (IPEA, 2007). The evidence presented in the paper demonstrates, indeed, that the expansion of federal social expenditure helped the PT and its left-wing allies to increase their representation in the poorest regions.

In spite of electoral change in the peripheral states, it is important to note some elements of continuity in the nuts and bolts of democratic institutions. Brazilian democracy is still characterized by a combination of weak parties and strong executives, which greatly affects the way through which subnational rulers develop and implement

their electoral strategies<sup>23</sup>. The policy-making capacities of legislatures at both the national and subnational levels are rather limited, thanks to institutional rules that provide chief executives with wide powers over budget planning and implementation, as well as the monopoly of legislative initiative in administrative, fiscal and tax matters (Figueiredo e Limongi, 1999). The combination of strong executives and an open list PR electoral system that weakens political parties in the electoral arena leads to “executive-centric” political dynamics {Pereira, 2003 #93;Samuels, 2003 #42}. This is evident in the opportunistic behavior of patronage-seeking politicians, which often switch parties to remain on the winning side and obtain access to bureaucratic jobs and resources controlled by chief executives. An important consequence of these institutional features is that chief executives at both the federal and state levels are bound to play a crucial role in the making and remaking of electoral coalitions.

The case of Rio Grande do Norte clearly indicates that control over the state executive greatly affects political parties’ electoral prospects, by allowing governors to rely on the power to implement policy and distribute pork and patronage to mobilize systematically pro-incumbent constituencies. By the same reasoning, the rapid decay of the Alves and Maia political families cannot be solely explained by voters’ greater disposition to support parties and candidates of the “left”. As long as local political machines continue to play an important role in the mobilization of voters statewide, one may assume that left-wing governors have no option other than playing the game of patronage politics mastered by their adversaries to win elections.

The Brazilian experience reinforces the view that subnational democratization is never a purely local issue. As argued by Gibson (2004), explaining subnational political change requires a systematic understanding of how subnational political institutions and elites are enmeshed in a larger system of territorial governance. The intensification of vertical competition in the Brazilian federation has increased the unpredictability of electoral contests, and state political bosses have lost the capacity to engineer electoral majorities and secure persistent access to executive office. This indicates that the territorial strategies of political control employed by regional elites are greatly affected by national and metropolitan political dynamics.

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<sup>23</sup> Left-wing parties are the exception to the general rule of weak party organization (Mainwaring, 1999). However, it should be noted that centre-left organizations such as the PSB and the PDT often work as non-programmatic party machines at the state level, as recruitment is guided by short-term electoral considerations rather than adherence to the party agenda.

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