

# The silent legislative process: a study on the ideological classification of the Brazilian political parties based on their bills (ALERGS 2003-2010)

Marcia Ribeiro Dias<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Since the late nineteenth century, understanding the parliamentary and electoral dynamics in Western political systems has become simpler because of the ideological classification of the parties into the left-right dichotomy. This simple nomenclature, which originated from the distribution of seats in the French National Assembly during the revolutionary period, transcended its geographical meaning and encompassed the set of values that drive the political action towards a specific direction, ie, the sense of the political world. Thus, understanding the individual or partisan political action depends on understanding the ideas that support the political activity. These ideas serve as an inspiration because they are able to both shape a particular world view and drive the action.

Since the 1960s, the left-right categories have been losing their power to mobilize. Similarly to what happened to the political parties, the ideological distance between the different points of the scale has become more fluid. If, on the one hand, the liberal right has been forced to incorporate some degree of redistributive perspective, because of the advance of socialism, the left field became more permeable to the capitalist economy, its values and institutions.

In a pioneering study on this topic, Daniel Bell (1965) identified the decline of ideologies in the contemporary political world. According to this author, different ideological orientations disagree on specific issues, especially regarding the redistributive potential of the State. However, they agree with the overall design of the democratic political system, which is associated with a capitalist economic model. After the end of communism, whose milestones were the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the former Soviet Union, those who forecast the ideological apocalypse, led by Fukuyama (1989), had their theses strengthened.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia Ribeiro Dias is an associate professor at the Postgraduate Program in Social Sciences of PUCRS. Researcher of CNPq. Visiting research fellow at the University of Oxford (2010-2011), mrdias@pucrs.br.

The centripetal tendency of contemporary political systems, identified by the reduced differences between left and right and the increasing convergence towards a kind of consensual or shared position, is a sign of the crisis of the traditional ideological model (Mair, 2009). Especially when the analytical focus lays on the advanced post-industrial democracies, it is easy to identify the domain of a broad and moderate political center (Dalton, 2006 [a] cited in Mair, 2009). Such circumstance originates from the fact that governments are more or less constrained to pursue certain policies and give up other policies. This is true for both left and right governments, with the result that it becomes less and less easy to distinguish such governments according to their partisan colors (Mair, 2009, p. 216).

Another sign of the contemporary ideological crisis was the emergence of left-wing movements that were not focused on class issues, ie, without an economic emphasis. Such movements are considered to be post-materialist ideological concepts; they have libertarian expectations based on the principle of equality, promoting the rights of the minorities and/or the ecological principles. The expansion of the ideological conviction beyond a strictly economic dimension, coupled with a decline in the cohesion of class and socio-structural identities, contributed to the weakening of traditional political orientations within the left-right spectrum (Mair, 2009).

According to Schwarzmantel (2008), the concepts of progress, rationality, and secularism, whose intention to be universal mark the traditional ideological model, started to be viewed with suspicion in an increasingly multicultural world, where difference and diversity are praised, a world that welcomes identity more often than ideology. However, Schwarzmantel does not agree with the thesis of replacing the traditional ideological model with the fragmented logic of post-materialist ideologies. He argues that any campaign is justified only in terms of a general philosophy or ideology.

Issues can only be identified as such within the framework provided by more general frameworks of ideological politics which give a map of the world, metaphorically speaking, and make it possible to specify why something is an issue and is worth fighting about, or demonstrating about. (Schwarzmantel, 2008, p.7)

Thus, new molecular ideologies -- such as environmentalism and feminism -- did not constitute a framework of ideas capable of grasping the complexity of contemporary politics. However, these ideologies have to perform the fundamental task of renewing the political-ideological dimension of social life, serving as a complement to the traditional model. That is, instead of a thesis of replacement of the ideological traditional model with a

more fluid model and, therefore, more compatible with a 'liquid modernity' (Baumann, 2000), Schwarzmantel chooses an interpretation of compliance or adjustment of the traditional model (left-right) to new methods of contemporary ideological manifestation, in a system of mutual support.

More recently, Jonathan White (2010) also discussed the survival of the old left-right dichotomy in a context of greater volatility of ideas. The author examines the political use of the 'Left' and 'Right' categories by politicians in their speeches. White uses the theory of positioning (cited in, Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as an analytical tool to understand the strategic use of the vocabulary related to the Left-Right dichotomy by political elites, positioning them and their opponents in relation to the public opinion. It is a pragmatic use of these traditional categories, in general, with the purpose of identifying the lack of flexibility of their opponents in the negative aspects of their positions to the left or to the right, while identifying themselves as more flexible and holders of more virtuous positions, either to the left or to the right. The author concludes that as such categories are manipulated to generate political advantage, they remain important to provide meaning to the political world.

### The Brazilian Case

The Brazilian democracy is often questioned because of the ideological and programmatic inconsistency of its political parties. The difficulty of fitting the Brazilian case to the analytical standards used in well-established democracies ultimately overestimates its instability and advocates its impracticability. Brazil's party system is known for its high fragmentation and its fragile social embeddedness. One of its main challenges is to arrange itself into a federal system characterized by significant regional differences. In this context, the explanatory power of the left-right ideological model about the political behavior in Brazil is usually considered poor or even null.

The recent literature on the ideological positioning of the Brazilian parties is relatively broad. Some authors have investigated the parties' programs and/or their government programs (Tarouco, 2007, 2008; Tarouco and Madeira, 2009); other authors are concerned with the voters' perception and behavior in relation to the ideology of the parties (Carreirão, 2002, 2007, 2008; Telles and Storni, 2009). The self-assessment of partisan elites and voters has also been analyzed, as well as the investigation on what they understand by the concepts of right and left.

In a study conducted based on surveys performed between 1990 and 2005 involving 850 federal legislators, Power and Zucco (2009) tried to estimate the ideological classification of the Brazilian political parties on a 1-10-point scale (Power and Zucco, 2009). They concluded that (1) the degree of ideological polarization has softened in Brazil since the return to democracy in the early 1980s; (2) the average Brazilian legislator is closer to the left wing and the political elites still avoid the association with the idea of conservatism; (3) there is stability in the ideological preferences of the Brazilian parliamentary elites; (4) and the phenomenon of the country's "ashamed right" persists [1] (Zucco and Power, 2009, p. 21).

Some studies support the conclusion that there is stability in the ideological preferences of the Brazilian parliamentary elites; however, these authors still defend the relevance of the left-right dimension for the understanding of the legislative behavior in Brazil. According to Leoni (2002), the left-right cleavage would be useful to predict 85% of the results of the voting sessions in the House of Representatives (Leoni, 2002, p. 382).

Despite some studies have demonstrated a significant "ideological stability" of the parliamentary elites, most recent research on this topic has been more pessimistic both about the ideological universe of the political parties in Brazil and its explanatory power regarding the legislative behavior. Instead of the "left-right" axis, the "government-opposition" dimension constitutes a more promising cleavage to understand the political wrangling in the House of Representatives (Zucco, 2009). Thus, the voting sessions do not necessarily reflect the ideological position of the parties' members. The dynamics of the parliament are basically linked to strategic and deideologised behaviors, based on the predominance of political incentives generated by the executive power at the expense of the legislators' preferences (Zucco, 2009, 2008).

The present article constitutes a proposal to reaffirm the relevance of the ideological dimension in the parliamentary activity. The research strategy used in this work was based on the analysis of the bills submitted by the party leaders to the Legislative Assembly of Rio Grande do Sul (ALERGS) - Brazil, between 2003 and 2010. Instead of recording what the parties had to say about themselves, the parties were ideologically classified considering their legislative activity. The hypothesis of the present study was that when the political parties are busy building an image for their voting public, when there are few eyes watching them, they are more likely to reveal their most conservative, pork-barreled, liberal, or socialist face.

## The Partisan Distribution in the Left-Right Axis

Most Brazilian parties have roots in left-wing activism, either because of their landmark of emergence or their history, either because of their nomenclature and statute. During the period analyzed in this study, ALERGS included seven left-wing parties: three labor parties (PT, PTB and PDT), two socialist parties (PSB and PPS), one social democratic party (PSDB), and one communist party (PC do B). PMDB (Party of the Brazilian Democracy Movement) was originally a left-wing party because it was the only party to oppose the military dictatorship and whose activity was allowed during the dictatorship, but is not affiliated to any explicit left-wing ideology. The parties that are explicitly linked to the right are the Liberal Party (PL), DEM (Democrats, former Liberal Front Party - PFL), and PP (Progressive Party, the most conservative in the ideological scale).

However, as shown in the literature, the nomenclature of the parties and the self-perception of their members are not necessarily consistent with their actual political position: the ideas and values they defend, the policies they design, and the alliances they establish. The objective of the present study was to investigate the ideological positioning of the parties, not based on what they say about themselves, which can vary according to the objective they want to achieve, but based on their actual parliamentary activity. Who do the parties serve? Which values do they defend when they propose a bill? What kind of projects do they propose to regulate social life?

Among the right-wing values that stood out in the parliamentary performance of the parties analyzed, the most popular value was the defense of the *Economy* and its agents as a means to build a good society. This topic was identified in 13.4% of the propositions during the study period. Considering only the propositions containing right-wing values, the representativeness of the topic expands to 53.8% of the propositions. That is, more than half of the propositions classified as belonging to the *Right* were focused on the value of *Economy*.

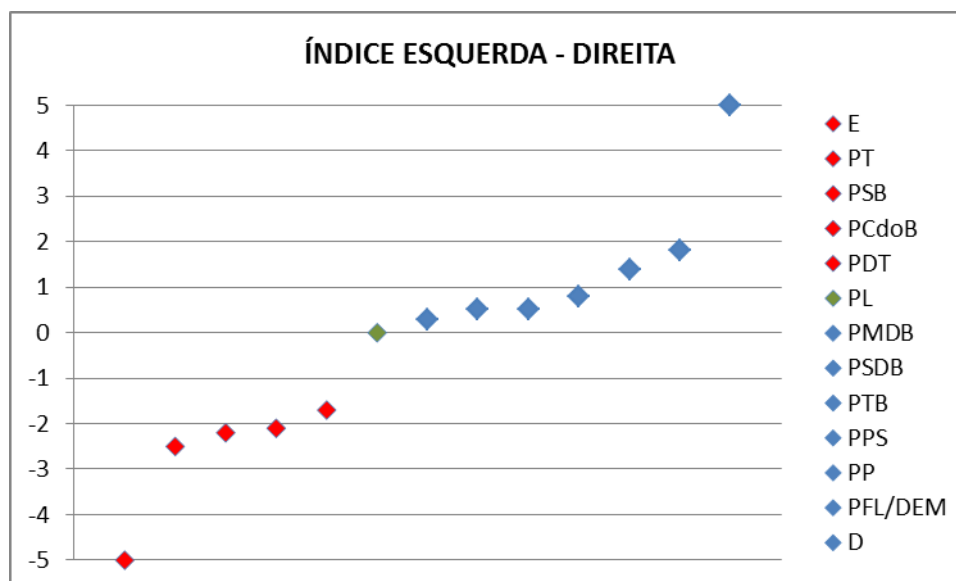
*Society* (21.6%) was the most popular left-wing value found in the propositions in terms of promotion of policies to support social welfare provided by the State. Considering only those propositions focused on the left-wing ideological field, the percentage of this topic expands to 54.5%. *Equality* was also used to justify the proposal of bills: 20% of projects belonging to the left adopted this value. Together, *Equality* and *Society* accounted for 74.5% of the left-wing propositions presented in the study period.

Such characteristics of the partisan framework regarding the parliamentary activity at ALERGS are consistent with the general trend demonstrated in the academic literature about the traditional left-right ideological model. According to Mair,

Budge and Robertson's (1987, 394-5) analyses of party programmes and election statements also reached this conclusion, finding that the left-right dimension was primarily concerned with 'economic policy-conflicts – government of the economy through direct controls or takeover... as opposed to free enterprise, individual freedom, incentives and economic orthodoxy'. The point was reinforced by the expert survey of Huber and Inglehart (1995, tables 3 and 4), who found that in twenty-five of the forty-two countries surveyed, the left-right divide was seen as revolving principally around issues relating to the economy or to class conflict.(Mair, 2009, p.214)

The adoption and defense of the left-right values in the proposals submitted by the political parties to ALERGS allowed them to be classified within the traditional ideological axis based on the design of a Left-Right Index. The index was developed based on the relative incidence of left-right values in each party's propositions. First, the dominant ideological field of each party was identified. Next, the incidence of values related to the opponent ideological field and which were occasionally present in the propositions of the party was reduced from the total value. The final value was weighted over a five-point scale: Left, Center-Left, Center, Center-Right, and Right. The results are shown in Figure 1, which offers a view of the ideological framework of the political parties at ALERGS.

Figure 1: Ideological distribution of the political parties at ALERGS (2003-2010)



Source: Center for the Study on Power, Parties and Elections (NEPPE) of the Brazilian Center for Research on Democracy (CBPD).

As shown in the figure above, there is a cluster of parties around the central political position, in line with the thesis of the centripetal tendency of political parties and the declining power of traditional political ideologies. However, it is clear that the right-wing parties are relatively closer to the center than the left-wing parties, although none of the latter has crossed the border of the Center-Left (-2.5).

The Workers' Party (PT), which was closer to the left in the ideological spectrum, reached the exact mark of -2.5, followed by the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) (-2.2), the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) (-2.1), and the Democratic Labor Party (PDT) (-1.7). It is important to emphasize that none of the parties classified into the left side of the axis had an index lower than -1, which places them closer to the left than to the center.

The political center was led by the Liberal Party (PL) because it presented both left and right values in its bills. The following parties are close to PL, but towards a right positioning: the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB) (0.3), the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB) (0.5), the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) (0.5), and the Popular Socialist Party (PPS) (0.8). Since they had indexes lower than 1, all these parties can be considered as being closer to the center than to the right, although right-wing political values were predominant in these parties. It is also worth noting the movements of these parties in the ideological scale. PL, which was originally a right-wing party, shifted to the political center, possibly influenced by the national alliance with PT. The other four parties have their origins in the left field, as shown above. The positioning of PMDB is not inconsistent with its history. PSDB's shift to the right can be explained by the long alliance with the former Liberal Front Party (PFL/DEM) during the years of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration (1995-2002). Such alliance was extended during the opposition agreement against PT's administrations (2003 to 2014). Finally, the most striking shift was performed by PPS, former Brazilian Communist Party. Its change of position was probably motivated by a group of leaders who entered the party coming from the right wing of PMDB in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

The Progressive Party (PP) (1.4) and the Democrats<sup>2</sup> (1.8) are positioned in the right field, but without crossing the border of the center-right (2.5). The main difference between these two parties in terms of the ideological stance is the conservatism of PP as opposed to the liberalism of the Democrats. That is, the closeness of these parties in the

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<sup>2</sup> Former Liberal Front Party (PFL).

ideological scale should not overlook the distinct nature of the "rightism" of each one of them.

So far, the methodological strategy proposed for the classification of the parties within the ideological axis has shown to be robust to the extent that its results are consistent other studies with the same objectives. The most important aspect is that it was possible to demonstrate that the traditional ideological values still provide subsidies for parliamentary political activity, show the differences between the parties, and reveal the face that hides behind the electoral platforms, which are designed for getting as much votes as possible.

However, the clustering of parties around the central ideological axis blurs the boundaries that separate them in terms of political parliamentary activity. In order to overcome this limit of the classification adopted, the influence of post-materialist values were incorporated into the legislative dynamics, trying to identify the parties that have demonstrated to be able to renew themselves by embracing emerging demands. According Schwarzmantel (2008), the modernization of the traditional ideologies is crucial to ensure the survival of the parties, as well as a sign of political-partisan vitality. Considering this proposition as an analytical assumption, we investigated how each party included post-materialist values in their parliamentary proposals.

### The Incidence of Post-Materialism in the Parliamentary Activity

Initially, it is important to mention some aspects of post-materialism in order to explain the political context in Brazil. The adoption of post-materialist values occurred in the Western world after the main problems related to material well-being, such as economic issues (poverty eradication, reduction of socioeconomic inequality, access to property, etc.), and safety were overcome in developed Western societies.

Post-materialist values are related to individual and collective self-expression and quality of life. Environmentalism, feminism, cultural identity, freedom of speech, political participation, social inclusion of minorities, among others, became priority values as those values related to the material survival lost their relevance as a consequence of the solution of the problems related to them (Inglehart, 2009).

Per capita income and educational levels are among the best readily available indicators of the conditions leading to the shift from materialist to postmaterialist goals, but the theoretically crucial factor is not per capita income itself, but one's sense of existential security – which means that the impact of economic and physical security is mediated by the given society's social security system. (Inglehart, 2009, p.225)

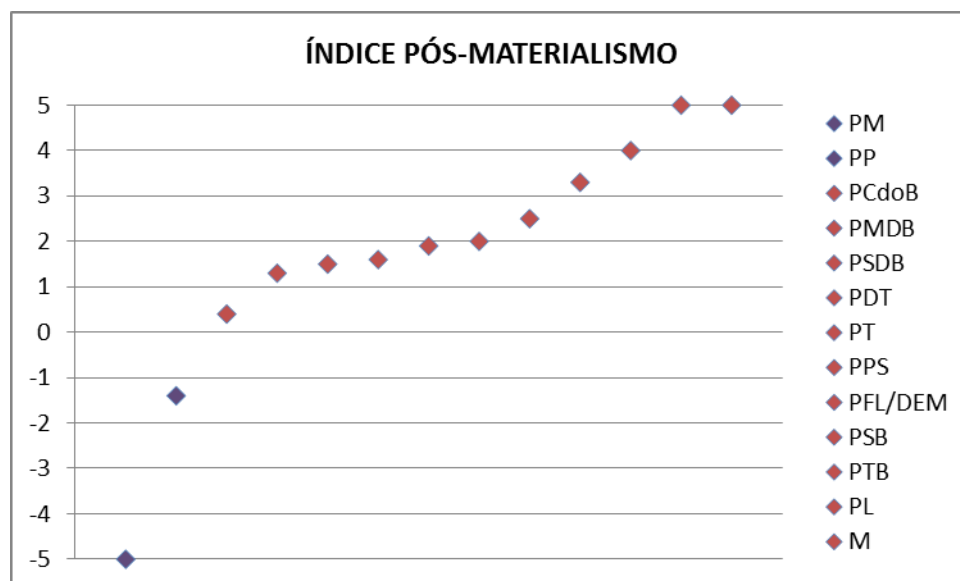


That is, beyond the hypothesis of providing for the material needs as a condition for the development of post-materialist values in a given society, Inglehart adds the hypothesis of socialization, suggesting that the consolidation of such values depends on the fact that “younger generations have experienced substantially different formative conditions from those that shaped older generations” (Inglehart, 2009, p. 237).

This means that the significant incorporation of such values into the political dimension should occur in a slow and gradual manner, as the material needs are provided for and, in the long run, as this process does not show signs of regression, making it possible for the new generations to be socialized within this new socioeconomic context.

In Brazil, a country where the fulfillment of material needs has not been achieved yet and which is still far from being compared with a society with social welfare, a weak incidence of post-materialist values in the parliamentary activity is expected. Figure 2 shows the relative incidence of post-materialist values in the parliamentary activity during the 51st and 52nd parliamentary terms.

Figure 2: Incidence of post-materialism in the parliamentary activity (2003-2010)



As expected, the vast majority of parties was placed in the materialistic side of the axis. Only the Progressive Party (PP) (-1.4) showed a proportionally greater share of post-materialist values in its bills. However, the sample of data is not robust enough to state that there is a different behavior of the PP in relation to other parties: only seven bills were submitted by the party over the period analyzed.

The order of parties on the figure shows their ability to incorporate post-materialist values, ranging from the most to the less inclusive, according to the incidence of post-materialist values in their legislative activity. In this sense, besides PP, PC do B (0.4) is the party most closely oriented towards the incorporation of post-materialism, whereas PL (5) is the party that does not base its activity on post-materialism. In addition to the PP and PC B, other parties stood out in the renewal of values. Namely: PMDB (1.3), PSDB (1.5), PDT (1.6), PT (1.9), and PPS (2).

However, the incorporation of such values does not automatically reflect a post-materialist positioning in comparison with the adoption of traditional values of the left-right axis. When materialism and post-materialism are compared, the position of some parties changes, although the general trend remains the same.

The ideological arrangement of the parties in this axis confirms the hypothesis that Brazil still lacks the necessary conditions for a robust presence of post-materialist values in its political dynamics. The design of this new axis makes it possible to reinterpret the left-right dynamics and the parties' positioning. Some examples are analyzed below.

PMDB and PL, which were placed in the central position in the left-right axis, were distant from each other in the post-materialism index. Whereas PMDB showed a balance between materialism and post-materialism, PL revealed to be exclusively materialistic. That is, they are both center parties, but they differ in their ability of promoting political renewal, since PMDB is more capable of reinventing itself than PL. PSB (3.3) and PT (1.9), which are also close in the center-left position, get slightly distant from each other when it comes to post-materialism, since PT is more open to incorporating new value trends into society in comparison with PSB.

## Conclusion

The present paper shows the results of a research project that is intended to be more comprehensive, including researchers from different Brazilian regions. Its general objective is to classify the Brazilian political parties in the left-right scale based on a content analysis of the Bills submitted by the leader of each party to the Legislative Assembly and the Congress. With that purpose in mind, a methodology was designed and the legislative proposals of the political parties with representation at ALERGS during the 51st and 52nd parliamentary terms (2003-2010) were analyzed.

After the collection and classification of the Bills, the analysis process was divided into two phases: (1) the distribution of the parties in the left-right axis; (2) the incidence of post-materialist values in the propositions.

In the first phase of the analysis, ie, during the classification of the parties in the traditional ideological axis, we found that the right-wing value that stood out in the parliamentary activity was the defense of *economy* and its agents as a means to build a successful society. Considering the left-wing parties, the most popular value was *society*, in the sense of making the State compensate the Society for the socioeconomic inequality.

Regarding the positioning of the parties, the scale resulting from the analysis showed a clustering around the political center, which is in agreement with the thesis of the centripetal tendency of the parties and the decline of traditional political ideologies. PL's position was exactly in the center of the scale, followed by PMDB, PSDB, and PTB, all of which belong to the right field, even though their rates were below 0.5 and, therefore, they may be considered as being closer to the center than to the right. We identified a right shift of the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), former Brazilian Communist Party -- which has adopted a different position in Rio Grande do Sul since former members of PMDB's right wing joined PPS. None of the parties was significantly positioned in the right: both PP and PFL/DEM had rates below 2.5, which classify them in the center-right field. Conversely, only two parties reached the center-left index: PSB and PT.

The analysis of the ideological classification of the parties represented at ALERGS revealed a centripetal tendency. None of the parties was classified in an extreme position, either to the left or to the right. Such conclusion required the expansion of the analysis to the molecular ideologies, also known as post-materialist ideologies, in order to investigate the parties' ability to promote ideological renewal.

Thus, the second phase of our research consisted of determining how the parties incorporated post-materialist values. PP, a center-right party, was the only one to prefer the post-materialist values instead of the materialist values. All the other parties were positioned in the materialistic side of the axis, as theoretically expected. Of these, PC do B was more prone to the incorporation of molecular ideologies; conversely, PL did not include molecular ideologies in its bills. The other parties that stood out in the renewal of values were PMDB and PSDB.

Comparing both scales, we found that PMDB and PL, which shared a central position in the left-right axis, were apart from each other in the materialism/post-materialism axis. While PMDB showed a significant ability to incorporate post-materialist

values, PL proved to be exclusively materialistic. That is, both are center parties, but they differ in their ability of promoting political renewal. PSB and PT, which are also close in the center-left field, are slightly away from each other when it comes to post-materialism, showing that PT is more open to the incorporation of new values into society.

Specifically, who do the political parties in Rio Grande do Sul serve? Who do they legislate for and which is their ideology?

PT is a center-left party, leaning slightly towards post-materialistic values. It is universalist in its proposals, but when it defines a more specific audience, it turns to the defense of the labor world. Conversely, PSB is little related to post-materialistic values; its priority audience are Specific Segments and Sectors: labor. PDT is adopting a post-materialist discourse, without compromising its left values. Its universal vocation in terms of target-audience is characterized by the definition of specific segments of society as a target for its policies. PC do B proved to be highly predisposed to the incorporation of post-materialist values; its priority investment was done in Specific Segments, softened by a universalizing activity, and in the Sectorial segment: Labor. PSDB has proven to be a center party, leaning slightly to the right, significantly predisposed to the adoption of post-materialistic values, and its audience of choice is Specific Segment, without, however, compromising universalistic propositions or labor-related proposals.

PMDB, which is positioned at the center of the traditional ideological axis, fails to produce a defined public identity. It defends the interests of capital, equality and environmentalism at the same time; its preferred target-audience was the Sectorial field: capital and labor, as well as Specific Segments. In the left-right axis, PL was close to PMDB. However, it proved to be much more traditional, without incorporating any post-materialistic values. Its primary target-audience was composed of Specific Segments and the capital. PTB was also in the central axis of the scale, but slightly to the right. It did not stand out in the adoption of post-materialist values and its audience of choice included sectoral targets in the labor fields. It also showed a universalist activity. It proved to be contradictory because it based its proposals on the center-right values and defend interests related to the left. DEM was in the central axis of the right field before the center-right mark; it almost did not adopt post-materialistic values and it defined the universal audience as its primary target, followed by Specific Segments. PPS underwent a change in the ideological field. It was the one closest to the right in the left-right spectrum and it adopted post-materialistic values. PPS serves a universal audience and capital.

These were the first results of an attempt to classify the Brazilian parties based on their legislative activity. At the end of this research project, we intend to design a national picture of the ideological dimension of the Brazilian political parties, mapping their positions in the scale and defining their target audiences based on the parliamentary activity of each party. We hope our results complement the analyses based on the classification of political elites, on the perception of voters regarding the voting sessions, and on the partisan or government programs, because we believe that each different type of analysis is able to compensate for the weaknesses of the others, defining a more accurate picture of the ideological dimension of the Brazilian politics.

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[1] The phenomenon of "ashamed right" is identified when the political elites avoid the "right" label and tend to position themselves more to the left regarding its actual ideological positioning.

[2] Former Liberal Front Party (PFL).