

# Contemporary Brazil: The Political Dimension

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**Objectives** As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:  
Analyze the nature of the political system.  
Assess the degree to which Brazilians enjoy the opportunity for civic and political participation.  
Apply Freedom House criteria to contemporary Brazil.

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**Materials** Student Handout: **Freedom House Ratings**  
Student Handout: **The Political Process and Civil Society**

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- Activities**
1. Distribute the student handout entitled **Freedom House Ratings**.
    - a. Explain that Freedom House is a non-governmental organization that studies the condition of political freedom and civil liberties in nations around the world.
    - b. Place the numbers “1,1,F” and “7,7,NF” on the chalkboard.
      - Explain that the first number indicates the level of political freedom in a country (right to participate in elections, a political party, etc.) and the second number indicates the level of civil liberties (freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, equal opportunity, etc.)
      - Explain that, based on their analysis, Freedom House assigns one of three ratings to a state: Free (F), Partially Free (PF), Not Free (NF)
      - Explain that the lower the rating, the more free and democratic the society is, with 1,1,F being the best rating and 7,7,NF the worst rating.
    - c. Direct students to take a few moments to read through the criteria for the ratings in the “Political Rights” segment of the handout.
      - Ask students to apply these criteria to the political system in the United States. What rating would they give the U.S.? Why?
      - After students have shared their observations, explain that Freedom House gives the U. S. a 1 regarding political rights.
    - d. Direct students to take a few moments to read through the criteria for the ratings in the “Civil Liberties” segment of the handout.
      - Ask students to apply these criteria to civil society in the United States. What rating would they give the U.S.? Why?

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**Activities  
(continued)**

- After students have shared their observations, explain that Freedom House gives the United States a 1 regarding civil liberties. This would give the United States a rating of 1,1, F, a free state.
2. Divide the class into a series of work groups and distribute the student handout entitled **The Political Process and Civil Society**
    - a. Explain to the class that they are now going to apply the Freedom House criteria to the nation of Brazil by examining a condensed version of the 2006 Freedom House report on Brazil.
    - b. Explain that their task, as a group, is to:
      - read through the evidence as presented by Freedom House.
      - reach a group consensus on what ratings Brazil should be assigned for both political rights and civil liberties.
      - label Brazil as a Free (F), Partially Free (PF) or a Not Free (NF) country based on their findings.
      - Construct a group report that explains the rationale for their rating, using examples from the Freedom House report to support their rating.
  3. When each group has completed its analysis, direct each group to select a spokesperson to deliver the findings of the group to the class.
    - a. As each group delivers its report, enter the group's rating (example: 2, 2, F) on the chalkboard.
    - b. After all groups have presented, direct the attention of the class to the ratings on the chalkboard. Is there consistency in the ratings? If not, ask the class to try to reach a consensus based on the evidence presented.
    - c. Once the class has achieved consensus, reveal that Freedom House has rated Brazil as 2, 2, F.
    - d. Direct students to read through the handout and to identify at least three reasons why Freedom House has rated Brazil as a Free state.
    - e. Ask students to note that, of particular significance, Brazil's civil liberties rating improved from 3 to 2 due to continued governmental steps to enhance racial equality.
  4. Concluding Activity

Direct students to compose an essay in which they identify what they believe to be the most significant obstacles to Brazil's achieving a full 1,1,F rating, justifying their arguments with data from the Freedom House report.
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# Freedom House Ratings

## Political Rights

Rating	Explanation
1	Countries and territories that receive a rating of 1 for political rights come closest to ensuring the essential political freedoms, beginning with free and fair elections. Those who are elected rule, there are competitive parties or other political groupings, and the opposition plays an important role and has actual power. Minority groups have reasonable self-government or can participate in the government through informal consensus.
2	Countries and territories rated 2 in political rights are less free than those rated 1. Such factors as political corruption, violence, political discrimination against minorities, and foreign or military influence on politics may be present and weaken the quality of freedom.
3 - 5	The same conditions that undermine freedom in countries and territories with a rating of 2 may also weaken political rights in those with a rating of 3, 4, or 5. Other damaging elements can include civil war, heavy military involvement in politics, lingering royal power, unfair elections, and one-party dominance. However, states and territories in these categories may still enjoy some elements of political rights, including the freedom to organize quasi-political groups, reasonably free referendums, or other significant means of popular influence on government.
6	Countries and territories with political rights rated 6 have systems ruled by military juntas, one-party dictatorships, religious hierarchies, or autocrats. These regimes may allow only a minimal manifestation of political rights, such as some degree of representation or autonomy for minorities. A few states are traditional monarchies that mitigate their relative lack of political rights through the use of consultation with their subjects, tolerance of political discussion, and acceptance of public petitions.
7	For countries and territories with a rating of 7, political rights are absent or virtually nonexistent as a result of the extremely oppressive nature of the regime or severe oppression in combination with civil war. States and territories in this group may also be marked by extreme violence or warlord rule that dominates political power in the absence of an authoritative, functioning central government.

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## Civil Liberties

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Rating	Explanation
1	<p>Countries and territories that receive a rating of 1 come closest to ensuring civil liberties, including freedom of expression, assembly, association, education, and religion. They are distinguished by an established and generally equitable system of rule of law.</p> <p>Countries and territories with this rating enjoy free economic activity and tend to strive for equality of opportunity.</p>
2	<p>States and territories with a rating of 2 have deficiencies in a few aspects of civil liberties, but are still relatively free.</p>
3 - 5	<p>Countries and territories that have received a rating of 3, 4, or 5 range from those that are in at least partial compliance with virtually all checklist standards to those with a combination of high or medium scores for some questions and low or very low scores on other questions. The level of oppression increases at each successive rating level, including in the areas of censorship, political terror, and the prevention of free association. There are also many cases in which groups opposed to the state engage in political terror that undermines other freedoms. Therefore, a poor rating for a country is not necessarily a comment on the intentions of the government, but may reflect real restrictions on liberty caused by nongovernmental actors.</p>
6	<p>People in countries and territories with a rating of 6 experience severely restricted rights of expression and association, and there are almost always political prisoners and other manifestations of political terror. These countries may be characterized by a few partial rights, such as some religious and social freedoms, some highly restricted private business activity, and relatively free private discussion.</p>
7	<p>States and territories with a rating of 7 have virtually no freedom. An overwhelming and justified fear of repression characterizes these societies.</p>

# The Political Process and Civil Society

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## **The Political Landscape**

Citizens of Brazil can change their government democratically. The October 2004 municipal elections were free and fair. A new constitution, which went into effect in 1985 and was heavily amended in 1988, provides for a president to be elected for four years and a bicameral National Congress consisting of an 81-member Federal Senate elected for eight years and a 513-member Chamber of Deputies elected for four years. A constitutional amendment adopted in 1997 permits presidential reelection.

Based on the size of congressional delegations elected in 2002, the largest Brazilian political parties, in descending order, are the Workers' Party (PT); the Liberal Front Party (PFL); the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB); the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB); the Brazilian Progressive Party (PPB); the Liberal Party (PL); the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB); the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), and the Democratic Labor Party (PDT). Each of these won at least 20 seats; 10 other parties are also represented in Congress.

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## **The Media**

The constitution guarantees freedom of expression. The press is privately owned, but foreigners can acquire only a 30 percent share of a media company and are restricted in their ability to influence editorial decisions or management selection. There are dozens of daily newspapers and numerous other publications throughout the country. The print media have played a central role in exposing official corruption.

The government does not impose restrictions on the use of the Internet, although federal and state police have begun to monitor the Internet to detect online recruitment by sex traffickers and to check on the activities of hate groups.

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## **Civil Liberties**

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice. Evangelical Christian communities have grown significantly in recent years, from 9 percent of the population in 1991 to 15 percent in 2000. The government does not restrict academic freedom.

The rights of freedom of association and assembly are generally respected, as is the right to strike. Industrial labor unions are well organized; although they are politically connected, unions tend to be more autonomous of political party control than is true in most other Latin American countries. There are special labor courts.

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**Crime**

Few Brazilians have not been affected by violent crime, and in 2005, the country's criminal justice system appeared on the verge of collapse, even as the police conducted military-style raids against drug traffickers in the hills of Rio de Janeiro. The climate of lawlessness is reinforced by a largely independent but weak judiciary, which is overtaxed, plagued by chronic corruption, and virtually powerless in the face of organized crime.

Brazil has the highest rate of homicide caused by firearms of any country not at war-more than 70 percent-and the yearly number of gun deaths has more than doubled since 1992. Police say that most violent crime in the country, perhaps as much as 70 to 80 percent, is directly or indirectly related to the illegal drug trade, including most of the 37,000 annual murders. An estimated 200,000 Brazilians are employed in the narcotics business, with at least 5,000 heavily armed gang members working for various drug-trafficking groups in Rio de Janeiro alone. Since 1994, the federal government has deployed the army to quell police strikes and bring order to Rio de Janeiro's 400 slums, most of which are ruled by gangs in league or in competition with corrupt police and local politicians.

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**The Issue of Corruption**

Despite a constitutional right of access to public information, Brazil does not have specific laws to regulate and guarantee the principle of transparency provided for in the constitution. Corruption remains a serious problem in Brazil, which was ranked 62 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

On January 1, 2003, Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva was inaugurated as president. He instituted anticorruption measures, maintained cordial relations with the United States despite his independent foreign policy, and quickly established himself as one of the world's foremost voices for developing nations.

However, his Worker's Party (PT) and its coalition partners were wracked by a series of highly explosive scandals in 2005, including accusations that they offered legislators millions of dollars in bribes, had paid for party campaigns across the country with illegally obtained funds, and were engaged in kickback schemes involving public works. Questions about da Silva's knowledge of the illegal acts led to a decline in his popularity ratings, although he rebounded from the scandal and won re-election in 2006, promising a full investigation and a package of anticorruption reforms.

Brazil's police are among the world's most violent and corrupt. Torture is used systematically to extract confessions from prisoners, and extrajudicial killings are portrayed as shootouts with dangerous criminals. Death squads operating in at least 15 of Brazil's 26 states, often composed of off-duty state police, terrorize shantytown dwellers and intimidate human rights activists attempting to investigate abuses.

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**Gender Issues** Congress approved a legal code that for the first time in the country's history makes women equal to men under the law. In January 2003, a new civil code took effect, formally replacing a 1916 text that contained myriad discriminatory provisions concerning social behavior in government, in business, and at home; the new code gave women the same rights in marriage as men. Nevertheless, violence against women and children is a common problem, and protective laws are rarely enforced. Forced prostitution of children is widespread. Child labor is prevalent, and laws against it are rarely enforced.

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**The Landless Movement** Large landowners control nearly 60 percent of the country's arable land, while the poorest 30 percent of the population share less than 2 percent. In rural areas, land invasions are organized by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), which claims that the lands invaded are unused or illegally held, but many of the properties invaded are legally owned by others. The courts have increasingly supported the eviction of such land invaders, and some owners have resisted with force. The MST is a grassroots movement not formally affiliated with the PT but has enjoyed some PT support.

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**The Issue of Race** Racial discrimination, long officially denied as a problem in Brazil, began to receive both recognition and remediation from the government of President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva. Afro-Brazilians earn less than 50 percent of the average earnings of other citizens, and on average, Afro-Brazilian university graduates earn less than others with only high school diplomas. In a precedent-setting series of actions, upon taking office da Silva named four Afro-Brazilians to his cabinet, appointed the country's first Afro-Brazilian Supreme Court justice, and pressed for the adoption of a Racial Equality Statute to redeem his pledge that Afro-Brazilians would make up at least one-third of the federal government within five years. In July, a court ruled in favor of an Afro-Brazilian man who claimed racial discrimination in his dismissal by a hotel in Rio de Janeiro in 2003.

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**Source** Adapted from a report used by Freedom House ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org))

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