

The Fate of Dilma Rousseff and the Future of Hillary Clinton: Anything in Common?

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Drawing comparisons or parallels between people, political situations, and different processes is a dangerous endeavor. One runs the risk of creating false analogies and equating events that are quite distinct because of notable historical and contemporary differences. Yet a Brazilian colleague teaching in the United States encouraged me to share my ideas with a wider audience about the impeachment process in Brazil and the current political moment in the United States. It seems timely to do so in the run-up to the U.S. presidential elections and as the center-right consolidates its power in Brazil.

The Brazilian elections that gave Dilma Rousseff her second mandate in office in 2014 were the most polarized since the return to democracy in the late 1980s. Reflective of that fact, her margin of victory of 3.2 percent was the smaller than that of Fernando Collor de Mello's 6.0 percent win over Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 1989 in Brazil's first democratic presidential election since 1960. Still she won by a hefty 54.5 million votes against her opponent Aécio Neves's 51 million. (We should keep in mind that Barack Obama defeated Mitt Romney in 2012 with a 3.8 percent margin and 65 million votes to Romney's 60 million).

The 2014 Brazilian electoral campaign was a rough-and-tumble affair, filled with accusations and counter-accusations about the fate of Brazil under a left-leaning Workers' Party-led coalition government or under the leadership of the center-right Brazilian Social Democratic Party and its allies. Lula had handpicked President Rousseff in 2010 to be his successor, and he heralded her strengths in her administrative experience, rather than in talents accumulated while rising to prominence as an elected politician. In her first two years in office,

she reached a 60 percent approval rating and only slipped in popularity during and after the massive June 2013 mobilizations that questioned government spending priorities and called for better health services, more educational opportunities, and improved public transportation, among other demands. Sensing that the President's support was waning, the conservative mainstream press and media conglomerates, which had initially opposed the São Paulo-based demonstrations against a bus fare hike, did an about-face and encouraged nationwide protests. Nonetheless, Rousseff won the 2014 elections. Immediately, her opponents charged electoral fraud and questioned the legitimacy of the outcome.

From that point on, opposition political parties in Congress, as well as members of the PT's electoral coalition, began challenging Rousseff's presidency and blocking her ability to govern. The systematic leaking of information about graft and corruption involving figures associated with her governing coalition by the *Lava Jato* (Car Wash) investigations further undermined her ability to rule, even though until today no personal corruption charges have been leveled against her. The country's economic downturn further undercut her popularity, and the opposition, now calling for impeachment, began mobilizations to bring her down. The legal bases for removing the president from office presented in Congress were flimsy at best, but they served a political end. Members of her governing coalition abandoned her. Some did so because she refused to block corruption investigations. Others jumped ship because they saw government posts and other opportunities in a new government coalition mounted by her vice president, Michel Temer. In this way, the pro-impeachment forces gained enough support to oust her from office. It was a parliamentary coup d'état, many would argue.

Barack Obama also faced a hostile Congress when he was elected president in 2008. Congressional Republicans met in Washington, D.C. on the day of his inauguration in January 2009 and made a pact to turn him into a one-term president. Rather than helping him pass legislation, they blocked his initiatives at every turn. Health care reform barely squeaked through Congress, in part because rightwing forces mobilized millions against Obamacare. Thus was born the Tea Party, with its overt and covert racist undertones, its xenophobia, its radical right discourse, and its militant opposition to anything that Obama touched. Enter a larger-than-life hotelier and reality television personality who championed the “birther movement,” arguing that the elections were illegitimate because Obama was actually born in Kenya and not eligible to be the president of the United States.

Obama steered the U.S. economy out of the Great Recession and inspired African-Americans, Latinos, and youth, with his hope-filled rhetoric. He will leave office relatively popular with a 55 percent approval rating, despite the ongoing rightwing campaigns against him. Although he remained publicly neutral in the Democratic Party primaries, it was clear that the candidacy of Hillary Clinton represented a defense of his presidential legacy. His unconditional support for a once political opponent, who then became his secretary of state, is striking.

Donald Trump will likely lose the elections. Yet, to point blame elsewhere, he now insists that the “system is rigged” and that he might not recognize the voting results. His reluctance to play by the rules of the game is unprecedented in the history of conventional American politics. Although some observers believe that he could lead his millions of supporters out of the Republican Party to form a new one, causing a major political realignment, it is more

likely that he will use his popularity to form a media empire to promote Donald Trump, which is what he does best. A significant sector of the Republican establishment, which in large part has distanced itself from the excesses of Trumpism during the election campaign, will quickly call his supporters back into the fold to wage a united anti-Hillary battle. They will try to block most of her legislative initiatives and work to undercut her support in Congress through the 2018 elections. It is possible that they will attempt to impeach her, especially if there is a resurgence of support for Republicans in the next elections when lower voter turnout among Democrats has historically favored their party.

Both Dilma Rousseff and Hillary Clinton are strong, determined women. Dilma Rousseff was a guerrilla fighter who endured torture and a three-year jail term for opposing the military dictatorship. In her youth, Hillary Clinton chose a legal career and work in an NGO to address the social issues on the 1960s and 70s. Even Donald Trump acknowledged her qualities as a fighter. Both women defend moderate social democratic programs that rely on the state to help address social inequality and injustice. Dilma Rousseff broke the glass ceiling in Brazil, and Hillary Clinton is likely to do the same in the United States.

However, there is no doubt that misogyny, fueled by the media but also based on widespread, deeply held traditional notions of appropriate gendered performance, played a role in systematically undercutting Dilma Rousseff's legitimacy in Brazil. Similar sentiments have plagued Hillary Clinton since her feminist comment that she would not sit back and merely "bake cookies" when asked about her role as First Lady so many years ago. The expectation that she be a warm, personable, smiling mother of the nation and the concern by some that a woman can't be the commander-in-chief are merely two of the many ways in which the double standard

towards men and women plays out in politics. Few impartial observers would deny that Dilma Rousseff suffered the same slings and arrows from her most vociferous detractors, as well as ordinary citizens who still believe that a woman's place in the home.

One also notices the subtexts of opposition to the Democrats and Obama/Clinton in the United States and to the Workers' Party and Lula/Dilma in Brazil. Latino immigrants and Muslims have upset the U.S. social order and must be put in their place. The uneducated and easily manipulated Brazilian poor voted for Rousseff because of Bolsa Família handouts. Social hierarchies have been undermined.

In the United States millions of white working-class voters believe that the civil rights movements (including those fighting for women's and LGBTQ rights), globalization, and a perceived weakening of traditional Christian moral values are the reasons for America's "decline." In Brazil, large sectors of the middle classes, which formed the core of the pro-impeachment forces, revolted in no small measure because their privileged status was upturned by social changes that have taken place over the last decade or so. In both countries the international reorganization of capitalism (job losses in the U.S. Rustbelt and the drop in export commodity prices in Brazil) is one of a number of factors that have left people insecure about their futures in weakened economies. Similarly, in Brazil and the United States, evangelical Christian movements with conservative social agendas are key players in mobilizing support for a shift to the right.

Whether or not Hillary Clinton will face an impeachment challenge in the second half of her first term in office remains to be seen. If charges are brought against her in the House of Representatives, it is unlikely that her opponents will be able to muster a two-thirds majority in

the Senate to remove her from office. Still the effort would serve to consolidate the sentiments encouraged by the Republican Party against Obama almost a decade ago and crystalized in the current campaign led by Trump, which unfortunately mirror an international turn to the right worldwide.