

THE CENTRÃO AND THE PARADOXES OF GOVERNANCE IN BRAZIL: COALITION POLITICS, BUDGETARY POWER, AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

O CENTRÃO E OS PARADOXOS DA GOVERNANÇA NO BRASIL: POLÍTICA DE
COALIZÃO, PODER ORÇAMENTÁRIO E RESPONSABILIZAÇÃO
DEMOCRÁTICA

EL CENTRÃO Y LAS PARADOJAS DE LA GOBERNANZA EN BRASIL: POLÍTICA
DE COALICIÓN, PODER PRESUPUESTARIO Y RENDICIÓN DE CUENTAS
DEMOCRÁTICA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of the Centrão in shaping governance dynamics in Brazil, focusing on the tensions between political bargaining, institutional stability, and distributive conflict. Drawing on governance theory and the literature on coalition presidentialism, the study analyzes how informal political arrangements interact with formal institutions to both enable and constrain executive action. The analytical framework is grounded in the contributions of Sérgio Abranches, George Tsebelis, and R. A. W. Rhodes. Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative approach combining literature review and a case study of recent budgetary politics (2024–2026), particularly the expansion of parliamentary amendments. The findings indicate that the Centrão operates as a pivotal governance actor: it ensures governability through negotiated exchanges while simultaneously reinforcing opacity, increasing transaction costs, and privileging particularistic interests. The article argues that the Brazilian case illustrates a broader paradox in contemporary governance, in which informal practices sustain institutional stability at the expense of transparency and programmatic policymaking.

Keywords: Governance. Centrão. Brazil. Budgetary.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o papel do Centrão na configuração das dinâmicas de governança no Brasil, com foco nas tensões entre barganha política, estabilidade institucional e conflito distributivo. Com base na teoria da governança e na literatura sobre presidencialismo de coalizão, o estudo analisa como arranjos políticos informais interagem com instituições formais para, simultaneamente, possibilitar e restringir a ação do Poder Executivo. O referencial analítico fundamenta-se nas contribuições de Sérgio Abranches, George Tsebelis e R. A. W. Rhodes. Metodologicamente, o artigo adota uma abordagem qualitativa, combinando revisão da literatura

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e estudo de caso da política orçamentária recente (2024–2026), com destaque para a expansão das emendas parlamentares. Os resultados indicam que o *Centrão* atua como um ator central da governança: assegura a governabilidade por meio de negociações políticas, ao mesmo tempo em que reforça a opacidade, eleva os custos de transação e privilegia interesses particularistas. O artigo argumenta que o caso brasileiro ilustra um paradoxo mais amplo da governança contemporânea, no qual práticas informais sustentam a estabilidade institucional à custa da transparência e da formulação programática de políticas públicas.

Palavras-chave: Governança. *Centrão*. Brasil. Orçamento Público.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el papel del *Centrão* en la configuración de las dinámicas de gobernabilidad en Brasil, centrándose en las tensiones entre la negociación política, la estabilidad institucional y el conflicto distributivo. Basándose en la teoría de la gobernanza y en la literatura sobre el presidencialismo de coalición, el estudio analiza cómo los arreglos políticos informales interactúan con las instituciones formales para, al mismo tiempo, posibilitar y limitar la acción del Poder Ejecutivo. El marco analítico se fundamenta en las contribuciones de Sérgio Abranches, George Tsebelis y R. A. W. Rhodes. Metodológicamente, el artículo adopta un enfoque cualitativo que combina la revisión bibliográfica con un estudio de caso sobre la política presupuestaria reciente (2024–2026), en particular la expansión de las enmiendas parlamentarias. Los resultados indican que el *Centrão* actúa como un actor clave de la gobernabilidad: garantiza la gobernabilidad mediante intercambios negociados, al tiempo que refuerza la opacidad, incrementa los costos de transacción y privilegia intereses particularistas. El artículo sostiene que el caso brasileño ilustra una paradoja más amplia de la gobernanza contemporánea, en la que las prácticas informales sostienen la estabilidad institucional a costa de la transparencia y de la formulación programática de políticas públicas.

Palabras clave: Gobernanza. *Centrão*. Brasil. Presupuesto Público.



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INTRODUCTION

Governance in recent democracies increasingly depends on complex interactions among political actors operating across both formal and informal arenas. Within the Brazilian political system, these dynamics are particularly evident in the emergence and consolidation of the *Centrão*, an informal, highly pragmatic, and strategically adaptive parliamentary bloc that exerts substantial influence over legislative bargaining processes and executive decision-making. Although frequently portrayed in both scholarly and public discourse as a manifestation of political fragmentation, opportunism, and clientelistic exchange, the *Centrão* simultaneously

constitutes a crucial mechanism through which governability is sustained within one of the most fragmented party systems among contemporary democracies.

Political developments observed between 2024 and 2026 suggest not merely the persistence of the *Centrão* as a relevant political actor, but rather the consolidation and expansion of its institutional leverage, particularly through its growing influence over budgetary governance and its capacity to coordinate legislative behavior across heterogeneous party organizations. Against this backdrop, this article conceptualizes the *Centrão* as both an enabler and a constraint of governance, examining the tensions that emerge at the intersection of political bargaining, institutional effectiveness, democratic accountability, and distributive politics.

As Borges (2025) contends, the *Centrão* should not be understood merely as a loosely organized coalition of parties and political actors, but rather as a strategically articulated power structure whose influence derives from its exceptional capacity for negotiation, coalition-building, and resource brokerage. Its principal objective lies in maximizing collective bargaining power within the institutional architecture of the Brazilian state. In this regard, the *Centrão* has become synonymous with political efficacy in the construction of legislative majorities, whether through reciprocal exchanges, selective incentives, or more complex forms of strategic coordination. Simultaneously, it retains considerable influence over the allocation of public resources and access to key governmental positions. Through its ability to shape decision-making processes, the bloc not only directs public policy trajectories but also establishes enduring parameters that structure legislative and executive interactions within the broader governance framework (Borges, 2025, p. 907).

As the *Centrão* has assumed an increasingly prominent position within Brazilian political dynamics, concerns regarding democratic legitimacy and institutional accountability have become correspondingly more salient. These concerns extend beyond questions of governability and legislative coordination, touching upon fundamental issues related to democratic representation, transparency, and the distribution of political power. As Borges (2025) argues, the *Centrão* is composed predominantly of centrist and center-right parties whose strategic alliances play a decisive role in determining both the operational logic of government and the legislative production process. More broadly, the political and institutional crisis that unfolded between 2015 and 2016 contributed significantly to the strengthening of a suprapartisan parliamentary bloc that progressively expanded its influence over the legislative arena while acquiring greater autonomy vis-à-vis the Executive branch.

At the core of this debate lies the question of transparency in political decision-making, particularly regarding legislative behavior, vetoes, and policy choices that frequently privilege specific interests over broader societal demands. The operational logic of the *Centrão* is fundamentally characterized by sophisticated bargaining strategies designed to maximize political returns, secure access to state resources, and expand institutional influence. Within this framework, the bloc often leverages public investment decisions, directing budgetary resources toward infrastructure projects in regions where its members possess substantial electoral support, thereby generating indirect benefits for economic actors closely linked to local political networks. Furthermore, its members strategically occupy influential positions within congressional leadership structures and parliamentary committees, enabling the bloc to shape legislative agendas through the advancement, modification, or obstruction of specific policy initiatives.

Beyond its influence over distributive politics, the *Centrão* also exercises considerable power over substantive policy outcomes. This influence may manifest in the promotion of sector-specific regulatory reforms, targeted modifications to labor legislation, or resistance to constitutional and institutional reforms perceived as contrary to the interests of its political constituencies. Consequently, the *Centrão* should be understood not merely as a legislative coalition, but as a central governance actor whose capacity to mediate access to political resources, institutional authority, and policy outcomes places it at the very heart of contemporary Brazilian statecraft. Its growing prominence reflects broader transformations in the balance of power between the Executive and Legislative branches, revealing a governance model increasingly characterized by decentralized authority, negotiated policymaking, and the institutionalization of distributive bargaining as a core mechanism of political coordination (Borges, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates two complementary methodological strategies: (1) a systematic review of the literature and (2) an in-depth case study analysis. The literature review engages with the theoretical traditions of governance studies, coalition presidentialism, and comparative institutional analysis, with particular attention to the works of Abranches, Rhodes, Kooiman, and Tsebelis.

The empirical component focuses on the evolution of Brazilian budgetary governance

between 2024 and 2026, examining the expansion of parliamentary amendments, the redistribution of fiscal authority, and the dynamics of executive-legislative bargaining. The case study was selected because it provides a strategic setting for observing how formal institutional rules interact with informal political arrangements in the production of governability.

Empirical evidence is drawn from publicly available government reports, congressional records, institutional documents, budgetary databases, and secondary scholarly analyses. Particular attention is devoted to patterns of budget allocation, parliamentary amendment execution, and legislative negotiation processes.

Analytically, the study adopts a process-tracing approach to identify the causal mechanisms linking political bargaining, coalition management, and governance outcomes. Rather than merely describing institutional developments, the analysis seeks to explain how negotiated exchanges among political actors shape policy implementation, resource distribution, and the broader configuration of democratic governance in Brazil.

GOVERNANCE, COALITION PRESIDENTIALISM, AND VETO PLAYERS

The concept of governance has undergone a profound theoretical transformation over the past decades, evolving from a state-centric understanding of public authority toward a broader conception that emphasizes networks, interdependence, negotiation, and multi-actor coordination. Rather than viewing the state as the sole locus of decision-making, contemporary governance scholarship highlights the complex interactions among governmental institutions, political actors, civil society organizations, and market actors involved in the formulation and implementation of public policies. In this regard, Rhodes (1997) conceptualizes governance as a system of interdependent networks characterized by resource exchange, mutual dependence, and negotiated coordination, whereas Kooiman (1993) emphasizes interactive forms of governing in which public and private actors jointly participate in the management of collective affairs. Governance, therefore, is increasingly understood not as hierarchical control but as the capacity to coordinate diverse actors operating across multiple institutional arenas.

Within the Brazilian context, these theoretical developments intersect with the institutional dynamics of what Abranches (1988) famously termed *coalition presidentialism* (*presidencialismo de coalizão*). According to Abranches, the combination of a presidential system with a highly fragmented multiparty structure creates strong incentives for coalition

formation as a prerequisite for governability. Unlike parliamentary systems, where governing coalitions are institutionally embedded, Brazilian presidents must continuously negotiate legislative support in order to secure policy approval and maintain political stability. Consequently, governance emerges not merely as an expression of presidential authority but as the outcome of complex and ongoing bargaining processes between the Executive and Legislative branches. Coalition management thus becomes a central component of policymaking and institutional performance.

Subsequent scholarship has refined and, in important respects, challenged early interpretations that associated party fragmentation with governmental instability. Figueiredo and Limongi (1999) indicate that Brazilian presidents possess substantial agenda-setting powers and institutional resources that enable them to coordinate legislative majorities despite the fragmented nature of the party system. Mechanisms such as provisional measures, budgetary discretion, and control over legislative procedures provide the Executive with significant leverage in coalition management. Their findings suggest that governance in Brazil is characterized not by institutional paralysis, but rather by a structured pattern of interaction between the Executive and Legislative branches in which coalition discipline, party coordination, and strategic bargaining facilitate policy approval.

Building upon this institutional perspective, Amorim Neto (2006) highlights the strategic contribution of cabinet formation as a mechanism for coalition maintenance and political coordination. The allocation of ministerial portfolios among coalition partners functions not only as an instrument for securing legislative support but also as a means of incorporating diverse political actors into the governing process. Cabinet appointments therefore constitute a critical resource through which presidents manage coalition dynamics, distribute political incentives, and preserve governability. From this perspective, governance depends fundamentally on the strategic allocation of political resources and institutional positions within governing coalitions.

A complementary body of literature emphasizes the significance of distributive politics and legislative behavior in sustaining coalition arrangements. Pereira and Mueller (2002) argue that exchanges involving legislative support and budgetary benefits constitute one of the principal mechanisms underpinning executive-legislative cooperation in Brazil. In particular, parliamentary amendments and distributive spending serve as instruments through which political actors negotiate support, allocate resources, and reinforce electoral constituencies. Governance, therefore, is not produced solely through institutional coordination but also through the strategic

distribution of material and political resources. Such arrangements shape not only legislative behavior but also the substantive content and territorial distribution of public policies.

More recent analyses have directed attention toward the growing importance of informal political actors and parliamentary groupings, particularly the *Centrão*. Frequently characterized by ideological flexibility and strategic pragmatism, these actors prioritize access to state resources, institutional influence, and political bargaining opportunities over programmatic commitments. Their participation in governing coalitions reinforces the transactional dimension of Brazilian governance, a phenomenon highlighted by scholars such as Pereira and Power (2010). The influence of the *Centrão* is especially evident in budgetary negotiations, legislative agenda-setting, and coalition maintenance, where support is often conditioned upon distributive benefits and access to decision-making processes. As a result, governance increasingly reflects negotiated exchanges among heterogeneous actors operating within both formal and informal institutional arenas.

Taken together, the Brazilian literature converges on the proposition that governance is deeply embedded within coalition dynamics. Rather than constituting an obstacle to governability, coalition politics represents the principal mechanism through which political stability and legislative coordination are achieved. However, this process carries important implications for policy design, distributive outcomes, democratic accountability, and the quality of political representation. Governance, in this sense, emerges as a continuous balancing act between institutional coordination and political negotiation.

From a comparative institutional perspective, the work of Tsebelis (2002) offers an important analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. According to veto player theory, political systems are composed of actors whose agreement is necessary for policy change. These veto players may be institutional, such as presidents, legislative chambers, and courts, or partisan, such as coalition partners whose support is required for maintaining governing majorities. The central proposition of the theory is that the likelihood of policy change decreases as the number of veto players increases and as ideological distances among them become more pronounced.

Tsebelis argues that any proposed policy must fall within the *winset* of all relevant veto players, that is, within the range of alternatives acceptable to each actor possessing veto power. As the number of veto players expands or their preferences diverge, the size of the winset contracts, making agreement increasingly difficult to achieve. Consequently, political systems

characterized by multiple veto players tend to exhibit greater policy stability, slower rates of institutional change, higher risks of legislative deadlock, and more extensive bargaining processes. Policy outcomes often emerge as the product of compromise and negotiation, resulting in incremental rather than transformative reforms.

Importantly, Tsebelis does not interpret the presence of multiple veto players as inherently detrimental to governance. Although they may increase the costs of decision-making and constrain policy innovation, veto players can also serve as safeguards against abrupt, unilateral, or extreme policy changes. In this sense, they contribute to institutional predictability, policy continuity, and democratic stability (Tsebelis, 2002).

Applied to the Brazilian context, veto player theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how coalition politics shapes governance outcomes. The coexistence of multiple institutional actors, fragmented party structures, and heterogeneous coalition partners requires continuous negotiation for virtually any significant policy change. Within this configuration, the *Centrão* can be understood as a collective veto actor whose support is often indispensable for legislative approval and policy implementation. Its capacity to condition governmental decisions, influence budgetary allocations, and shape legislative outcomes underscores its central role within Brazil's most recent governance architecture. Accordingly, governance in Brazil is best understood as the product of complex interactions among formal institutions, coalition dynamics, distributive bargaining, and multiple veto players operating within an increasingly fragmented political environment.

THE CENTRÃO AS A GOVERNANCE ACTOR

The origins of the *Centrão* can be traced to the National Constituent Assembly of 1987–1988, during which a heterogeneous coalition of conservative, centrist, and pragmatically oriented legislators coalesced into a suprapartisan bloc with the explicit objective of influencing the drafting of Brazil's new democratic constitution. Acting in a highly coordinated manner, this parliamentary alliance sought to moderate progressive constitutional proposals while safeguarding the interests of regional political elites, business sectors, agrarian groups, and other actors associated with traditional structures of political and economic power (Power, 2000; Kinzo, 1993). As Timothy Power (2000) observes, the *Centrão* did not emerge as a formalized political organization but rather as an informal coalition characterized by distributive incentives,

political pragmatism, and limited ideological cohesion, attributes that would remain defining features of its political behavior throughout subsequent decades.

Following the promulgation of the Federal Constitution of 1988, the *Centrão* became increasingly institutionalized within the broader framework of coalition presidentialism described by Abranches (1988). The interaction between a highly fragmented multiparty system and the Executive's structural dependence on legislative majorities created favorable conditions for the expansion of the bargaining power exercised by informal parliamentary coalitions. Within this institutional environment, the *Centrão* gradually consolidated its position as a pivotal actor in executive-legislative relations, frequently exchanging political support for access to budgetary resources, ministerial appointments, strategic bureaucratic positions, and influence over policy formulation and implementation (Abranches, 1988; Figueiredo; Limongi, 1999).

The literature further suggests that the *Centrão* embodies a historical continuity of political practices that predate Brazil's democratic transition. Rather than representing a novel institutional phenomenon, it reflects the persistence of political arrangements rooted in clientelism, pragmatism, personalistic networks, and territorially based political machines. According to Kinzo (1993), the restructuring of the party system during the democratization process generated institutional conditions conducive to the proliferation of weakly programmatic parties and informal legislative alliances. From this perspective, the *Centrão* should be interpreted less as an institutional anomaly than as a logical consequence of the incentives embedded within Brazil's political system and its historical trajectory of state formation. Its enduring presence underscores the extent to which governance and policymaking in Brazil remain shaped by informal mechanisms of coordination operating alongside formal constitutional arrangements.

Importantly, the *Centrão* does not constitute a political party in the conventional sense, nor does it possess a stable organizational structure or clearly defined ideological platform. Rather, it functions as a flexible and adaptive parliamentary coalition whose influence derives from its capacity to aggregate legislative support, mediate executive-legislative interactions, and coordinate the preferences of otherwise heterogeneous political actors. Its political relevance stems less from programmatic coherence than from its strategic ability to occupy pivotal positions within legislative bargaining processes.

Consequently, the *Centrão* exemplifies a hybrid mode of governance in which informal political practices are deeply embedded within formal democratic institutions. This dual character generates a fundamental governance dilemma. On the one hand, the *Centrão* contributes to

governability by facilitating coalition formation, legislative coordination, and institutional stability. On the other hand, its operational logic frequently reinforces clientelistic exchanges, opaque decision-making processes, and particularistic forms of policymaking that privilege negotiated interests over programmatic policy objectives.

A further analytical challenge arises from the fluid and inherently informal nature of the *Centrão* itself. Because it lacks formal organizational boundaries, there is no definitive or universally accepted list of member parties. Its composition fluctuates over time in response to political alignments, electoral incentives, and negotiations with successive administrations. During the 2024–2026 period, however, the *Centrão* has generally been understood to encompass a set of medium-sized and ideologically flexible parties occupying strategic positions within Congress. Among the parties most frequently associated with the bloc are the Progressistas (PP), Republicanos, União Brasil, Partido Liberal (PL), Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB), and Partido Social Democrático (PSD). Depending on legislative behavior and coalition dynamics, additional parties such as Podemos, Avante, and Solidariedade may also be incorporated into broader definitions of the bloc.

Accordingly, the *Centrão* is best understood not as a stable coalition or coherent political organization, but rather as a fluid parliamentary formation whose boundaries are continuously renegotiated through processes of political bargaining and strategic alignment. Its membership is defined primarily by participation in negotiated governing arrangements, access to distributive resources, and involvement in coalition-building processes, rather than by enduring ideological commitments or formal organizational ties. In this sense, the *Centrão* represents a distinctive institutional phenomenon within Brazilian democracy: a flexible collective actor capable of exercising substantial influence over governance outcomes while remaining largely detached from the programmatic and organizational constraints that traditionally characterize political parties.

Ultimately, the growing prominence of the *Centrão* reflects broader transformations in the architecture of Brazilian governance. Its trajectory illustrates the increasing relevance of informal political coordination mechanisms in contemporary democracies, where governability often depends not only on formal constitutional rules but also on the capacity of political actors to construct and sustain complex networks of negotiation, exchange, and coalition management. As such, the *Centrão* occupies a central position in understanding the evolving relationship between institutional stability, democratic accountability, and political power in Brazil.

CASE STUDY: BUDGETARY GOVERNANCE AND PARLIAMENTARY POWER (2024–2026)

Emerging developments in Brazil's fiscal governance have evidenced a marked expansion in the scope and significance of parliamentary amendments. Between 2019 and 2024, federal transfers executed through such amendments, particularly within the health sector, experienced an almost twofold increase in real terms. By 2026, these instruments are projected to constitute a considerable share of discretionary federal expenditure, thereby underscoring their growing centrality in the allocation of public resources.

This shift reflects a redistribution of power from the executive to the legislature, with actors aligned with the Centrão gaining increased control over resource allocation. Parliamentary amendments now represent a key instrument of political bargaining, linking budgetary decisions to legislative support.

The growing influence of the *Centrão* on the Brazilian budget process has significantly reshaped the governance and allocation of the public fund (*fundo público*). Although the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) does not attribute the expansion of parliamentary amendments exclusively to the *Centrão*, its studies demonstrate that the strengthening of congressional control over discretionary expenditures has altered the institutional balance between the Executive and Legislative branches, increasing the capacity of parliamentary coalitions to influence the allocation of federal resources (Almeida; Dominguez, 2025).

From the perspective of political economy, parliamentary amendments constitute distributive policy instruments through which legislators allocate public resources to municipalities and electoral constituencies, thereby strengthening political support and legislative bargaining. According to Almeida and Dominguez (2025), the international literature classifies these expenditures as non-programmatic distributive policies, whose allocation is influenced not only by technical planning criteria but also by political incentives associated with electoral competition and coalition governance. In the Brazilian context, where the *Centrão* occupies a pivotal position in presidential coalition-building, the expansion of mandatory parliamentary amendments has reinforced the bargaining capacity of these parties over the federal budget, increasing their influence on the management of the public fund.

Ipea further argues that the continuous expansion of parliamentary amendments has transformed the pattern of public expenditure by transferring a growing share of discretionary

spending from executive planning to legislative decision-making. This institutional change has fragmented budget execution, since an increasing proportion of public resources is distributed according to localized political negotiations rather than integrated national policy priorities. Consequently, the Brazilian public fund has become progressively conditioned by congressional bargaining dynamics, particularly those involving parliamentary groups capable of guaranteeing legislative majorities for the Executive, such as the *Centrão* (Almeida; Dominguez, 2025).

Empirical evidence produced by Ipea illustrates the magnitude of this transformation. Preliminary analyses indicate that parliamentary amendments represented approximately 52.5% of discretionary federal health expenditures in 2023, whereas they accounted for only 18.6% in 2014. This substantial increase demonstrates that legislative actors now exercise direct influence over a considerable portion of federal spending, especially in sectors characterized by decentralized transfers, such as health, education and employment policies (Ipea, 2025).

Despite efforts by judicial institutions to enhance transparency and oversight, informal practices continue to shape budget execution. Mechanisms previously associated with opaque allocation have been reconfigured rather than eliminated, establishing the adaptability of political actors within institutional constraints.

Furthermore, the expansion of amendment-based funding has strengthened the electoral position of *Centrão*-aligned politicians. Control over public resources enhances their capacity to deliver targeted benefits, reinforcing political loyalty and territorial influence. Latest developments in Brazil illustrate how the *Centrão* has strengthened its role in budgetary governance, reshaping the balance of power between the Executive and Legislative branches.

One key example is the consolidation of mandatory parliamentary amendments (*emendas impositivas*), which expanded Congress's control over budget allocation. Originally institutionalized in the 2010s, these instruments gained further relevance by 2024–2026, allowing legislators to direct significant portions of federal spending to their constituencies. According to Carlos Pereira and Bernardo Mueller (2002), this mechanism reinforces a system of exchange between political support and distributive benefits, increasing legislators' autonomy in policymaking (Pereira; Mueller, 2002).

A second example is the persistence and adaptation of rapporteur amendments (*emendas de relator*), especially following controversies surrounding their opacity in earlier years. Although partially constrained by judicial and institutional reforms, new budgetary arrangements have continued to provide key legislators, often aligned with the *Centrão*, with influence over

resource allocation. As noted by Fernando Limongi and Argelina Figueiredo (1999), control over the budget is a central tool through which Congress shapes policy outcomes and negotiates with the Executive (Figueiredo; Limongi, 1999).

A third example involves coalition management under recent administrations (2023–2026), where the Executive has relied on distributing cabinet positions and budgetary discretion to secure legislative support. This dynamic reflects the logic of coalition presidentialism described by Sérgio Abranches, in which governance depends on continuous bargaining. More recent analyses by Timothy Power (2010) highlight that the Centrão’s growing leverage has shifted policymaking toward a more decentralized and transactional model, where policy design is increasingly shaped by congressional preferences (Power, 2010).

Together, these examples revealed that budgetary governance in Brazil (2024–2026) is characterized by: decentralization of fiscal authority toward Congress, Increased bargaining power of parliamentary blocs and Policy design influenced by distributive and territorial interests.

THE EXPANSION OF PARLIAMENTARY AMENDMENTS UNDER THE LULA ADMINISTRATION

New developments in Brazilian fiscal governance reveal an unprecedented expansion in the volume of resources allocated through parliamentary amendments, reflecting a broader reconfiguration of the balance of power between the Executive and Legislative branches. Official federal budget data indicate that parliamentary amendments have reached historically unprecedented levels, consolidating their position as one of the principal instruments through which legislators influence the allocation of public resources and negotiate political support within the federal policymaking process.

The Budget Law approved by the National Congress for fiscal year 2026 earmarked approximately BRL 61 billion for parliamentary amendments, encompassing individual, caucus, and committee modalities (Senado Federal, 2025). This figure represents the continuation of an upward trajectory observed throughout Lula’s third administration and reflects the growing institutionalization of congressional participation in budgetary decision-making.

Evidence of this trend was already apparent in the 2024 budget proposal, in which the Executive projected approximately BRL 37.6 billion exclusively for individual and caucus amendments (Senado Federal, 2023). By 2025, authorized appropriations associated with

parliamentary amendments had increased substantially, reaching an estimated BRL 48–50 billion, with execution rates approaching the total amount approved by Congress. Such figures suggest not only an expansion in nominal allocations but also a significant enhancement in legislators' capacity to influence the effective distribution of public expenditure (Gazeta do Povo, 2026).

The magnitude of this transformation becomes even more evident when budget execution data are considered. According to information derived from the Integrated Planning and Budget System (Sistema Integrado de Planejamento e Orçamento – SIOP), administered by the Ministry of Planning and Budget, the federal government committed approximately BRL 127 billion to parliamentary amendments between 2023 and 2025 (Gazeta do Povo, 2026). Complementary estimates based on data available through the Federal Senate's budgetary monitoring platform (*Siga Brasil*) indicate that actual disbursements during the same period reached approximately BRL 119.5 billion (Diário de Indústria & Comércio, 2026). These figures underscore the increasing fiscal significance of parliamentary amendments and their growing centrality within the architecture of Brazilian budgetary governance.

From an institutional perspective, this expansion should not be interpreted as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as the culmination of a longer process of legislative empowerment that began during the previous decade. Constitutional reforms that transformed various categories of parliamentary amendments into mandatory expenditures significantly reduced executive discretion over budget execution and enhanced Congress's capacity to direct public investment. As a consequence, the Legislative branch has acquired an increasingly prominent role in determining the territorial and sectoral distribution of federal resources.

More broadly, the expansion of parliamentary amendments reflects a structural shift toward a more decentralized model of fiscal governance, characterized by the diffusion of budgetary authority across multiple institutional actors. In this context, budgetary policymaking increasingly emerges from negotiated interactions between the Executive and Legislative branches rather than from unilateral executive control. This transformation has strengthened the bargaining capacity of congressional actors, particularly those associated with the *Centrão*, while simultaneously reinforcing the distributive and transactional dimensions of coalition presidentialism. The growing prominence of parliamentary amendments therefore represents not only a fiscal phenomenon but also a significant institutional development with profound implications for governability, democratic accountability, and the allocation of political power within contemporary Brazilian democracy.

PARLIAMENTARY AMENDMENTS AND COALITION MANAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN PRESIDENTIALISM

Parliamentary amendments constitute one of the principal institutional mechanisms through which members of the National Congress influence the allocation of public resources. Formally, these instruments allow deputies and senators to direct budgetary expenditures toward specific territorial constituencies, thereby strengthening links between elected representatives and their electoral bases (Senado Federal, 2025). However, their relevance within the Brazilian political system extends far beyond their distributive function, encompassing broader dynamics of coalition management and inter-branch bargaining.

Current studies on Brazilian governance have emphasized the growing strategic of parliamentary amendments in the maintenance of legislative support within fragmented multiparty environments. In the context of coalition presidentialism, budgetary resources have increasingly functioned as instruments through which the Executive negotiates congressional backing for its legislative agenda. The expansion of parliamentary amendments over the last decade has therefore altered the balance of power between the Executive and Legislative branches, reinforcing Congress's capacity to influence policy outcomes and institutional negotiations.

Particularly significant has been the expansion of committee amendments (*emendas de comissão*), whose execution remains subject to greater discretionary control than constitutionally mandated individual amendments. This institutional arrangement creates additional opportunities for political bargaining, enabling both the Executive and congressional actors to employ budgetary resources as mechanisms for coalition maintenance and legislative coordination. Consequently, parliamentary amendments have become central not only to distributive politics but also to the broader governance architecture of Brazilian democracy.

The increasing prominence of the *Centrão* during the third administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva illustrates the enduring relevance of coalition presidentialism as a defining feature of Brazil's political system. Originally conceptualized by Abranches (1988), coalition presidentialism refers to the necessity for Brazilian presidents to construct and sustain heterogeneous legislative coalitions in order to ensure governability. Subsequent scholarship has verified that executive success depends largely on the capacity to coordinate congressional actors through a combination of cabinet appointments, policy concessions, and distributive incentives

(Figueiredo & Limongi, 1999).

Within this framework, the *Centrão* has consolidated its position as a pragmatic and highly influential parliamentary bloc. Rather than operating as an ideologically cohesive coalition, it functions as a flexible political arrangement characterized by strategic bargaining, institutional adaptability, and a strong orientation toward resource allocation and political influence. Its growing leverage reflects broader transformations in the distribution of political power, whereby Congress has acquired greater capacity to shape policy agendas, influence institutional appointments, and constrain executive decision-making.

These developments are consistent with broader theoretical interpretations of legislative-executive relations in fragmented presidential systems. Comparative political research suggests that where party systems are highly fragmented, presidents must continuously negotiate with diverse congressional actors to secure legislative majorities and policy implementation (Power, 2010). Under such conditions, distributive instruments, including parliamentary amendments, become essential mechanisms for reducing transaction costs and stabilizing governing coalitions.

The present-day evolution of Brazilian presidentialism also reveals an increasing decentralization of political authority. Scholars have observed that Congress has expanded its influence through mechanisms such as budgetary control, veto overrides, and enhanced participation in institutional decision-making processes (Samuels, 2003). As a result, governance increasingly depends upon complex negotiations among the Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary branches, rather than unilateral presidential leadership.

From a comparative perspective, these transformations suggest an ongoing reconfiguration of coalition presidentialism in Brazil. While the system continues to rely upon negotiated inter-party cooperation, congressional actors have acquired unprecedented bargaining power, particularly through their control over budgetary instruments. Parliamentary amendments therefore represent not merely mechanisms of constituency service but also critical institutional resources that mediate executive-legislative relations and shape the broader dynamics of democratic governance. Their growing importance underscores the adaptive nature of Brazilian coalition presidentialism and highlights the central role of distributive politics in sustaining governability within a highly fragmented political environment.

THE ROLE OF THE *CENTRÃO* IN CONTEMPORARY COALITION PRESIDENTIALISM

The *Centrão*, an informal and heterogeneous coalition of predominantly centrist and center-right political parties, has emerged as a pivotal actor in the functioning of Brazil's system of coalition presidentialism. Although lacking a formal organizational structure or a coherent ideological program, the *Centrão* is generally composed of parties such as Progressistas (PP), União Brasil, Republicanos, Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB), and sectors of the Partido Social Democrático (PSD). Depending on the legislative context and the policy issue under consideration, the bloc may also incorporate parliamentary factions from smaller parties, including Podemos and Avante. Consequently, the *Centrão* is better understood as a flexible parliamentary coalition organized around strategic political interests, access to state resources, and institutional influence rather than ideological commitments.

Characterized by a pragmatic approach to governance, the bloc has historically occupied a strategic position in legislative negotiations, serving as an intermediary between the Executive and Congress. Its influence has become particularly significant in contexts where presidents lack stable partisan majorities and must rely on broad and fragmented coalitions to secure legislative support. In such circumstances, the *Centrão* frequently acts as a pivotal veto player whose support is essential for the approval of executive initiatives and major policy reforms.

Within this institutional framework, parliamentary amendments have acquired increasing relevance as instruments facilitating executive-legislative coordination. Rather than merely serving distributive purposes, these budgetary mechanisms operate as institutional resources through which political actors negotiate support, construct governing coalitions, and manage legislative agendas. Consequently, amendments have become an integral component of the bargaining processes that underpin governability in Brazil's multiparty presidential system.

The growing volume of parliamentary amendments has further strengthened the bargaining capacity of congressional actors, particularly those associated with the *Centrão*. Given the bloc's frequent control of strategic positions within both the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate, its members possess considerable leverage in budgetary negotiations and legislative decision-making. This institutional influence enables the *Centrão* to play a decisive role in shaping policy outcomes, mediating executive initiatives, and influencing the allocation of public resources.

Moreover, the expansion of parliamentary amendments reflects broader transformations in the distribution of political authority within the Brazilian state. Latest scholarship has identified a gradual strengthening of Congress's budgetary prerogatives, resulting in a more decentralized model of governance in which legislators exercise increasing influence over public expenditure decisions. This process has contributed to a partial rebalancing of executive-legislative relations, reducing the Executive's traditional dominance over discretionary spending and enhancing congressional participation in policy implementation.

From a comparative perspective, these developments illustrate the adaptive nature of coalition presidentialism in highly fragmented party systems. As legislative actors gain greater control over budgetary instruments, governance increasingly depends upon negotiated cooperation rather than hierarchical executive leadership. The growing prominence of the *Centrão* therefore reflects not only the strategic behavior of political parties but also deeper institutional transformations that have expanded congressional influence within Brazil's democratic framework. In this context, parliamentary amendments serve as both distributive mechanisms and instruments of political coordination, reinforcing the centrality of legislative bargaining in the recent Brazilian political system.

Importantly, the contemporary influence of the *Centrão* illustrates a broader trend toward the institutionalization of congressional power in Brazil. By controlling key committee positions, leadership posts within both legislative chambers, and substantial portions of discretionary budgetary resources, the bloc has become an indispensable actor in governance. This configuration reinforces the argument that Brazilian coalition presidentialism has evolved toward a more decentralized and negotiated model of decision-making, in which congressional actors increasingly shape policy outcomes and influence the distribution of political authority across branches of government.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY CHALLENGES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY AMENDMENTS

Notwithstanding their institutional significance within Brazil's system of coalition presidentialism, the growing prominence of parliamentary amendments has generated important debates concerning transparency, accountability, and the quality of public governance. As budgetary instruments increasingly central to executive-legislative relations, parliamentary

amendments have also become the subject of scrutiny by oversight institutions, scholars, and civil society organizations.

One of the principal concerns involves the limited transparency surrounding the allocation and execution of amendment resources. Although recent institutional reforms have sought to enhance disclosure mechanisms, significant challenges remain regarding the identification of decision-making criteria, the traceability of expenditures, and the monitoring of policy outcomes. These limitations may reduce public accountability and hinder the effective evaluation of whether allocated resources correspond to broader developmental priorities or merely reflect short-term political interests.

Furthermore, the expansion of parliamentary amendments has intensified debates regarding the fragmentation of public spending. Critics argue that the increasing volume of individually negotiated budgetary allocations may undermine strategic planning and weaken the coherence of national public policies. From this perspective, the proliferation of distributive mechanisms can generate tensions between localized political demands and broader governmental objectives, potentially affecting the efficiency and coordination of public investment.

The institutional controversy surrounding the so-called *orçamento secreto* (secret budget) further highlighted these governance challenges. Although judicial and legislative reforms have formally altered the mechanisms through which discretionary resources are distributed, concerns regarding transparency have not been entirely eliminated. Rather, debates have shifted toward the extent to which new amendment modalities effectively ensure public oversight and democratic accountability. Consequently, scholars continue to question whether recent reforms have substantially increased transparency or merely transformed the institutional channels through which distributive negotiations occur.

From a governance perspective, these developments illustrate a broader dilemma inherent to coalition presidential systems. While parliamentary amendments may facilitate governability by fostering legislative cooperation and coalition stability, their expansion simultaneously creates risks associated with opacity, uneven resource allocation, and weakened accountability mechanisms. The challenge for Brazilian democratic institutions therefore lies in reconciling the political utility of these instruments with the principles of transparency, fiscal responsibility, and effective public oversight.

Ultimately, strengthening accountability mechanisms requires not only greater disclosure

of budgetary decisions, but also the development of institutional frameworks capable of monitoring the implementation and outcomes of amendment-funded projects. Such measures are essential for ensuring that parliamentary amendments contribute to democratic representation and policy effectiveness without compromising the integrity of public financial management.

GOVERNANCE DILEMMAS IN BRAZILIAN COALITION PRESIDENTIALISM

The Brazilian experience of coalition presidentialism offers a particularly illuminating case for examining the inherent tensions that characterize governance in fragmented democratic systems. Rather than constituting isolated challenges, the dynamics associated with executive-legislative relations, distributive politics, and coalition management reveal a set of interconnected governance dilemmas that emerge from the interaction between formal institutions and strategic political behavior. The growing influence of congressional actors, particularly the *Centrão*, further accentuates these tensions, exposing the complex trade-offs that underpin political stability and democratic governance in Brazil.

The first dilemma concerns the relationship between governability and accountability. Coalition presidentialism has historically been praised for its capacity to generate legislative support in a highly fragmented party system, thereby mitigating the risks of executive paralysis. As originally argued by Abranches (1988), the construction of multiparty coalitions constitutes a functional adaptation to Brazil's institutional environment, enabling presidents to secure congressional majorities and sustain policy implementation. Yet the mechanisms through which such support is obtained frequently involve extensive political bargaining, including the distribution of cabinet portfolios, budgetary resources, and agenda-setting privileges. While these arrangements contribute to governmental stability, they may simultaneously obscure decision-making processes, reducing transparency and complicating mechanisms of democratic accountability. Consequently, the institutional practices that facilitate governability may also weaken citizens' capacity to monitor political decisions and attribute responsibility for policy outcomes.

A second tension emerges between political stability and administrative efficiency. The literature on executive-legislative relations has confirmed that coalition discipline can generate remarkably stable governing arrangements, allowing presidents to achieve high rates of legislative success despite party fragmentation (Figueiredo & Limongi, 1999). However, the

maintenance of broad and heterogeneous coalitions requires continuous negotiation among multiple actors with divergent interests and policy preferences. Such processes inevitably increase transaction costs, generate coordination challenges, and often necessitate compromises that dilute policy coherence. Stability is therefore achieved through institutional arrangements that may reduce decision-making efficiency and limit the government's capacity to pursue comprehensive policy reforms. In this respect, governance becomes characterized by a paradox in which political predictability is sustained at the expense of administrative agility.

A third dilemma concerns the relationship between collective welfare and particularistic representation. The distributive logic that underpins coalition management frequently incentivizes the allocation of public resources according to political and electoral considerations rather than broader developmental objectives. As indicated by Pereira and Mueller (2002), legislators often seek targeted benefits for their constituencies in exchange for legislative cooperation, thereby reinforcing patterns of particularistic resource distribution. Although such practices may enhance political representation by responding to localized demands, they can also fragment public spending and undermine the coherence of national policy agendas. The resulting tension reflects a fundamental challenge within representative democracies: reconciling responsiveness to specific constituencies with the pursuit of collective and long-term policy goals.

A fourth and equally significant dilemma arises from the coexistence of formal institutional arrangements and informal governance practices. Brazil's constitutional framework establishes a sophisticated set of rules regulating policymaking, fiscal management, and inter-branch relations. Nevertheless, the effective functioning of the political system depends heavily upon informal mechanisms, including ad hoc legislative coalitions, personalized negotiation networks, and discretionary forms of resource allocation. These informal practices often compensate for institutional rigidities and facilitate political coordination in complex governing environments. At the same time, their reliance on unwritten norms and negotiated accommodations may generate uncertainty, reduce transparency, and complicate institutional accountability. Governance thus emerges not solely from formal constitutional design but from the continuous interaction between codified rules and informal political practices.

In short, these dilemmas contribute to understanding that governance in Brazil cannot be adequately understood through institutional arrangements alone. Rather, governance outcomes are produced through a dynamic equilibrium between competing normative and functional

imperatives, including governability and accountability, stability and efficiency, collective welfare and particularistic representation, as well as formal institutional authority and informal political coordination. The Brazilian case therefore illustrates a broader theoretical proposition within comparative political science: democratic governance is not merely the product of institutional architecture but also of the strategic interactions through which political actors adapt institutions to the practical demands of coalition-building and policy implementation.

From a comparative perspective, these findings suggest that coalition presidentialism should be understood not simply as a mechanism for ensuring governability but as a complex system of negotiated governance characterized by persistent trade-offs. The increasing prominence of congressional actors, particularly the *Centrão*, reveals an evolving distribution of political authority in which policymaking is progressively shaped by decentralized bargaining processes. As a consequence, current Brazilian governance reflects the continual negotiation of competing democratic values, highlighting both the resilience and the inherent contradictions of coalition-based presidential systems.

CONCLUSION

The *Centrão* embodies a central paradox in Brazilian governance. It is indispensable for maintaining political stability within a fragmented system, yet it simultaneously reinforces practices that undermine transparency and efficiency. Recent empirical developments (2024–2026) establish that its influence has expanded, particularly through increased control over budgetary mechanisms.

The findings suggest that informal political practices are not anomalies but integral components of governance in complex democracies. Understanding the role of the *Centrão* is therefore essential for both empirical analysis and theoretical debates on governance.

This article has examined the role of the *Centrão* as a central actor in Brazil's governance arrangements, highlighting its dual capacity to enable and constrain policymaking. Grounded in the literature on coalition presidentialism and governance theory, the analysis reveals that the *Centrão* operates as a pivotal intermediary within a fragmented institutional environment, facilitating executive-legislative coordination while simultaneously reshaping the distribution of political power.

The empirical evidence from the 2024–2026 period, particularly regarding the expansion

of parliamentary amendments, underscores a significant transformation in Brazil's budgetary governance. The increasing centrality of Congress, and, more specifically, of Centrão-aligned actors, in the allocation of public resources reflects a broader shift toward a more decentralized and transactional model of governance. In this configuration, political support is sustained through continuous negotiation and distributive exchanges, reinforcing patterns identified in earlier scholarship while also intensifying their scale and impact.

At the same time, the findings reveal that the mechanisms underpinning governability carry the impact of normative and institutional implications. While the Centrão contributes to political stability by securing legislative majorities, it also amplifies challenges related to transparency, accountability, and programmatic coherence. The persistence and adaptation of informal practices within formal institutional frameworks illustrate the resilience of hybrid governance arrangements, in which rules and discretion coexist in dynamic tension.

Ultimately, the Brazilian case speaks to a broader paradox in ongoing democracies: the very practices that sustain governability may, over time, erode key dimensions of democratic quality. The Centrão exemplifies this tension, functioning both as a stabilizing force and as a vector of particularism and opacity. Future research should therefore explore the long-term implications of these dynamics, particularly with regard to institutional reform, fiscal governance, and the prospects for strengthening accountability within coalition-based political systems.

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