

Biting the Bullet and Banning Guns:

The Brazilian National Referendum of 2005 and Its Defeat at the Polls

By Katie Soltis

Brazil is not a country at war in the traditional sense. However, with 39,000 deaths by firearms per year, roughly one death every 15 minutes, Brazil accounts for 13% of the world's gun-related deaths—despite having only 2.8% of the world's population (Instituto Sou da Paz 2006: 1). Because Brazil is the world leader in gun violence, outranking even warzones in total number of deaths by firearms per year, the Brazilian government decided to “bite the bullet” and address its high level of gun crime. In 2003, Brazil passed the Disarmament Statute, which, among other measures, set the date for a national referendum to vote on a gun ban for citizens (Instituto Sou da Paz 2006: 3). On October 23, 2005, Brazil became the world's first and only country to hold a referendum on the topic of gun control, asking its citizens, “Should the sale of arms and ammunition be prohibited in Brazil?” (Mendonça 2009: 515). Although public opinion polls showed a support level of 80% for the ban as close as three months before the referendum, Brazilian voters surprisingly rejected the ban by a margin of about 2 to 1, with roughly 64% of those who voted, or 59 million, voting “No” to the ban (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral).

The referendum acquired global significance. Newspapers including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy*, and the UK's *The Guardian* all featured articles on the referendum. As the only country to have ever held a national referendum on gun policy, Brazil provided a battleground for opposing global players to compete directly for the first time, and “many organizations in Brazil received funding and advice from global networks” (Springwood 2007: 32). International actors saw the referendum as having implications far beyond controlling the level of gun violence in Brazil. For instance, NRA spokesperson Andrew Arulanandam justified the organization's involvement in Brazil by claiming, “If gun control proponents succeed in Brazil, America will be next” (Morton 2006). On the opposing side, the “Yes” front received support from the London-based International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), a coalition of 500 transnational NGOs in support of gun control (Morton 2006). Director of IANSA Rebecca Peters argued that opportunity for a gun ban in Brazil promised that other “campaigns will arise in other

countries, in Latin America and elsewhere, for a moratorium or for serious restrictions on the proliferation of guns" (Hearn 2005).

Literature Review

Literature on the subject is limited, and I have had to rely primarily on sources written in Portuguese. Scholarly research has focused on the role of international actors in shaping the discourse and how campaign arguments in the media determined the outcome of the Referendum (Maia 2009, Veiga and Santos 2009, Mendonça 2009, Lissovsky 2006). The United States-based National Rifle Association has been of chief importance in these studies. According to Guaracy Mingardi, a UN-affiliate who researches crime, the NRA's involvement was the basis of the pro-gun lobby's success because "They didn't talk about guns. They talked about rights" (Morton 2006). Even though gun ownership is not a constitutional right in Brazil as it is in the United States, the chief campaign strategy of the "No" front became "Defend your rights," a message imported from the United States and inspired by NRA rhetoric (Morton 2006). Mendonça (2009) and Veiga and Santos (2009) both analyzed electoral ads, arguing that the "No" vote was successful because it framed gun prohibition as a loss of freedom and a threat to democracy. Maia also focuses on the roles of the media and public deliberation in shaping the arguments employed by each front (2009). In two other studies, Lissovsky and Mota attributed the loss of the "Yes" front to its "inefficient," "disastrous," and "misguided" advertising programs that lacked a "clearly defined strategy" (Lissovsky 2006: 47, Mota 2006: 13).

While the international dimension has received considerable attention, several questions have largely been unexamined, including the role of local actors and, the major lacunae, the circumstances surrounding the adoption of the referendum in 2003. There are a few writers, including Springwood, who have touched on the interaction between the global and the local forces. Springwood, for instance, notes that the success of the "No" vote was much more than the ability of "global conservative agendas" to "force their rhetoric and their logic on Brazilian referendum voters" (Springwood 2007: 41). However, local factors concerning security, levels of violence, and standards of living have largely been ignored as determinants of the outcome. Neiva also looks at the local dimension in a study of voting variation in the House of Representatives, concluding that party affiliation was the "most important explanatory variable" (2010: 26),

but studies have not yet examined how gun control made it on the national agenda, why they decided on a referendum, and which members of Parliament supported gun control and why.

Research Question

With my project, I hope to shed light on the two areas mentioned previously that have not yet received much analysis. As such, my approach to the topic will be two-fold. First, as mentioned previously, the lacunae I wish to address concern the political landscape in 2003 when the referendum came to be adopted in the first place. As mentioned above, no other country had ever before held a referendum on any topic concerning gun control. Moreover, not only was Brazil the first country to do so, it also proposed the most radical proposal possible: a total ban on gun ownership. How do politicians in support of the ban compare to each other in terms of political party, ideology, and region? Why did so many politicians favor such harsh arms control measures? Why did they call for a Referendum in the first place rather than instituting other stricter policy options? Why did they expect to win the Referendum and why were they so surprised at their loss?

Second, while the international campaign messages undoubtedly affected how Brazilians voted, how much of the final outcome was a result of the global rhetoric and how much was a result of local-specific issues regarding security, politics, and violence? In other words, because the results of the Referendum do not solely reflect an acceptance of the NRA-inspired rhetoric about personal rights, what other factors contributed to the rejection of the referendum? In order to address this question, I will compare regional variations in voting outcomes at a statistical level to see if these patterns are associated with local factors such as wealth, living standards, level of violence, level of police corruption, trust in police, and political party identification. Other local conditions at stake include a corruption scandal involving Lula's government that erupted at the same time as the referendum (Maia 2009: 318) and the actions of Forjas Taurus SA and Companhia Brasileira de Cartuchos, two major small-arms manufacturers that make Brazil the second largest gun-producer in the Western Hemisphere and contributed 97.5% of the "No" front's financing (Springwood 2007: 33, Instituto Sou da Paz 2006: 5). Did voters reject the ban, which was supported by Lula, as a way or

showing their discontent with his government? Furthermore, in what regions were these arms manufacturers active and how did their lobbying power affect the results?

Research at Duke

From Duke, I will be able to answer these questions in part. In order to study the domestic political landscape and the adoption of the referendum on the national agenda, I can look at voting records of politicians and recorded debates, which are available online. I can also conduct a regional comparison of voting patterns at a statistical level from Duke, as the Brazilian voting agency, Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, provides the voting statistics of each state and municipality online. I also have access to an online database of opinion polls through my correspondence with Rachel Meneguello of the University of Campinas.

Research in Brazil

With a month of field research in Brazil, I plan to go to Brasilia for one week to interview politicians involved in the two parliamentary fronts. Also, I plan to spend one week in Rio de Janeiro and two weeks in São Paulo to meet with both gun-control NGOs and pro-gun organizations. I have contacted São Paulo-based Sou da Paz and Rio de Janeiro-based Viva Rio, the two-major anti-gun NGOs that were partly responsible for putting gun control on the national agenda in the first place. I have also been in contact with pro-gun groups Brazilian Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property and the National Association of Gun Owners and Retailers.

I will also interview voters in the city of Diadema, which was the only city in the São Paulo metropolitan area where the “Yes” vote won a majority (Instituto Sou da Paz 2006: 8). Interestingly, Diadema was previously known as the “homicide capital” of Brazil until the government instituted severe security measures in 1999. Diadema will provide an interesting case study because its citizens voted in favor of what they thought would be a resolution of the terrible gun violence that plagues the city. I am interested in the specificities of this particular context because other equally violent places in the peripheries of São Paulo did not vote the same. I have been in contact with Rachel Meneguello, who works in the Political Science department at the University of Campinas in Brazil and conducts public opinion polling, and David

Verge Fleischer, a professor at the University of Brasília. They have been helpful in suggesting archives, libraries, and other contacts.

I am well prepared for conducting field research in Brazil. I have taken Portuguese 53, 63, and 76 at Duke. I studied abroad in Rio de Janeiro for six weeks in summer, 2010, where I took two other Portuguese classes. I am at an advanced level of speaking, writing, and reading. I have communicated with several contacts in Portuguese and conducted much of my scholarly research in Portuguese as well.

Conclusion and Relevance to Development

The questions I seek to address, namely why and how the national legislature came to adopt the referendum and what local factors contributed to the referendum's defeat, have broad implications not only for arms-related policies but also for development issues as a whole. Brazil cannot begin to make significant progress on other fronts until it deals with the astronomically high rate of gun violence. The international dimension is also of note. The success of global actors in influencing the Brazilian populace exhibits the potential of international forces to shape policies within countries when they use effective campaign strategies and have well-standing connections with domestic actors.