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Women In Brazilian Politics: Between Formal Quotas and "Laranja" Candidacies

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the phenomenon of "laranja" (placeholder) candidacies in Brazilian politics as an expression of the gap between the formal rights achieved by women and authentic political representation. Starting from the historical milestone of 1932 and the institutionalization of gender quotas by Law No. 9.504/1997, it investigates how political parties instrumentalize female candidacies to access public resources and comply with legal formalities without transferring real power to women. It examines the profile of instrumentalized candidates, the insufficient action of oversight institutions, and the persistence of party machismo. It concludes that overcoming this scenario requires coordinated action among voters, parties, institutions, and civil society, so that female participation ceases to be merely formal and becomes effective — an indispensable condition for the quality of Brazilian democracy.

KEYWORDS: Laranja candidacies; Gender quotas; Female participation; Electoral law; Democracy; Political representation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in Brazilian politics remains a central issue for the quality of democracy. Since 1932, when they conquered the right to vote, women have advanced in formal rights, but still face structural barriers that turn the conquest of citizenship into an unfulfilled promise. The phenomenon of "laranja" candidacies exposes this contradiction with precision: while the law requires gender quotas to balance representation, political parties instrumentalize them to access public resources without any real commitment to female participation.

This article analyzes the gap between the normative framework of inclusion and Brazilian electoral practice, taking "laranja" candidacies as a privileged lens to understand how affirmative actions can be perverted into tools of fraud. To this end, it examines the historical trajectory of quotas, the profile of instrumentalized female candidates, the insufficient action of oversight institutions, and the mechanisms of party machismo that persist even in the face of legal determination. Finally, it proposes concrete paths for female representation to cease being formal and become authentic, concluding that a democracy that excludes half of its population from the real exercise of power cannot be considered fully democratic.

II. THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY AND THE QUOTA PARADOX

The Electoral Code of 1932 marked an inflection point in Brazilian political history. Bertha Lutz and other feminist leaders conquered a fundamental right: the exercise of full citizenship. Decades later, the Elections Law (Law No. 9.504/1997) institutionalized the quota system, requiring parties to reserve at least 30% of candidacies for one of the sexes. Simultaneously, the Special Campaign Financing Fund (FEFC) began allocating specific resources to foster female candidacies.

Numerically, the result seems positive. Women occupy more legislative seats than in the past. However, this metric hides an uncomfortable reality: many of these candidacies exist only on paper. They are records that comply with legal formalities without any intention of electing women or allowing them to exercise real political power.

III. "LARANJA" CANDIDACIES: WHEN THE QUOTA BECOMES FRAUD

"Laranja" candidacies represent a perversion of affirmative actions and quota policies. Women are registered as candidates not because they have genuine political projects or party support, but because the law requires it. Frequently, these candidates receive minimal campaign resources, do not participate in debates, and their only function is to allow the party to access the public funds destined for female campaign financing.

The case of Valença do Piauí, in which the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) annulled the proportional coalitions for gender quota fraud, illustrates the severity of the problem. But this is only one documented case among many others that go unnoticed or face insufficient oversight.

This practice constitutes a form of political gender violence. It instrumentalizes women for partisan purposes, completely distorting the purpose of affirmative actions. Even more serious: it weakens the legitimacy of inclusion policies, feeding the argument that quotas do not work, when, in fact, what fails is the integrity of their implementation.

IV. THE PROFILE OF THE "LARANJA" CANDIDATE

There is a pattern in "laranja" candidacies that deserves attention. Frequently, the registered women are single mothers, divorced women, professionals with low formal schooling but some professional success, or media personalities, actresses, models, influencers. Rarely are they women with a consolidated political trajectory or a declared commitment to public agendas.

This selection is not accidental. Parties seek candidates who generate visibility without threatening internal power structures. A woman with her own political capital can question decisions, claim real space, demand genuine resources. A "laranja" candidate, on the other hand, remains invisible: her name appears on the ballot, but her voice does not echo in institutions.

The result is perverse: the illusion of inclusion is created while exclusion is perpetuated. Parties display women as a showcase, complying with quotas, while keeping intact the macho structures that control real political power.

V. THE INSUFFICIENT ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

The Superior Electoral Court and other regulatory entities have a clear responsibility: to intensify oversight and apply effective sanctions against gender fraud. So far, the action has been episodic. Cases like Valença do Piauí are exceptions that confirm the rule: most "laranja" candidacies continue operating without visible consequences.

Civil society, in turn, has demonstrated mobilization capacity. Campaigns such as "Mulher não é Laranja" ("A Woman Is Not a Laranja"), promoted by Interlegis, play a fundamental educational role. These initiatives demystify prejudices, raise voter awareness, and encourage women to demand authentic participation. But awareness campaigns, although necessary, do not replace institutional reforms.

VI. PARTY MACHISMO BEYOND QUOTAS

The persistence of machismo in political parties is notorious even after the determination of quotas regulated by the partisan normative framework. In practice, these quotas served mainly to move party finances through access to public funds, without transferring real power to women.

Some women within parties are aware of this dynamic and participate in it. Others, however, face lack of support, insufficient resources, and blocked opportunities for political advancement. The difference between consent and coercion is not always clear when power structures are so unequal.

Institutional machismo also manifests in the distribution of portfolios, the prioritization of agendas, and the allocation of campaign resources. Elected women frequently inherit secondary portfolios or face resistance when proposing agendas that challenge the status quo. This invisible dynamic is as effective as "laranja" candidacies in keeping women out of real power.

VII. POPULAR TRUST AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The Brazilian population plays a crucial role in this scenario. Voters who are unaware of the nuances of "laranja" candidacies may inadvertently validate fraud by voting for candidates without a political trajectory. Simultaneously, women who could be authentic candidates may give up in the face of the perception that the system is corrupted.

Restoring trust requires transparency. Parties must publicize how they allocate resources to female candidates. The TSE must disclose data on identified "laranja" candidacies and applied sanctions. Voters need information to make conscious choices.

This responsibility is collective. Political parties must abandon fraud and genuinely embrace inclusion. Government institutions must oversee rigorously. Civil society organizations must continue denouncing and educating. Voters must demand authenticity and punish fraud at the ballot box.

VIII. PATHS TO AUTHENTIC TRANSFORMATION

Real change will come when women can participate in politics on equal terms, without being used as tools in partisan schemes. This requires more than quotas: it demands cultural and institutional transformation.

First, it is necessary to strengthen oversight mechanisms. The TSE should publish annual reports on identified "laranja" candidacies, applied sanctions, and detected patterns. Transparency creates accountability.

Second, political parties should be encouraged, or obliged, to genuinely invest in female candidates. This means equitable campaign resources, access to party structure, political mentoring, and real support for election.

Third, civil society must expand awareness campaigns, reaching voters in diverse contexts. Political education on gender and authentic representation is an investment in democracy.

Fourth, women already in power must create support networks for new candidates, reducing isolation and increasing chances of electoral success.

IX. CONCLUSION: AN INCOMPLETE DEMOCRACY

The struggle for gender equality in Brazilian politics is not a secondary issue; it is a fundamental issue for the quality of democracy. A democracy that excludes half of its population from real participation is not fully democratic. "Laranja" candidacies reveal an uncomfortable truth: formal rights do not guarantee real power. Women conquered the right to vote in 1932 and the right to quotas in 1997, but still fight for the right to exercise authentic political power. It is exactly in this gap between norm and practice that fraud thrives.

Closing this gap requires coordinated and simultaneous action on four fronts: conscious voters who demand authenticity and punish fraud at the ballot box; parties willing to share power and invest campaign resources equitably; institutions that oversee without complacency and publish data on identified fraud; and women who refuse to be "laranjas," demanding real space and building mutual support networks. The only alternative to this collective effort is the perpetuation of a façade democracy, in which seats are occupied without power being exercised.

True transformation, therefore, will not come only from new laws, but from a cultural and institutional change that recognizes women as full political subjects. Only then will it be possible to build a scenario in which women not only occupy seats, but propose agendas, transform institutions, and exercise power in fact. A democracy that genuinely includes women will be fairer, more representative, and therefore stronger.

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