UNITED STATES, BRAZIL, POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC PUSHBACK. ASSAULT ON DEMOCRACY?

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Introduction

After a tight presidential election, the former Vice President of the United States Joe Biden was elected President and successor of Donald J. Trump on November 3rd, 2020.

On January 6th, 2021 - the day of the congressional formalization of Joe Biden's election - a mob of supporters of the still President Donald Trump assaulted the US Congress on Capitol Hill, in Washington DC. The aim of the attack was stopping Joe Biden's election, who the supporters believed was guilty of "stealing the elections" to keep Donald Trump out of power. The assailants failed to overturn the election results, and Joe Biden could start his mandate.

After two years, on January 8th, 2023, a similar attack also happened in Brasilia, where a mob of supporters of the former President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro assaulted the three most important democratic institutions of Brazil: the Parliament, the Presidential Residence and the Congress. Once again, the assault was aimed at overturning the legitimate election of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who had in the former weeks won a very tight presidential election against Jair Bolsonaro. Once again, the assault was not successful.

In the aftermath of the Brazilian assault, it was immediately clear that the two assaults have a striking resemblance: in fact, both

assaults share similar aims, structure, background, consequences and political context.

The transitions of power in the American and Brazilian democracies happened at times of deep political polarization, meaning "the division of individuals or parties into distant ideological camps, positioned at the extremes".

Therefore, can there be a correlation between political polarization and political violence during the transitions of power in democracies? If so, in which conditions can democracies backslide or breakdown, in the face of political polarization phenomena, and in which conditions do democracies withstand internal aggressions?

This article will provide a brief definition of political polarization, and it will apply it to the American and Brazilian case study. After that, an overview of the perils of political polarization for democracies will be given. In conclusion, the conditions for democratic resilience in the face of political polarization will be explored.

1. *Assault on Democracy. USA, Brazil and attempts to subvert democracy*

On January 6th, 2021, a group of "true believers" of President Donald J. Trump protested against the election of Joe Biden in front of the US Congress in Washington, DC. The protest, galvanized by President Trump himself[1], turned into an armed assault against the US Congress and democratic institutions, which caused 5 deaths and many injured[2].

According to the protesters, Joe Biden and the Democratic Party were guilty of rigging the democratic processes and of "stealing the elections".

In the preceding weeks and days, President Trump had protested against the results of the elections, tweeting that he had, in fact, won

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[1] WASHINGTON POST, *Trump, Republicans incite crowd before mob storms Capitol*, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mh3cbd7niTQ .

[2] S. TAN, YI. SHIN, D. RINDLER, *How one of America's ugliest days unraveled inside and outside the Capitol,* The Washington Post, *https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/capitol-insurrection-visual-timeline/,* visited on 23/02/2023.

the electoral competition "in a landslide". The hashtag *#StopTheSteal* became viral on Twitter on the same day as the attacks at Capitol Hill, in Washington DC.

As mentioned, groups of armed protesters, such as the Oathkeepers and the Proud Boys, also joined the attack[3].

Two years later, similar events happened in Brazil. On January 8th, 2023, a group of supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro attacked Brazilian democratic institutions in Brasilia[4] after his defeat at the electoral competition against Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva.

Brazilian protesters "justify their protests on their fears against imaginary communism and, in this case, with accusations of electoral fraud"[5]. They also demanded a military coup and the consequent subversion of Brazilian democracy[6]. In the previous days, camps were organized in front of some Brazilian military bases, too[7].

At that time, Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva was already 2 weeks in to his third mandate as President, and the former President Jair Bolsonaro was out of the country, namely in the USA, for medical reasons. Nonetheless, groups of supporters – which had already demonstrated against communism and Lula's third presidency – managed to organize an assault in Brasilia, which in the end was not successful and ended in some 1500 arrests.

Both attacks share similar backgrounds, aims, structures and political contexts. They do in fact come at times of profound political polarization, in the US and in Brazil at the same time. Furthermore, both attacks happened during or just before a delicate transition of power, in which a right-wing incumbent (Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil) was ending his term and ceding power to a left-

[3] THE NEW YORK TIMES, *Day of Rage, How Trump supporters Took the US Capitol, Visual Investigation*, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWJVMoe7OY0 .

[4] UOL, *Terroristas bolsonaristas invadem e depredam Congresso, Planalto e STF,* https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2023/01/08/bolsonaristas-congresso-policia.htm, visited on 18/02/23.

[5] D. OPPERMAN, *The attack against the Brazilian institutions and its impact on the political discourse in the country*, LSE, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2023/01/25/the-attack-against-brazilian-institutions-impact-political-discourse/, visited on 25/03/2023.

[6] D. OPPERMAN, *The attack against the Brazilian institutions and its impact on the political discourse in the country,* cit..

[7] CNN, *The violent attack on Brazil's government was months in the making. Here's what you need to know*, visited on 14/03/23.

wing new President (Joe Biden and Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva), all in a deeply polarized political context. Therefore, a profoundly disaffected part of the population did not accept the results of the democratic processes.

2. *Contemporary political polarization. Definition, models and correlation with the attacks*

How can political polarization be defined?

Suggestions from Estaban and Ray and Bruno Castanho Silva, in an article of 2015, offer a simple definition of political polarization: "Polarization, in general, can be understood as a situation in which a group or population may be divided into separate 'clusters', and there is
(a) high within-cluster similarity alongside,
(b) high between-cluster dissimilarity.

Political polarization, therefore, may be seen as the division of individuals (mass-level), or parties (elite-level), into distant ideological camps positioned at the extremes, while the central position is voided"[8].

Though political polarization (and populism, with their mutual relationship) has been a rising topic in political science inquiry, it has been a subject of studies for a long time. For instance, Anthony Downs studied a situation of political polarization, within a bipolar party system and a bimodal voter preferences model in 1957, in his book "*An Economic Theory of Democracy*"[9].

According to Downs, such a situation is likely to cause both the parties to fall apart on the ideological spectrum, so that they can catch the highest possible number of votes. Downs also states that a situation of political polarization might cause instability and chaos in democracies and be the start of a revolution - in that, a situation of political polarization is part of a cycle of politics[10].

These findings, though, do not consider the capacity of democracies

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[8] B. CASTANHO SILVA, *Populist radical right parties and mass polarization in the Netherlands,* in "European Political Science Review", Volume 10, Issue 2, 2018.

[9] A. DOWNS, *An Economic Theory of Democracy.* New York, Harper and Row, 1957.

[10] A. DOWNS, *An Economic Theory of Democracy,* cit..

to contain both the social and political conflict, nor the structure of democracies (majoritarian or consociational) which Arend Lijphart would go on to study in the following years[11].

Giovanni Sartori, in his book "*Parties and Party Systems*" offers another model of analysis of party systems with large ideological distance. The model of "polarized pluralism" moves forward from the Downsian original model, since it considers more than two parties (up to five), and states that at least one of them shall be an *anti-system* party – in other words, a party with *delegitimizing impact* on the current political regime[12].

In the model of polarized pluralism, a governing party in the centre of the metrical system receives *bilateral opposition* by the other parties. In that, the metrical centre is *out of competition*, due to the central positioning of the incumbent party.

Therefore, opposing parties have an incentive to distance themselves from the metrical centre – and the consequence of this is the further polarization of the party system. And, along with that: "The fact remains that in all cases the spectrum of political opinion is highly polarised: Its lateral poles are literally two poles apart, and the distance between them covers a maximum spread of opinion"[13].

This goes along with another concept of Sartori, who understands parties as "the natural system of channelment of the political society"[14].

For the purposes of this article, an in-depth study of the causes of polarization will not be addressed. In any case, Bogaards, Helms and Lijphart agree that "the institutional foundations of political competition play an important role as do developments at the level of, inter alia, party differences, the dimensionability of political conflict, and of economic inequality"[15]. Furthermore, populism itself is

[11] A. LIJPHART, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, Yale University Press, 2012.

[12] G. SARTORI, *Parties and Party System: a Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

[13] G. SARTORI, *Parties And Party System, A Framework for Analysis*, cit..

[14] G. SARTORI, *Parties And Party System, A Framework For Analysis*, cit..

[15] M. BOOGARDS, L. HELMS, A. LIJPHART, *The Importance of Consociationalism for Twenty- First Century Politics and Political Science*, in "Swiss Political Science Review" vol.25, n .4, pp. 341-356.

associated with political polarization: Bruno Castanho Silva explains that right-wing populism not only thrives in a polarized polity but is also a cause of even more polarization[16]. Populism, according to Cas Mudde, is an expression of a social crisis[17], so we might also assume that political polarization arises in times of social crisis.

To understand more about political polarization and its consequence for democracy, it is essential to ask whether the US and Brazilian party and electoral systems are polarized. To get an insight on this topic, I am referring to election results (for mass level polarization) and literature on both American and Brazilian parties (for elite-level polarization), with the aid of the Downsian and Sartorian models to get a perspective on the party systems and their ways of functioning.

2.1 *Is the USA polarized?*

The first insight on the topic of political polarization comes from the United States. After four years of Donald Trump's presidency, the 2020 presidential competition has become one of political polarization's best case-studies. Former vice president Joe Biden, after the primary in the Democratic party, in which he mainly competed against Bernie Sanders, managed to secure its leadership and to unite the party for the "battle for the soul of the nation"[18]. Donald Trump, according to democrats, with his promise to "Make America Great Again", paved the backsliding of American democracy, due to his radical-right, illiberal, and populist traits.

As Sartori conceived, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are "literally two poles apart". Ever since Donald Trump's election as presidential candidate at the Republican primaries of 2016 (and before as well) the Republican Party has been the protagonist of a great

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[16] B. C. SILVA., *Populist radical right parties and mass polarization in the Netherlands,* cit..

[17] C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in "Government and Opposition" Vol. 39, n.4, pp. 542-56.

[18] J. BIDEN, *Battle for the Soul of the Nation | Joe Biden for President*, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHLcR_CSlsE.

radicalization process. The shift on the far-right of the political spectrum has made the GOP one of the most prominent examples of Populist-Radical Right Parties (PRRPS), a category of party which melts a conservative political agenda with populist rhetoric and traits[19]. It is an example of the "nostalgic pessimism" of western "postdemocracies", studied by Colin Crouch[20].

On the other side, the Democratic Party of Joe Biden expressed a progressive agenda, a mixture of liberal economic policies and progressive cultural values. Part of the Democratic Party is also Bernie Sanders' and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's faction – meaning a sub-unity of the party – which pushes for more courageous policies in a socialist way.

In this political context, Joe Biden pivoted his campaign around Trump's defeat, and his presidency with the vow to "restore the soul of America" and to "end the uncivil war"[21]. The competition ended with the result of 51,3% of voter preferences for Joe Biden and 46.9% for former President Donald Trump[22].

Even if the American party system may look bipolar (the Republican Party and the Democratic party are two poles apart), according to Carlo Invernizzi Accetti[23], the American party system, at the time of the presidential elections of 2020, had become "europeanized", due to its fragmentation and ideological polarization. The metrical center was, in fact, occupied by the Democratic Party, guided by President Biden, and received bilateral opposition from the Republican Party (both the moderate and the more radical factions) and from the more radical faction of the Democratic Party, with Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as leaders, which pushed the more moderate faction and President Biden to strive for more radical policies.

[19] C. MUDDE, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe,* Cambridge University Press*,* 2007.

[20] C. CROUCH, *Post-Democracy After the Crises*, Polity, 2020.

[21] CNN, *Watch President Joe Biden's full inauguration speech*, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGukNIEIhTU .

[22] CNN, *Election results*, https://edition.cnn.com/election/2020/results/president, visited on 18/03/2023.

[23] C. INVERNIZZI ACCETTI, *The Quiet and Dangerous Way U.S. Politics Is Becoming Europeanized*, Foreign Policy, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/29/quiet-dangerous-u-s-politics-becoming-europeanized-polarized-pluralism/, visited on 28/02/2023.

Therefore, with such a composition, and due to the large ideological distance among the factions in competition, the American party system of 2020 is explainable with the Sartorian model of polarized pluralism.

2.2 *Is Brazil polarized?*

Brazilian democracy tells us another story. According to Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power[24] for the presidential elections of 2022 "Brazil's party system has undergone far-reaching change… the political centre has been abandoned, and with its emptying out has come the collapse of what had been something like a two-party system: the rivalry between the PT and the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB)"[25].

The electoral confrontation in 2022, in fact, mainly revolved around the incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro (Partido Liberal, PL, which once again can be categorized as Populist Radical Right[26]) and former President Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) in spite of the great fragmentation of Brazil's party system[27]. According to the two authors previously mentioned, "a vast ideological space lay between these two (Bolsonaro and Lula) … no other candidate was able to frame a viable "third way" to fill any of this wide area".

The two candidates for the presidential bid were, indeed, extremely distant from an ideological point of view. "Bolsonaro stood for hard-right nationalism, law and order, and a conservative discourse in "defense of the family" … Lula promoted progressive social values, strong support for minoritized populations, and concern with restoring Brazil's voice in the international community"[28].

The Brazilian presidential elections ended with the final results of 50.9% of the votes to Lula, and 49.1% to Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro did not manage to stay in power, but "pro-Bolsonaro politicians won the "triple

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[24] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, in "Journal of Democracy", n.1, 2023.

[25] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act,* cit..

[26] L. ZANOTTI, K. M. ROBERTS, (*Aún) La Excepción Y No La Regla: La Derecha Populista Radical En América Latina*, in "Revista Uruguaya de Ciencia Política", Fasc. 1, 2021.

[27] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, cit..

[28] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, cit..

crown" of Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio de Janeiro… the powerhouse of the national economy"[29].

In conclusion, at the time of the 2022 elections the Brazilian party system was polarized and resembled the Downsian bipolar model, with a bimodal voter preferences system associated with it.

At the time of the presidential elections in the US and in Brazil, the two party and electoral systems were polarized. Can this be correlated with the assaults at the institutions?

3. *Democratic erosion or democratic breakdown – democracies facing pernicious polarization*

According to McCoy, Rahman, and Somer[30] political polarization, if severe, can have some serious consequences for democratic polities. In a study, Alan Abramowitz and Jennifer McCoy[31] found that "rising mistrust and, at times, hatred of the opposing party and its leaders may be one of the most dangerous consequences". In fact, as stated by McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, when one polity becomes permeated with the "*us-vs-them*" vision of politics – along with Cas Mudde's concept of Populist Zeitgeist[32] – "supporters of each party are more likely to be willing to accept illiberal measures such as restrictions on freedom of expression or even the use of force against political opponents"[33].

That could help explain what happened in the United States and in Brazil.

In the US, Abramowitz and McCoy had already noted in 2019 that "there appears to be a strong likelihood that ideological conflict and partisan hostility will reach new heights during the Trump years".

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[29] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, cit..

[30] J. McCoY, T. RAHMAN, M. SOMER, *Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities*, in "American Behavioural Scientist", n. 1, pp. 16-42.

[31] A. ABRAMOWITZ, J. McCoY, *United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America*, in "The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", n. 1, pp. 137-156.

[32] C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, cit..

[33] A. ABRAMOWITZ, J. McCoY, *United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America*, cit..

At the time of the presidential elections of 2020[34] – and in the following years as well[35] – hostility towards the political opponents was so high that a part of the Republican electorate refused the results of the electoral competition – the very core of democracy – and tried to overturn Joe Biden's confirmation in favor of the incumbent President Donald Trump. Democrats – and the US democratic system in general – were, according to Trump's supporters, guilty of rigging the elections and that Biden was therefore not the legitimate winner[36].

The same thing happened in Brazil. In the events of the presidential election of 2022, "each candidate [Bolsonaro and Lula] campaigned on the urgent need to defeat the other"[37] and the electorate acted accordingly. According to Hunter and Power, Bolsonaristas considered Lula as "a godless communist intent on shuttering all Christian churches in the country"[38] and constantly reminded voters about Lula's "image of corruption"[39].

Lula, instead "ran as "not Bolsonaro" but managed to reach "beyond his ideological base", by uniting a front of the left and of former center right against the candidate who "many Brazilians had come to see as odious and unacceptable"[40].

The levels of polarization in both the USA and Brazil reached what McCoy, Somer and Luke called "pernicious polarization" – that is to say "the division of society into mutually distrustful Us versus Them camps in which political identity becomes a social identity"[41] – and

[34] G. C. JACOBSON, *The Presidential and Congressional Elections of 2020: A National Referendum on the Trump Presidency*, in "Political Science Quarterly", vol. 136, Number 1, 2021.
[35] PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System*, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/, visited on 18/02/2023.
[36] G. C. JACOBSON, *The Presidential and Congressional Elections of 2020: A National Referendum on the Trump Presidency*, in *"Political Science Quarterly", n. 1, 2021.
[37] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, cit..
[38] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, cit..
[39] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, cit..
[40] W. HUNTER, T. J. POWER, *Lula's Second Act*, cit..
[41] M. SOMER, J. L. McCOY, R. E. LUKE, *Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies, in "Democratization", n. 5, 2021, pp. 929-948.

that causes politics to enter "a state of exception" which requires "extraordinary, democracy eroding actions"[42].

Therefore, political polarization, if severe, can stretch democracy's capacity to contain political violence and to convey it in the democratic processes. In fact, this might be the very core of the assaults on Brazilian and American institutions: due to the "existential threat" perceived by at least one of the political sides, and the consequential eroded faith in democracy, Trump's and Bolsonaro's supporters resorted to the last instrument to change a political life they deemed unacceptable: violence.

According to Haggard and Kaufman[43], polarization and the capture of the executive and legislative institutions are two of three (together with incremental subversion of democratic institutions) causal factors of democratic backsliding. Both in Brazil and the USA there were high levels of polarization and the capture of the executive - if we consider Trump's and Bolsonaro's presidencies as illiberal[44] – therefore, the very next step should be the capture of legislative institutions, which was in fact implied by the attacks. US Congress and Brazilian Parliament were, in fact, the main aims of the assailants.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, high levels of polarization can be particularly dangerous in majoritarian democracies (using Arend Lijphart categories)[45] because, as Bogaards, Helms and Lijphart himself state, majoritarian democracies have intrinsically polarizing traits, are incompatible with populism, and are the cause of more political polarization themselves[46]. Majoritarian democracies, such as the United States, pose a limit to democratic representation in the executive, by relegating the non-winning political side to non-effective opposition roles. In a polarized context, this can further exacerbate the spiral of political polarization.

[42] J. MCCOY, T. RAHMAN, M. SOMER., *Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities*, cit..

[43] S. HAGGARD, R. KAUFMAN, *The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding*, in "Journal of Democracy" Volume 32, n. 4, 2021.

[44] T. POWER, W. HUNTER, *Bolsonaro and Brazil's Illiberal Backlash*, in "Journal of Democracy", Volume 30, 2019, pp. 68-82.

[45] A. LIJPHART, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, cit.

[46] M. BOOGARDS, L. HELMS, A. LIJPHART, *The Importance of Consociationalism for Twenty- First Century Politics and Political Science*, cit..

All this considered, Brazilian and American democracies were at serious risk of backsliding into electoral or illiberal democracies. The attacks were not just political protests but attempts to subvert democracies and turn them into – at least de facto - autocracies.

But still, democracies managed to withstand.

4. *Democratic resilience in the face of political polarization*

As already stated, both attacks failed.

After the mob assault at US Congress on Jan. 6th, 2021, Joe Biden's election was still certified, and Biden became the US 46th President on Jan 20th, 2021. 725 people have been arrested for crimes associated with the assault[47].

Former President Donald J. Trump still refused to accept the elections' result and did not take part in the inauguration ceremony of President Biden. None of Trump's claims about the electoral competition were confirmed[48].

Similar were the events of the aftermath of the attack in Brazil. At the time of the attack, Lula already was President, and his legitimacy was not shaken at all. Bolsonaro, unlike Trump, was outside of the country and he did not take any responsibility for the attacks on the institutions. Jair Bolsonaro is currently under investigation by Brazil's Supreme Court for the events in Brasilia[49].

It is therefore possible to say that both democracies withstood the attempts of subversion and were therefore resilient. According to Wolfgang Merkel and Anna Lührmann, democratic resilience can be defined as: "the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character"[50].

[47] THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, *One Year Since the Jan. 6 Attack on the Capitol*, https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/one-year-jan-6-attack-capitol, visited on 23/02/2023.

[48] A.C. EGGERS, H. GARRO, J. GRIMMER, *No evidence for systematic voter fraud: A guide to statistical claims about the 2020 election*, in "PNAS", vol. 118, n. 45, 2021.

[49] M. ALBERTI, M. REVERDOSA, *Brazil's Supreme Court to investigate Bolsonaro over January 8 attacks*, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/13/americas/brazil-public-prosecutor-investigate-bolsonaro-intl-hnk/index.html, visited on 23/02/23.

[50] W. MERKEL, A. LÜHRMANN, *Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges*, in "Democratization", vol. 28, n. 5, 2021.

Merkel and Lührmann further investigate the concept of democratic resilience in their study, by listing three "possible reactions of political regimes to internal and external challenges"[51] which constitute the concept of democratic resilience.

Democracies can withstand challenges without major changes, or can adapt through internal changes, or yet they can recover after initial damage and disorder[52].

It is then crucial, for democracies, to have structural resilience (the institutional level, according to Merkel and Lührmann) but also, resilience of "civil culture and civil society"[53], or at the level of the political community, actors and citizens[54].

This is not a new concept in Political Sciences. Tocqueville – as Merkel and Lührmann recall – already thought that "the internalization of democratic norms into the collective consciousness of a society may serve as a bulwark against non-democratic tendencies"[55].

If so, democracies are protected by both their structure and their citizens: democracies, to be resilient, must have a stronghold of democratic and civic culture, understanding political culture as "the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations toward politics among the members of a political system", as stated by Almond and Verba[56].

"The deeper democratic principles are rooted in the traditions and mores of a society, the better they translate into open, participatory and effective institutions"[57] – as Merkel and Lührmann affirm.

If citizens within democracies lose faith in democracy itself (and perhaps, accept some form of non-democratic and autocratic

[51] W. Merkel, A. Lührmann, *Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges*, cit..

[52] W. Merkel, A. Lührmann, *Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges*, cit..

[53] W. Merkel, A. Lührmann, *Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges*, cit..

[54] W. Merkel, A. Lührmann, *Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges*, cit..

[55] W. Merkel, A. Lührmann, *Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges*, cit..

[56] G. Almond, S. Verba. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963.

[57] W. Merkel, A. Lührmann., *Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges*, cit..

behaviour[58]), democratic polities are left with their structural resilience. Therefore, an underbelly for an undemocratic and authoritarian route would be opened.

This goes along with Almond's and Verba's concept of "congruence"[59] between a polity's structure and its citizens' culture and beliefs, which is necessary for institutions to be stable. Karl Bracher, in 1971, warned that a "democracy without democrats" might not survive: therefore, democracies must be kept alive by their own citizens to be resilient in the face of internal and external aggressions.

Arend Lijphart, too, who calls for the 'kinder, gentler' policies of consensual democracy – one of the two "visions of democracies"[60] and the one which most guarantees power-sharing in the democratic processes, and more stability in divided societies[61] – agrees with the above-mentioned authors.

In fact, for Arend Lijphart as well "consensus democracy and these kinder, gentler policies stem from an underlying consensual and communitarian culture", along with Almond and Verba, who recalled the "complex, multidimensional system of causality"[62] of structural and cultural phenomena. It is therefore possible to assess that democratic resilience stems from both the structure of democracy itself and the civic culture of its citizens, which in turn affect each other and, if *congruent* – in a democratic and consensual way – make politics less a zero-sum game, and democratic backsliding a more remote possibility.

For the scope and aims of this article, it is not possible to assess and measure the democratic and civil culture of Brazil and the United States. It is possible to state, though, that in both Brazil and the United

[58] M. H. GRAHAM, M. W. SVOLIK, *Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States*, in "American Political Science Review", n. 2, 2020, pp. 392-409.

[59] G. ALMOND, S. VERBA *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, cit..

[60] G. BINGHAM POWELL, *Elections as instruments of democracy: Majoritarian and proportional visions,* Yale University Press, 2000.

[61] M. BOOGARDS, L. HELMS, A. LIJPHART, *The Importance of Consociationalism for Twenty- First Century Politics and Political Science*, cit..

[62] G. ALMOND, S. VERBA *, The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, cit..

States the democracies have shown structural resilience in the face of internal aggressions, since the attacks were largely unsuccessful and no changes to the transitions of power in both countries have been imposed. Therefore, using Merkel and Lührmann categories, US and Brazilian democracies withstood the challenges of political polarization with no major changes.

The possible consequences of political polarization on democratic and civil culture, and the possible erosion of democratic legitimacy in public opinion, shall be explored in future research.

Conclusions

Political polarization can be harmful for democracies. It can erode politics until it gets to its essential categories of "*friend and foe*", according to Carl Schmitt, thus making the political competition a zero-sum game and creating an adversarial context which can strain democracy's capacity to contain political violence and to channel it in the democratic processes.

It is the "Us versus Them" politics, connected to the "Populist Zeitgeist" found by Cas Mudde, and the quintessence of populism itself, which posits one good side versus the other, evil by definition.

This was the core of the attacks to American and Brazilian democracies: the good, populist side had to attack the evil establishment, guilty of "stealing the elections" and of subverting the conquests of the "champions of the people", Trump and Bolsonaro, who managed to bring back politics - and the nation - to the old glories, along with the concept of nostalgic pessimism studied by Colin Crouch[63].

In a polarized context, if democracy does not turn out to be the way of keeping the grip on power for an illiberal political side (in this case, populist-radical right parties), then the ultimate way to defend it is violence, and thus exiting democratic norms.

Democracies, though, have a way to bounce back. If citizens still have an underlying base of democratic culture, and if democracies

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[63] C. CROUCH, *Post-democracy After the Crises*, cit..

manage to keep their solid division of power, so that any incumbent is in check, democracies can withstand forms of authoritarian and illiberal aggression. If not, democracies are at risk of backsliding and turning into electoral, illiberal democracies and authoritarian states.

In the end, as Merkel and Lührmann put it, "political agency matters". In the end, it is all in the hands of the people.

Riassunto - Questo articolo, partendo dagli attacchi alle istituzioni democratiche statunitensi e brasiliane del gennaio 2021 e 2023, si pone come obiettivo di comprendere se e in che modo il fenomeno della polarizzazione politica possa essere correlato ad un aumento della violenza politica nelle democrazie e ad un possibile arretramento democratico. Allo stesso modo, verrà indagato il concetto di resilienza democratica e di come le democrazie possono resistere ai pericoli della polarizzazione politica.

Il fenomeno della polarizzazione politica può essere dannoso per le democrazie in quanto, se estremo, può portare la politica alle categorie essenziali di "amico e nemico", la politica del "noi contro di loro", che può conseguire nell'accettazione di azioni antidemocratiche come gli assalti alle istituzioni sopracitati.

Tuttavia, le democrazie possono trovare nel consolidamento della cultura civica e democratica, e nella rigida separazione dei poteri, lo strumento per resistere alle sfide alla democrazia stessa, tra cui il fenomeno della polarizzazione politica.