

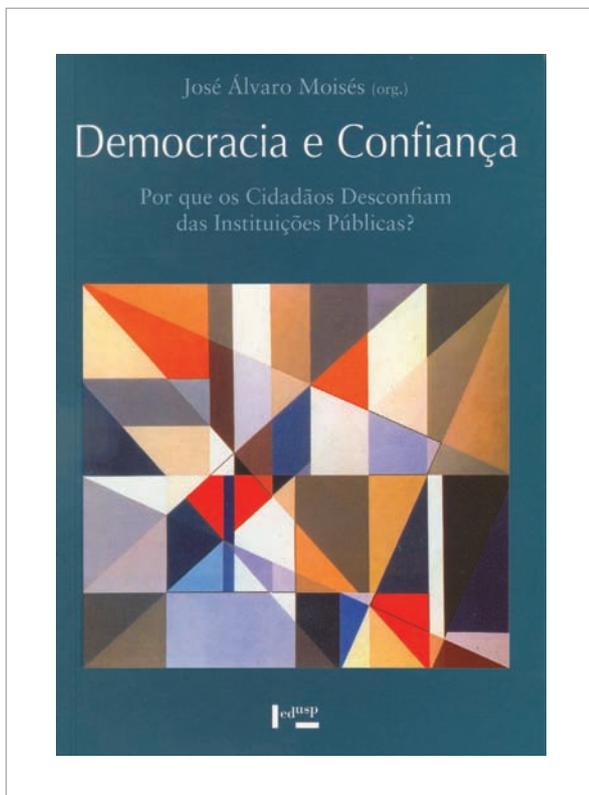
CITIZENS' DISTRUST OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

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Cover image of a book related to the project, authored by Samsom Flexor: *Geométrico Grande*, 1954, MAC-USP

The focus of this research is the phenomenon of Brazilian citizens' distrust with regard to important aspects of political life, such as governments, public authorities and, particularly, democratic institutions*. The Brazilian case is analyzed in comparison with other Latin American countries and other new democracies that have emerged from the political transformations provoked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.

In the last decades, empirical studies have demonstrated that despite the recent and relative stability of the Brazilian democracy and the temporal continuity of its public institutions, 2/3 of Brazilians do not trust politicians, parliaments, parties, the office of the President of the Republic or public service bodies (Moisés, 1995). More recently, this finding was reiterated by the publication of results of studies conducted by academic institutions and international bodies, such as the World Values Survey (WVS), the Corporación Latinobarómetro and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (Lapop), among others. According to data from these studies, the majority of Brazilian citizens and citizens of other Latin American countries not only declare themselves dissatisfied with the new democratic regime but also do not trust the public institutions (Moisés, 1995; Meneguello, 2002; Moisés and Carneiro, 2008; Lagos, 1997; Norris, 1999). In light of this apparently paradoxical picture, the central aim of this research is to assess the scope of distrust among Brazilian citizens and the implications for the functioning of the democratic regime, to ascertain the central determinants of this phenomenon and to explore their consequences.

* The project understands democratic institutions as those over and above the political community itself, of which citizens are a part. These institutions relate to the National Congress and local parliaments, political parties, executive bodies such as the Office of the President of the Republic and the Ministries, public service agencies (schools, police, public health, etc.), the Federal Supreme Courts and justice tribunals, among others (see Research Project FAPESP, 2004)..

SUMMARY OF RESULTS TO DATE AND PERSPECTIVES

The main objectives of this research were as follows:

a) to diagnose the nature of the Brazilian citizens' distrust of democratic institutions and b) to map associations between this attitude and a set of other attitudes, opinions and behaviors of the public related to the democratic regime. Therefore, the focus of this study was attitudes of political trust with regard to democracy.

In relation to the first objective, the results of the analyses, expounded into texts, articles and chapters of books, show that the main determinants of citizens' distrust regarding democratic institutions are related to the concrete performance of these institutions, which has been assessed from the perspective of subjective perception and objective experience and to the presence of values and normative perspectives adopted by the public with regard to the role of institutions. The results point to a convergence between interpretations of this research and what the recent political science literature (associated with both the culturalist and the institutionalist approaches) suggests as an explanation of the phenomenon of political distrust. The results from the research show that it is necessary to move toward the adoption of explicative models that integrate both perspectives.

With regard to the second objective, the analyses resulting from this project show that in relation to important themes such as democratic adherence, the relationship between the media and political trust, corruption, trust and democracy, citizenship and trust, political participation and political involvement, the assessment of public services and trust, and the relationship between trust, social capital and gender, explicative models must be wide-reaching and diversified. In other words, none of the issues mentioned can be explained exclusively by political trust or distrust; rather, the determinants of each aspect are based on a multiplicity of factors, such as socio-demographic perspectives, assessments of the economy and politics of specific governments, the relationship with religious creeds and political parties, and factors associated with the political culture, as observed in the case of trust.

The research has also produced methodological advances with regard to the validation and re-evaluation of surveys on political culture and scales to measure attitudes and opinions.

In summary, the analyses conducted in this project suggest a multi-dimensional explanation for the phenomenon of distrust of politics in Brazil as well as the set of other attitudes related to interviewees' opinions with regard to the democratic regime. This explanation is based on values, objective assessments and perceptions of the economy, politics and current governments. The findings point to important advances of knowledge in this area.

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