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Brazil

The Far Right and Bolsonarismo

Lucio Rennó

Brazil has undergone consecutive and unrelenting episodes of economic crisis and political turbulence since 2013. Year after year, economic data indicated continued recession and inflation, an extremely disheartening combination, especially for the socially vulnerable. Indeed, the entire population suffered; an overall feeling of disappointment and disgruntlement took hold, especially after many prior years of economic prosperity and significant upward social mobility (Peixoto & Renno, 2011; Rennó et al., 2021).

In addition, political instability became endemic. Dilma Rousseff, Lula's Workers' Party (PT) successor, was impeached in 2016. Aécio Neves, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) president and presidential runner-up in the 2014 elections, who almost defeated Dilma, was implicated in corruption scandals and fell in disgrace. Dilma's vice-president, Michel Temer, who took office after her impeachment, suffered the same fate. Both Neves and Temer were prematurely ousted from the 2018 presidential elections, caught in the whirlwind of the Lava-Jato Operation at the federal level. In fact, the Lava-Jato Operation devastated the Brazilian political landscape, exposing several corruption scandals and tainting all of the main political parties in power since 1995.

The population took to the streets, sometimes with diffuse and unclear demands, such as the protests of 2013; sometimes with more specific requests like the manifestations in favour of and against Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, starting as early as 2015, only a few months into her second term.

Conditions were ripe for the perfect storm. The political vacuum generated by the joint economic and political crises was an invitation for the emergence of a political outsider – with an 'us against them' rhetoric in defence of a vague concept of the people – to again contend for national power, as the script for the rise of populist leaders dictates (Weffort, 1978). Jair Bolsonaro did not hesitate. He took advantage of the situation and as early as 2014, immediately

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after Rousseff's successful re-election bid over Aécio Neves, launched his candidacy for the presidency.

Initially seen as an eccentric politician with no chance of winning, Bolsonaro stubbornly held on to his presidential bid, slowly but steadily gaining popular support. In mid 2017, he appeared in polls to be doing relatively well, but still was not taken seriously by his competitors or pundits. He had no political party, almost no budget, very little free television time in the campaign, and no mayors or governors to support him: he was depleted of all of the most important electoral resources, decisive in prior Brazilian presidential elections. Still, Bolsonaro won the 2018 elections with a very consistent and coherent conservative rhetoric, savvy use of social media, and the strong commitment and enthusiasm of a core group of 'true believers'. He established himself as *the* far right in Brazil, based on issue positions and profiting on the rejection and resentment against all major political parties, especially the PT and the left, imprecisely described as communists.

Bolsonaro is a turning point in Brazilian political history because he single-handedly and persistently defended and advanced a coherent conservative agenda, at the national level, incorporating distinct policy dimensions simultaneously. He fits easily into the characterization of the far right, with a special emphasis on sociocultural factors (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2023). Bolsonaro proposes a backlash against progressive cultural positions; a liberal economic agenda; is strongly against affirmative action for minorities groups and favourable to reducing state intervention in the economy; zero tolerance towards crime and delinquency, adopting a *mano dura* approach to law and order. Albeit strongly against affirmative action, Bolsonaro approached other social policies, especially conditional cash transfer programs, ambiguously (Rennó, 2020). He understood the electoral impact of the 'Bolsa Familia', a PT inheritance difficult to remove, but worked steadily to undermine and change it, aiming at establishing a new brand for a similar program.

His supply of a consistent and coherent far-right rhetoric resonated with parts of the public: issue positions on abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and perceptions of crime are key attitudes among Bolsonaristas (Rennó, 2020, 2022). Indeed, Bolsonarismo can be understood as the far-right political alignment in contemporary Brazil, very much distinct from the mainstream right, embodied by the PSDB, or the catch-all, clientelist conservative parties of the past and present (Montero, 2014).

It is important to highlight that the failure of the mainstream right in Temer's unpopular government and its prior radicalization led by Neves of the PSDB when advancing the impeachment process further legitimized the far-right project advanced by Bolsonaro. A weakened mainstream right led by the PSDB and Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) (Temer's party) was unable to offer a 'third way' in the 2018 and 2022 Brazilian elections. The failure in attenuating the economic problems while in government and involvement in

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successive scandals were strong determinants of the rise of the far right in Brazil, to the detriment of the traditional right.

Neves had a particularly significant role in undermining democracy when he questioned the results of the 2014 elections. The PSDB employed a private, third-party firm scrutinizing the election results, questioning the integrity of the electronic ballot. Once his claims were proven to be mistaken, he and his supporters were unwilling to acknowledge the results widely, leaving behind a mistrust in the Brazilian voting system that Bolsonaro was able to build upon.

Bolsonaro was able to produce an electoral alignment based on policy positions. His voters consistently agree with his harsh rhetoric – and actions while in government. Later, these came to incorporate other dimensions, such as strong rejection of science, spurred on while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and a clear defence of anti-democratic positions, proposing a military coup to keep Bolsonaro in power.

In this sense, regarding the taxonomy proposed by Rovira Kaltwasser (2023), Bolsonaro adopts positions of the populist radical right as well as the extreme right – given his opportunistic ambiguity towards democratic backsliding. It can be said that Bolsonaro fluctuated from a populist radical-right position – within the boundaries of illiberal democracy – to the extreme right, especially after 2020. The deadly wave of COVID-19 in early 2021 severely damaged Bolsonaro's image and affected his popularity. With a possible electoral defeat looming large on the horizon, the authoritarian temptation was irresistible. He became increasingly prone to promote authoritarian solutions to the country, only to back down when confronted by resistance from social and political groups defending democracy. This was the tone of his performance in office regarding democracy: bravado when among supporters; cowardice when confronted by defenders of the regime.

In this chapter, we describe Bolsonaro's rhetoric during his rise to power and his tenure in office. We show how he has defended positions that are clearly associated with the proposed understanding of what the far right represents. We also discuss some of his actions in power, especially regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, but also his disruptive work, as Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca (2009) define the concept, in specific areas, such as conditional cash transfer programs.

Our argument is that within the far right, Bolsonaro oscillates between a populist radical right and an extreme rightist, increasingly flirting with authoritarianism as his mandate progressed and the threat of losing re-election materialized as a very likely outcome. As the fear of losing increased, and the associated anticipation of possible punishments for his several challenges to the rule of law during his term, Bolsonaro increasingly moved to the extremist, authoritarian far right. In the end, it was this feeling of threat to democracy, of democratic crisis, that marked the 2022 Brazilian elections, when the defence and attack of the regime became an electoral issue (Rennó, 2022).

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3.1 BOLSONARO AS THE FAR RIGHT

There is no question that Bolsonaro represents a rupture in the history of the contemporary Brazilian right. In 1989, Fernando Collor de Melo was the first civilian directly elected president after an electoral interregnum of twenty-nine years. He was impeached in 1992, on accusations of corruption. Collor has been classified as a right-wing populist, defending a heterodox economic agenda as candidate, but shifting to neoliberal policies when in government (Stokes, 2001; Weyland, 1999). He attempted to circumvent Congress in the policy-making process and turned to the streets to seek support. Unfortunately for him, his harsh economic policies, implemented by surprise early in his mandate, reduced popular support. The streets did not respond well to his call – instead of dressing in the Brazilian colours, as requested by the president on the eve of his impeachment process, students flocked to the streets in 1992 with painted faces and wearing black to demand his ousting. The 'cara pintadas' movement, as the students became known, were decisive in strengthening the congressional effort to oust the weakened president. Collor advanced a clear neoliberal agenda with an inclination to weaken democratic institutions, especially Congress, but never openly defended anti-democratic solutions. He could have been seen as populist, but not far right as it is understood today. At most, he was a defender of illiberal solutions.

Between 1995 and 2002, Brazil was governed by the mainstream right – with two consecutive Fernando Henrique Cardoso terms. The agenda was predominantly socioeconomic, focusing on the control of inflation and establishing the roots for macroeconomic stability, in line with the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus. The understanding was that attaining economic stability through harsh fiscal and monetary policies and establishing the basis for sustainable growth was the way to combat socioeconomic inequalities. In line with this goal, the focus shifted to inclusive social policies, but this came only in 2001, late in the second term of Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Probably too late to assure electoral success in the 2002 elections.

The two consecutive PSDB administrations of Fernando Henrique Cardoso between 1995 and 2002 were clearly of a moderate nature and could be classified as centre right. Cardoso deepened reforms following Collor's neoliberal agenda, especially with the consolidation of a politics of privatization, but also of state reform to professionalize public administration and to increase incentives to assure fiscal discipline. The control of inflation and assurance of macroeconomic stability became the trademark of Brazilian social democrats. The downside of such policies was slow and exclusive growth. Unemployment and poverty were at the root of the PSDB's defeat by Lula's PT in the 2002 elections.

Bolsonaro had little to do with Collor de Melo and even less with the PSDB. In fact, in 2018, Bolsonaro was vehemently attacked by Geraldo Alckmin, the PSDB presidential candidate, in a final, desperate attempt to avoid his inevitable

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victory. Different from the mainstream right and his predecessors, Bolsonaro shifted the political agenda to sociocultural factors, leaving the socioeconomic agenda to a secondary position. Bolsonaro also differs from his predecessors on the right by strongly flirting with illiberal democracy and authoritarianism. This completely sets him apart from the PSDB. Collor did have centralizing inclinations and attempted to circumvent Congress, but never openly defended authoritarian solutions – at best, as stated, he was an illiberal populist. Bolsonaro also promoted a political platform that is coherent with modern-day conservatism: he brought together and promoted issues that the mainstream right avoided. Abortion, religion, disdain for human rights – issues the PSDB and Collor never openly discussed – became central in Bolsonaro's far-right agenda. The emergence of this consistent alternative to the left and to the mainstream right was key to boosting Bolsonarismo to centre stage of Brazilian politics.

Bolsonaro, like most populists, thrives in conflict (Moffitt, 2016), and he actively pursued controversial issues to set him apart from the competition. In doing so, he naturally activated the innate or dormant conservatism that was kept at bay during the fourteen years of PT rule (eight with Lula and six with Dilma Roussef). In fact, the concept of abashed right that Timothy Power (2000) employed to describe post-authoritarian Brazil no longer applies to substantial portions of the population. On the contrary, parts of the public responded promptly, as Bolsonarismo, or the right-wing multidimensional electoral alignment in current Brazilian mass politics, has been surprisingly consistent over the years and with solid popular backing (Avritzer & Rennó, 2021; Chaguri & Amaral, 2023; Fuks & Marques, 2020; Fuks et al., 2021; Rennó, 2020, 2022; Silva et al., 2022; Tanscheit, 2023; Tanscheit & Barbosa, 2023). As Rennó (2020, 2022) has shown, significant parts of the population, one in five Brazilians, are 'true believers'. This is enough to assure Bolsonaro as a force to be reckoned with at the national level, placing him and his allies as natural contenders for power and practically hegemonic on the right.

For instance, look at the 2022 elections. Even after disastrous management of the pandemic and a severe economic crisis, Bolsonaro entered the race with a very high electoral floor, fending off any competition on the right. Hence, what to some might seem low – 20 percent of the Brazilian voting population – is sufficient to promote Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo as the main contestant on the right, becoming the strongest force to capture anti-Petismo, understood as a strong rejection of the PT (Samuels & Zucco, 2018).

Bolsonaro constructed his career – from the early days as a *Vereador* (Council member) in Rio de Janeiro in 1988, when he received 11,062 votes – on an electoral stronghold based on retired military personnel (he was a former army captain and paratrooper). From 1991 to 2018, he held the office of Federal Deputy, representing the state of Rio de Janeiro. His agenda was purely clientelist, in favour of gaining and maintaining benefits and privileges for military personnel and their families. However, his constituency increased

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significantly as he gained notoriety as a hard-core conservative and defender of the military regime. His aggression against the left, and towards gender politics in particular, became a trademark from early on, as well as his obstinate defence of the harsh punishment of crime.

Bolsonaro's electoral results as Federal Deputy show a staggering increase from the 67,041 votes received in 1990 to the 464,572 votes obtained in his last election for the Chamber of Deputies, in 2014. Over the course of his seven mandates as Federal Deputy, also a record among Brazilian politicians, his votes either remained stable or increased election after election, with a drop in 2002 and 2006, but regaining momentum in 2010 and then almost quadrupled in size in 2014. There is no doubt that Bolsonaro's strategy to run for president is backed by his astonishing performance in 2014, given Brazilian standards. He was the most voted-for Federal Deputy in Rio de Janeiro after a long time in the office.

Bolsonaro is so influential that he got his three eldest sons elected to public office. Flavio Bolsonaro is a Senator of the state of Rio de Janeiro, elected in 2018, after four mandates as State Deputy, between 2003 and 2019. His second oldest son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, is a Federal Deputy of the State of São Paulo, first elected in 2015 and now on his third term. His third son, also publicly called by Bolsonaro '03', is Carlos Bolsonaro, a six-term *Vereador* in the city of Rio de Janeiro, since 2001. Hence, Bolsonaro's family has been in politics for a long time, signalling the force of the name in Brazilian politics, especially Rio de Janeiro.

Bolsonaro has also fared extremely well in electing allies beyond his family in the 2022 elections. Several of his ministers won office. Tarcisio de Freitas, Minister of Infrastructure in Bolsonaro's cabinet was elected Governor of São Paulo. Damaris Alvez, former Secretary of Human Rights, was elected Senator by the Federal District. Ricardo Salles, Minister of Environment, was elected Federal Deputy by São Paulo. And the list goes on. His party, the Partido Liberal, elected ninety-nine federal deputies, becoming the largest party in the Chamber of Deputies, followed by the PT with eighty elected deputies. In the Senate, the president's party elected fourteen senators and became the new largest party, after twenty-five years. Of the fifteen elected governors in the first round of 2022, nine supported Bolsonaro in the second round, including those elected in the larger and richer states: Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. It is impossible to deny that Bolsonarismo remains strong after the 2022 elections. Even with the defeat in the presidential election, Bolsonaro himself received 49.1 percent of the vote in the second round – dividing the Brazilian electorate in half. In 2018, he obtained 49,277,010 votes in the first round and in 2022 he won 51,072,345 votes. Hence, his support remained significantly stable in the two electoral cycles, even after his controversial presidential mandate during the very harsh times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, Bolsonaro has switched parties many times. As president, he was for a long time unaffiliated to any party after he left the Social Liberal Party (PSL).

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He only joined the Liberal Party (PL) in November of 2021, where he still remains, a year before the 2022 elections. He was a member of eight different parties during his career. But he never really constructed a new personalist electoral vehicle for himself. The PSL, probably the smallest party he joined, was the closest he came. All of the parties he joined were already established organizations. Hence, Bolsonaro clearly falls into the appropriation of an existing party strategy, jumping between parties by convenience and using them to advance his own personal agenda. With the PL it has been a bit different, as his move to that party propelled it to become one of the largest in the country.

Given this impressive trajectory, what does Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo stand for? What are the issue dimensions associated with Bolsonarismo, promoted by his incendiary rhetoric? We focus here on the supply side, provided by Bolsonaro himself, highlighting what he has been saying and defending over the years. It is clear that Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo represent a shift in Brazilian politics, openly promoting agendas that the right had previously avoided. He has advanced a new alignment in Brazilian politics.

3.2 BOLSONARO SPEAKS

The study of the far right in Brazil has made steady headway since Bolsonaro's debut as a central actor in the country's political scene. Studies have turned their attention to the supply side of radical discourse, focusing on elite speeches, in addition to the growing literature on the demand side, on mass voting behaviour. The growing academic interest is just another indication of how Bolsonarismo represents a change in the undercurrents of Brazilian politics, introducing something that was not there before and that some insist on neglecting or stubbornly choose to ignore.

Studies about Bolsonaro's rhetoric tend to focus on the question of whether or not he is a populist. Tamaki and Fuks (2020) study Bolsonaro campaign speeches from July to October of 2018. They claim Bolsonaro promotes a mixture of populist, patriotic, and nationalist rhetoric. He ranks the highest among Brazilian presidents in the use of populist jargon, but much lower than his contemporary counterparts around world. Tamaki and Fuks (2020) rely on Team Populism's coding strategy to quantify populist rhetoric. The codification process, obviously, focuses on the presence of populist traits in Bolsonaro's speeches, including, among others: a Manichean view of politics, exaltation of the will of the people, labelling enemies and fiercely attacking them. The authors use official speeches and Facebook live streams as sources to collect the data. People-centrism, vilification of the elite as selfish and corrupt, especially the PT, and a Manichaean division of Brazilian politics, stressing the polarization with the PT, are fundamental qualitative traits of Bolsonaro's choice of words. This final division brings into the mix derogatory comments about communists, personified by the case of Venezuela in Latin America, on one hand, and a defence of traditional family values as being on the correct side

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of history, on the other. Hence, it is in the presentation of a simplistic division of Brazil between communists on the left and people of good will on the right that Bolsonaro's conservative agenda emerges in the analysis of his populist inclinations.

Feres and colleagues (2022) pose the exact same question – is or isn't Bolsonaro a populist? – focusing on the 2022 elections, and come to relatively similar conclusions. They claim that Bolsonaro is not a 'classic' populist. Bolsonaro innovates, according to the authors, in his emphasis on the concept of corruption, alongside his strong anti-left stance, covering diverse areas of public policy while doing so. As was the case with Tamaki and Fuks (2020), Feres and colleagues (2022) argue that a notion of patriotism and nation are more central to the Bolsonarista rhetoric than that of the people, which distances Bolsonaro from the prototypical populist. Also, in accordance with Tamaki and Fuks (2020), the Bolsonarista discourse 'constructs a leftist scarecrow against which it articulates its stance as a champion of conservative, individualistic, God-fearing values' (Feres et al., 2022, p. 7). Again, the left and the PT in particular are presented as communists who will turn Brazil into a chaotic and dictatorial Venezuela and must be confronted and defeated.

In addition, Bolsonaro relies heavily on the use of the word corruption, which cuts across all of the policy topics he mentions and is used to further distinguish himself from the PT. In spite of advocating for conservative Christian values, especially regarding issues of gender and LGBTQ+ politics, the latter are not seen as morally corrupt. Corruption is something that political elites in Brazil have repeatedly engaged in. It is not something of the people, even of those Bolsonaro clearly disagrees with on the basis of issues. Militarism becomes an antidote to corruption, in Bolsonaro's rhetoric, linking the military presence in his government as a guarantee of honesty and dedication to the nation, free of the corrupt inclinations of the political class.

Hence, Bolsonaro is a populist of sorts, who relies on some traditional strategies that populists of the past used but introduces new themes and topics. In any case, he seems to weave together several aspects that move his populist appeal in a clear ideological direction, motivated by positions on issues. His aggressive anti-left rhetoric is constructed upon concrete policy themes. It is also through this strategy that Bolsonaro engages the 'us against them' approach, so common to populists (Feres & Gagliardi, 2021). Therefore, if it is questionable whether Bolsonaro is a classic populist, there is no doubt that he represents a shift in the Brazilian right and embodies radical and extreme far-right issues.

According to Feres and Gagliardi (2021), Bolsonaro mobilizes factors that emerge repeatedly in his savvy and extensive use of social media as the preferred locus for his political communication, something he also pioneered in Brazilian politics. They go on to argue, similarly to prior studies, that Bolsonaro defends militarism and military rule as a solution to the corruption problems in Brazil. He associates himself with Christianity, in particular the moral agenda of

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Evangelical churches. He also demonizes the left and the PT. Bolsonaro exacerbates his vulgarity and crudeness, as a way to identify with the common man in the streets. He oversimplifies themes as a form of reaching out to the direct, everyday communication of mass politics. Hence, Bolsonaro has adopted certain ways of presenting himself that differentiate his political platform from all others in Brazil. He has chosen his words carefully and has become the spokesperson of a significant portion of the Brazilian public that holds similar ideas about politics.

Still, the studies above focus too much on Bolsonaro the populist. We are more interested in a less explored angle: Bolsonaro, the leader of the far right in Brazil and Latin America. The focus here is not on discussing if Bolsonaro is a populist. Instead, we want to map his positions on political issues – how different topics appear on his statements: therefore, we propose to map Bolsonaro's political agenda according to how he describes it in his own words. The emphasis is not on a systematic, quantitative content analysis of expressions and words, as in the studies cited above. The chapter uses Bolsonaro's own words, as they have appeared in media outlets, to exemplify his adherence to far-right ideas. Hence, the emphasis is on identifying how he has been portrayed by the media based on his own self-presentation: what he has said and done through the eyes of media outlets. In this way, we can advance on the findings of prior studies by more closely focusing on the right-wing content of Bolsonaro's rhetoric. I also focus on what the media has echoed, and not just the analysis of what came out of Bolsonaro's mouth. This provides insights about how third parties have seen Bolsonaro and associated him with certain topics and issues.

3.3 PENAL PUNITIVISM TO COMBAT CRIME AND CORRUPTION

First, Bolsonaro, as a military man himself, is in favour of harsh confrontation of crime and delinquency. Bolsonaro defends that policing should be repressive and that consideration of human rights should be a secondary concern. He clearly adopts a 'mano dura' approach to combating crime. In this sense, Bolsonaro clearly adopts a stance of penal punitivism, politicizing public security and relying on it as a central policy position in his agenda. Given that crime and corruption have consistently ranked very high among the main national problems in the population's view and that there is significant support for punishing criminals (Renno, 2020, 2022), defending the harsh treatment of crime, disregarding human rights, is a favourable position for Bolsonaro.

Furthermore, Bolsonaro's position fits well with Harig's (2022) central thesis that the militarization of public security in Brazil is not driven by the military's ambition to seize power, but by a 'demand-side' from politicians and society. According to Harig (2022), the public, disillusioned with failing civilian institutions (like the police), increasingly trusts the military and demands its deployment in internal security roles. Politicians, in turn, are persuaded to use the

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armed forces for public security because it is a popular and politically expedient option. The military, on the 'supply-side', agrees to these new roles because it justifies its budget and maintains its relevance. This creates a vicious cycle that further erodes civilian institutions and normalizes the military's expanded role. There are many instances where Bolsonaro's words reinforce penal punitivism. For instance, he has said on several occasions that killer cops should be rewarded and not punished: 'The [policeman] enters, solves the problem, and, if he kills 10, 15 or 20, with 10 or 30 bullets in each one, he should be decorated and not put on trial.'[1]

He went on, in his 2018 campaign, to argue that criminals are not normal human beings. They should not be respected or be seen as victims of society; instead, they should be killed. 'This type of people (bandits), you cannot treat them as if they were normal human beings, ok? One who should be respected, who is a victim of society. We cannot allow that police officers continue to die at the hands of these guys.'[2]

Bolsonaro also defended filling prisons with criminals by restricting measures that attenuate imprisonment, such as assuring family visits at Christmas. Criminals should rot in prison and should not be given any rights. 'We have to make the punishment harsher for these guys. If it was for me, this guy would rot in jail.'[3] Indeed, his campaign symbol was a sign of a gun made with a hand gesture, with the index finger pointing straight and the thumb pointing up. He encouraged children to make the hand signal, a direct promotion of violence.[4]

As a Federal Deputy in 2003, Bolsonaro repeatedly and openly defended the killing of criminals. In a speech in the Chamber of Deputies, he claimed that until the state has the courage to adopt the death penalty, killings by paramilitary groups should be welcomed. He invited groups from Bahia, where the incidents took place, to go to Rio de Janeiro, Bolsonaro's state, to kill criminals there.

[1] www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/. 'O conteúdo de CartaCapital está protegido pela legislação brasileira sobre direito autoral. "[O policial] entra, resolve o problema e, se matar 10, 15 ou 20, com 10 ou 30 tiros cada um, ele tem que ser condecorado, e não processado"' (2018). All translations by the author.

[2] https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/08/28/bolsonaro-diz-ao-jn-que-criminoso-nao-e-ser-humano-normal-e-defende-policial-que-matar-10-15-ou-20.ghtml. 'Esse tipo de gente (bandidos), você não pode tratá-lo como se fosse um ser humano normal, tá? Que deve ser respeitado, que é uma vítima da sociedade. Não podemos deixar os policiais continuarem morrendo nas mãos desses caras.'

[3] www.gazetadopovo.com.br/politica/republica/eleicoes-2018/na-jovem-pan-bolsonaro-diz-que-vai-entupir-a-cadeia-de-bandidos-9cb650wxl5ct7zatocknl3di7/. 'Temos que agravar a pena desse cara. Se depender de mim, esse cara mofa na cadeia.'

[4] www.brasildefato.com.br/2021/10/12/5-vezes-em-que-bolsonaro-fez-apologia-a-violencia-usando-criancas-eca-tem-que-ser-rasgadoandhttps://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/veja-gente/como-os-filhos-de-bolsonaro-fazem-da-pauta-do-armamento-um-estilo-de-vida

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I want to say to our comrades in Bahia – I just heard a Parliamentarian criticize the extermination groups – that until the state does not have the courage to adopt the death penalty, the crime of extermination, in my understanding, will be very much welcome. If there isn't space for it in Bahia, you can come to Rio de Janeiro. If it depends on me, they will have all my support, because in my state only the innocent people are decimated. In Bahia, by the information I have – of course they are illegal groups – marginality has decreased. Congratulations![5]

It is very important to highlight in this extract of Bolsonaro's rhetoric the open defence of the death penalty. This is a clear policy position associated with Bolsonarismo, linked to the harsh view on law and order it promotes. If the death penalty is not introduced, given the cowardice of the state, people should take the law into their own hands and indiscriminately kill *bandidos* (bandits), obviously without any trial. Hence, the rule of law is obviously secondary until the law reflects exactly what Bolsonarismo defends.

Regarding the killing of hundreds of prisoners by policemen in Carandiru Prison, São Paulo, in 1992, he wished more had been killed. This was a tragic episode in Brazilian history in which the São Paulo police invaded Carandiru Prison, in the centre of the North Region of São Paulo, to contain an ongoing riot and massacred 110 prisoners, of whom 84 were still awaiting trial. Soon after, the prison was closed down and completely removed from the premises, providing space for a public park. Still, despite its traumatic consequences, Bolsonaro went on to defend the killings: 'Few died. The Military Police should have killed a thousand.'[6]

The theme, obviously, was part of the 2018 campaign, when Bolsonaro said he would propose laws that prevented policemen from being charged for having killed criminals in the line of duty. He went on to conclude that criminals would die like cockroaches in the streets if such a policy was adopted. 'The guys will die in the street like coach roaches, yeah!'[7]

As president, Bolsonaro very consistently followed through on his prior comments and went on to increase access to guns by the population to defend itself from criminals. He passed over forty decrees that facilitated access to gun ownership, which significantly increased the purchasing of weapons by

[5] https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/area/pais/bolsonaro-apoiou-grupo-de-exterminio-que-cobrava-r-50-para-matar-jovens-da-periferia/. 'Quero dizer aos companheiros da Bahia – há pouco ouvi um parlamentar criticar os grupos de extermínio – que enquanto o Estado não tiver coragem de adotar a pena de morte, o crime de extermínio, no meu entender, será muito bem-vindo. Se não houver espaço para ele na Bahia, pode ir para o Rio de Janeiro. Se depender de mim, terão todo o meu apoio, porque no meu estado só as pessoas inocentes são dizimadas. Na Bahia, pelas informações que tenho – lógico que são grupos ilegais – a marginalidade tem decrescido. Meus parabéns!'

[6] www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/. 'Morreram poucos. A PM tinha que ter matado mil.'

[7] https://oglobo.globo.com/politica/os-caras-vao-morrer-na-rua-igual-barata-po-diz-bolsonaro-sobre-criminosos-23855554. 'Os caras vão morrer na rua igual barata, pô!'

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Brazilian citizens during his administration.[8] He also defended the passage of laws that would reduce the age of criminal responsibility, another of his preferred policy positions. He failed in doing so during his first term, but promised to implement it if re-elected, especially because he expected a much more conservative Congress in his second term.[9]

Thus it is clear that the discourse against human rights, when it comes to combating crime, is a central dimension of Bolsonaro's far-right positions. The police should be allowed to kill, and citizens should be allowed to arm themselves to fend off criminals. There is no such thing as human rights in the Bolsonarista law-and-order rhetoric.

3.4 ANTI-LGBTQ+ AND ANTI-GENDER POLITICS

A second controversial and constant theme in Bolsonaro's agenda is his fight against gender politics and LGBTQ+ issues. He has repeatedly criticized homosexuals and related homosexuality to a disease that can be cured – especially through strict disciplining by the father, a strong male figure. He has also adopted positions that are detrimental to women's rights in the labour market and is strongly against the legalization of abortion, a theme that has become central to Bolsonarismo. In this case, the sociocultural dimension of Bolsonaro's right-wing agenda clearly differentiates him from the moderate nature of the mainstream right – as does his harsh law-and-order rhetoric. The mainstream right in Brazil, with the PSDB as its main representative, has never openly defended intolerant positions towards minorities or ignored human rights. Similar to the left, when pressed to position itself on the theme in the 2010 elections, both the PT and the PSDB adopted ambivalent positions (Rennó & Ames, 2014). Again, similar to issues regarding public security and crime, abortion is a taboo that the left and moderate right have not found a clear way to position itself on.

Indeed, positions on LGBTQ+ rights and gender politics, especially abortion, are favourable topics for the right because of massive popular rejection of the latter and a divided electorate regarding the former, as Rennó (2020, 2022) has shown. Using public opinion data from Brazil, Rennó provides evidence of a majoritarian and temporally consistent popular rejection of the right to abortion, hovering above 80 percent between 2018 and 2021. Same-sex marriage

[8] www.brasildefato.com.br/2022/09/12/apos-mais-de-40-decretos-de-bolsonaro-brasileiros-compram-1-300-armas-por-dia

[9] www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-volta-a-defender-reducao-da-maioridade-penal-caso-reeleito/#:~:text=Bolsonaro%20volta%20a%20defender%20redu%C3%A7%C3%A30%20da%20maioridade%20penal%20caso%20reeleito,-Em%20evento%20de&text=O%20presidente%20Jair%20Bolsonaro%20(PL,elei%C3%A7%C3%B5es%2C%20no%20pr%C3%B3ximo%20dia%2030andwww.poder360.com.br/governo/se-reeleito-bolsonaro-diz-que-aprovara-reducao-da-maioridade-penal/

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and the adoption of children by same-sex couples is supported by about half of the population. In addition, when analysing the internal consistency of Bolsonarismo, by correlating support for Bolsonaro as composite measure combining vote for Bolsonaro and positive evaluations of his government with several issue positions, views on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights strongly correlate with Bolsonarism. These findings are consistent over time as well. In fact, in a more recent study that includes 2023, Rennó (2023) finds that even once out of government, and facing substantial crisis, Bolsonarismo remained stable, internally coherent, and consistent over time.

Even if across Latin America, there isn't a strong backlash against policy advances on gender and LGBTQ+ rights, as Abreu Maia, Chiu, and Desposato (2023) show, this does not mean that, in the particular case of Brazil, the topic was not extensively explored by Bolsonaro and that it did not resonate with his core electorate. Indeed, data above from Rennó (2020, 2022, 2023) shows just the opposite: Bolsonarismo remains strong. Indeed, as will be clear here, Bolsonaro has consistently explored the topic in his speeches. Regarding gays, Bolsonaro repeatedly made homophobic statements as Federal Deputy. In 2010 he said that he preferred a dead son to a gay one. 'For me, it's death. I say more: I rather he dies in an accident than shows up with another guy with a moustache. To me he will have died anyway.'[10]

In 2011, he stated that a boy who is starting to act like a 'little faggot' will change if beaten. Again, violence is the cure for homosexuality. It is also interesting how his concern is with male homosexuality, always making reference to gay man, never to gay woman. 'The son starts to act like a little faggot, takes a beating, he changes his behaviour. Ok?'[11]

He clearly positioned himself against the adoption of children by gay couples, stating that they will certainly become homosexuals and hustlers, call boys. Hence, a family cannot be constituted by same-sex partners. This is another issue that his supporters also back (Rennó, 2020, 2022), positioning themselves against adoption by same-sex couples. Once again, the reference here is to male homosexuality only: '90% of the adopted boys [by a gay couple] will become homosexuals and will be call boys for sure'.[12]

Finally, he stated he would never help people with Aids because the majority became infected through sharing syringes and homosexuality. In other words, people's so-called deviant behaviour caused their health condition and society should let them die. Notice also the use of foul language, another trademark of Bolsonaro. Also notice the pejorative, derogatory use of the term *aidéticos* to

[10] 'Para mim é a morte. Digo mais: prefiro que morra num acidente do que apareça com um bigodudo por aí. Para mim ele vai ter morrido mesmo.'

[11] 'O filho começa a ficar assim meio gayzinho, leva um couro, ele muda o comportamento dele. Tá certo?'

[12] '90% desses meninos adotados [por um casal gay] vão ser homossexuais e vão ser garotos de programa com toda certeza.'

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refer to people who are HIV-positive. In this sense, Bolsonaro and Milei are similar in their use of colloquial language that the population, or at least a part of the population that they share views with, also uses frequently. Foul language is part of this jargon, as it also reinforces these leaders' image of strong, aggressive males, who do not hesitate to say things as they see them and how the everyday person, other men in particular, also sees them. 'The guy comes to ask money to help people with aids [*aidéticos*]. The majority is because of sharing needles or homosexuality. No fucking way I will help! I will help the decent boy.'[13]

Regarding gender issues, Bolsonaro has clearly positioned himself against the legalization abortion. As noted, in the 2010 elections, Marina Silva, an evangelical left-wing candidate, profited electorally when she adopted a clear position against abortion, in opposition to the moderate PSDB candidate and the then PT candidate, Dilma Rousseff (Rennó & Ames, 2014). This is a theme that has strong popular support, and Bolsonaro never hesitated to mobilize it.

He has also adopted misogynistic and sexist positions throughout his career. In a very well-known episode in the Chamber of Deputies, while in a very aggressive discussion with a female Federal Deputy from the Rio Grande Sul Workers' Party, Maria do Rosário, he said: 'I would never rape you because you don't deserve it.'[14]

He also justified women's lower salaries because they get pregnant and employers have to pay for six months' leave: 'That is why the employer pays less to a woman (because she gets pregnant).'[15] This issue also came up in his important campaign interview with Globo TV in 2018, when he accused the broadcast station of paying different salaries to the male and female anchors who were interviewing him.[16]

The two core themes of Bolsonarismo – penal punitivism as a zero-tolerance stance towards crime and anti-gender politics and gay rights – are the pillars of far-right ideology in Brazilian politics. These are political positions that most of the Brazilian population tend to agree with (Rennó, 2020, 2022). Hence, it is quite comfortable and natural for Bolsonaro to openly defend them in his campaign; something other candidates, especially on the mainstream right and left, hesitate to do and are ambivalent towards.

[13] 'O cara vem pedir dinheiro para mim para ajudar os aidéticos. A maioria é por compartilhamento de seringa ou homossexualismo. Não vou ajudar porra nenhuma! Vou ajudar o garoto que é decente.' All of the above statements available at www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/. O conteúdo de CartaCapital está protegido pela legislação brasileira sobre direito autoral.

[14] www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/. 'Eu jamais ia estuprar você porque você não merece.'

[15] www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/. 'Por isso o cara paga menos para a mulher (porque ela engravida).'

[16] www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2018/08/28/interna_politica,984235/renata-vasconcellos-bolsonaro-entrevista-vira-meme-redes-sociais.shtml

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As president he was coherent with his past trajectory, as he had been outspoken about these topics throughout his career as a federal deputy. He was never taken seriously by fellow politicians and always considered an eccentric. However, what history went on to show was how in tune Bolsonaro was with a considerable part of the Brazilian population, who did not hesitate to elect him president with a safe margin in 2018 and almost re-elected him in 2022.

3.5 ANTI-LEFT

Another defining trait of Bolsonarismo is anti-communism and anti-Petismo – resentment against the Workers' Party, in particular, and the left in general. Bolsonaro also associates anti-communism with the glorification of the armed forces in Brazil, especially the army, and the 1964 coup. In this view, the military were responsible for avoiding the take-over of Brazil by communist forces. In addition, there is a religious connotation to Bolsonaro's anti-communism, opposing it to the defence of the family and God.

In 2022, this issue came up in his re-election bid, in a speech in which the focus was attacking Lula, who he called a 'cachaceiro descondenado' (a de-convicted drunk). Bolsonaro 'asks God daily that Brazil never feels the pain of communism'.[17] The link between Lula da Silva, and the PT, with communism is common in Bolsonaro's rhetoric. Furthermore, he adds to it religiously charged language. For instance, in the 2022 campaign, he refers to Lula da Silva as 'the devil that will instal communism in Brazil'.[18]

On the same occasion, Bolsonaro indicated General Braga Netto as his vice-presidential candidate, substituting General Hamilton Mourão, who was vice-president on his slate in the first term and stepped down to run and win a seat in the Senate. Hence, the military has always been a strong ally and base of support for Bolsonarismo. Regarding Braga Netto, Bolsonaro said a vice-president cannot be somebody who conspires against you, a clear reference to Michel Temer's relationship with Dilma Rousseff, and because of that he chose an army general. Hence, Bolsonaro uses anti-communism and anti-Petismo to praise the military, who are seen beyond any doubt as honest patriots. Again, in relation to Braga Netto, he refers to the military as the people's army, which fights corruption and fraud: 'Braga Netto is our army, it is the army of the people, who are in our side. It is the army that does not admit corruption, that does not admit fraud. This is the army that wants transparency: wants, no, will have.'[19]

[17] https://valor.globo.com/politica/noticia/2022/07/24/bolsonaro-fala-de-comunismo-stf-e-elogia-lira-em-primeiro-discurso-como-candidato.ghtml

[18] https://noticias.uol.com.br/eleicoes/2022/09/13/em-discurso-bolsonaro-chama-lula-de-capeta-que-quer-impor-o-comunismo.htm?cmpid=copiaecola

[19] ''Este, Braga Netto, é o nosso exército, é o exército do povo, que está no nosso lado. É o exército que não admite corrupção, não admite fraude. Esse é o exército que quer transparência; quer, não, vai ter.'

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Anti-communism is used to criticize the left, with religious language relating it to the devil and the rejection of God, and to praise the military, who are trustworthy and reliable enemies of communism and defenders of the people. The army is above and beyond corruption.

For these reasons, the military was the backbone of the Bolsonaro government. He appointed many of them (Schmidt, 2022), including to leading managerial and central cabinet positions. Additionally, for the first time after re-democratization, a general became Minister of Health during the pandemic. Bolsonaro's vice-presidential candidates were both generals. Hence, his government was intrinsically linked to the army and brought the armed forces, once again, after an interregnum of almost forty years, to the centre of Brazilian public administration.

Indeed, during the Bolsonaro administration, Brazil has seen an unprecedented return of military personnel to prominent political roles (Amorim Neto & Acácio, 2020; Hunter & Vega, 2021). This heightened military involvement is not due to a traditional coup, but rather to an invitation from a democratically elected leader, marking a unique phase in Brazil's civil–military relations. Both analyses highlight that President Bolsonaro, lacking a strong conventional political base, turned to the armed forces as a crucial source of support and stability for his government.

The military's willingness to engage in this political alliance is explained by several converging factors (Amorim Neto & Acácio, 2020). Historically, the Brazilian armed forces possess an 'internalist' orientation and a self-perception as the 'moral guardians of the nation', often intervening in politics during times of institutional instability. They also sought to regain prestige and defend corporate interests, which they felt had been diminished under previous administrations through measures like cuts, the creation of a civilian-led Ministry of Defence, and the findings of the National Truth Commission that named alleged human rights perpetrators from the military regime. Bolsonaro, an ex-captain, appealed to these ideational and material motivations, promising to restore their standing and provide financial benefits and support for strategic defence projects.

However, this symbiotic relationship has generated significant concerns for the health of Brazilian democracy and the principle of civilian supremacy. Amorim Neto and Acácio (2020) as well as Hunter and Vega (2021) agree that placing military representatives, from an opaque and vertical organization, at the heart of a political regime based on transparency and horizontal relations inherently weakens civilian control and blurs the lines between military and civilian functions. This shift not only suspends the progress towards civilian supremacy but also risks pushing Brazil back to a stage where military intervention in political conflicts becomes a tangible threat. Furthermore, the military's professional integrity is jeopardized when they are tasked with non-defence, often civilian, functions, particularly when associated with an increasingly unpopular government.

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Despite the initial mutual benefits, the alliance has faced growing tensions as Bolsonaro's approval ratings declined. The military leadership, recognized for its professionalism, has shown increasing reluctance to be drawn deeper into the political fray, especially when presidential demands threaten the institution's cohesion and reputation (Hunter & Vega, 2021). This suggests a limit to the military's backing, indicating a desire to protect their long-term institutional image, especially in anticipation of future political transitions.

3.6 ANTI-AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND REDISTRIBUTIVE POLICIES

A final topic in Bolsonaro's political platform is his critical position towards affirmative action and redistributive policies. Bolsonaro is a harsh critic of any type of quota system. He has openly criticized it throughout his career. For instance, Bolsonaro would never enter an airplane piloted by a 'cotista' – a person helped by affirmative action to enter the university – or agree to be treated by a 'cotista' doctor. Furthermore, he argues that those who use the quota system are admitting to being incompetent, to being less competitive and capable than those who don't use the system. 'Whoever uses quotas, in my understanding, is admitting to being incompetent. I would never enter an airplane flown by a "cotista". Nor would agree to be operated on by a cotista doctor.'[20]

As late as 2018, Bolsonaro argued that quotas treat minorities as if they were incompetent and should be pitied. In the extract below of Bolsonaro's speech, all of his prejudices are exposed as he lists those who are incompetent, in his view, and that benefit from societies pity: black people, women, homosexuals, people from the Northeastern Region in Brazil, in particular from the state of Piaui, one of the poorest in the country. In this speech, Bolsonaro summarizes the set of prejudices that mark Bolsonarismo. Hence, the criticism of affirmative action is a vehicle to express discrimination and intolerance in its many forms: racism, sexism, prejudice against the northeast, against the poor. 'This cannot continue existing. Everything is based on pity. Pity of the black, pity of the woman, pity of the gay, pity of the Northeasterners, pity of the Piauiense. Let's end this.'[21]

However, Bolsonaro is ambivalent towards the Bolsa Família, the Workers' Party conditional cash transfer programme. Prior to his tenure in the

[20] www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/. 'Quem usa cota, no meu entender, está assinando embaixo que é incompetente. Eu não entraria num avião pilotado por um cotista. Nem aceitaria ser operado por um médico cotista.'

[21] 'Isso não pode continuar existindo. Tudo é coitadismo. Coitado do negro, coitado da mulher, coitado do gay, coitado do nordestino, coitado do piauiense. Vamos acabar com isso.' www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/10/vamos-acabar-com-coitadismo-de-nordestino-de-gay-de-negro-e-de-mulher-diz-bolsonaro.shtml

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presidency, Bolsonaro considered the Bolsa Família in a similar vein as affirmative action, as a way to unfairly reward the less competent. He tweeted in 2010 that 'Bolsa-Farelo (*bolsa-crumps*) would keep the PT in power'.

He also stated that ignorant voters would be coopted by the PT with the Bolsa Família. Indeed, in this speech, Bolsonaro states his view that those who receive the Bolsa Familia are ignorant and pitiful, unable to be in control of their own lives, and are easy targets for PT clientelism. 'More often than not, the poor thing, ignorant, while receiving the Bolsa Familia, become corralling (*cabresto*) voters of the PT.'[22]

Finally, he anticipated somewhat his position as president, stating that there should be a transition of the Bolsa Familia to a new project because it removed money from those who work to those who don't work: 'The Bolsa Familia is nothing more than a project to remove money from those who produce and give it to those who don't, to use their vote to maintain those in power. We should put if not a stop, a transition to an end to projects like the Bolsa Família.'[23]

When in office, and following his predecessor, Michel Temer, Bolsonaro kept as Minister of Citizenship Osmar Terra, who had worked diligently to disrupt and undermine the Bolsa Familia programme through intensive scrutiny and accusations of corruption in the distribution of funds.[24] Alternative social policies were attempted. But when the pandemic hit, Bolsa Familia was fundamental to distributing funds as part of the Emergency Aid, which actually reduced inequality in the country in 2021 – amidst the pandemic. Emergency aid was also quite important to reverse Bolsonaro's falling popularity in 2020 and 2021 (Rennó, 2022). In 2022, Bolsonaro changed the Bolsa Familia programme's name to Brazil Aid, as he had done to other social programmes of the PT, aiming at establishing a new brand and shifting its electoral impact in his favour.[25] The same occurred with the Minha Casa Minha Vida Programme, the PT housing programme, which was changed to Casa Verde-Amarela (Green and Yellow House), alluding to the colours of the Brazilian flag. In the case of the Brazil Aid, the differences from Bolsa Familia were significant – conditionalities were weakened, exit doors were amplified, and merit rewards were introduced. Thus, as president, Bolsonaro acted consistently with his proposals and with ideas he has defended throughout his career.

[22] https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/area/governo/bolsa-farelo-e-voto-de-cabresto-as-contradicoes-de-bolsonaro-sobre-o-bolsa-familia/

[23] https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/area/governo/bolsa-farelo-e-voto-de-cabresto-as-contradicoes-de-bolsonaro-sobre-o-bolsa-familia/. 'O Bolsa Família nada mais é do que um projeto para tirar dinheiro de quem produz e dá-lo a quem se acomoda, para que use seu título de eleitor e mantenha quem está no poder. Nós devemos colocar, se não um ponto final, uma transição a projetos como o Bolsa Família.'

[24] Interviews with bureacrats from the Bolsa Familia programme.

[25] www.cnnbrasil.com.br/economia/macroeconomia/fim-do-bolsa-familia-e-comeco-do-auxilio-brasil-como-fica-agora/

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3.7 DENIALISM

As president, a new defining trait of Bolsonarismo emerged: denial of the pandemic and of science. Bolsonaro has been a spokesperson of denialism in confronting the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide (Bertholini, 2022; Borges & Rennó, 2021; Meyer, 2020; Rennó et al., 2021). He defended alternative cures and was against social distancing, the use of masks, and lockdowns. He actively participated in illegal rallies during lockdown, promoted social gatherings, and resisted the use of masks in public. He was actually fined in the state of São Paulo for not wearing a mask in public.

Politicizing the pandemic was a way for Bolsonaro to keep conflict as an active part of his political style and of maintaining himself in the political spotlight. Still, when the pandemic's fourth and fifth waves hit the country hard in early 2021, Bolsonaro saw his popularity plummet and was fiercely criticized and accused of downplaying the pandemic, with tragic consequences to the population (Rennó, 2022). This was also a 2022 campaign topic that he had a very hard time responding to and it probably cost him re-election.

In 2020 he stated that the virus was not so destructive and that it was being exaggerated for economic reasons.[26] In March 2020, he said that COVID-19 was a minor flu (*gripezinha*) and that Brazilians would be immune to it because they swim in sewers and nothing happens to them. When death rates increased, he stated that Brazil should stop being a country of faggots (*maricas*).

Regarding vaccination, he strongly positioned himself against it, stating that it is very dangerous to mess with people's immune systems, and that if you get vaccinated against COVID-19, you could transform into an alligator: 'If you turn into an alligator, it's your problem. If you turn into superman, if women grow beards or a man starts to have a shrill voice, they won't have anything to do with it. Even worst: to mess with people's immune system.'[27]

Those who defend vaccinations 'are idiots'. He went on to lie that 'whoever got infected, became immunized'. Hence, Bolsonaro continuously reverted to lies and questionable humour to ridicule vaccination and to downplay the pandemic.

3.8 RADICAL-RIGHT POPULIST, EXTREME RIGHT, OR BOTH? ANTI-DEMOCRATIC POSITIONS

There is no question that Bolsonaro represents the far right in contemporary Brazilian politics and that he is the first political leader who has been able to

[26] All of the quotes below come from: www.poder360.com.br/coronavirus/2-anos-de-covid-relembre-30-frases-de-bolsonaro-sobre-pandemia/

[27] 'Se você virar um jacaré, problema de você [sic]. Se você virar super-homem, se nascer barba em alguma mulher aí ou algum homem começar a falar fino, eles não vão ter nada a ver com isso. O que é pior: mexer no sistema imunológico das pessoas.'

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align right-wingers in the country around a clear, specific, and coherent ideological platform based on issues. Conservative leaders prior to him gained local prominence defending similar issues – Carlos Lacerda in Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s and Paulo Maluf in São Paulo in the 1980s – but none scaled up their support to the national level as Bolsonaro has or included such a broad spectrum of political themes (Rennó, 2022).

However, it is more difficult to classify Bolsonaro when it comes to the subdivision within the far right. Bolsonaro is clearly a radical-right populist – his conflict with the Supreme Court in Brazil, but within the realm of the constitution, which he likes to stress using a soccer analogy – 'dentro das quatro linhas da constituição' (within the four lines of the constitution) – leaves no doubt of that.[28] Nonetheless, Bolsonaro also significantly flirts with anti-democratic extremism. As president, he increasingly did so as the 2022 elections approached, and he saw Lula da Silva's lead in polls increase. He raised issues about the integrity of the Brazilian vote counting system, claiming that it was prone to fraud, creating an environment disposed to questioning unfavourable election results if necessary.

In addition, from 2020 he participated in popular protests against lockdowns that demanded a military coup, only to reconsider his position and step back from his statements when criticized by the media and politicians for his authoritarian positions. It is true that as a federal deputy, throughout his career, he has always been a defender of the military dictatorship in Brazil and of the 1964 coup. He was also a defender of military torturers, saying that the dictatorship should have killed more socialists in the country. Bolsonaro contended that the military coup should be commemorated in Brazil as a new Independence Day: '31 March 1964, we should celebrate this date. In the end, it was a new 7 September (Independence Day) [. . .] Brazil deserves the values of the military of 1964 to 1985.'[29]

He thought the military regime should have killed more people: 'The mistake of the dictatorship was to torture and not kill.'[30] He defends torture in general, stating that he, like the Brazilian people, is in favour of torture: 'Torture works. I am favourable towards torture, you know that. And the people are favourable as well.'[31]

As president he was silent on torture but packed his government – civilian positions – with military men and women. Towards the end of his tenure, he

[28] www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/todos-andarao-dentro-das-quatro-linhas-da-constituicao-apos-eleicao-diz-bolsonaro/

[29] The next quotes are from: www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/03/veja-10-frases-polemicas-de-bolsonaro-sobre-o-golpe-de-1964-e-a-ditadura-militar.shtml. '31 de março de 1964, devemos, sim, comemorar esta data. Afinal de contas, foi um novo 7 de setembro [. . .] O Brasil merece os valores dos militares de 1964 a 1985.'

[30] 'O erro da ditadura foi torturar e não matar.'

[31] 'Pau-de-arara funciona. Sou favorável à tortura, tu sabe disso. E o povo é favorável também.'

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showed clear signs that he would not accept election results unfavourable to him – trying several times to change the electronic vote counting system in the country. He constantly encouraged his followers to doubt the election results. Indeed, after the 2022 elections, Bolsonaro and his party questioned the results.[32]

The positions in favour of the military and the military regime were central to his government. When president, in a UN meeting he denied that the change in power in 1964 was a military coup. He defended the narrative of the military, that it was a legitimate movement backed by Congress and the judiciary as part of the fight against communism.[33]

In particular, the celebrations of 7 September, Independence Day in Brazil, in 2021 were marked by a strong articulation in favour of a coup to keep Bolsonaro in power.[34] Bolsonaristas protested on the streets across the country and especially in Brasilia, where truck drivers loudly paraded into town. A strong intervention by the chief justice, Luiz Fux, was fundamental to avoiding an attempted invasion of the Supreme Court that night.[35] In fact, the Supreme Court worked diligently to avoid a military coup in Brazil in 2021.[36] Hence, another national symbol, one of the most important dates in Brazil, Independence Day, was politicized by Bolsonaro and became a day of Bolsonarista resistance in 2021 and 2022.

Brazil seems like a case in which a radical populist mutated into an anti-democratic extremist as his re-election prospects stalled: a case in which the authoritarian tendencies of the far-right populist naturally surfaced in the face of an adverse scenario. As it seems, populists instrumentalize democracy, using it to their benefit and then quickly shifting to undermine the regime when it is no longer useful for them. The line between delegitimizing democracy into its illiberal form and the actual defence of authoritarianism is a very thin one. Hence, we might want to reconsider the difference between radical populists and authoritarian extremists. Certainly, in the case of Brazil, it is difficult to tell where one starts and the other begins.

The evidence leaves no doubt that Bolsonaro inaugurated his government as a clear radical populist. In his first two years in power, he systematically avoided Congress, preferring to use decrees to govern. He was also a fierce critic of negotiating with or constructing a solid basis of support in Congress, criticizing coalition presidentialism – the term dubbed to classify Brazil's

[32] www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-volta-a-questionar-seguranca-da-urna-eletronica-nao-e-inviolavel-e-penetravel-sim/

[33] https://vladimirherzog.org/em-evento-na-onu-governo-brasileiro-se-recusa-a-reconhecer-o-golpe-de-1964/

[34] www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-58476535 [35] www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-58521649

[36] https://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/bela-megale/post/atuacao-de-ministros-do-stf-para-evitar-que-bolsonaro-incendeie-atos-do-7-de-setembro.html

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multiparty presidential system. According to Bolsonaro, this was the basis for corruption in the country, and he would change how politics was done.

However, after significant threats of impeachment and a growing independence of Congress, with the Executive Branch tracking behind, Bolsonaro changed his relationship with Congress and engaged in a coalition with the traditional centrist parties that have always been essential for governability in Brazil. The second half of Bolsonaro's term witnessed a smoother relationship with Congress. Bolsonaro shifted his artillery towards the Supreme Court in this second period, especially regarding the alleged attacks by the court against him on the question of fake news and his questioning of the reliability and integrity of the electronic ballot system. The Supreme Court and some justices in particular – Luiz Roberto Barroso and Alexandre de Moraes – both of whom presided over the Supreme Electoral Court from 2020 onwards, were the preferred targets. In fact, the Supreme Court itself was a victim of an attack by radical Bolsonaristas in 2020, with firecrackers simulating the sound of guns and protesters demanding if the justices 'got the message'.[37]

Finally, the movement in favour of a military coup to keep Bolsonaro in power was repeatedly present in manifestations against lockdowns during the pandemic. Bolsonaro participated in these movements enthusiastically and made initial statements supporting the idea, only to back down when pressed to clarify his statements.[38] This was a consistent pattern of behaviour in the Bolsonaro years: he pushed the envelope as far as he could in holding controversial and threatening positions towards democracy, only to roll back on his statements when reactions were negative.

His criticism of the vote-counting system appears as a legal and institutional claim at first, a stance to improve elections in Brazil and, therefore, completely legitimate. However, it hid an intent to delegitimize elections and create distrust in the system so that he could claim fraud if the results were unfavourable.

3.9 CONCLUSION

Jair Bolsonaro governed Brazil between 2019 and 2022. He won an election that followed deep political and economic crisis, with significant popular distrust of democratic institutions and dissatisfaction with democracy. Bolsonaro was strongly inspired by Donald Trump in the United States and followed his playbook by promoting democratic destabilization based on fake news and escalating conflict. It is no surprise that the aftermath of Bolsonaro's

[37] https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/06/14/grupo-de-apoiadores-de-bolsonaro-lanca-fogos-de-artificio-contra-o-predio-do-stf.ghtml

[38] www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/09/datafolha-metade-dos-brasileiros-diz-acreditar-que-bolsonaro-pode-dar-golpe.shtml and www.brasil247.com/poder/presenca-de-bolsonaro-em-ato-contra-a-democracia-causa-mal-estar-na-ala-militar

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electoral defeat is marked by clear attempts at overthrowing democracy in Brazil, something not seen since democratization in the late 1980s.

Bolsonaro's administration represented a significant threat to democracy. The 2022 elections witnessed the discussion of regime stability as an electoral topic. Views on democracy were a factor that influenced voting behaviour (Fuks & Casalecchi, 2025; Rennó & Avritzer, 2023). The crisis of democracy that intensified in the country after 2013 – with the violent and diffuse street protests being a watershed moment – peaked during the Bolsonaro years. The authoritarian element of the extreme far-right rhetoric and corresponding popular support for a military coup deepened, legitimized by Bolsonaro's inflammatory rhetoric. The country will have to remain vigilant in the years to come. Democratic resistance is only needed when the regime is under stress, in crisis, and there is no denying that Brazilian democracy is under significant stress.

The criticism of the Brazilian voting system promoted by Bolsonaro, inaugurated by Aecio Neves' PSDB in 2014, led to substantive street protests after the election in 2022. The conduct of radical Bolsonaristas based in army headquarters across the country in the months after the election, which culminated in the violent attacks on the Supreme Court, National Congress, and the Presidential Office on 8 January 2023, along with a handful of prior attempts against democracy, are the pinnacle of a prolonged process of democratic crisis in Brazil.

On a more theoretical note, the case of Bolsonaro in Brazil indicates the very thin line that distinguishes, on one hand, the effort of delegitimizing liberal democracy and pushing it into illiberal forms and the open defence of authoritarianism and the overturn of the democratic regime. In Bolsonaro's Brazil, these differences have been blurred by the former president's insistence on moving back and forth between them – one moment defending authoritarian solutions, only to back down, and then attempt some type of regime reform in line with illiberal rule. We might want to reconsider the difference between radical populists and authoritarian extremists: in Brazil, they were one and the same. Bolsonaro fluctuated between both positions.

Unquestionable, however, is the fact that Bolsonaro has been able to align the far right in Brazil. Bolsonarismo is issue-based: solid and consistent for two consecutive elections. Bolsonaro is clearly anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQ+ rights, pro-police killings of criminals and penal punitivism, economically liberal, and a distrust of science. Furthermore, he combines a pro-family religious discourse with patriotism backed by the armed forces, in a fight against communism and the left and, during his term in office, the Supreme Court.

Research on public opinion has shown that Bolsonaro's core supporters hold identical positions to his own. Bolsonarismo – the right-wing alignment spearheaded by Bolsonaro – is issue-based. Bolsonaro supporters strongly embrace penal punitivism – there is a predominant view among Bolsonaristas that a 'good criminal is a dead criminal' – and support for the reduction of the age of criminal responsibility. Bolsonaristas are also strongly against the legalization of drugs. Additionally, a cornerstone of Bolsonarismo is its rejection of the

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legalization of abortion and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights of same-sex marriage and adoption of children (Rennó, 2020, 2022, 2023). The core Bolsonaro supporter is defined by Rennó as those who voted for Bolsonaro and positively evaluated his government – and they consistently hover around 20 percent of the population since 2018. This proportion, one in every five Brazilians, is more than sufficient to ensure that Bolsonaro, or someone supported by him, is a strong contender for the second round of any Brazilian presidential election. Hence, Bolsonaro has become the key player on the right in Brazil.

Indeed, on 11 September 2025, Jair Bolsonaro was convicted of leading a coup attempt in Brazil and sentenced to twenty-seven years and three months of incarceration. He is currently under arrest in a federal penitentiary in the Federal District. However, in polls held between October and December 2025, which still included Jair Bolsonaro, he appeared as the most competitive candidate on the right, in a race against Lula da Silva. In 2026, his eldest son, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, has been indicated by Jair Bolsonaro as his successor, receiving the explicit support of other potential politicians that could occupy that spot – including the Governor of São Paulo, Tarcísio de Freitas, and former First Lady, Michele Bolsonaro. Flavio Bolsonaro now appears extremely competitive in the polls, in a close race against Lula da Silva.[39] Therefore, even facing a very adverse political setting, Bolsonaro remains a political giant, and there are no signs that his hold over the far-right vote will diminish.

Because of Bolsonaro's authoritarian inclinations, intolerance towards gender and LGBTQ+, and his denial of science any agreement with the moderate, mainstream right seems impossible. The PSDB has always been deeply committed to democracy and to political tolerance, making them unlikely partners. Instead, Bolsonaro engaged in a coalition with the centrist, more clientelist parties that control a significant portion of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, but only in the second half of his term. He relied on the negotiation practices he so vehemently criticized as a candidate and in the early days of his mandate. But this was never done based on pragmatic rather than ideological terms. There was never any policy concession by Bolsonaro when he broadened his coalition. Unlike other leaders on the far right, Bolsonaro monopolized control over his coalition and always openly defended his ideological and political platform, without compromise.

Since the 2022 elections, developments have been adverse for Bolsonaro. The immediate aftermath of the election saw intense political turmoil.

[39] www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/pesquisa-testa-cenarios-eleitorais-com-lula-tarcisio-e-michelle-para-2026-veja-os-resultados/; https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pesquisas_eleitorais_para_a_elei%C3%A7%C3%A3o_presidencial_de_2026_no_Brasil

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Bolsonaro unwillingly condemned highway blockages that followed the announcement of his defeat, given the negative repercussions. He did so reluctantly, as the video of his declarations clearly shows.[40] He was silent regarding the attacks on the Federal Policy Building in downtown Brasilia on 12 December 2022, when the elected representatives received their confirmatory diplomas, including President Lula, who was staying in a nearby hotel. He fled Brazil to Miami on 30 December to avoid formally transferring power to Lula. Finally, he had to repeatedly defend himself against accusations of involvement in the terrorist attacks on the buildings of Brazil's key democratic institutions on 8 January 2023.

Bolsonaro has been trialled and convicted for abuse of political power by the Supreme Electoral Court and is unelectable for eight years.[41] He won't be able to run for office until 2030. He has also been fined by the São Paulo government for illegal participation in social gatherings without masks.[42] Still, Bolsonaro has raised over R$17 million in donations from supporters to pay his fines.[43]

The main platform of Bolsonaristas in Congress is the defence of an amnesty law for those involved in the acts of 8 January, in the hope that Bolsonaro would also benefit. Several political rallies and meetings have occurred in many Brazilian cities over the past years calling for Bolsonaro's amnesty, with many of his allies present.

On 4 August 2025 another development rocked the political system in Brazil. Because of his disrespect for rulings by Judge Alexandre de Moraes in an investigation regarding Eduardo Bolsonaro, who is in the United States working to mobilize the Trump administration to pressure Brazil to grant amnesty, Jair Bolsonaro was placed under house arrest.[44] Part of the Bolsonaro family's strategy has involved the United States government, which in an unprecedented move to impose taxes against Brazilian exports, clearly associating the policy change with the 'witch hunt' against Bolsonaro. In addition, the US government has imposed the Magnitsky Act against Judge Alexandre de Moraes – a punishment associated with war crimes and corruption. Hence, US policy has been designed to favour a specific Brazilian politician and influence another country's domestic policies solely on ideological terms.

[40] www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2022/11/bolsonaro-pede-desobstrucao-de-rodovias-mas-diz-que-outras-manifestacoes-sao-do-jogo-democratico.shtml

[41] www.tse.jus.br/comunicacao/noticias/2023/Outubro/tse-declara-inelegiveis-bolsonaro-e-braga-netto-por-abuso-de-poder-no-bicentenario-da-independencia

[42] www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-e-multado-em-r-376-mil-pelo-governo-de-sp-por-nao-usar-mascara-em-ato-do-7-de-setembro-em-2021/

[43] www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2023/07/bolsonaro-recebeu-r-171-milhoes-via-pix-neste-ano-aponta-relatorio-do-coaf.shtml?utm_source=whatsapp&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=compwa

[44] www.gazetadopovo.com.br/republica/prisao-domiciliar-de-bolsonaro-quais-sao-os-proximos-passos-no-processo/

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This has never been seen before in the current democratic period of Brazilian history.

In protest against Bolsonaro's arrest, members of his PL party seized and occupied the directing table of the Chamber of Deputies and Federal Senate, impeding the normal transaction of legislative business for over twenty-four hours.[45] Jair Bolsonaro remains in control of media attention and is extremely influential over a party that is becoming a national force. In fact, the performance of his PL in the 2024 municipal elections was astounding, winning the most overall votes in the country and gaining a substantial number of mayoral offices, performing especially well in big cities.[46]

The increased tariffs on Brazilian exports had a somewhat negative impact on Bolsonaro and boosted President Lula's faltering popularity.[47] Evaluation of Lula's government improved along with vote intention, compared to Bolsonaro and his ally Tarcisio de Freitas. Both, however, remain very competitive, especially Jair Bolsonaro.

Even though unelectable, Bolsonaro has successors within the far right, and his support will be decisive to assure a good electoral outcome for Bolsonarismo in 2026. The 2022 elections saw significant victories of Bolsonarismo. The fact that Bolsonaro won 43.2 percent of the valid votes in the first round, much higher than polls forecast, and 49.1 percent in the second round – the highest vote of any defeated candidate in Brazilian history – shows how popular his agenda is. The fact that his party, the PL, elected the largest caucus in the Chamber of Deputies and that his supporters won difficult races for the Senate and governorship of several states including São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio de Janeiro, shows the strength of the far right nationwide. The 2024 municipal elections confirmed the growing strength of the PL and Bolsonaro.

Jair Bolsonaro's absence from the electoral competition while incarcerated brings back memories of Lula da Silva's situation in 2018, when he was the official PT candidate even behind bars up to a month before the election. Lula remained influential, but obviously less so than if he were the candidate or if he were free to campaign for Fernando Haddad, who substituted him on the slate. The same fate might wait for Bolsonaro in 2026. What is clear is that Bolsonarismo will remain a strong electoral force in the upcoming presidential election of 2026, independent of who will finally be the candidate.

[45] www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/adesivos-na-boca-e-correntes-como-foram-as-24-h-de-ocupacao-do-congresso

[46] www.gazetadopovo.com.br/eleicoes/2024/pl-encerra-eleicoes-como-o-mais-votado-mas-distante-da-previsao-de-mil-prefeituras/ and https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2024/eleicao-em-numeros/noticia/2024/10/27/pl-de-bolsonaro-e-o-maior-vencedor-nas-grandes-cidades-pt-de-lula-cresce-em-relacao-a-2020.ghtml

[47] www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/cvg14jje1ydo and www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/c2djxjrn2n8o

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