

Elections in Brazil and the Bolsonaro Effect

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What it means that a far-right fascist sympathizer is a leading candidate in Brazil's presidential election this Sunday

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Jair Bolsonaro is an unavoidable name in Brazilian politics nowadays, and has been for a few years. A few days before election day on October 7, the most recent polls indicate that Bolsonaro is now the leading candidate in the presidential race, followed by Fernando Haddad of the Workers' Party (PT).

Bolsonaro's political language is hatred. He often calls for the annihilation of the Left. A few days after talking about shooting PT supporters with a machine gun at a campaign rally [1], a man stabbed him in the stomach [2]. As the situation in Brazil escalates, and the possibility of Bolsonaro becoming president increases, it's important to understand more about the far-right candidate.

The "Protest Vote"

Jair Bolsonaro is a former military officer from the small Social Liberal Party (PSL) and now serves as a federal congressman. He is a far-right politician who combines liberal economic positions with inflammatory declarations against human rights. He is an anticommunist and an apologist for the dictatorship's use of torture. His public security motto is "a good criminal is a dead criminal." When it comes to economics, he defers to neoliberal economist Paulo Guedes [3], who he's tapped to head economic policy in a Bolsonaro government.

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Although the stereotypical Bolsonaro voter is sexist, racist, and aligned with far-right politics, this is not always the case. For many, voting for Bolsonaro means a renewal of hope and political energy. Some even call it a "revolutionary" or "protest vote." Our research shows a surprising diversity of people and ideology among his voter base.

Just recently, we were discussing politics with a group of young men in a restaurant in the impoverished periphery of Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. Two waiters interrupted the conversation to spontaneously declare their vote for Bolsonaro. Two other men from the next table then jumped into the conversation to proudly yell "me too!" In a matter of seconds, others were chiming in, enthusiastically saying that for the first time they could support a candidate's campaign based on "faith," "love," and "hope," rather than in exchange for money or jobs — a standard practice in the clientelist politics still prevalent in many parts of Brazil.

U.S. voters are by now familiar with the reasons that make politicians like Bolsonaro a phenomenon. Like Donald Trump, he employs hatred as a political mobilizer and even incites violence directly against his political competitors. He also, like Trump, is adroit at posing as an anti-establishment outsider.

Yet Bolsonaro is by no means new to the political scene. He has been a congressman since 1991, along with his brother and sons. Most of his political career was spent in the Progressive Party (PP), of which the imprisoned former São Paulo governor Paulo Maluf was a key figure. Maluf is the archetype of the corrupt Brazilian politician, embodying the famous slogan "*rouba mas faz*" — that is, "he steals but he gets things done."

In spite of his history and associations, Bolsonaro has been widely viewed as a novelty in this election, a candidate synonymous with renewal and honesty. Although he has accumulated political privileges and has taken advantage of them, there are still no significant corruption scandals hanging over him. His military background and the promise of discipline and order is appealing amid the chaotic political climate. And after the soft coup that removed PT president Dilma Rousseff from power, his calls for military intervention are no longer taboo.

The Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) used to enjoy hegemony on the Right as the Workers' Party's main opposition. The PSDB has tried to slow Bolsonaro's ascent by claiming to be the real guarantor of efficiency and the corporate class's wellbeing. Yet its candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, continues to lag behind his far-right counterpart.

Bolsonaro's far-right character is most evident when he's agitating against basic human rights. When he voted in favor of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, he did so in honor of the memory of General Carlos Brilhante Ustra. Ustra is known as one of the cruelest torturers of the dictatorship era in Brazil. He ordered Dilma Rousseff's torture when she was imprisoned as an anti-dictatorship militant in her youth.

Such controversies are part of Bolsonaro's strategy for staying in the spotlight. When a journalist confronted him about his inflammatory views, he simply laughed it off. "The point is to forget these little slip ups from the past and focus on the future," he said in the well-known talk show *Roda Viva*. In one strike, he can attack the mainstream media and say something meaningful to Brazilians desperate for a change of course.

Bolsonaro knows how to take advantage of social media and its capacity to spread misinformation. He has accumulated 6.6 million followers on Facebook (one million just in the last three weeks), compared to Lula's 3.5 million and Haddad's six hundred thousand. He is seen as "funny," "authentic," and is admired for "saying what he thinks," encouraging others to voice their prejudices as well. His online campaign is a machine of fake news, rumors, and defamation. Recent analysis provided by *Political Debate Monitor* [4] shows that 80 percent of his online content is focused on attacking the left wing, feminism, and the massive TV conglomerate Globo.

Whatever he says is made into viral memes. Yet Bolsonaro is not just an Internet phenomenon. In fact, without Lula in the race, he has steadily occupied first place in all presidential polls with as much as 31 percent of voter intentions according to the latest Ibope poll. Lula is now imprisoned and unable to run, with his successor Fernando Haddad taking his place as PT candidate. More important than the polls, however, is the legion of fans Bolsonaro has accumulated, who crowd airports, chant, and cry when he lands in any city.

Bolsonaro's hateful and misogynist narrative is mostly succeeding in attracting men, who make up two-thirds of his potential voters. This strategy, however, has led to his overwhelming rejection

among women. Recent polls suggest that around 50 percent of women “would never vote for him.” It is the fiercest gender discrepancy in the last 24 years of Brazilian democracy. Our research also identified a strong affinity for Bolsonaro among young voters.

From Hope to Hate

Bolsonaro gained a lot of traction by discussing urban violence. In the outskirts of Brazil’s big cities, collective spaces where people could discuss communal problems are absent. People know that, regardless of whether they represent the left or right of the spectrum, politicians will only show up in their communities during elections, offering around twenty dollars for people to distribute pamphlets.

Bolsonaro has rapidly gained popularity in the midst of this democratic vacuum by offering punitive solutions, shamelessly embracing the popular saying that “a good bandit is a dead bandit.” He promises simplistic solutions for complex problems, such as adopting policies that allow the arming of the general populace, raising penalties in the criminal code, and chemically castrating rapists.

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Bolsonarism is also part of a broader social backlash against women’s rights. The mass demonstrations of June 2013 constituted a milestone in Brazilian politics [5], marked by the emergence and proliferation of autonomist feminist, queer, and antiracist groups, especially among young people. In 2016, low-income teenagers occupied public high schools nationwide. Teenage girls were the main protagonists of this movement, giving rise to the now-famous slogan *lute como uma garota* (“fight like a girl”).

On the other hand, young boys who look up to Bolsonaro call him a “mito,” or “legend.” He has become a symbol of male authority.

This scenario has led many, including the Left, to identify all Bolsonaro supporters as ultra-conservative men. However, based on our research, apart from the fact that most of his supporters are indeed men, we have yet to identify any other discernible pattern. There are young and old people, formal and informal workers, funk singers, protestants, Catholics, and so on. All in all, they are not the “fascists” that the social media portrayals have made them out to be.

Of course, the stereotypical racist, misogynist, homophobic, and angry white man appears among Bolsonaro’s ranks. But he is by no means the rule. Many supporters find Bolsonaro too extreme or too misogynistic, yet they are convinced that there is no other alternative. We have even encountered people who would vote for Lula if he were free, but turn to Bolsonaro as their plan B. In both cases, these voters aren’t necessarily judging candidates by how right or left-wing they are. Instead, they’re looking for a national savior.

Many Bolsonaro supporters are undeniably driven by gender, sexual, and racial prejudices. But we can’t discount the heavy weight of economic stability as a factor driving his popularity. Brazilian economic growth plunged from 7.5 percent in 2010 to -3.77 percent in 2015, exacerbating a political and institutional crisis that culminated in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016.

Michel Temer’s administration set up an intense neoliberal austerity agenda, prioritizing cuts in public education and health. This scenario creates a complex, though still unclear, blend of economic, political, and social factors that drive the Bolsonaro effect.

Over the past ten years, Brazil has gone through a cycle that we have dubbed “from hope to hate.” 2010 was the peak of Lulismo, marked by economic growth largely based on domestic consumption and financial inclusion. Cash transfer policies, such as Bolsa Família [6], fostered consumption and a sense of individual self-worth among the very poor.

While Lulismo brought about dramatic social improvements, it also systematically demobilized its base in order to sustain the political contradictions of its time in government. The PT paid a high price for this. Starting in 2014, the economy worsened, and the population has become increasingly indebted as unemployment grows and public goods and services are attacked. Under Temer’s cuts to the social safety net, quality of living has dramatically decreased.

The protests of June 2013 inaugurated a period of political instability, which combined with economic crisis to open the window to the Right’s offensive on the PT. That process ended in Rousseff’s impeachment a few years later. Since then, the political and legal systems have gone rogue, and people’s everyday life has deteriorated.

The common sense response, thanks to deep distrust of politicians, has been to blame corruption, rather than neoliberal economics or Brazil’s underdeveloped economy. Bolsonaro and his authoritarian narrative gained space precisely amidst this national limbo and sense of chaos. Surveys show that since the impeachment and the corruption scandal that affected former PSDB candidate Aécio Neves in May 2017, Bolsonaro’s vote intentions jumped from 8 percent to 31 percent. He gained ground with some people disappointed with the PT. But mainly the increase was found among right-wing voters who shifted their party loyalties. The Bolsonaro effect is the reorganization and radicalization of the ideological poles in Brazilian society.

By often employing the expression “isso é uma pouca vergonha” (meaning, “this is absurd!”), Bolsonaro poses himself as an honest man who is eager to solve, through military discipline, all these complex structural national issues. This line of thinking drove the protests against Dilma Rousseff in 2015-16, helping to polarize those enraged by the corruption scandals behind Bolsonaro and against the Left.

Reorganizing the Left

The phenomenon of Bolsonarism goes beyond a single candidate: it represents the rise of a conservative zeitgeist in a time of profound social, political, and economic transformation. All analyses today predict that the second round of the presidential race will be a highly polarized one, with both Bolsonaro and Haddad facing high rates of rejection. Regardless of the result, Brazil will experience some more years of political instability.

The challenges for the Left are enormous. First and foremost, it needs to admit the problems with the Lulista development model, which resulted in the demobilization of the PT’s popular base and shifted the Left’s emphasis from collective social rights to individual financial inclusion.

It is also crucial to reevaluate the political alliances that were forged by Lula and Rousseff in the name of governability. Lula’s popularity reflects his individual charisma, and his association with good economic times, more than it does widespread loyalty to the PT or the Left.

The Left, already fragmented in Brazil, suffered great losses after Rousseff’s impeachment in June 2016. Most organizations have failed to produce credible new leaders, and the PT has focused almost exclusively on denouncing the soft coup and the growth of fascism. This antifascist stance is, of course, crucial. Yet the lack of a positive program risks creating a political vacuum. The Left

needs first to build a new and radical political agenda that enables a dialogue with people and their concerns, and second to be able to approach and to mobilize the popular base.

Regarding the first issue, the rise of Bolsonarism has made it clear that a lack of security in urban areas and corruption are key issues to be addressed in the political agenda. This requires simple, yet not simplistic, language that reaches ordinary citizens. Major left-wing parties, paralyzed by the polarization defining Brazilian social networks, have neglected these subjects, allowing the Right to cynically appropriate them.

The second issue is slightly more complex as it requires the abandonment of an outdated hierarchical mode of doing politics, embracing new, sometimes unpredictable political actors. This is the case of the new youth movements that demand decentralized politics and social diversity at times when leftist political meetings anachronistically remain the domain of white men.

This is also the case regarding the new precariat mobilizations, which function in an ambiguous way, sometimes denouncing the political system, sometimes asking for military intervention. In the recent strike by truck drivers that brought the country to a standstill [7], the reaction of the PT was to criticize the movement as a lockout led by authoritarian groups. In times of *uberization* and automatization, this stance is highly risky. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, visited the strike and declared his support for the drivers. His attitude provided a basic lesson to the Left: workers must be supported, since class consciousness demands political investment.

Bolsonarism shows us how radical frustration over the system can be harnessed for political gain.

Since 2013, what we have seen is a paralyzed left that rejects all the groups that it can neither understand nor deal with. This is a strategic mistake. Bolsonarism shows us how radical frustration over the system can be harnessed for political gain. Left-wing activists must understand and embrace this dissatisfaction by acting through the gaps of capitalism's contradictions, while offering an alternative radical agenda that makes sense for ordinary citizens.

Amid this pessimistic scenario, it seems that the radical reorganization of the Left may emerge from the feminist movement [8]. It was women's organizing efforts that helped remove Eduardo Cunha, the corrupt president of the Chamber of Deputies who orchestrated the impeachment. Feminist militants are also the leaders behind the *#elenão* (*#nohim*) movement pushing for a national alliance against Bolsonaro. They are managing to foment an anti-fascist front in Brazil in ways that the leftist parties talked about but were unable to produce. Last Saturday, millions of women and other minorities took the streets and marched against fascism. This unprecedented and extraordinary grassroots movement, spread all over the social fabric, online and offline, transcends the Left's fragmentation and has the potential to reorganize the field in the turbulent few years ahead.

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P.S.

• NACLA, October 4, 2018:
<https://nacla.org/news/2018/10/04/bolsonaro-effect>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://catracalivre.com.br/cidadania/bolsonaro-simula-fuzilamento-de-petistas-durante-campanha-no-acre/>

[2] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-45441447>

[3] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-02/chicago-boy-helps-calm-bankers-fears-about-brazil-wild-card>

[4] <http://www.monitordigital.org/relatorios/nota-tecnica-3/>

[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/world/americas/brazil-protests.html>

[6] https://www.huffingtonpost.com/sarah-illingworth/the-success-and-future-of_b_12913176.html

[7] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/06/truck-drivers-strike-brazil-temer-petrobras-lula>

[8] <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/11/brazil-abortion-rights-cunha-rousseff>