

## WHO SUPPORTS BOLSONARO? EMERGING POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL

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Decades of parliamentary inexpressiveness helped Jair Bolsonaro, a candidate unknown to much of the electorate, to present himself as an outsider in politics, a candidate for change, a champion against the systemic corruption that allegedly plagued the country, and a defender of the “traditional Brazilian family” and its values (Botelho, 2018; Solano, 2021). At that time, the Brazilian electorate was, in general, receptive to an agenda strongly associated with fighting corruption. The 2018 election showed that voters generally punished legislators involved in political scandals tied to corruption, especially when candidates were directly implicated in such scandals, in a form of vertical accountability (Castro and Nunes, 2006).

There was also discontent across different layers of society with an ongoing economic and institutional crisis, as well as support from a significant part of Evangelicals, whose influence has been growing stronger in the national political scene (Dip, 2018). Amaral (2020) also showed a strengthening of antipetismo—the rejection of the Worker’s Party—among a growing number of voters identified with the political right. Araújo (2021) demonstrates that “antipetismo” tends to be stronger among Pentecostal Evangelical voters, mostly non-white, low-income, and with fewer years of formal education. Even Pentecostal Evangelicals who were beneficiaries of Bolsa Família—a conditional cash transfer created by the Workers Party—were less likely to reward the PT in the ballot box for their welfare gains. Finally, with a communication strategy structured according

to the segmentation of potential groups of voters (Kalil, 2018) and a campaign anchored in large-scale distribution of misinformation via social media, Bolsonaro benefited from an unexpected scenario.

Three years into his government, Jair Bolsonaro’s administration delivered worrying results on social and economic fronts, which were worsened by the coronavirus pandemic. The main reasons lie in the poor response by the federal government to the diverse needs of society, with poor management and the destruction of the government’s capacity to design and implement policies in a decision-making system heavily centered on the Executive (Ignatius, 2021). Hecksher (2021) showed that in 2020 Brazil registered more deaths by COVID-19 than 89.3% of the other 178 countries, according to data compiled by the World Health Organization<sup>[1]</sup>. Based on employment level data compiled by the International Labor Organization, Brazil registered a more intense employment reduction in comparison to 84.1% of the other 63 countries analyzed in the last three quarters of 2019.

Political indicators also showed growing fragility, with lower rates of Executive success in the legislature being observed during the pandemic period (Santos and Barbosa, 2021). Even a Commission of Parliamentary Inquiry was approved by the Senate, where the Executive’s mishandling of the pandemic was on spotlight for several weeks, including allegations of corruption. Bolsonaro’s response was twofold. For one, he radicalized politically, dismissing science

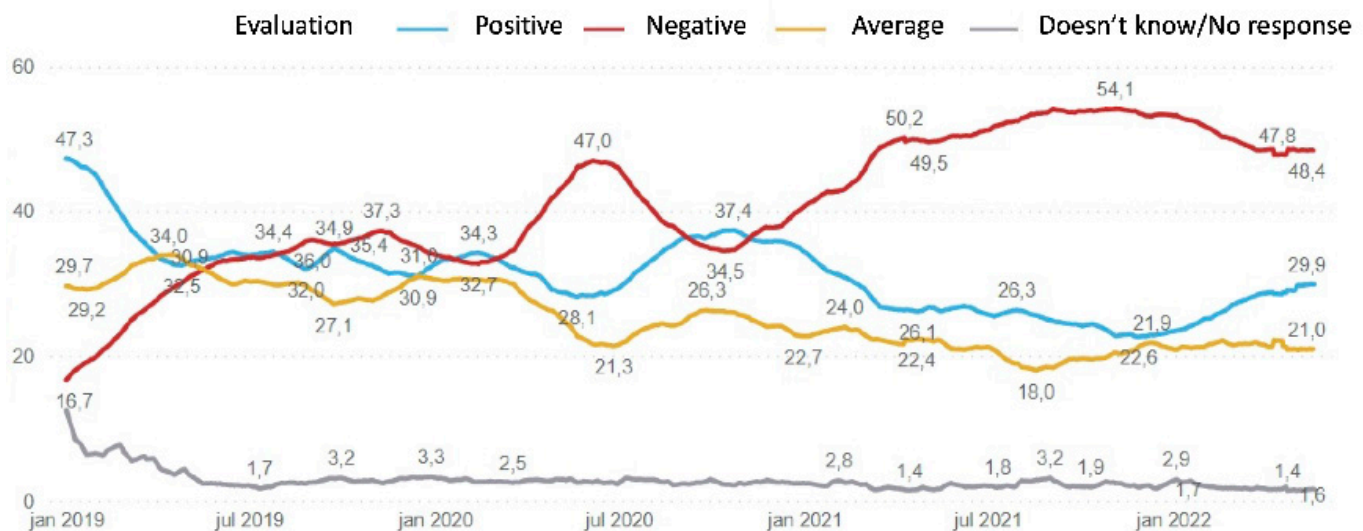


Figure 1. Government evaluation by survey respondents. Authors’ elaboration based on Agregador Jota.



and attacking other government branches and authorities over COVID-19 policies. For another, he turned to distribution of public resources to multiple political parties to maintain a supporting coalition in Congress and to protect itself from an impeachment process. This, in turn, reinforced the trends observed since 2008 of greater Congressional protagonism in policy and politics (Santos and Barbosa, 2021, Ranulfo, 2021). As a result, the federal executive lost the ability to lead and was unable—and unwilling—to take measures to manage the pandemic, to develop a sustainable economic plan, and to elaborate and adopt a mass vaccination policy. Not surprisingly, the President's image in society deteriorated considerably. The government's rejection rates increased, reaching more than 50% by mid-2021 according to polls carried out by multiple institutions (Figure 1).

Yet despite the increase in government disapproval, the President's approval rate remained surprisingly high, with support from a solid 29,9% of the electorate. Who are these supporters and what do they tell about social and political changes in contemporary Brazil?

Nicolau (2020) showed that men, Evangelicals, residents of urban centers, of older age, with higher education, and with access to social media tended to vote for Bolsonaro in 2018. Current opinion polls now show some differences. Since December 2020, his group of supporters is comprised mainly by men, with more support coming from citizens with higher income levels (and less support by those with lower income tiers)<sup>[2]</sup>. They are Evangelicals, residents of inner cities, with elementary and high school education and are concentrated in the North, Midwest, and South regions of the country. Among those who support Bolsonaro, more than half identify themselves as entrepreneurs and businessmen<sup>[3]</sup>.

Qualitative research has also helped to unpack this group. According to Solano (Source, page), "there is still a discourse that seeks to respond to the moral crisis caused by systemic political corruption, the disillusionment with successive years of left-leaning governments, and a generalized social disorder. Bolsonaro proposes to revamp two sources of values, the religious and the military, which, adopted in the private and public spaces, would restore the traditional order that should not have been interrupted". Nicolau (2020) also demonstrated that the 2018 Brazilian elections were marked by more conservative voters, on the right of the ideological spectrum. After three years in government, an important part of these voters still follow the leadership of the far-right president.

It is reasonable to assume that the scenario of economic and social deterioration, aggravated by the government's low capacity to respond to the population needs, reduces the chances of Bolsonaro being reelected. But the resilient support by approximately a quarter of all voters is a source of concern, indicating that a significant part of society supports non-civic values and is resistant to democracy.

In this sense, it is important to understand different voter motivations. Numerous studies have shown that voters' belief systems are multidimensional and ambivalent about certain issues; hence the apparent inconsistency (Rennó, 2001). Experimental studies have shown (Boggio et al, 2021) that leaders seek to create a sense of social identity among individuals, thereby promoting cooperative bonds for better or for worse. Consequently, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic open greater opportunities for influence by leaders like Bolsonaro.

While Bolsonaro voters were in various strata of society, most fit a male, Evangelical, anti-PT (Worker's Party) type, whose identification with the far-right president allows them to see him as an unequivocal leader, calling him a "myth"—someone special, who does not make

mistakes. Even if the president is not reelected, society will have to bear the costs of living with the explicit preference, by part of the electorate, for openly authoritarian and conservative views.

## Notes

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[1] When the comparison is adjusted to the population distribution by age and gender in each country, Brazil's results become worse than 94.9% of 178 countries.

[2] Support continues in both spectrums, of 2-5 minimum wages and of 10+ minimum wages.

[3] This designation is interesting when considering those earning between 2 and 5 minimum wages and who support the president. Would they be bar owners, Uber drivers, street vendors, taxi drivers, and small merchants? It is also important to understand the adherence of businessmen and the financial market to Bolsonaro until more recently, when the president's intentions for institutional and democratic rupture became obvious. Further research could help in this identification process.

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