



Democracy (still) on the Edge: An Analysis of Brazil's Political Response to the Covid-19 Crisis

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This is a guest post from Matthew B. Flynn, André Pereira Neto, and Letícia Barbosa.

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Brazil's response to the COVID-19 pandemic [ranks as the worst](#) of all the countries around the world. This is surprising, especially given its past experiences in fighting infectious disease and in light of the existence of a national public health system, known as the Unified Public Health System, or SUS in Portuguese, that provides public and free health services from preventive care to medical assistance. Why has Brazil fallen so far behind in confronting the novel coronavirus?

Any discussion about Brazil's failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic must start with the country's far-right populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, including his worldview and rise to power amidst increasing political polarization.

From Leftist Hegemony to Political Polarization

Brazil's recent political crisis dates back to demonstrations that began in mid-2013. Originally focused on fare hikes in public transportation, Brazilian political scientist [André Singer](#) argues that the "protests acquired such magnitude and energy that it became clear something was happening deep inside Brazilian society." Though originally organized by leftist, anti-globalization activists demanding that state resources should not go into soccer stadiums for the World Cup but towards building world-class hospitals, rightwing activists soon hijacked growing discontent towards the left-leaning Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*—PT) that had been in power for over a decade.

To understand how the growing political divide in Brazil paved the way for a demagogic leader in Bolsonaro, we have to go back to the early 2000s, a history best depicted in the [documentary](#) *The Edge of Democracy*. Directed by Petra Costa and nominated for an Oscar in 2020 in the category of Best Documentary Feature,

the film retraces the historic 2002 election of Luis Inácio da Silva, known as Lula. He was Brazil's first president from a working-class background and who was succeeded by Dilma Rousseff (2011) – Brazil's first woman president – both from the PT.

During their 14 years in government, the PT implemented various public policies to extend social protections and promote social rights of millions of Brazilian below the line of poverty. Researchers have highlighted that in “the 21st century, Brazil made pro-poor choices that associate economic growth with a reduction of inequalities, in the endeavor to redress its heavy historical imbalances.”

Despite the remarkable social progress the Lula and Rousseff's administrations had achieved, Costa recounts the entrenched forces and pervasive clientalism that marks the Brazilian political reality. A far-reaching corruption investigation, known as Operation Car Wash (or *Lava Jato*) revealed in detail this ugly underbelly of Brazilian politics. Due to new plea bargaining rules Rousseff approved, federal prosecutors were able to trace a money laundering scheme at a local car wash into a vast network of kickbacks between politicians across the political spectrum and large construction conglomerates.

Public support for the prosecution and the crusader judge who led the charge, Sergio Moro, reached an all-time high with jail sentences for previously absolved elected officials and business executives. The PT was not immune to corruption charges, but the alliance between Brazil's judiciary and powerful media groups (such as *O Globo*) revealed its partisan nature through biased reporting. Even Moro's impartiality as a judge came into question when publications of his text messages revealed he directed the prosecution against Lula who he succeeded in imprisoning despite the weak evidence against him.

Although Rousseff was never accused of wrong-doing in Operation Car Wash, Brazil's congress moved to impeach her. The *Edge of Democracy* highlights the irony that half of those in the lower house who sought her impeachment were actually under investigation for corruption charges. Many observers called her removal a parliamentary coup given the weak case against her. (Rousseff's crime, transferring funds between public accounts in order to conform to fiscal regulations, had been carried out by previous presidents).

Regardless, the impeachment ended close to 14 years of political rule by the PT. Michel Temer, the vice-president, assumed the presidential office from 2016 to 2018. One of his most notable achievements of his administration is the passage of a constitutional amendment that prohibits increased spending on SUS. The 2013 protests seeking more investments in the public health system released forces leading to dramatic far-right shift in Brazil's politics right before the advent of a Covid-19 tsunami.

The Emergence of Bolsonaro

Costa ends her documentary with the election of Jair Bolsonaro and reflects that she grew up during the country's re-democratization process that started when she was born in 1983. Now she confesses: "I fear that democracy has been an ephemeral dream." Bolsonaro's election and the measures he adopted during the pandemic appear to be accelerating the end of this dream. He won by 57 million votes (55%) in the run-off election, defeating Fernando Haddad from the PT.

Various **explanations** converge on the factors that contributed to his victory emphasizing the corruption scandal, an on-going economic crisis, and insecurity on the streets. In fact, large media conglomerates had systematically criticized PT's political practices since 2002. The nightly news **presented** the party as a corrupt organization with Lula as the mastermind behind its operations.

They blamed Rousseff's government for the economic crisis the country had faced since 2013. Street protesters, dressed in Brazil's national colors and accusing the PT of communism, assumed a **socially conservative bias**. In his political campaigns, Bolsonaro emphasized that he was not a traditional politician. He represented a *new* politician who defended the upstanding, law-abiding Brazilians against common criminals and corrupt politicians.

As his popularity grew, Bolsonaro aligned himself with a small, unknown party and gained the support of the so-called Bible, Beef, and Bullet political factions. In other words, politicized neo-pentecostals, including a mega-church that operates one of Brazil's largest television networks; large-scale agricultural interests known as *latifundarios*; and the armaments industry. Bolsonaro's inner circle also includes links to Olavo de Carvalho. Currently living in the US state of Virginia, this former-astrologist-turned-self-proclaimed philosopher absorbs the partisan rhetoric of the US culture wars and adapts them to Brazilian audiences through social media.

Exemplary of his extreme rhetoric, Carvalho **claims** that COVID-19 is “the biggest manipulation of public opinion that has ever existed in the history of humankind...”

While campaigning, Bolsonaro stated that social policies the PT had fought to implement are unwarranted handouts. For him, the state should not intervene in the economic system and become just an observer of social life. His **communication strategy** created an archetypical image of himself as “the legend” that resonated even with the youth: “a politician is not a man, he is a simple image, an image consistent with the needs and desires of the electorate. The price paid for a product is money, in the political scenario that price is the vote.” Thirsty for this *legend*, a large proportion of the Brazilian electorate was convinced of outlandish **fakenews** stating that the PT, if elected, were, among other things, going to distribute baby-bottles with nipples in the form of a penis to daycare centers. Bolsonaro assumed the presidency on January 1st, 2019.

Brazil and COVID-19

At the start of 2020, the world was surprised by the coronavirus pandemic. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro’s relationship with the worldwide outbreak was one of profound and explicit contempt. Several times, during the months of March and April 2020, he downplayed the disease. On March 24, for example, he called the pandemic “a little cold.” At the time, Brazil had few infections. The president **circulated** in the streets greeting people as if nothing was happening.

He has opposed measures such as social isolation and limiting economic activity to halt the spread of the disease, despite the proclamations of his health minister, the physician Luiz Mandeta, who argued that the health system would not support the expected number of COVID-19 patients. Wearing a vest with the initials of SUS, Mandeta provided daily briefings of the pandemic in the country and the efforts that had to be taken.

In April, coronavirus deaths began to occur. By the 12th, the country had registered more than a thousand deaths. Bolsonaro reacted by saying: “The virus is going away”. On the same Sunday night, in an interview, on a national television program with the largest audience in the country, the Minister of Health stated: “I expect a single speech, a unified speech, because that makes Brazilians doubt. They don’t know whether to listen to the Minister of Health, to the president, or to whom.”

This public doubt was seen in the streets. On weekends, the beaches, shopping malls, and sidewalks **remained full of pedestrians**. On April 16, Bolsonaro appointed Nelson Teich to take Mandeta's place. When the number of fatalities exceeded 5,000 dead by April 28, Bolsonaro **exclaimed**: "And so? I regret it. What do you want me to do? I am Messiah, but do not do miracles," **in reference to** his middle name *Messias*.

Minister Nelson Teich was replaced after less than a month in office. The **reasons** for his departure stem from the fact that the president openly advocates hydroxychloroquine as treatment for COVID-19. Teich had been following the guidelines of the WHO that does not recognize any drug capable of curing this disease, although Bolsonaro wanted him to recommend the medicine. Given Teich's resistance, he was dismissed. The new head of the Ministry of Health is General Eduardo Pazuello, who has no health training and is considered a specialist in logistics. Pazuello, despite his interim position, has already appointed 17 high-ranking military officers to positions of trust at the top of the ministry.

On May 20, Brazil had registered more than 290,000 cases. The federal health research institute **Fundação Oswaldo Cruz** forecasts 580,000 thousand confirmed cases by June 1. Despite Bolsonaro's outrageous claims and disputes with local governors and mayors imposing restrictions to curb the pandemic, he retains popular support. Those thinking his overall performance as great or good continues to **hover at a third** of the electorate. Only in his handling of the coronavirus have public attitudes begun to shift, but only marginally (see Table 1). In mid-March, 35% of respondents in a nationally representative poll had a positive view of Bolsonaro's performance in relation to the disease, with 33% saying it was bad or terrible. By May 19th, the number of those saying he was doing a great or good job fell to 25% compared to negative views rising to 50%.

Table 1: Public Attitudes towards Bolsonaro's Performance in Relation to the Coronavirus

Timeframe	Great/Good	Regular	Bad/Terrible
March 18-20, 2020 (Datafolha)	35%	26%	33%
April 1-4, 2020 (Datafolha)	33	25	39
April 17, 2020 (Datafolha)	36	23	38

April 27, 2020 (Datafolha)	27	25	45
May 19, 2020 (XP Ipespe)	25	n/a	50

Sources: [Datafolha](#); [XP Ipespe](#)

Various political parties fear that the president will use the epidemic as a pretext to concentrate his powers as other leaders have done like Viktor Orbán in Hungary. In fact, on March 31st, the day of the military coup in 1964, Bolsonaro participated in a protest in support of closing Brazil's national congress and highest Supreme Court. He claimed that it would be “relatively easy” to decree a “State of Siege” but said that he still was not planning on doing so.

At the same time, a [petition](#) circulated on social media stating that the “brilliant government of Jair Bolsonaro is being stopped by this corrupt body” and requesting users to sign in support of “closing Congress”. On the same day, some Bolsonaro supporters even held a [demonstration](#) in front of the Federal Supreme Court (STF), where they demand the judges to “let the *legend* work” – in an allusion to the legal obstacles that were often being imposed on the president by the courts. Already, the Bolsonaro government has the most military officials (both retired and active) in his administration compared to all the previous democratic leaders combined.

By April 27, Brazil's lower house of Congress had [issued](#) 25 requests for impeachment. These demands had gained increased traction in the chamber after Brazil's Minister of Justice, Sergio Moro, exited the government due to Bolsonaro's interference in federal investigations about Bolsonaro's sons' ties to militia groups and political assassinations.

Nonetheless, a [new poll](#) on the same day found that the president still retained high levels of support with 45% of the population stating that congress should impeach the president while 48% said no. Many politicians and pundits say that Brazil should avoid a political crisis amidst the health crisis, but this view begs the question of Bolsonaro's complicity in the COVID-19 death count and attacks on the country's democratic institutions.

Political leadership occupies an important place in addressing disease outbreaks. Ostergard [argues](#) that “the executive level generally plays three critical roles in combating pandemics: mitigating risks, framing the collective problem and providing guidance and purpose for a plan to combat the virus.” Bolsonaro has done

the opposite by not following the advice of international health authorities and leading the Brazilian populace to dismiss the epidemic. His speech and mannerisms are not only completely unprofessional, for example his use of profanity with voters, doctors, scientists and journalists, but also demonstrates an utter disdain and lack of empathy with the virus' victims.

Bolsonaro's failures could be catastrophic. On April 18 he openly admitted that 70% of the Brazilian population could be contaminated. That is, approximately 140 million people. If 1% of them die, that would result in 1.4 million deaths. Manaus, the capital city of Amazonas state, has had to dig mass graves, and the health systems of several large cities have nearly collapsed. Most recently, the US has barred entry of non-citizen travelers who have come from Brazil.

Understanding Brazil's COVID Crisis

The Brazilian paradox, from global health leader to disastrous paralysis in the face of a pandemic, from incipient social democracy to reactionary populism, with a leader who ironically retains political support from a large swath of Brazilian society, calls forth some possible explanations. On the one hand, Brazilian society remains rooted in 400 years of slave labor, the brutality of one man against another, torture and punishment, and social exclusion. Bolsonaro's way of speaking and acting, as well as his political underhandedness, embody this ethos with mastery. He resembles a slave master that continues to loom large in the country's political culture.

On the other hand, the current context reveals the depths of Brazilians' increasing disenchantment with democracy. According to [Latinobarameter](#), Brazilian attitudes about democracy as the best form of government have declined by 15 percentage points, from 49% to 34%, in the 2013-2018 period. While outright support for authoritarian regimes appears to have not changed much, the perception that there really is not much of a difference between democracy and autocracy has nearly doubled over the same period. The democratic model as a form of government is losing its representativeness, legitimacy, and reason for being.

Citizens increasingly have stopped participating in elections, as evidenced in the fact that 21% of Brazilians did not go to the polls in 2018 in a country where voting is mandatory. As a result, voters cling to visionary leaders, who appear at the last minute and promise to combat a contaminated political environment. But like the promotion of hydroxychloroquine as a panacea for a pandemic, the rise of

Bolsonaro illustrates the symptoms of Brazil's political morass but also the consequences of using a potentially fatal treatment.

With whispers of a *coup de etat* in the air, it looks like Costa is justified with the title of her documentary: Brazil's democracy remains on edge.



Health, Regional



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