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When Incompetence Meets Bad Luck: Bolsonaro's Third Year in the Brazilian Presidency

Cuando la incompetencia se une a la mala suerte: el tercer año de Bolsonaro en la presidencia de Brasil

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ABSTRACT

The third year of the Bolsonaro presidency coincided with the second year of the pandemic of the Covid-19, and with the worsening of economic conditions in the country. This article contends that Brazil's economic performance, resulting from a unique mix of "bad luck" and incompetence, is the main driver of Bolsonaro's low popular support and unfavorable electoral prospects, six months before the poll. I rely on the literature on economic voting and on assignment of responsibility to argue that this is true because citizens (1) have short memory, (2) do not discount exogenous conditions when casting an economic vote, and (3) hold the president responsible for economic outcomes. I conclude by discussing how the early realization of a potential electoral loss helps explain Bolsonaro's growing focus on his core support base and systematic attempts to challenge the fairness of Brazilian elections.

Keywords: Brazil, election, economic vote, Bolsonaro, pandemic.

RESUMEN

El tercer año de la presidencia de Bolsonaro coincidió con el segundo año de la pandemia del Covid-19, y con el empeoramiento de las condiciones económicas del país. Este artículo sostiene que el desempeño económico de Brasil, resultante de una mezcla única de "mala suerte" e incompetencia, es el principal impulsor del bajo apoyo popular de Bolsonaro y de sus desfavorables perspectivas electorales, seis meses antes de los comicios. En base a la literatura sobre el voto económico y sobre la asignación de responsabilidad argumento que esto es cierto porque los ciudadanos (1) tienen poca memoria, (2) no descuentan las condiciones exógenas cuando emiten un voto económico, y (3) consideran al presidente responsable de los resultados económicos. Concluyo discutiendo cómo la temprana comprensión de una potencial pérdida electoral ayuda a explicar el creciente enfoque de Bolsonaro en su base de apoyo principal y los intentos sistemáticos de desafiar la limpieza de las elecciones brasileñas.

Palabras clave: Brasil, elección, voto económico, Bolsonaro, pandemia.

I. BACKGROUND: 2018, A VERY EXCEPTIONAL ELECTION IN BRAZIL

Presidential elections in South America are often a referendum on economic performance (Campello and Zucco 2020). Changes in individual welfare are sometimes the only signal voters may have of presidents' competence in poorly institutionalized and fragmented party systems, where parties have weak roots in society and party brands are hardly informative (Lupu 2011). The 2018 presidential election in Brazil, however, was an exception to this rule, thanks to the unique conditions in which it was held.

The election was held in the midst of an economic collapse of serious proportions, which began with the sudden reversal of commodity prices between 2011-12 and worsened after the re-election of Dilma Rousseff in 2014, which the defeated candidate refused to accept. From the beginning, Rousseff's second term was marked by economic and political uncertainties, later exacerbated by the Lava-Jato corruption scandal, culminating in her impeachment in 2016. This multidimensional crisis – economic, political and moral – spurred widespread frustration among voters, and the rejection of politics and politicians alike, by then intrinsically associated to corruption and wrongdoing.

The 2018 election was also exceptional for the absence of an incumbent, as president Michel Temer did not run or actively campaign for any candidate. Rather, despite the Workers' Party (PT) being out of office for two and a half years, for many the election was actually a referendum on the PT governments. At the same time that Lula's 40% of the vote intentions reflected voters' memory of the good economic times lived during his presidency, anti-Petism was at its highest point in 2018, when 35% of Brazilians willing to support any candidate that could defeat the PT (Zucco Jr, Amaral and Samuels 2020). The fact that Lula was jailed and not allowed to run, campaign, or even give interviews[1] and that candidate Fernando Haddad was nominated only a month before the poll, ended up preventing Lula's votes to be fully transferred, harming the party's electoral prospects and boosting the chances of anyone who could capture anti-political sentiment.

This sentiment was evident even before the election year began; A national poll released in October 2017 found that an alarming 82% of respondents rejected mainstream politicians and declared their willingness to vote for a candidate from outside the political establishment.[2]

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[1]   The sentence that was reversed by the Brazilian Supreme Court in April 2021.
[2]   Marques, Carlos José. "Os outsiders estão em alta para 2018." Istoé, 17 Oct 2017. The survey was conducted by IPSOS, at the request of the Federal University of Pernambuco.

That outsider could have been the former president of the Brazilian Supreme Court Joaquim Barbosa, or the TV presenter Luciano Huck. After neither decided to run, though, he ended up being Jair Bolsonaro, a backbencher with a 27-year-long career in the Brazilian Congress, who could only pass as an outsider thanks to the irrelevance of this trajectory. In almost three decades, Bolsonaro introduced 170 bills, most of them insignificant, as the one that inscribed former federal deputy and far-right presidential candidate Enéas Carneiro in the Book of Heroes of the Fatherland, or another that authorized the applause to the national flag after the anthem is played. The only two laws Bolsonaro managed to pass were a tax exemption for information technology equipment, and an authorization of a (later proven ineffective) "cancer pill", the synthetic phosphoethanolamine.

The conditions just depicted suggest that, if the 2018 election was not the usual referendum on a government economic performance, it was neither about Bolsonaro's diffuse agenda – which included elements of the U.S. cultural war, populist rhetoric and Chicago-style neoliberal policies – nor evidence of a "turn to the right" of the Brazilian electorate. That poll was the expression of voter rejection of politics broadly speaking, materialized in the figure of an anti-political candidate.

In this article, I contend that the 2018 exceptionalism should be taken for what it is – exceptional. I rely on the literature on economic voting, and on assignment of responsibility for economic performance to argue that this will not be the case in 2022; there are few reasons to expect this election to be, again, about the PT, corruption or anti-politics sentiment. The 2022 poll should be, once again as it is usually the case, a referendum on economic outcomes obtained during Bolsonaro's presidency. This should be true regardless of the president's efforts to divert responsibility for the economy to other political actors, and despite the fact that this performance was deeply affected by an exogenous shock of major proportions – the pandemic of Covid-19.[3]

The article is structured as follows. The next section briefly summarizes the literature on economic voting and assignment of responsibility, with a particular focus on research dedicated to the Brazilian case. Section 3 frames the pandemic of Covid-19 as "bad luck" – a negative exogenous shock –, describes Bolsonaro's response to that shock and discusses potential explanations for his behavior. Section 4 presents evidence that Bolsonaro's public support has been closely associated to economic performance, even though this performance is partly a result of bad luck, and despite his attempts to shift the blame to other political players. I contend that, considering historical patterns from Brazil and the region, the president's popularity points to dire re-electoral prospects. The arti-

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[3] After Feb 2022 the economy was also affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but this phenomenon is too recent to be addressed here.

cle concludes with a discussion of the consequences of this scenario to Bolsonaro's behavior on the months that precede the 2022 poll.

II. ECONOMIC VOTING IN BRAZIL: WHO IS TO BLAME?

The economic vote is a widely documented regularity in the political science literature. Since Kramer (1971) scholars have found a positive correlation between economic performance and the success of politicians and parties in office. In its simplest form, economic voting theory posits that citizens hold the government responsible for economic events, rewarding incumbents in good times and punishing them in bad times. Surely, a number of caveats apply to this simple notion; scholars still debate whether the economic vote works as a sanction or as a selection mechanism (Fearon 1999), whether voters respond to aggregate economic performance or to changes in their own welfare (Kramer 1983; Mutz & Mondak 1997), and to which economic outcomes voters respond to (Lewis-Beck & Stegmeier 2000).

More directly related to this article, another subset of this literature attempts to establish how and to whom voters assign responsibility for economic performance. Students of "clarity of responsibility" look into this problem from an institutional perspective, asking which institutional arrangements improve voter capacity to identify those responsible for economic policymaking (Powell & Whitten 1993). Those concerned with the impact of globalization investigate whether and how individuals discount exogenous conditions when casting an economic vote in integrated economies (Duch & Stevenson 2010).

First accounts of economic voting in Brazil date from re-democratization, when Lavareda (1989) associated the poor results obtained by the incumbent candidate in the 1989 presidential elections to the failure of the Cruzado stabilization plan.[4] Conversely, the success of the Real Plan was pointed as the main factor to explain the landslide victory of, by then, former Finance Minister Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the first round of the 1994 dispute (Mendes & Venturi 1994; Meneguello 1995; Almeida 1996; Kinzo 1996). Those findings were later reinforced by Carreirão (1999) who explored the economic impact of stabilisation plans on the vote, comparing the 1989, 1994 and 1998 presidential elections. Authors also highlighted the relative importance of retrospective evaluations vis-`a-vis ideology (Carreirão 2007), as well as partisanship and corruption (Rennó 2007) in explaining Lula's reelection in 2006.[5]

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[4] The Cruzado Plan was an anti-inflationary program based on the freezing of wages and prices. Initially successful in controlling inflation, it lasted less than a year. By the 1989 election, inflation was back to 50% a month.

[5] This evidence is consistent with more recent work that shows that Latin American voters tend to overlook corruption scandals during economic booms (Carlin, Love & Martinez-Gallardo 2015).

Along the same lines, studies later revealed the decisive role of the Bolsa Família Program (BFP) in explaining the dramatic change in Lula's support base between 2002 and 2006 (Hunter & Power 2007; Zucco Jr. 2008; Licio, Castro & Renn´o 2009; Terron & Soares 2010). More recently, Zucco Jr. (2013) and Zucco Jr. (2015) extended previous analyses to encompass multiple presidential elections, revealing that the electoral effect of the program was quite consistent over time. This literature suggests that, more than a structural realignment of the Brazilian electorate (Singer 2009), Lula's increased support among the poor reflected straightforward economic voting. Interestingly, scholars observed that the change that was documented in Lula's support base did not extend to the PT (Samuels 2004*a*; Baquero 2007). In light of Zucco Jr.'s results, later reinforced by Rennó & Cabello (2010) individual-level analyses, this finding illustrates the restricted nature of the Brazilian economic vote, fully captured by the figure of the president.

Examining the factors that mediate the impact of the economy on the vote in presidential systems, Samuels (2004*b*) argues that voters are more likely to punish presidents and incumbent candidates when elections are held concurrently with legislative races, which is true in Brazil, and also finds that executives are subject to greater sanctions and rewards than legislators. Carlin & Singh (2015) demonstrate that strong legislative powers and the frequent use of decrees, also typical of Brazilian politics, increase the impact of individuals' evaluations of the economy on presidential approval. The economic vote is also stronger in reelections (Gélineau 2007; De Ferrari 2015), not surprisingly, authors find a weaker effect of the BFP in the election of Dilma Rousseff (Nicolau 2014; Amaral & Ribeiro 2015; Zucco Jr. 2015).

In sum, the literature provides consistent evidence of economic voting in Brazil, but the phenomenon seems restricted to presidential elections, with poor evidence of economic vote occurring either at the regional or local levels, or for the legislature.

III. ECONOMIC VOTE AND EXOGENOUS SHOCKS: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Whereas it has been established that Brazilian voters attribute responsibility for the economy to the president, it is less clear how capable they are of discounting external conditions that affect the economy but that presidents do not influence.

Models of economic voting suggest citizens can identify exogenous shocks by benchmarking their country's economic performance (Duch & Stevenson 2008; Duch & Stevenson 2010; Kayser & Peress 2012), and voting based on *relative* rather than *absolute* economic performance, which better reflects government competence. Citizens that benchmark should also refrain from casting an eco-

nomic vote in case performance is largely driven by conditions that are beyond government influence.

Several empirical studies document voting behavior that is consistent with these theoretical expectations. Voters from the OECD seem to respond to relative economic performance (Kayser & Peress 2012). They are also less likely to cast an economic vote in economies that are highly vulnerable to exogenous conditions, such as in small open European countries (Duch & Stevenson 2008; Duch & Stevenson 2010), or in U.S. states dominated by natural resources (Ebeid & Rodden 2005). Hellwig & Samuels (2007) show that voters become less responsive to the economy as globalization advances, and Alcañiz & Hellwig (2011) claim they are less prone to blaming presidents for the economy for this same reason.

These results are not uncontested; studies were published showing that voters do respond to exogenous components of economic growth (Leigh 2009; Aytaç 2018). Wolfers (2002) diverges from Ebeid & Rodden (2005), by showing that voters in oil-producing U.S. states tend to re-elect incumbent governors during oil price rises, and to vote them out of office when the oil price drops. Moreover, recent research evidences that voters in developing nations judge incumbents based on economic outcomes driven by exogenous factors, such as commodity prices (Monteiro & Ferraz 2014; Novaes & Schiumerini 2015; Campello & Zucco Jr. 2016) and remittances (Ahmed 2017; Germano 2013; Tertytchnaya, De Vries, Solaz & Doyle 2017).

In a seminal work that still spurs intense academic debate, Achen & Bartels (2006) showed that events as random as droughts, floods and shark attacks affect voting in the U.S.. To the authors, voters are myopic and "forget all about most previous experience with the incumbents, voting solely on how they *feel* about what has happened lately" (Achen & Bartels 2004: 6). They also tend to punish incumbents for "changes in welfare that are clearly the acts of God or nature" (Achen & Bartels 2016: 15).

These rather provocative results inspired a whole series of studies examining the electoral impact of natural disasters such as hurricanes (Malhotra & Kuo 2008), droughts (Gasper & Reeves 2011; Cole, Healy & Werker 2012), floods (Arceneaux & Stein 2006), and tornados (Healy & Malhotra 2010). Most of this research reclaimed the rational nature of retrospective voting, arguing that individuals are indeed capable of separating the effects of random events from those of government responses, and to act upon the latter.[6]

More recently, however, a third wave of studies advancing the electoral impact of random events — this time unquestionably unrelated to government decisions, such as college games (Healy & Malhotra 2010), spousal losses (Liberini, Redoa-

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[6] More recently Fowler & Hall (2018) challenged Achen & Bartels's (2006) findings, to which the authors responded in Achen & Bartels (2018).

no & Proto 2017), lotteries (Huber, Hill & Lenz 2012; Gurdal, Miller & Rustichini 2013; Bagues & Esteve-Volart 2016), and even rain (Meier, Schmid & Stutzer 2019) — struck a serious blow on the rational nature of the connection between welfare and vote.[7]

This research suggests that economic voting may not be about rational processing of relevant information; rather, voters' general sense of well-being may be the conduit between the state of the economy and electoral outcomes (Healy & Malhotra 2010). This also explains why voters have short memories, and are more responsive to economic performance in the months leading to elections (Bartels 2008).

In the particular case of Brazil, Campello & Zucco Jr. (2014) show that president's popular support is largely driven by external conditions that affect the economy but that are beyond incumbent influence, such as commodity prices and U.S. interest rates. Figure 1 reveals that, in a simple linear model, the Good Economic Times Index (GET)[8] – a principal component score that summarizes variations in commodity prices and U.S. interest rates – accounts for about 2/3 of variation in presidential popularity in the country.

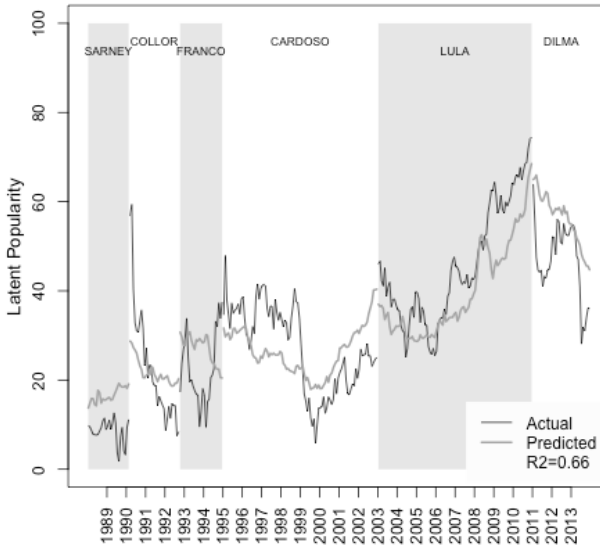Figure 1: Popularity - Actual and Predicted

Figure shows monthly popularity for Brazilian presidents, actual (dark line) and predicted (light line) in a linear model where the explanatory variable is the Good Economic Times Index, which summarizes changes in commodity prices and U.S. interest rates (Campello & Zucco Jr. 2014).

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[7]   See Fowler & Montagnes (2015) and Healy, Malhotra & Mo's (2015) response.
[8]   See Campello & Zucco Jr. (2014) for a more detailed explanation of the index.

Later, in a more sophisticated unit response model, the authors show that a one unit increment in the GET index increases presidential support by 1.8 percentage points in the short term, this effect converging to 15 pp after 18 months (Campello & Zucco 2020). These results suggest that Brazilian voters do not discount the effect of external conditions when judging the performance of their presidents.

Arguably, there is no reason to expect that voters respond to the pandemic of the Covid-19 differently than they do to other exogenous shocks that affect the domestic economy. Even with all the information that was available during the pandemic, it is hard for the average citizen to identify a clear benchmark or a measure that allows her to compare Brazil's performance vis-à-vis other countries. To give an example, the government for a long time displayed the number of Brazilians that "recovered" from covid as a measure of government's "good handling" of the pandemic – a number proportional not only to the size of the population but also to the number of infected individuals.

Even if these comparisons were straightforward, there are a number of factors — such as prior conditions, and state capacity – that influence the outcomes of a pandemic, besides governments' policies, and that are harder to assess even for specialists. The connection between economic outcomes in 2022 and a pandemic that was at its peak more than a year before are even harder for the average vote to grasp.

Finally, if it were not for all these difficulties, Downs's (1957) notion of "rational ignorance" suggests that the incentives for the citizens to perform comparisons that would allow them to distinguish merit (government responses) from luck (the pandemic) in the management of the economy are limited considering the high costs and the limited benefits of information. For all these reasons, as the pandemic eases and the election approaches, economic conditions should determine popular support to the president, regardless of the effects the pandemic may have had on growth or inflation.

IV. WHEN BAD LUCK MEETS INCOMPETENCE: BOLSONARO'S MANAGEMENT OF THE PANDEMIC

Even before the Covid-19 crisis, Brazil faced frankly unfavorable economic conditions. In the first year of Bolsonaro's presidency the country registered a GDP growth of 1.1%, throwing to the ground the expectations that the economy was about to undertake a consistent recovery in 2020. External conditions known to affect the Brazilian economy were also not favorable, with most scenarios pointing to the stability (or even a fall) of commodity prices and to risks of a rise in U.S. interest rates. Then the pandemic hit.

Since the first case of Covid-19 was registered in Brazil, in January 2020, Bolsonaro adopted the same divisive rhetoric as U.S. president Trump, establish-

ing a dichotomy between those who "defend the economy" – his allies – and those overreacting to the pandemic – his detractors.[9]

In the construction of this rhetoric, Bolsonaro systematically downplayed the severity of the disease,[10] confronted governors who followed the guidelines of health experts,[11] proclaimed the virtues of chloroquine,[12] cast doubt on the actions of the Chinese government[13] and publicly disavowed two Health Minister, both of them fired for disagreeing with the president's push for reopening the economy and defense of the chloroquine.[14] Not even Trump, however, dared to invite the population to protests[15] amid the pandemic, or circulated in public places while infected with the virus.[16] It is safe to say that, in the region, Bolsonaro was only topped by Daniel Ortega, who summoned his supporters to a national day of mobilization — a gigantic march in Managua — to celebrate "el amor en los tiempos de Covid."[17]

The federal government's denial of science and the severity of the crisis cost the health and the wellbeing of Brazilians (Lotta & Wenham 2022). By advocating a quick resumption of economic activity at any cost, Bolsonaro deliberately promoted a premature loosening of social distancing that, according to health specialists, increased the death toll in the country, disproportionally affecting regions that concentrated president supporters (Xavier et al. 2022).

Unfortunately, the damage imposed by Bolsonaro's response to the pandemic went far beyond rhetoric. After a six-month committee investigation, the Brazilian Senate concluded that the president "intentionally let the coronavirus rip through the country and kill hundreds of thousands in a failed bid to achieve herd immunity and revive Latin America's largest economy.[18]

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[9]   For president Trump's response to the pandemic please see: Lawrence, Jill. "Trump's chaotic coronavirus presidency: Historically divisive and, for some, fatal," USA Today, 30 Mar 2020. See also Shear, Michal D. et al."Inside Trump's Failure: The Rush to Abandon Leadership Role on the Virus", The New York Times, 15 Sep 2020, and Tollefson, Jeff. "How Trump damaged science — and why it could take decades to recover."-Nature News Feature, 7 Oct 2020. For Trump's defense of unproven treatments and its consequences see Niburski & Niburski (2020).

[10]   "Relembre o que Bolsonaro j´a disse sobre a pandemia, de gripezinha e pa´ıs de maricas a frescura e mimi-mi,"Folha de S˜ao Paulo, 5 Mar 2021.

[11]   Negrisoli, Lucas. "Bolsonaro, na ONU, culpa governadores por crise econˆomica da Covid no Brasil." O Tempo, 21 Sep 2021.

[12]   Guerra, Rayanderson. "Bolsonaro defendeu uso de cloroquina em 23 discursos oficiais; leia as frases". O Globo, 20 May 2021.

[13]   Ribeiro, Gustavo. "Bolsonaro suggests Coronavirus is part of China's biological war". The Brazilian Report, 15May 2021

[14]   "Assim como Teich, Mandetta caiu apos discordar de Bolsonaro sobre cloroquina e isolamento." G1, 15 May 2020.

[15]   Carvalho, Daniel. "Ida de Bolsonaro a ato em meio a pandemia de coronav´ırus ´e irrespons´avel, dizem parla- mentares." Folha de S˜ao Paulo, 15 Mar 2020.

[16]   Carvalho, Daniel and Bragon, Rainier. "Nos u´ltimos 14 dias, Bolsonaro se aglomerou e interagiu, sem m´ascara, com centenas de pessoas." Folha de S˜ao Paulo, 7 Jul 2020.

[17]   Miranda, Wilfredo. "El Gobierno de Ortega invoca al "amor" y moviliza a sus simpatizantes ante la pande-mia." El Pa´ıs, 14 Mar 2020.

[18]   Nicas, Jack."Brazilian Leader Accused of Crimes Against Humanity in Pandemic Response." The New York Times, 8 Nov 2021

According to the Senate's report, Bolsonaro pushed unproven drugs, well after they had been shown to be ineffective for treating Covid-19, and purposefully caused a monthslong delay in the distribution of vaccines. The administration ignored literally hundreds of e-mails from Pfizer offering vaccines and, instead, opted to overpay for an unapproved vaccine from India, a deal later stalled over suspicions of corruption.

Bolsonaro went as far as to veto legal provisions to make mask wearing mandatory in churches and in Brazil's overcrowded prisons. In late 2020, after being warned of an impending shortage of oxygen in the Amazonas state, instead of securing supply the administration sent drugs that have no proven effect against the virus, leading to the death of dozens of patients as the oxygen ran out.[19] As late as February 2022, the Ministry of Health had still not developed a national plan to combat the pandemic. For all these reasons, the Brazilian Senate formally accused the president of crimes against humanity.

There is widespread agreement among health specialists that the outcomes of the pandemic were not worse only thanks to the existence of the SUS (Sistema Único de Saúde), Brazil's publicly funded health care system and the largest in the world, established by the 1988 Constitution. Thanks to the SUS, Brazil has a distinguished track record of vaccinations and disease control that, altogether with the propensity of Brazilians towards vaccines, somehow compensated for the government's denialist behavior.

Concluding, Brazil's experience of the pandemic can be depicted as a confluence of bad luck and startling incompetence, which by the time this article is concluded led the country to 664k deaths from Covid-19, only second to the 996k deaths reported in the U.S.. In relative terms, Brazil presents the 14th highest death per capita, out of 155 countries for which the Statista has data.[20]

Potential drivers of Bolsonaro's behavior

Several factors may help understand Bolsonaro's behavior in the pandemic. Besides the usual mimicking of president Trump, observed in other behaviors unrelated to the Covid, it is important to remember that a relevant number of people close to the president tested positive for the coronavirus early in 2020, without their condition worsening substantially, or even requiring hospitalization.[21]

Bolsonaro demonstrated countless times to privilege personal experience vis-à-vis scientific evidence, whether due to a predisposition of character or a cognitive lim-

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[19]   Canineu, Maria Laura and Muñoz, César. "The Toll of Bolsonaro's Disastrous Covid-19 Response." Human Rights Watch, 27 Oct 2021.

[20]   See   https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/for comparisons.

[21]   "Sobe para 17 o total de pessoas que estiveram com Bolsonaro nos EUA e tˆem coronavˊırus."G1, 18 Mar 2020.

itation to operate otherwise. It is plausible that, based on these personal experiences, the president actually came to believe that the new coronavirus was just "a little flu" with minimal effects.

Another factor that helps explain Bolsonaro's behavior is his natural inclination towards confrontation and conflict. This was the way he behaved during his long legislative career and also during the presidential campaign.[22] Since his victory speech on election night, a confrontational rhetoric directed towards opponents and the media has been his most distinctive mark as president. Thus, at the moment when a consensus was formed around the World Health Organization guidelines – one that united governors, legislators and magistrates in Brazil – it was unsurprising that the president placed himself against it, after all it takes enemies to inflame radical Bolsonaristas.

Most importantly, however, there was plenty of evidence that Bolsonaro realized early on that a sharp reduction of activity would prompt a severe economic downturn, potentially harming his popular support. His strategy was, thus, to do all he could to "reduce the damage" by forcing the return to economic activities and, meanwhile, to find culprits to blame when the crisis hit.[23] At the same time that Bolsonaro correctly realized the political consequences of an economic downturn, however, he ignored two important findings of the economic voting literature, discussed in the previous section.

The first is voter myopia, the tendency to assign disproportionately greater weight to the months leading up to elections when casting an economic vote. Different from Trump, running for reelection already in 2020, Bolsonaro's electoral prospects depended mainly on economic performance closer to 2022.

By mimicking Trump's attempts to downplay the pandemic and to force the immediate reopening of the economy, the Brazilian president missed the opportunity to limit the effects of the health crisis by promoting social distancing and lockdowns. Studies show that countries that prioritized the pandemic over immediate economic results were more successful in saving lives and resuming growth (Balmford et al 2020). By advocating a quick resumption at any cost, Bolsonaro deliberately promoted a premature loosening of social distancing that, according to health specialists, dramatically increased the death toll in Brazil (Xavier et al. 2022).

In addition to voter myopia, Bolsonaro also ignored that the chances of a president evading responsibility for the economy — by shifting the blame to the Supreme Court magistrates or to governors, for example — are minimal. As the next sections show, in spite of Bolsonaro's efforts, Brazilians strongly believe

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[22] Falcão, Márcio and Pádua, Luciano. "Bolsonaro: ofensas verbais podem inviabilizar sua candidatura?". Jota, 07 Jun 2018.

[23] "Esse ´e um caminho do fracasso, que vai quebrar o Brasil", diz Bolsonaro sobre lockdown. Revista Carta Capital, 15 May 2020

that he — not the pandemic, not the governors — is the one to blame for the economic downturn.

A note on the emergency help to the poor

At some point in 2020 it looked as if president Bolsonaro could escape most pessimistic predictions about the impact of the pandemic in his popular support. After all, opposite to what happened to most of the planet and despite his disastrous response to the pandemic, after an initial slump the president's popularity increased significantly at the same time that both the pandemic and the economic crisis progressed.

Not coincidentally, this was the period in which the government began to grant an emergency aid totaling R$ 293 billions in benefit of 68 million Brazilians. Thanks to this aid, which cost almost twice the annual amount of the Bolsa Familia Program in a month, the number of Brazilians below the extreme poverty line dropped to the lowest levels in forty years. This is no small feat, and in light of studies on the political impact of cash transfers, it should be expected that such an initiative gave impetus to the president's popularity.[24]

To illustrate this possibility, the figure 2 aggregates results from 195 national presidential performance assessment surveys carried out by twelve different Brazilian research institutes, the results of which are publicly available. Inferring cause and effect between benefit and popularity is, in the current context, limited, but it is impossible to overlook a sudden eight percentage points jump in Bolsonaro's popularity after May — the month in which it reached its lowest level and when the first installments of the aid began to reach all beneficiaries — and August 2020. This jump is recorded in the two different ways of aggregating the surveys that are reported in the figure (simple monthly average and "latent popularity"). The president's popularity, then, remained more or less stable at this higher level until the end of the emergency aid period in December, when it dropped by about five points in a single month.[25]

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[24] Faced with Bolsonaro's rise in the polls, many analysts lamented the apparent "indifference" of Brazilians towards the victims of the pandemic. To understand the relative effect of the bad management of the pandemic vis-`a-vis the emergency aid on Bolsonaro's popularity it is first necessary to consider that by December 2020 a 192,000 people had died from Covid-19. Assuming five others directly experienced the trauma of these deaths, terrible as this calculation is, this amounts to less than 1 million Brazilians, compared to the 68 million families who benefited directly or indirectly from the emergency transfer. One can still argue that the tragedy of the thousands of deaths should affect even those not directly related to them. Students of "psychic numbing" (Slovic 2013), however, teach us that for evolutionary (and not moral) reasons, large numbers reverberate little in the human mind. This is true in events as horrific as genocides, and is probably also true in the context of a pandemic.

[25] Source: Zucco and Campello, "O Paradoxo do Coveiro", Revista Piau´ı, March 2021, https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/o-paradoxo-do-coveiro.

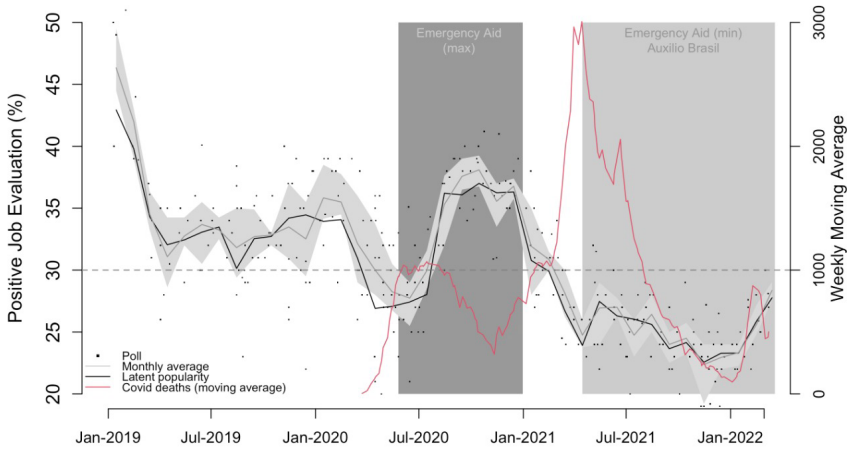## Figure 2: Presidential Popularity, Covid Deaths and Emergency Aid

Figure shows the average popularity of president Bolsonaro (respondents assessment of the government as good or excellent) in 195 national surveys released in the period. Dark grey area denotes the period when the emergency help varied between R$ 600 and R$1,200 and covered 68 millions of adults. The light gray denotes the period in which these values were halved and reached 18 millions of families, or about 27 millions of adults.

A visual inspection of this figure suggests that variations in popularity followed variations in household incomes much more sharply than the death toll from the pandemic, reported in red (data are from Our World in Data project), at least until the end of 2020.

Bolsonaro's popularity dropped sharply between February and May 2020, before a significant increase in deaths, but at a time when the economic effects of the pandemic were already being felt. As deaths picked up in the "first wave" of the pandemic, between May and July, popularity remained stable, perhaps because aid was already being distributed. Bolsonaro's popularity, then, experienced the "leap of aid," which occurred when daily deaths were still on the "lateau" of the first wave. From July to September, when the number of deaths dropped during the duration of the aid, popularity did not increase. Throughout 2020, therefore, the trajectory of the president's popularity is in line with the idea that it is primarily determined by the economy.

At the turn of the year, it was possible to observe the sharp drop in popularity that coincided with the end of the emergency aid. This drop also coincided with the acceleration of the death rates, making it more difficult to separate the effects of the two processes in that period.

After a halt in the end of 2020, the government re-initiated a downsized aid program in March 2021, which does not seem to have affected its lowering popularity throughout the year.

It was only in the beginning of 2022 that popularity reversed its downward trend, this time coinciding with the launching of the so-called "Auxílio Brasil" program (ABP), a generous re- branding of the former Bolsa Família (BFP), one of the hallmarks of the Workers' Party (PT) government. The budget almost tripled under the new program, going from R$35bi to R$100bi, and individual transfers rose substantially, from an average of R$220 to R$400. In a scenario of tight fiscal constraints, the extension of the program was only possible thanks to an amendment authorized by the Brazilian Congress, which allowed Bolsonaro to fund it with money saved from delays in government payment of compensation ordered by the courts.

It is worth noting that Bolsonaro's attempts to use his incumbency advantage to boost popularity in electoral year were not limited to the "Auxílio Brasil." The program was part of a wider is package of social spending expected to inject R$165 billion ($32.4 billion) into the economy. Measures allow employees to withdraw 1,000 reais from FGTS severance funds and to anticipate 13^{th} salary payments that are typically made later in the year, and also guarantee loans for workers with troubles accessing credit. The government also reduced taxes over industrialized products at a cost of R$ 20 billions, and announced intentions to give a pay rise for public servants, estimated in R$ 1.6 billion.[26]

Popularity and electoral prospects

As this article is concluded, it is still early to infer the effect of all those measures on popular support for Bolsonaro, and whether it will be enough to compensate for high inflation and unemployment (expected to reach 8% and 12%, respectively, in 2022).

As shown in the previous section, Brazilian's assessment of president Jair Bolsonaro hit the lowest level in November 2021, when only 19% of respondents of the Genial/Quaest Survey had a positive view of the president, and showed some recovery since then, reaching now somewhere between 25-30%.

In line with the arguments made in this article, the same survey reveals that 46% of respondents consider the economy Brazil's main problem, compared to 14% who believe the main problem is the pandemic. About 62% believe the economy worsened in the past year, and 80% disapprove Bolsonaro's management of inflation.

No wonder, the president has been trying to divert voter attention from the economy towards corruption, confronting the Supreme Court magistrates or questioning the fairness of the Brazilian electoral process. Unfortunately for

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[26]   Iglesias, Simone and Carvalho, Daniel. "Bolsonaro Rolls Out $32 Billion Social Plan Eyeing Election". Bloomberg, 17 Mar 2022.

him, though, this strategy seems doomed to fail in the middle of a crisis of such proportions.

In another survey released in April 2022 by BTG/FSB, 62% of the respondents affirm that Brazil is in the midst of an economic crisis with no signals of recovery, and 42% consider the president the main culprit for the economic situation (vis-à-vis 25% who blame the pandemic).

Consistent with Brazilians' negative assessments of the government's performance, Bolsonaro's vote intention in stimulated questions is currently in the 25%-30% range. The history of measurements carried out in the past suggests that such low popularity six months before the election severely harms Bolsonaro' reelection prospects.

In a sample of 62 presidential elections held in 9 South American countries between 1985 and 2021 for which there is popularity data,[27] the average popularity of presidents ten months before the election is 41%. Among those who failed to be re-elected or to elect their successor, this average drops to 33% and among the successful ones it rises to 56%. Among presidents who held more than 40% popularity at that point on the electoral calendar, 72% were successful. Above 30% the success rate is 62%. Below 30%, this rate drops to 20%.

Leaving South America aside and examining the Brazilian elections in the current democratic period, there is a strong relationship between the evaluation of presidents' performance and vote intention for the incumbent candidate, as shown by Figure 3. In the figure, Ulysses Guimarães and Henrique Meirelles are considered the candidates of José Sarney and Michel Temer respectively, although their support for them was not emphatic.

Even recognizing the inherent limitations of the exercise of estimating a relationship between two variables with only eight points, the pattern that emerges is quite clear. Up to a level of about 50% of positive evaluations on the eve of the election there is a little more than one-to-one correspondence with the voting of the candidate of the situation in the first round.

This relationship does not necessarily mean that whoever evaluates the president well is the one who votes for him/her in the first round, but it does give us some parameter to think about in 2022. With today's popularity, Bolsonaro would have less than 30% of the votes, which is his current vote intention in scenarios for the second round. This value may place him in a still uncertain second round, but is not enough for an electoral victory.

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[27]   This analysis is based on data available in Campello & Zucco Jr. (2020).
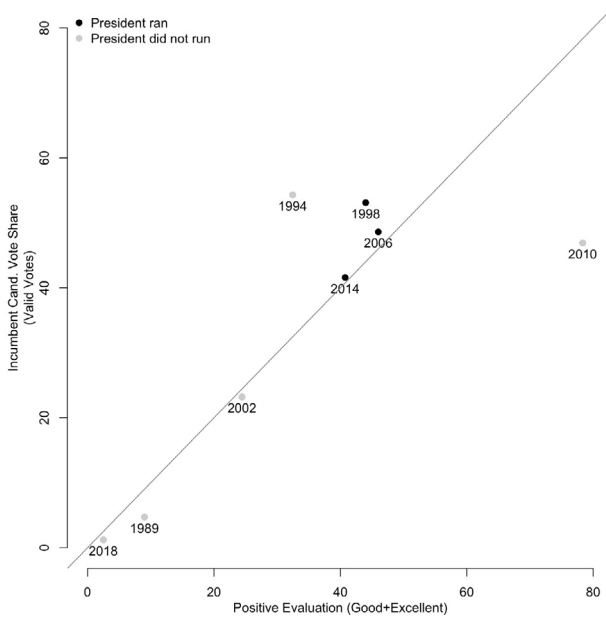
Figure 3: President Evaluations and Vote

Figure shows the share of respondents that find the president performance's good or excellent on year before the poll, and incumbent candidate's actual vote. Source: Cesar Zucco, "Bolsonaro, o Favorito?", Revista Piau´ı, https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/bolsonaro-o-favorito/.

Concluding, without a significant improvement in the economy, there will be no improvement in popularity, and without a substantial improvement in popularity, there is little chance that Bolsonaro will win the elections, regardless of the number, identity or strategy of the other candidates. Still, a Bolsonaro with reduced chances of success could do considerable damage. One of the most worrisome implications of Campello & Zucco's (2020) work is that presidents who are almost certain to win or lose elections have very low incentives to meet voters' needs and are far more prone to rent-seeking than presidents whose victory or defeat is uncertain.

This trend, in a less negative light, implies that presidents in this situation make decisions that benefit their captive audience vis-à-vis the wider electorate, in an effort to secure future support. In the worst-case scenario, however, presidents who find themselves with no chance of re-election may seek to remain in power through non-electoral avenues. This danger is real when it come to president Bolsonaro who, following once again Trump's steps, has been very explicit in his intentions to question the fairness of the poll in case of loss.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING AHEAD

Elections in Brazil are often referenda on economic performance. In this article, I argued that the 2018 poll that elected Bolsonaro was an exception to this rule,

with no clear incumbent and a jailed frontrunner. There are several reasons to believe, however, that the 2022 presidential election will be "typical" in that sense.

Based on findings of the literature on economic voting and assignment of responsibility for economic performance, I argued that the economy is a major determinant of Bolsonaro's popularity and that it will also be the main driver of his reelection prospects.

Interestingly, the same president that correctly anticipated the economic implications of the pandemic on voters support, overlooked well-known patterns documented in the economic vote. The first is voter myopia – the fact that economic performance is more relevant to the vote in election years. By openly opposing lockdowns and defending Brazilians' immediate return to normal life, mimicking the behavior of a president pressed by a 2020 election, Bolsonaro harmed economic recovery and, with that, his own electoral prospects in 2022. The second is that, in presidential systems like the Brazilian, the president is always the one to be bear responsibility for economic performance.

As the specialized literature would anticipate, as the pandemic eases and death rates decrease, health has been replaced by the economy as Brazilians' main concern. Individuals disapprove of president's Bolsonaro management of the economy, irrespective of the effects the pandemic (or, more recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine) may have had on growth and inflation.

After seeing a notable increase in his popularity, driven by unsustainable emergency aid, public support for the president reached its lowest levels in late 2021, following the downsizing of the program and worsening economic conditions. Despite some recovery after the implementation of "Auxílio Brasil", Bolsonaro's popularity six months before the election evidences his poor electoral prospects.

It must be recognized that, if it is possible to say that after the tragedy the country experienced in the past three years, there was one aspect in which Brazil can be considered "lucky": the election of an authoritarian leader coincided with a period that would not have been kind to any ruler.

If Bolsonaro were leading the country at a time of unprecedented economic bonanza, as happened, for example, with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the consequences for the Brazilian democracy could be much worse. If that had been the case, regardless of his government's dismantling of the Brazilian state and democratic institutions — hardly comparable to anything ever seen in Brazilian politics after re-democratization — and tragic handling of the pandemic, Bolsonaro could be heading for another four years in the presidency (Campello & Zucco 2020).

Looking ahead, it is never enough to stress that a decrease in popular support and re-election prospects raises the risks that Bolsonaro will divert resources from the general population to his core supporters and, ultimately, refuse to

accept unfavorable election results for himself. At this moment, Brazil needs to gather all the efforts at its disposal and channel them to prevent such behavior. This requires the strengthening of the consensus around the fairness of Brazilian elections, and a public and non-negotiable commitment, on the part politicians and business leaders of all ideological strands, to the defense of the Brazilian democracy.

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