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BRAZIL, BOLSONARO, AND BARRETO: POPULISM, PEOPLE, AND PUBLIC



ROBERTO MALTA

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Roberto Malta

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The modern waves of populism that have arisen in several countries in recent years share both global and local characteristics. Brazil is no exception. The presidency of Jair Bolsonaro and his particular brand of populism combines Brazilian elements, inspired by the short-lived presidency of Fernando Collor (1990-1992), with global ones, inspired by former U.S. President Donald Trump, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and the Law and Justice Party in Poland. Moreover, Brazil is no stranger to populism. Its decades-long and complex relationship with populists has played an integral part in Brazilian history. However, the current form of populism in the country is distinct from the one of decades past. Using Cas Mudde's definition that populism is an ideology that divides society into a Manichean struggle between the virtuous people and the corrupt elites while populist leaders argue that politics ought to be the simple expression of the general will of the people outside of liberal constraints,¹ this paper provides an overview of Bolsonaro populism through the lens of 1920s Brazilian writer Lima Barreto.

Background

On the evening of October 28, 2018, right-wing, populist candidate Jair Bolsonaro defeated the Workers' Party contestant Fernando Haddad to become the 38th President of Brazil. During the campaign, Bolsonaro used the widespread discontentment with political elites to his advantage, marketing himself as an alternative to the establishment.² With divisive rhetoric on social issues, nostalgia for the military dictatorship, and a powerful social media presence, he became the first right-leaning president to be elected since Fernando Collor de Mello's victory in 1989. Moreover, due to his tendency for explosive discourse and sensationalistic claims, Bolsonaro was singled out by some academics as the most extremist political leader ever elected in Latin America.³

In the year before the election of Bolsonaro, the annual International Literary Festival of Paraty featured the work of Lima Barreto, a sharp Brazilian writer and a critic of Brazilian society and the oligarchic Old Republic (1889-1930). In an article in the magazine *Careta* in 1922, Barreto wrote that "Brazil does not have a people, it has a public."⁴ Barreto's quote is a succinct analysis of Brazilian political history. To him, a "people" is more than a group with a shared culture, history, and language, it should be united in fighting for common rights, interests, and desires, whereas a "public" lacks active political participation toward common desires.⁵

¹ Cas Mudde. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 543. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

² Ernesto Londono and Shasta Darlington. "Jair Bolsonaro Wins Brazil's Presidency, in a Shift to the Far Right." *The New York Times*, 28 Oct. 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/world/americas/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-election.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lima Barreto. *Revista Careta*, (Num 728, Anno XV). 1922.

⁵ Francis Paulina Lopes da Silva. "O Discurso Nacionalista De Lima Barreto." p.11 *Faculdade De Filosofia, Letras, e Ciências Humanas, Universidade De Sao Paulo*, dlcv.fflch.usp.br/sites/dlcv.fflch.usp.br/files/05_12.pdf.

The absence of a politically active people has made Brazil particularly vulnerable to populism. The most pronounced period was between 1945 and 1964, a period officially known as the Fourth Republic and sometimes called by historians the “Populist Era”, “the Populist Republic”, or “the Populist Years.” Populism is a product of Brazilian history, democratic experience, and its people. To understand how Brazil came to elect Bolsonaro in 2018, it is important to study a trio of former presidents: Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945 and 1951-1954), Fernando Collor de Mello (1990-1992), and Luis Inacio Lula da Silva (2003-2010).

Brazilian Populist History

Writing about Latin American and Brazilian populist history, the scholar Leslie Bethel describes how populism prospered in the sub-continent throughout the 20th century. He points out that from a broader Latin American perspective, in the absence of strong communist parties or something analogous to the progressive New Deal Democrats in the United States, classic populism of the 1930s to 1960s was the only avenue workers had to manifest their political interests. However, Bethel notes that these populists were reformists. While these leaders were of authoritarian nature and not committed to the liberal institutional framework, they intended to foster political inclusion and social change, gradually enacting reforms toward a more egalitarian country.⁶

A shared characteristic of classical populists across Latin America was their ambivalence to liberal democracy. On the one hand, they aimed to include many formerly excluded groups of society. They sought to exalt workers- many who previously were not allowed to vote or were coerced to do so in a certain way- as the core of the nation. On the other hand, the same leaders rejected liberal constraints and shielded themselves behind the will of the people, claiming that political action outweighed the need for parliamentary debate and constitutional constraints.

Using this argument, populist leaders passed and pushed through their social reforms and economic development plans, bypassing resistance from other political actors. These populist leaders were not necessarily out to deceive the populace but were sincere in their commitment to their proposed reforms. Another shared element was their failure to address the structural problems of the country or the potential consequences of their reforms, leaving both matters to their successors. In Brazil, this was observed in the economic realm, marked first by astonishing growth between 1930 and the late 1970s, followed by economic collapse in the 1980s. The 1980s was known as the lost decade, a consequence of galloping inflation and ballooning debts.⁷

Getúlio Vargas, who was the dictator of Brazil between 1930-1945 and president between 1950-1954, would take this populist model further by consolidating a de facto authoritarian rule. He retained political legitimacy by keeping workers at the center of his political platform, implementing social reforms, and including into political life groups formerly excluded during the oligarchic Old Republic. A defining figure in Brazilian history, he ruled the country for almost two decades, becoming both Brazil’s first dictator and its first populist leader.

⁶ Leslie Bethel. “Populism in Brazil.” In *Brazil: Essays on History and Politics*, 176. University of London Press, 2018. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv51309x.10. Accessed 11 May 2021.

⁷ Carlos de la Torre. *Populism in Latin America*. Edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. Vol. 1, 196-198. Oxford University Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.8>.

Before adopting populism, Vargas led the movement that brought down the Old Republic in 1930. After the coup, he ruled as the head of the provisional government and then, with the creation of the Estado-Novo in 1937, as an authoritarian dictator.⁸ Vargas was inspired by autocratic movements in Europe, particularly Józef Piłsudski in Poland, to write the constitution of 1937. Under this new charter, the current congress was dissolved, and the parliament was rebuilt into a different two-chamber composition. It also allowed the president to rule by decree during states of emergency, limited the autonomy of the judiciary, rolled back civil rights, institutionalized censorship, and centralized power within the office of the chief executive.⁹ In many ways, it legitimized the powers that Vargas had exercised since coming to power seven years earlier. This constitution also paved the way for Vargas to outlaw all political parties.¹⁰ At the same time, it made substantial advances in social rights, including the right to education, better labor rights, and the framework for a labor justice system that would be independent from other branches of the judiciary.¹¹

Vargas had a broad and unusual political alliance that included economic elites, trade unions co-opted by the state, and up to 1937, Brazilian fascist movements. He also developed a cult of personality around himself. Most notably, he created a state organization that both strengthened and suppressed trade unions by legalizing them under the direct supervision of the federal government. This is the beginning of *trabalhismo*, a labor ideology that would have lasting consequences for the future of Vargas and of Brazil.¹²

Lima Barreto, who died a few months after writing the quote that acts as a guiding thread to this essay, did not live to see Vargas's rise to power. However, the events that unfolded in Brazil in the 1930s as the Brazilian public rallied behind Vargas, reinforced the validity of his quote. Vargas acted as a paternalistic and even messianic figure for the public to follow rather than a political leader who would guide his people through the challenges ahead, relying on shared political ideals and aspirations for the country. This specter haunts Brazil to this day.

In politics, Vargas was a pragmatist, as evidenced by his labor policy. Pragmatism was also present in his foreign policy approach. During the Second World War, Brazil joined the Allies because they offered economic advantages in providing financial, technical, and physical support for Brazilian industrialization. In particular, the Americans funded the construction of a steel mill in Volta Redonda.¹³ However, as the war ended, Vargas faced insurmountable international and domestic pressures to democratize Brazil. The country had just spent lives and resources fighting for liberty and democracy in Europe- while these concepts were limited at home. Both military members

⁸ Bethel, 178-179.

⁹ Julio de Souza Gomes, Zamarian, Livia Pitelli, Leandro Douglas Lopes, and Ronaldo Adriano dos Santos. "Capítulo IV: A Constituição Do Estado-Novo (1937)." Essay. In *As Constituições Do Brasil: Análise Histórica Das Constituições e De Temas Relevantes Ao Constitucionalismo Pátrio*, edited by Livia Pitelli Zamarian, 59-60, 74-75. . Birigui, Sao Paulo: Editora Boreal, 2012.

¹⁰ CPDOC - Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação História Contemporânea do Brasil. "PARTIDOS POLÍTICOS (EXTINÇÃO)." CPDOC - Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil. Fundação Getulio Vargas. Accessed July 21, 2021. <http://www.fgv.br/cpdoc/acervo/dicionarios/verbete-tematico/partidos-politicos-extincao>.

¹¹ Gomes, Zamarian, Lopes, and dos Santos, 75.

¹² Bethel, 179-180.

¹³ Frank McCann. 1995. "Brazil and World War II The Forgotten Ally. What Did You Do in the War, Zé Carioca". *Estudios Interdisciplinarios De América Latina Y El Caribe* 6 (2), 5-6. <http://eial.tau.ac.il/index.php/eial/article/view/1193>.

returning from Italy and political elites in Rio de Janeiro wanted change, and Vargas was forced to agree to hold new elections. However, he was noncommittal on whether he would participate in the election and so, fearing a new coup and a repeat of the political maneuvering that had kept him in office in 1937, the Army removed him from his post before the election. A few days later, a provisory government was sworn in.¹⁴

Despite popular demonstrations known as *queremismo* demanding that Vargas ran for president in 1945, he refused to do so.¹⁵ Instead, he supported the presidential bid of Eurico Gaspar Dutra, his former minister of war. Out of office, Vargas rebranded himself as the “father of the poor” and fully embraced *trabalhismo* as a way to mobilize workers since the full weight of a totalitarian state was not available.¹⁶ In the next election five years later in 1950, Vargas ran for president and easily won, garnering 19% more votes than the runner-up.¹⁷ As such, Vargas pivoted aggressively toward populism, replacing his previous authoritarianism. During the campaign, he made many promises to enact worker and social policies- promises that he meant and would later fulfill in office. He also relied heavily on his personal appeal to win voters, a tactic that would be adopted by later Brazilian populists. One promise- to double the minimum wage- was completed in the last year of his term. In announcing this promise, Vargas claimed that the future of Brazil would be workers composing the government themselves. However, that would have to wait- for at least some time. Vargas was still around, and he knew he was talking to a public he could control, rather than a people with political agency.¹⁸

As Vargas's term wound down, fears rose once again within the military that he would try another coup to stay in power (the Constitution of 1945 prohibited consecutive terms for president). To prevent his second removal by the armed forces and to remain in control of the narrative, Vargas committed suicide in the presidential palace in 1954.¹⁹ His suicide letter is one of the most emblematic populist documents in Brazilian history. He claimed to always have been a “slave of the people” and to have returned to power in 1950 on “the shoulders of the people.”²⁰ He said he had attempted to defend the people, particularly the very poor, from foreign and domestic powerful interests that halted his government attempts to rule the country. In this letter, Vargas gives a Manichean view of politics and draws himself as a champion of the workers, practically reiterating Mudde’s definition of populism in prose. Vargas concludes with a quote that is among the most important in Brazilian history: “I depart from life to enter into history.” His death led to much commotion and displays of devotion, a last salvo of *queremismo*, as if the Brazilian public had lost its only protector.²¹

The dramatic conclusion of Getulio Vargas’s life and political career ensured that he would be the most influential figure of Brazilian politics, society, and economy for the next few decades. Populism remained the modus operandi of successful politicians- including the three presidents that succeeded him. Socially, *trabalhismo* was a leading ideology and the days of the ruthless suppression of the

¹⁴ Bethel, 180-181.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bethel, 179-180.

¹⁷ Bethel, 181.

¹⁸ Bethel, 182.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ InfoEscola. “Carta-testamento de Getúlio Vargas - História.” Accessed July 21, 2021.

<https://www.infoescola.com/historia/carta-testamento-de-getulio-vargas/>.

²¹ Bethel, 182.

working class were long gone. The Vargas legacy was also profoundly influential economically, transcending future regime types. For example, his adoption of developmentalism, the belief that the correct way to industrialize a country is through promoting a robust internal market and fostering a national industry via high tariffs and import-substitution policies,²² became a fixture of Brazilian economic policy until the election of Collor in 1989. From Vargas until the election of Collor, Brazilian political leaders would derive their political legitimacy through economic performance and live or die by the dogmas of developmentalism.

The Populist Republic ended in 1964 when the military and their civilian allies organized a coup and instituted a new authoritarian regime that would last for the next two decades.²³ However, starting from the mid-1970s, coinciding with the Jimmy Carter administration, international pressure mounted for a democratic transition. In 1989, Fernando Collor de Mello defeated Luis Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil's first free and fair presidential election since 1960.²⁴ Collor, then governor of Alagoas, was a member of one of the most influential political families of his state. His grandfather had been Vargas's first labor minister, and his father was a former senator and had served as governor of Alagoas.²⁵ Collor was not an outsider to Brazilian political life, but until running for president, he was virtually unknown outside of Alagoas.

Collor's path to political power was through a committed populist stance. In 1986, he left the PDS (Democratic Social Party), the continuation of the Arena, the dictatorship's political party, and in 1989 joined the almost irrelevant Party of National Reconstruction.²⁶ During the presidential campaign, Collor denounced corruption and used his masculine persona to build the image of a young, virile leader. In addition, he criticized traditional politicians and their defense of elite interests, ignoring his own family's history part of the traditional political caste.²⁷ Economically, Collor broke with Vargas's tradition by defending neoliberal reforms and proposing to deregulate the import market as the path to solving Brazil's long-lasting economic troubles.

Collor's downfall, however, was only two and a half years away. The failure of his economic policies, compounded by his decision to freeze all savings accounts in Brazil, made him deeply unpopular.²⁸ Once a massive corruption scandal, known as Operation Uruguay, broke, public discontentment boiled over. Collor attempted to show his political support by asking the Brazilian public to come out wearing green and yellow, the national colors, in support of him. Instead, the Brazilian people came

²² Glauco Arbix, Scott B. Martin, and Global Legal Studies Center. "Beyond developmentalism and market fundamentalism in Brazil: inclusionary state activism without statism." In *WORKSHOP ON "STATES, DEVELOPMENT, AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE"*, 8-10. Madison: Global Legal Studies Center and the Center for World Affairs. 2010.

²³ Thomas E. Skidmore. *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-1985*, 3-4. New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1990.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=299092>.

²⁴ Kurt Weyland. "The Rise and Fall of President Collor and Its Impact on Brazilian Democracy." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 35, no. 1 (1993): 8-9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/166101>.

²⁵ "Fernando Collor De Mello." CPDOC - Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil. Fundação Getulio Vargas. Accessed July 2, 2021.

<http://www.fgv.br/cpdoc/acervo/dicionarios/verbete-biografico/collor-fernando>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Weyland, 8-9.

²⁸ Weyland, 16-17.

out wearing black, calling for his impeachment.²⁹ Taking stock of his situation and aware of his almost certain defeat in the looming impeachment trial, Collor resigned.³⁰

The next landmark in the history of Brazilian populism came from the runner-up of the 1989 election, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva. A former union leader, Lula founded the Workers' Party (PT) in 1980.³¹ After facing defeat in the first three free presidential elections of the New Republic, he was finally victorious in 2002. Lula's success was due in part to shifting to center his political views to obtain the political establishment's support. To cement this move, he penned the "Letter to the Brazilian People," attacking what he called the "Exchange Rates Populism" of his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso.³² Lula concluded that Brazilians sought social change, not only political or economic, and promised that he would enact those changes in accordance with the existing institutions and the 1988 constitution.

However, Bethel argues that Lula did not fully embrace populism until 2010 when he attempted to elect a successor instead of running for an unconstitutional third consecutive term.³³ His chosen successor, Dilma Roussef, did not share his charisma, so Lula and Roussef decided to turn toward populism to keep their party in power. Consequently, government expenditure increased, previous fiscal constraints were dropped, and the election turned into a plebiscite on whether one was for or against Lula, for or against his project for the future of Brazil, and consequently, for or against the people³⁴. In a July 2010 speech, Lula displayed his new populist rhetoric, claiming that he was being persecuted by the elites and that they were the ones that had made Vargas commit suicide. He declared that if the elites wanted to fight Lula, they would have to look for him in the streets among the Brazilian people.³⁵

Armando Boito agrees with Bethel that Lula's government was not populist, but he adds that his campaign was.³⁶ In the terms of Lima Barreto, Lula mobilized the Brazilian public around him in the elections, turning himself into a paternalistic figure.³⁷ Yet as president, Lula was closer to the political establishment and did not rule as a populist. This attitude, however, left the regime without a leg to stand on when the establishment politicians defected from the Rouseff administration, who was subsequently impeached and removed from office. As Brazilians became increasingly politically polarized, the events surrounding her impeachment became entangled in conflicting narratives. According to some, like the scholar Luis Felipe Miguel, it was a parliamentary coup, while others, such as the scholar Leon Victor de Queiroz Barbosa, argued it followed the legal procedure outlined in the constitution of 1988, highlighting the political aspect of an impeachment process.³⁸ Ultimately, a

²⁹ Naief Haddad. "Collor Pediu Apoio Em Verde-Amarelo, Mas População Saiu Às Ruas De Preto." *Folha De S. Paulo*. February 13, 2020.

³⁰ Weyland, 23.

³¹ Bethel, 189-190.

³² "Folha Online - Brasil - Leia Íntegra Da Carta de Lula Para Acalmar o Mercado Financeiro - 24/06/2002." Accessed July 21, 2021. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u33908.shtml>.

³³ Bethel, 192.

³⁴ Bethel, 192-193.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Armando Boito. "Lulism, Populism, and Bonapartism." *Latin American Perspectives* 47, no. 1 (January 2020): 138, 143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X19887910>.

³⁷ Boito, 141.

³⁸ Luis Felipe Miguel, and Leon Victor de Queiroz Barbosa. "O Impeachment Da Presidente Dilma Rousseff Foi Golpe Ou Crime?" *Revista Galileu*. Grupo Globo, November 1, 2016.

deciding factor in Roussef's ousting and the fall of the Workers' Party was that the mass of unorganized and marginalized workers did not rally to defend her or the party.

The Election of 2018

As Brazil neared the election of 2018, the political climate was ripe for a populist challenger to rise to the top. Brazil was dealing with no fewer than four concurrent crises. A prolonged recession dating back to the end of the first Roussef term; a political crisis due to rising polarization and mistrust of traditional political parties; a corruption crisis caused by the massive Lava Jato, or Car Wash, scandal; and a security crisis due to an increase in crime.³⁹

There were two important questions for all candidates to answer in the elections, first, were they anti-establishment? Second, were they anti-Workers' Party (which was viewed at that point as responsible for most of Brazil's problems)? No candidate but Bolsonaro could answer yes to both questions. Bolsonaro was hidden in plain sight. He was not quite an outsider since he had served in the legislative branch for nearly three decades but he was far from being a political insider. He was thus able to use his name recognition coupled with his explosive and divisive rhetoric to market himself as an anti-establishment, anti-Workers' Party candidate, and the most viable alternative.

Bolsonaro's political career began after he was transferred from the Army to the Army Reserve for publicly complaining of the armed forces' salary in an article to *Veja* magazine. A second *Veja* article reported on Bolsonaro's trial and conviction for allegedly plotting to plant bombs at Army bases to put pressure on the High Command to raise the soldier's pay- he was later acquitted in a second trial.⁴⁰ Once out of military life, Bolsonaro joined politics: first as a city councilor in Rio de Janeiro and then as a federal deputy for the state of Rio de Janeiro. At first, he primarily advocated for higher pay in the military.⁴¹

During his 28 years in congress, Bolsonaro was a backbencher who had only been able to turn three of his proposals into law.⁴² Two of these are of particular relevance to his presidency. One bill approved the use of a chemical compound, known as the "cancer pill" that had no scientifically proven efficacy. The law was soon overturned by the Supreme Federal Court.⁴³ The second bill was a reform to Brazil's electronic voting system that would allow voters the option to use paper ballots.⁴⁴ Throughout Bolsonaro's presidency, disputes between him, Congress, and the Supreme Federal Court over paper ballots have periodically resurfaced, leading to clashes between the three branches of government and then disappearing from public debate, until the next election cycle.

<https://revistagalileu.globo.com/Sociedade/noticia/2016/11/o-impeachment-da-presidente-dilma-rousseff-foi-golpe-ou-crime.html>.

³⁹ Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power. "Bolsonaro and Brazil's Illiberal Backlash." *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 70-74. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0005>.

⁴⁰ "O Artigo Em VEJA e a Prisão De Bolsonaro Nos Anos 1980." *Veja*, May 15, 2017.

⁴¹ Hunter and Power, 74-75.

⁴² GZH. "Em 26 anos, Bolsonaro apresentou 171 projetos; dois foram aprovados," July 23, 2017.

<https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/politica/noticia/2017/07/em-26-anos-bolsonaro-apresentou-171-projetos-dois-foram-aprovados-9850750.html>.

⁴³ Marina Oliveira. "Insistência de Bolsonaro com cloroquina relembra episódio da pílula do câncer." *Congresso em Foco* (blog), June 11, 2020. <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/governo/insistencia-de-bolsonaro-com-cloroquina-relembra-episodio-da-pilula-do-cancer/>.

⁴⁴ GZH, "Em 26 anos, Bolsonaro apresentou 171 projetos".

Bolsonaro's election was not simply the elites' reaction to the Workers' Party's rule but a wider anti-establishment movement motivated by the Brazilian public's mistrust of traditional politicians. Support for Bolsonaro cut across demographic and socioeconomic lines, and his voters shared their candidate's views on most social issues.⁴⁵ This focus on social policies was reflected in his inaugural speech on January 1, 2019. Bolsonaro focused on social policies, promising "to unite the people, rescue the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, combat gender ideology, conserving our values."⁴⁶ He vowed to break with the redemocratization liberal democracy status quo and bring law and order and authoritarian elements to the presidency.

President Bolsonaro

Rhetoric aside, Bolsonaro's regime is sustained by five elements, the five B's of Bolsonaro: bovines, bullets, Bible, business, and balmy.

Bovines refers to the bovine meat and cattle industry, one of Brazil's main exporters and the reason for lax environmental policy and the loss of the frontiers of the Amazon, burnt down to clear room for grasslands. Bullets refers to the expansion of gun rights and Bolsonaro's support for the military and law-and-order policies to counter rising crime. Bible is his political alliance with Neo-Pentecostal evangelicals, who have come to play a substantial role in domestic politics, serving as defenders of social conservatism and so-called protectors of the Brazilian family. Business relates to Bolsonaro's promotion of neoliberal economics. Finally, balmy are the ideologically minded conservatives who find inspiration in populist and conservative leaders around the globe, such as Trump, Orbán, and Putin.

Bolsonaro's rhetoric is not made of empty words, but of promises to his political base that he intends to fulfill, like the classic populists before him. No instance reveals the interplay of Bolsonaro's populism with Brazilian life and politics as much as his health policy amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Bolsonaro first denied the pandemic,⁴⁷ then minimized it, claiming that it was a "little flu" and that he would not suffer from it due to his athleticism.⁴⁸ Even as Donald Trump moved away from suggesting chloroquine was a miracle cure, Bolsonaro held on and began promoting it as preventive treatment against the disease.⁴⁹ He said whatever was necessary so that businesses and churches could remain open.

Bolsonaro's health policy goes starkly against how Brazil has handled medical crises since the turn of

⁴⁵ Lucio R. Rennó. "The Bolsonaro Voter: Issue Positions and Vote Choice in the 2018 Brazilian Presidential Elections." *Latin American Politics and Society* 62, no. 4 (2020): 18–19. doi:10.1017/lap.2020.13.

⁴⁶ Dom Phillips. "Bolsonaro Declares Brazil's 'liberation from Socialism' as He Is Sworn In." *The Guardian*, January 1, 2019. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/01/jair-bolsonaro-inauguration-brazil-president>.

⁴⁷ Brian Gordon Lutalo Kibuuka. "Complicity and Synergy Between Bolsonaro and Brazilian Evangelicals in COVID-19 Times: Adherence to Scientific Negationism for Political-Religious Reasons." *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4, no. 2 (December 2020): 291–294. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00124-0>.

⁴⁸ Nick Paton Walsh, Jo Shelley, Eduardo Duwe, and William Bonnett. "Bolsonaro Calls Coronavirus a 'little Flu.' Inside Brazil's Hospitals, Doctors Know the Horrifying Reality." *CNN*, May 25, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/23/americas/brazil-coronavirus-hospitals-intl/index.html>.

⁴⁹ Oliveira, "Insistência de Bolsonaro".

the 20th century. In addition to a robust combat of AIDS and experience with mitigating Dengue fever, Brazil had many important public health officials at the turn of the 20th century who helped improve sanitary conditions and expand life expectancy. One of them was Emilio Ribas, the namesake of one of the biggest hospitals in Brazil. In a letter to Oswaldo Cruz, the namesake of one of the largest health institutes in Brazil, Ribas writes, "To let ill spread is a discredit, an unforgivable lack of regard, and will be the most revolting political mistake in the days of republican administration."⁵⁰ Bolsonaro's dismissal of lockdowns and mass testing, without regard to the consequences or how effective it may be to counter the pandemic, has led to a disastrous scenario where over half a million Brazilians have died so far, causing Ribas's greatest fear to come to fruition.⁵¹

Bolsonaro's disregard for following proper public health advice is not recent. I already mentioned his bill authorizing the use of Phosphorylethanolamine, also known as the "cancer pill", as a treatment for cancer, a medication with no scientifically proven efficacy.⁵² Today the same attitude behind that bill is expressed in his continuous promotion of chloroquine and campaigns against lockdowns, even going to the Supreme Federal Court to sue governors who have enacted policies to control the pandemic.⁵³ However, Bolsonaro's actions could have been even more catastrophic. Fortunately, because national and state level institutions checked him and were able to act on their own initiative, closing what public spaces they could to slow the spread of the disease and accurately informing the public.⁵⁴

Bolsonaro's Populism

Bolsonaro's populism is a mixture of Brazilian and global characteristics, reinforcing the theory that populism is not a firm ideology but rather expressed in context specific ways. The closest comparison to Bolsonaro in Brazilian history is Collor. Both employed anti-elite and anti-corruption rhetoric to get elected, both were established politicians but not considered to be national leaders before being elected for president, and both leaned on traditional masculine stereotypes to power their campaigns. They also struggled to improve the economy with neoliberal policies, faced corruption scandals despite their anti-corruption rhetoric, were prone to nepotism, and evoked nationalist themes.

Bolsonaro is also part of a broader phenomenon, one that the ideological hardliners who support him do not hesitate to point out. In an interview with the *Guardian* around the time of Bolsonaro's election, his son Eduardo, also a congressman, said that his father was not a far-right politician but rather part of a "global movement" alongside Marine Le Pen of France and Gert Wilders of the

⁵⁰ Marta de Almeida. "Combates Sanitários e Embates Científicos: Emílio Ribas e a Febre Amarela Em São Paulo." *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* 6, no. 3 (February 2000): 577–607. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702000000400005>.

⁵¹ Bruno Lupion. "Brazil Exceeds 500,000 COVID-19 Deaths." *Deutsche Welle*, June 19, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/brazil-exceeds-500000-covid-19-deaths/a-57956562>.

⁵² Oliveira, "Insistência de Bolsonaro".

⁵³ Valdo Cruz. "Bolsonaro Vai Recorrer De Novo Ao STF Contra Ações De Governadores Para Conter Pandemia." *G1. Grupo Globo*, May 26, 2021. <https://g1.globo.com/politica/blog/valdo-cruz/post/2021/05/26/bolsonaro-vai-recorrer-de-novo-ao-stf-contra-acoes-de-governadores-para-conter-pandemia.ghtml>.

⁵⁴ "Brasil: as Instituições Confrontam Bolsonaro." *Human Rights Watch*, January 13, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/pt/news/2021/01/13/377542#>.

Netherlands.⁵⁵ Bolsonaro's criticism of the progressive left and inclusive social policies enacted in the western world since the end of the Cold War echoes a larger global backlash against these policies. Bolsonaro's first foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, known for his anti-globalist policies, expressed admiration for the United States, then under Donald Trump, and Viktor Orbán's Hungary, highlighting their nationalist focus.⁵⁶ The Brazilian president admired Orbán so much so that before the pandemic he had a planned trip to Budapest to meet Hungary's prime minister.⁵⁷

Bolsonaro copied Trump in his social media strategy, targeting social programs and their beneficiaries and appealing to patriotism and nostalgia.⁵⁸ Both leaders use vague phrases that allude to an anti-corruption discourse, such as Trump's "draining the swamp" catch phrase. Bolsonaro has routinely claimed to want to end the "old politics" of Brasilia. Yet he has been accused of many counts of corruption himself and has often given in to cronyist political parties. While nominally promoting anti-corruption, Trump and Bolsonaro are ridden by scandals and violations themselves.⁵⁹ Their anti-corruption strategy has been to rely on trusted allies while dismantling reigning institutions; for example, Bolsonaro sought to replace federal investigators who were looking into his sons' business deals. In addition, his ally was former judge Sergio Moro, former the head of the Lava Jato Operation and his first justice minister. However, this faulty strategy of anti-corruption puts the leader in direct confrontation with the judiciary, a branch of government that Bolsonaro has attacked the most and has routinely threatened to dismantle.

Another key similarity between Bolsonaro's populism and other populist leaders around the western world is the prevalence of Christian conservatism, a political movement that seeks to influence public policy so that it reflects aim to maintain the sexual and religious values of conservative Christianity⁶⁰. A manifestation of right wing reactionary populism, Christian conservatism aims to radicalize the ideological positions of right-wing parties towards a more fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity, particularly concerning LGBT+ rights, social rights, and free-market policies.⁶¹ Recently, Christian conservatism has gained strength in Central and Eastern Europe, the United States, and Brazil as a cross-border movement motivated by broader religious themes rather than several different national populist movements.

⁵⁵ Tom Phillips. "Trump of the Tropics: The 'dangerous' Candidate Leading Brazil's Presidential Race." *The Guardian*, April 19, 2018. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/19/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-presidential-candidate-trump-parallels>.

⁵⁶ Paula Adamo Idoeta. "Iliberalismo: o 'eixo' global que, para alguns analistas, poderá incluir o Brasil." *BBC News Brasil*, January 16, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-46796474>.

⁵⁷ Ricardo Noblat. "O sonho de consumo de Bolsonaro está do outro lado do mundo | Noblat." *VEJA*, July 30, 2020. <https://veja.abril.com.br/blog/noblat/o-sonho-de-consumo-de-bolsonaro-esta-do-outro-lado-do-mundo/>.

⁵⁸ Pedro Paulo Weizenmann. "'Tropical Trump'? Bolsonaro's Threat to Brazilian Democracy." *Harvard International Review*, August 23, 2019. <https://hir.harvard.edu/tropical-trump-bolsonaros-threat-to-brazilian-democracy/>.

⁵⁹ Lica Porcile and Norman Eisen. "The Populist Paradox." *Brookings Institute*, October 28, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/28/the-populist-paradox/>.

⁶⁰ Vincent Charles Keating and Katarzyna Kaczmarek. "Conservative Soft Power: Liberal Soft Power Bias and the 'Hidden' Attraction of Russia." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, no. 1 (March 2019): 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-017-0100-6>.

⁶¹ Cynthia Burack and R. Claire Snyder-Hall. "Introduction: Right-Wing Populism and the Media." *New Political Science* 34, no. 4 (December 2012): 439–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2012.729736>.

A clear example of how the ideological hardliners see themselves as part of a larger movement occurred after Bolsonaro's election in 2018, when future foreign minister Araújo suggested the creation of a new Holy Alliance with Brazil, conservatives at that moment in power in the United States, and Russia against China, Europe, and the American democrats.⁶² Araújo was referencing an earlier Holy Alliance, a conservative and reactionary group that was created by the monarchs of Russia, Austria, and Prussia after the 1814-1815 Congress of Vienna that aimed at countering and repressing nascent liberalism and revolutionary movements in continental Europe. The proposal was not passed during Araújo's stint in the ministry, but he was far from the only one to act on the extremes of Christian conservatism.

On the day that Bolsonaro was elected, Filipe Martins, Bolsonaro's advisor in international affairs, tweeted, "A new crusade is decreed. Deus Vult!" Martins was not only referencing a battle cry from the Crusades that had become a slogan of right-wing extremists, but it reflected the same Christian conservative thinking that led to Araújo's unusual proposal.⁶³ Bolsonaro himself is not a mere observer on this matter. In his speech at the opening of the 2020 United Nations General Assembly, he appealed for renewed fight against Christophobia, the persecution and oppression of Christians.⁶⁴ However, Bolsonaro is neither a religious leader nor are persecutions against Christians a prominent issue in Brazil or in any of its Latin American neighbors.⁶⁵ It is, however, a powerful appeal to Christian conservatives in Brazil and abroad.

There are still crucial differences between Bolsonaro's populism and other varieties of populism in Europe and the United States. For instance, immigration and nativism do not evoke the same feelings in Brazil that they bring forth in other places. To better fit the Brazilian context, Bolsonaro's populism is based on social grievances over the country's progressive transformations since the redemocratization years. He decries policies such as the creation of a limited welfare state following the constitution of 1988⁶⁶ and argues for a return to traditional values,⁶⁷ a common refrain found in other populist movements in Hungary and in the United States under Donald Trump.⁶⁸ While differences are present and must be highlighted, the similarities discussed above are more significant and influential to the Bolsonaro administration.

⁶² Thais Bilenky. "Futuro Chanceler Propôs a Bolsonaro Pacto Cristão Com EUA e Rússia." Folha de S.Paulo. Grupo Folha, December 16, 2018. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2018/12/futuro-chanceler-propos-a-bolsonaro-pacto-cristao-com-eua-e-russia.shtml>.

⁶³ Raphael Tsavkko Garcia. "Bolsonaro and Brazil Court the Global Far Right." NACLA, August 21, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/08/21/bolsonaro-and-brazil-court-global-far-right>.

⁶⁴ "Discurso Do Presidente Da República, Jair Bolsonaro, Na Abertura Da 75ª Assembleia Geral Da Organização Das Nações Unidas (ONU)." Governo Federal do Brasil, September 22, 2020. <https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/discursos/2020/discurso-do-presidente-da-republica-jair-bolsonaro-na-abertura-da-75a-assembleia-geral-da-organizacao-das-nacoes-unidas-onu>.

⁶⁵ Guilherme Mendes. "O Que é Cristofobia e Por Que Faz Pouco Sentido Bolsonaro Falar Sobre Isso." Congresso em Foco. Uol, September 23, 2020. <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/governo/o-que-e-cristofobia-e-por-que-faz-pouco-sentido-bolsonaro-falar-sobre-isso/>.

⁶⁶ Palácio do Planalto. "Constituição Da República Federativa Do Brasil de 1988." Accessed July 21, 2021. http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm.

⁶⁷ Dom Phillips, "Bolsonaro Declares Brazil's 'liberation from Socialism' as He Is Sworn In".

⁶⁸ Rosa Schwartzburg. "Why Academia Is Such an Easy Target for Authoritarians." Slate Magazine. Slate, February 20, 2019. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/02/authoritarians-education-universities-hungary-brazil-populism.html>.

What's Ahead

Despite Bolsonaro's attempts to break down Brazilian political institutions, they have shown to be thus far resilient in reasserting the strength of the constitution of 1988. Although several sources, including the V-DEM 2021 report on the state of global democracy, argue that Brazilian democracy is backsliding, Brazil has so far mostly resisted Bolsonaro's efforts.⁶⁹ For example, state and local level institutions, including mayors, governors, and state-level health agencies, as well as the judiciary have acted as constraints on executive power and federal overreach.

Brazilian democracy is not consolidated. It is fragile and young; its most recent iteration began in 1985. It is by no means secure, especially as Bolsonaro threatens the judiciary and other checks on his powers, employs divisive rhetoric, and joins protests calling for the return of the military regime. Brazil has a long running history with populism, but it is typically limited to campaign season with leaders subsequently adopting a more moderate position during their tenure (this is particularly true in the case of Lula). Bolsonaro, however, has been innovative in the way that he has governed as a populist from day one. Through a cult of personality, the use of disinformation, and fear-inducing rhetoric he continues to mobilize his base in shows of support, even during the direst moments of the pandemic. Such public support goes far beyond what past populists like Vargas in 1954, Collor in 1992, and Lula and Rouseff in 2016 were able to summon.

Bolsonaro has been heavily influenced by the presidency of Donald Trump, and there is one final instance where Bolsonaro can follow in Trump's footsteps: claiming that massive voting fraud will take place in the 2022 presidential elections. As a congressman, Bolsonaro repeatedly questioned the integrity of Brazilian elections and he continues to do so as president.⁷⁰ He often questions the legitimacy of the Brazilian electronic voting system and the reliability of the results of previous elections, sometimes going back to 2014. This is not a new tactic. He made the same claims in 2018 when he falsely argued without producing evidence that were it not for electoral fraud, he would have been elected in the first round of the election.⁷¹ As the 2022 election draws near, baseless accusations of electoral fraud have returned to the forefront of Bolsonaro's speeches, as he threatens that without paper ballots, there will be no election in 2022.⁷²

No matter who runs against Bolsonaro whether it is Lula or another opposition candidate- it will be a polarized and hostile election, and the future of Brazilian democracy will hang in the balance. The Brazilian people, or rather its public, will have to decide whether they want Brazil to go down an illiberal path similar to Hungary under Viktor Orbán, or a future based on the 1988 constitution, with its separation of powers, protection of individual rights, and liberal democracy.

⁶⁹Sebastian Hellmeier, Rowan Cole, Sandra Grahn, Palina Kolvani, Jean Lachapelle, Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Shreeya Pillai, and Staffan I. Lindberg. "State of the World 2020: Autocratization Turns Viral." Democratization, May 24, 2021, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1922390>.

⁷⁰ GZH, "Em 26 anos, Bolsonaro apresentou 171 projetos".

⁷¹ "Sem Provas, Bolsonaro Diz Que Aécio Neves Venceu Eleição Em 2014." CNN Brasil. CNN Brasil, June 17, 2021. <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/2021/06/17/sem-provas-bolsonaro-diz-que-aecio-neves-venceu-eleicao-em-2014>.

⁷² Ricardo Brito. "Sem Voto Impresso Não Vai Ter Eleição Em 2022, Afirma Bolsonaro." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, May 6, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/voto-impresso-bolsonaro-eleicoes-idLTAKBN2CN2LJ>.

When Lima Barreto wrote in 1922 that Brazil does not have a people but a public, he could not have known that he would be predicting the future of his country or foretelling the kind of leaders who would shape that future. But he would not have been surprised either. The most influential democratic leaders since Barreto's days have been populists who are obsessed with remaining in power and who seek to build a paternalistic and messianic persona. Barreto would also have found it predictable that the Brazilian public's political apathy was their downfall on the road to autocracy. However, just over a few months after the centennial of Barreto's quote, the Brazilian public will have another chance to prove him wrong, rise as a people, and rally together around the ideals of liberal democracy and the political institutions enshrined in the 1988 constitution. Only the future will tell whether Brazilians will unite as a people and advocate for a leader who can deliver good governance or whether they will remain a public, captivated by leaders pandering to them with shallow promises in the interest of self-preservation.