Entrenching right-wing populism under covid-19: *denialism, social mobility, and government evaluation in Brazil*

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Governmental response to the covid-19 pandemic has varied broadly. A few authoritarian regimes, such as Iran, Russia and Turkey initially chose to ignore or to downplay the pandemic, pointing to a simple correspondence between authoritarianism and denialist positions[5]. Some regimes used the pandemic to increase their grip on the population or to target the opposition (Russia and Hungary) whereas in other cases the reaction served to bind together the government and the population (Germany and Portugal). In others, leaders adopted a religious stance towards the virus (Burundi, Tanzania, Nicaragua). However, leaders in some democratic regimes have also downplayed the pandemic. Some of them rapidly changed positions (Italy and the United Kingdom), whereas others did not (Sweden).

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Several of those leaders who downplayed the virus in democratic regimes were populists. According to Meyer (2020), five populist presidents downplayed the threat of Covid-19: Bolsonaro (Brazil), Lukashenko (Belarus), Obrador (Mexico), Ortega (Nicaragua) and Trump (United States). The UK prime minister Boris Johnson and the mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, could easily be included in the list. However, when cases skyrocketed in Italy, the mayor of Milan apologized to the population and adopted strong social distancing measures. At the moment that cases skyrocketed in the UK and in the US, important reversions of former policy also took place. The same did not happen in Brazil. Jair Bolsonaro downplayed the crisis, denied science, and dismantled health policies during the pandemic. The Brazilian president was not compelled to change his positions despite the seriousness of the pandemic in the country. Bolsonaro's denialist positions are better explained by characteristics of the political movement he leads than by his need to promote governability. Elements of anti-politics and anti-science are strong in *bolsonarismo* – reaching beyond Bolsonaro's government and infiltrating society.

With his alternative narrative of the pandemic, Bolsonaro has been strategically intensifying political polarization and his social media-based culture war (SMITH, 2020). His denialist position influences views on the pandemic, especially among those who support him and consume the narratives he and his staff spread over the Internet (PEREIRA; NUNES, 2021). The role of the internet suggests that Bolsonaro has managed to defy the consensus accepted by traditional media and scientists about the risk of the pandemic, especially among his supporters. Our study finds patterns of alignment among those who support Bolsonaro's positions and his government in mid-2020; however, it brings to this discussion new elements regarding short-term economic mobility.

Hence, it is fundamental to ask: how have Brazilian citizens reacted to the president's radical positions? Data from several public opinion surveys show that Bolsonaro's popularity did not recede over the course of 2020. How, then, can we understand the lasting support for Bolsonaro in Brazil during the pandemic? Is there congruence between political elites and masses in views about how the covid-19 pandemic should be confronted? Are Brazilians as denialist as the president or, alternatively, does support for him rest on other perceptions?

Our main hypothesis is that Bolsonaro's responses to the pandemic are supported by an expressive minority, and that this minority shares his positions downplaying the virus. We focus, thus, on denialist behavior among the population, but also on support for the government. In particular, we test if perceptions of social mobility – both upward and downward – influence positive evaluations of the government. We argue that people who have suffered the long-term impacts of the economic crisis, who therefore have suffered downward social mobility before Bolsonaro came to power, will be more likely to support Bolsonaro's positions, as occurred in 2018 when this social group voted for him (AMARAL, 2020). However, in the short run, during the pandemic, we expect those who may have experienced upward social mobility will be more likely to back Bolsonaro as these improvements occur during his term.

In this article, we will further explore how the president's attitudes and policies towards the pandemic reverberated in the population as a way of exploring the microlevel congruence between voter and leader positions towards the pandemic using public opinion data from the survey "A Cara da Democracia no Brasil" (INCT, 2018, 2019, 2020).

This paper is organized in three sections and a conclusion. The first section discusses populism and stresses its supply and demand aspects and, focusing on the Brazilian case, identifies sources of electoral support for Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections. The second section presents Bolsonaro's reaction to the pandemic, arguing that it is a populist reaction. The third section moves into data analysis of popular views of the pandemics and how they relate to government evaluation.

Populism: supply, demand, and the Brazilian case

The concept of populism has many entry points. Marxians considered populism to indicate a gap between class and class consciousness. Mass politics was problematic given insufficient class consciousness (GERMANI, 1974; KAYSEL, 2016). Liberals considered populism to indicate mass political pressure upon an institutionalized political system (HUNTINGTON, 1968; LA PALOMBARA; WEINER, 1966). Populism built itself upon the gap between the rising demand/insatisfaction of the masses and political systems with limited capacity to satisfy those demands due to the institution of rights and the

balance of power structures. During the last decade in Latin America, populism adapted its historical critique of the political system to a demand for a strong, immediate, and non-mediated representation of the people (ROSANVALLON, 2020). Populism that was once considered to be a post-war adaptation of an illiberal pattern of politics to a new democratic order (FINCHELSTEIN, 2017) now challenges the balance of power of that order and the relation between the people and its representation.

Latin America has been considered the "land of populism" and has spawned classic, neoliberal, and radical types of the phenomena (DE LA TORRE, 2017). However, the last decade has shown that populism is an even more complex phenomena that can thrive both in developed and underdeveloped economies as well as in consolidated and non-consolidated democracies. One of the reasons why populism was considered a problem principally affecting developing economies and unconsolidated democracies was that despite a high demand for populism in liberal democracies there were limitations to the supply side. That is, the non-mediated form of politics that populism advocated is more difficult to implement in consolidated democracies, as the Trump experience in the United States has shown.

Aligning, in this paper, with the literature that conceives populism as an ideology we draw on the understanding that populism has two dimensions: the first is a political proposal to deny the importance of mediating institutions such as parties and the media and to impose the complete sovereignty of the political leader. The second is a public opinion dimension that allows the populist leader to gather and to concentrate power. In short, populism operates at both elite and mass levels. Political elite strategies are the supply side of populist strategies showing that populism is an adaptation of the Schumpeterian model of elites providing an offer through the political system to the masses (SCHUMPETER, 1942).

To be successful, those strategies must find support in sectors of the citizenry (MUDDE; KALTWASSER, 2017, p. 20). Successful populists "are able to combine a broad range of societal grievances around a populist discourse" (*Ibidem*, p. 104). In this sense, there must be some form of elite/masses congruence regarding populist alternatives and positions, even if these are not static elements and may vary over time.

Both in the United States and the United Kingdom, there were forms of containment of populism despite the high level of demand. Gatekeeping in the early 20th century limited the rise of populism in the US, despite Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh's attempts to play the outsider card. (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018). Three actors played key roles in avoiding the emergence of populism: parties, business elites and the media. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) pointed out the primary system in the United States was the main gatekeeping institution through the superdelegates process. Thus, gatekeeping limited the outsider discourse giving the two parties in the US a high bar for supplying populist policies during elections. In addition, business elites limited the amount of money that candidates could raise to make their proposals. Last, but not least, huge media outlets placed populist discourses outside the mainstream and could effectively block them. In the last decade, the new role of the primaries in the US together with the enormous expansion of social media removed at least two of these three gatekeeping institutions, normalizing outsider discourse, against the expectations of many political scientists (HUNTINGTON, 1968; PRZEWORSKI, 2019).

Brazil provides a case for understanding populism for several reasons. First, it is a case of strong deterioration of trust in the political system built around two axes: corruption charges corroborated by the Lava Jato (Car Wash) operation (SÁ E SILVA, 2020) and major demonstrations against the political system from 2013 through 2015 and 2016 (TATAGIBA; GALVÃO, 2019; AVRITZER, 2020).

Gatekeeping elements have never been strong in Brazil. During the first democratic experience in Brazil (1945-1964), gatekeeping was conducted by forces outside the realm of political competition: the military, the media and business elites served as gatekeeping institutions through the enforcement of credible threats both to political competition and to governability.

The recent democratic experience in post-1980s Brazil created more barriers to populism but did not change the demand side. On the one hand, two new political parties, the PT and the PSDB, emerged after democratization. Between 1994 and 2014 political competition at federal level had to go through them (KINGSTONE; POWER, 2008). At the same time, large-scale fragmentation of the political system created a sort of political menu which

had the PT or PSDB at the top but still managed to incorporate lower down a broad array of coalition parties. However, if a new barrier to populism emerged at the party level in Brazil, a completely different phenomena has occurred at the business level. Political fragmentation continues to provide political space for outsiders and business elites and the media have had very little ability to keep such candidates out of power.

The emergence of a new type of right-wing populism in Brazil is linked to changes in gatekeeping institutions that affected both the demand and the supply sides of populism. The low bar for party formation and flexible membership rules effectively allowed outsiders to run. Other recent institutional changes reduced the official campaign period, set limits for campaign costs, prohibited campaign donations by firms and expanded public funding (RENNÓ, 2020).

In addition, there are several explanations for the emergence of popular support for populist alternatives. One explanation is related to the economy and immigration, associated with feelings of economic downfall, status threat and vulnerability (AKKERMAN; ZASLOVE; SPRUYT, 2017; ALGAN *et al.*, 2017; BONIKOWSKI, 2017; BORNSCHIER; KRIESI, 2013; CRAMER, 2016; GIDRON; HALL, 2017). Individuals who have suffered some form of loss, social or economic, over the years and blame the mainstream political parties and elites for it are very likely to support charismatic outsiders that espouse rhetoric that resonates with citizens' daily challenges and criticize the system for its corrupt ways. A complementary explanation focuses on a cultural backlash that in addition to economic downfall, increases resistance to progressive social change that occurred in prior years related to gender politics and to environmental and scientific approaches to sustainable development (INGLEHART; NORRIS, 2016, 2017).

In particular, we will explore how perceptions of social mobility, as an indicator of status threat or gain, lead to support for the Bolsonaro government. This is an important explanation for vote choice in Brazil (PEIXOTO; RENNÓ, 2011; AMARAL, 2020). Prior studies in Brazil show that perceptions of downward mobility positively correlated with vote for Bolsonaro in 2018 (AMARAL, 2020), as the literature on populism would expect, just as upward mobility helped explain the PT's success in 2010 (PEIXOTO; RENNÓ, 2011). We further develop this argument by distinguishing between short- and

long-term mobility. The former, over the course of the pandemic, captures views of changes in social class in the three months prior to the survey (applied in June 2020). Positive feelings of upward economic and social mobility should be favorable to Bolsonaro's incumbent government. On the other hand, the latter refers to longer processes, not attributable to the Bolsonaro government, downward mobility that occurred prior to his government should positively affect his evaluation.

In the 2018 election, Bolsonaro built a coalition that cut across demographic and socioeconomic lines and addressed popular concern in line with the classical demand side explanations for the emergence of populism (RENNÓ, 2020, p. 15). The crisis of the left government created a new middle-class demand for populism. Anti-corruption demonstrations by the middle class changed the conditions for the legitimacy of the political system. Yet, the likely winner of this new demand, the center-right forces, did not manage to create a proposal capable of attracting the dissatisfied middle-class. Indeed, the 2018 "A Cara da Democracia no Brasil" survey (INCT, 2018) showed that only 1,5% of Brazilians trusted political parties. Jair Bolsonaro managed to overcome the several layers of gatekeeping by crafting a very a-typical coalition: first, he reached sectors of the middle-class by crafting a vulnerable and yet effective anti-corruption discourse; second, he reached broad sectors of poor Brazilians by appealing to their conservative moral beliefs. Third, he reached out to business by proposing a very restrictive and anti-state economic agenda – revisiting the neoliberal populist agenda of the 1990s. Business made the unlikely move of supporting a populist right wing candidate on the promise that it would be allowed to choose the economic policy makers. Finally, he bypassed all existing media institutions and public forms of political campaign through WhatsApp massive advertising. This arrangement allowed Bolsonaro to overcome the three existing barriers to populism: the party barrier, the business barrier, and the media barrier. Even parts of the liberal middle class supported Bolsonaro in 2018. Hence, Brazil elected the first outsider in more than 20 years through a rearrangement of the gatekeeping elements of the electoral system. The background of the support for an outsider was the strong de-legitimization of the political system.

Bolsonaro nominated a cabinet that resembled his conception of populist anti-politics. Very few members of political parties including his own PSL were nominated. On the contrary, ministry positions were offered to public personalities who attacked previous policies in key areas. In 2019, the first year of his government, Bolsonaro was true to his agenda of reforms and of discontinuing policies, especially in areas of social protection and human rights – including women's and racial inequalities agenda, and the environment. Budget cuts were praised by the government in a scenario of falling tax revenue and timid economic recovery – the GDP increased 1.1 per cent in that year, after growing only 1.1 per cent in 2018, and 1.3 per cent in 2017, following two consecutive years of negative rates. Ministries with higher visibility were those of the "ideological branch". Key aspects of past governments were disassembled in areas of education with Abraham Weintraub, environment with Ricardo Salles and human rights with Damares Alves – including the dismantling of ethno-racial policies with the appointment of an anti-indigenous officer for Funai and an anti-racial equality officer for the Fundação Palmares. One area remained an exception until 2019, the Ministry of Health.

Bolsonaro in office and the pandemic

Brazil confirmed its first covid-19 cases on February 26th 2020. Unlike the United States, where Trump participated in press conferences about the outbreak, in Brazil the Minister of Health, Luis Henrique Mandetta, led the daily press conferences, in which he announced the numbers of cases and deaths and presented policies and federal coordination efforts in terms of supply acquisition and distribution. Mandetta was an exception in terms of Bolsonaro's top echelon. Despite being a critic of the health program called "Mais Médicos" he was in favor of the public healthcare system (SUS) and had carried out successfully a public campaign against dengue fever in his tenure as health secretary in the city of Campo Grande. Mandetta organized the Brazilian response to covid-19 according to the international guidelines of the moment. He carried out daily briefings and tried to use the ministry to promote a more equal distribution of health resources among the states.

At the same time, the president continued with informal and social media-diffused speeches. Coronavirus did not become central in his personal

agenda, although he mentioned the pandemic through his efforts to downplay the severity of the crisis. In early March, while visiting the US, he stated that the outbreak was "fantasy" and was "not that big of a deal despite the mass media efforts to spread fear around the world". He also called covid "a small flu" ("gripezinha" in Portuguese). When the country reached 5,000 deaths, a reporter mentioned that Brazil had surpassed China's death toll, to which the president answered, "So what? I am sorry, what do you want me to do?" In August 2020, when Brazil reached 100,000 covid deaths, the president instead stressed the number of citizens that had recovered from the viral infection (FOLHA DE S.PAULO, 2021).

The World Health Organization declared covid-19 a pandemic on March 11th 2020, and four days later Bolsonaro interacted with supporters, claiming to be "demonstrating that I am with the people". While governors and the Ministry of Health suggested social distancing, the president participated in demonstrations – some of them openly praising the military regime and demanding the seizure of the Supreme Court – and visited cities around the capital, Brasília. While the government was presenting two different messages about the pandemic, the president performance was a classical populist one, highlighting his direct connection to "the people".

Meanwhile, as the visibility of the Minister of Health-led press conferences increased, the president sewed discontent, stating that the country should go "back to normal", an idea he repeated over the following months (CNN, 2020). He also argued that the Ministry of Health should recommend the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat Coronavirus patients, despite studies increasingly showing the drug's ineffectiveness and side effects.

The conflict between Bolsonaro and his Minister of Health led to the latter's dismissal on April 16th, 2020 Press conferences were soon discontinued, and, as the numbers of infections did not seem to go down, the president suggested they should no longer be made public (SANDES; VICENTINI, 2020). The government eventually retreated from this position after public outcry. It is possible to argue that Bolsonaro needed to discontinue the Ministry of Health response to the pandemic because it was rehabilitating the political system and the idea of organized public policies. The Ministry of Health was functionally replaced by a military general as the leader of Brazil's pandemic response.

However, General Pazuello did not answer to the army but rather to the president. He downplayed the gravity of the pandemic even after the disastrous Manaus episode when hospitals fell short of oxygen supply.

In sum, Bolsonaro disorganized the response to covid-19 in two ways: First, by confusing the message of social isolation and effectively contributing to easing lockdowns (MORETTO; VARELLA; ZEINE, 2020); and second, by dismantling efforts to coordinate public health policy. On April 15th 2020, the Supreme Court decided unanimously that governors and mayors could determine restrictive measures during the pandemic, even though the Bolsonaro government argued they should not have the power to restrict services deemed "essential" by the federal government.

Finally, there is the economic issue. The Brazilian federal government announced the first measures in response to covid-19 by mid-March, 2020. These measures destined additional resources to the health budget and postponed federal contributions and taxes for employers and companies. New regulations allowed for flexible work agreements with wage and time reductions. Public pension beneficiaries received an advanced payment of the annual bonus salary. There was extra credit for small businesses and interest rate reduction for individuals (MINISTÉRIO DA ECONOMIA, 2020). These measures were announced by the Minister of the Economy, who insisted that continuing with a state reform agenda would provide Brazil with better economic conditions for the fight against covid.

The most important support program was an emergency cash transfer for low-income informal workers that reached over 60 million people. By March 18th, the executive branch announced a three-month payment of USD $40 to informal workers but did not present the proposal to Congress; Congress, for its part, demanded an integrated package of actions coordinated with the Parliament and state governors (XAVIER; MORAES, 2020). In an unforeseen joint effort, in one week the two chambers of Congress passed an emergency aid bill that would increase the value of the aid payment to 120 USD.

Bolsonaro's argument against lockdowns had several simultaneous aims, all of which support our understanding that the president organized a populist response to the pandemic. First, by downplaying the risks of the virus – a small flu, something that would not affect an athletic person – he reinforced

himself as a strong leader, a "mythic" figure and promoted a "macho" self-image. Second, he opposed the media narrative of the outbreak, reinforcing his point about the biased press (PEREIRA; NUNES, 2021). Finally, and more importantly, by downplaying the virus and highlighting the economic impacts of lockdowns, he sought to portray himself as taking the side of the people, a core element of every populist theory. When Bolsonaro rallied against alleged "globalist" scientists and left-wing bureaucrats, he intended to shift the burden of the economic crisis onto his opponents, forge new connections to the poorer sectors of Brazilian society and re-assert his reputation as a popular champion focused on "real" (i.e., economic) problems: again, the true and unmediated representative of the real people.

The presidential efforts of downplaying the pandemics, however, are only one side of the story. In the following section, we turn to how the public opinion received his discourse and actions.

Data analysis: sources of Bolsonaro's support during the pandemic

The data for this study comes from "A Cara da Democracia no Brasil" surveys conducted in 2018, 2019 and 2020 coordinated by the Institute for Democracy. The Institute is part of the Program of National Science and Technology Institutes funded by the Federal Government's Capes Foundation and composed by researchers from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, State University of Rio de Janeiro, University of Campinas and University of Brasilia.

Sample sizes vary by year, as does the mode of interviewing, but are representative of urban populations in Brazil. In 2018, 2500 face-to-face interviews were conducted in 179 municipalities. In 2019, another 2009 respondents were interviewed face-to-face in 151 municipalities and in 2020, 1000 interviews were conducted over the telephone in 69 municipalities. We will focus on the 2020 survey, collected in the first week of June, which included items on issues related to the pandemic.

The 2020 survey is unique because it was conducted over the phone during the height of the pandemic first wave in Brazil. The fieldwork span from May 30th to June 5th, 2020, with a 3.1 per cent margin of error and 95 per cent confidence interval. The survey was in the field during a phase of accelerating deaths, which peaked a few weeks later, remaining at a plateau of

high mortality rates. Hence, it was a moment of increased consternation with the disease as contamination and death rates were on the rise.
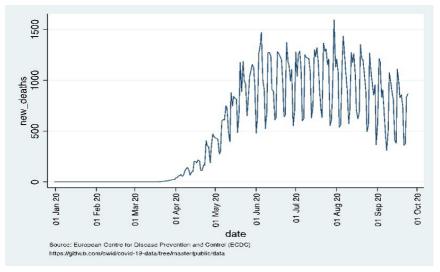
Figure 1 – Daily confirmed covid-19 deaths in Brazil

Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)
https://github.com/owid/covid-19-data/tree/master/public/data

The survey attempted to capture popular perceptions regarding the pandemic and other current events that affected the Bolsonaro government in the first six months of 2020. Given that interviews were conducted over the phone, questionnaire size was reduced, in comparison to prior face-to-face rounds, which impedes the exploration of parallel themes, such as how positions towards the pandemic relate to other issue positions (RENNÓ, 2020). Still, we explore how views on the pandemic affected government evaluation and how these are distributed across society focusing on age, race, income, gender, religion, and perceptions of social mobility.

The main questions in our analysis are related to popular reactions towards the pandemic. We focus on four different aspects of the health crisis. During the pandemic, Bolsonaro has been critical of the Brazilian public health system. Hence, the first is related to views on the Brazilian Health System's (SUS) performance in combating the pandemic. The item reads: the new Coronavirus is leading the Brazilian Public Health System (SUS) (public hospitals and emergency rooms) to the limit of its capacity. In your opinion:

the pandemics shows the importance of the SUS, justifying an increase in its funding; the SUS has done well in confronting the pandemic with the resources available and no further increases are justified; the SUS has performed poorly in combating the new Coronavirus (the pandemic) and its continuity should be discussed[6].

The second item refers to the discussion about centralizing or decentralizing powers during the pandemic. The Supreme Court was invited to define whether states and municipalities or the federal government were responsible for establishing policies regarding the pandemic. At issue was the increasing of central government power, something many populists and authoritarian leaders undertook during the crisis. We asked Brazilians to position themselves towards the following statement: The Supreme Court determined that governor and mayors should have autonomy to adopt measures to combat the new Coronavirus. In your opinion, such measures should be a responsibility of the: 1) Federal government; 2) Governors and Mayors; 3) depends (do not read)[7].

A third item addresses positions towards the president's role during the pandemic and focuses on his behavior denying the virus. Bolsonaro has become a classic case of downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic. Through his actions and words, Bolsonaro has shown more concern with the economy than with the direct loss of lives with the spread of covid-19. He recurrently appeared in public without a mask and in public gatherings. The government was also slow and not proactive in disbursing monetary assistance to individuals and businesses. Hence, evaluating how his negationist behavior resonates with the public is a central goal of this research agenda. We asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following item: Some people evaluate that the president gave little importance to the impact of the new Coronavirus, harming the combating of the pandemic in the country[8].

Finally, we asked an item about behavior, to complement the three

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6   Translation by the authors: "A pandemia do novo coronavírus está levando o SUS (hospitais públicos e unidades de pronto atendimento) ao limite de seu atendimento. Em sua opinião: 1. A pandemia mostra a importância do SUS e justifica um substancial aumento em seu financiamento. 2. O SUS tem se saído bem no enfrentamento do coronavírus (da pandemia) com os recursos que tem e não se justifica um aumento no financiamento. 3. O SUS tem se saído mal no enfrentamento do novo coronavírus (da pandemia) e sua continuidade deveria ser discutida".

7   Translation by the authors: "O STF determinou que governadores e prefeitos devem ter autonomia para tomar medidas no enfrentamento ao novo coronavírus. Na sua opinião, tais medidas deveriam ficar a cargo: 1) do governo federal; 2) de governadores e prefeitos; 3) depende da situação (não ler)".

8   Translation by the authors: "Algumas pessoas avaliam que o presidente deu pouca importância ao impacto do novo coronavírus, prejudicando o combate à pandemia no país. O sr(a).: concorda muito, concorda pouco, nem concorda e nem discorda (não ler), discorda pouco ou discorda muito".

above questions on opinions and attitudes towards the pandemic. We asked if, because of the Coronavirus pandemic, the respondent is: living normally, without changes in their routine; taking care, but still going out to work or do other activities; leaving home only when unavoidable or; is in complete isolation, without leaving home. The question, therefore, captures declared behaviors adopted during the pandemic, varying from complete disregard to social distancing measures, to complete adherence to recommendations and regulations to enforce social isolation[9].

The four questions above are central in evaluating the convergence between voters and Bolsonaro in Brazil, as they reflect behaviors and issue positions associated with the pandemic that have been central in the current agenda of public debate. The questions will be used first to analyze the impact of issue positions on government evaluation and later to explore which voters are more favorable to the denialist, positions of the government.

We rely on the literature about who supports populist leaders, an ever-growing strand of research that has addressed the problem from various angles. Popular support for populist leaders, or the demand-side of populism, has mostly been explained on the basis of economic hardship, the left-outs of globalization, status threat, cultural backlash, mistrust in institutions, and beliefs about law and order (MUDDE; KALTWASSER, 2018). Rennó (2020) has shown that several of the above factors, as well as others resulting from the particularities of right-wing politics in Latin America (LUNA; KALTWASSER, 2014), have aligned in Brazil under *bolsonarismo*. However, one aspect of this discussion requires further investigation: perceptions of social mobility associated with status gain and threat (PEIXOTO; RENNÓ, 2011; AMARAL, 2020). This is linked to the discussion of the loss of economic and social status as an explanation for the support of anti-systemic candidates (MUTZ, 2018). In Brazil, perceptions of upward social mobility were associated with voting for Dilma Rousseff of the PT, more so in the sectors that received social assistance through the Bolsa Família Program (PEIXOTO; RENNÓ, 2011). Amaral (2020) finds a similar result in the 2018 elections, with perceptions of upward social mobility leading to a PT vote and with a negative effect on votes for

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9   Translation by the authors: "Em função da pandemia de coronavírus, atualmente você: está vivendo normalmente, sem mudar nada na sua rotina; tomando cuidado, mas ainda saindo de casa para trabalhar ou fazer outras atividades; saindo de casa só quando é inevitável; ou está totalmente isolado, sem sair de casa de jeito nenhum".

Bolsonaro. In other words, voting for Bolsonaro is associated with a perception of downward mobility, of frustration associated with a feeling of decreasing social and economic status.

Views of social mobility are measured using two variables. A first starts with the current, declared economic class divided into upper, middle-upper, middle, middle-lower, lower and the very low. In a second moment, respondents are asked what class they belonged to in a specific period in the past. Comparing both responses, we can identify if respondents feel they are in the same class as in the past or if they experienced gain (upwards social mobility) or loss (downward social mobility). Downward social mobility should be linked to support for populist leaders in Latin America, as these feelings increase the likelihood of rejecting mainstream politicians, associated decline, and supporting outsiders, who blame the prior corrupt system for the social malaise.

The time frame used to measure changes in social classes in Brazil was of eight years, as to allow for comparisons between the current and prior administrations. We innovate here to capture changes in the short run as well, exploring the potential impact of the pandemic on the perception of social and economic decline. We include in the analysis a comparison with three months earlier (the survey was conducted in June, 2020), to check if the pandemic, which started to be felt in Brazil in March 2020, had an immediate effect on perceptions of economic stability, alongside a long-term measure of perception of social mobility.

We also use the traditional indicator of social mobility, as well as the new one, focusing on the period of the pandemic, to explain support for the government. The effect of long-term negative perceptions should be favorable to Bolsonaro – given his anti-systemic approach to politics. But the short-term effect is yet unclear. Those who have seen some gain may be more likely to support Bolsonaro, since he is in the government now and might gain support among those who feel more positively about their social and economic status. This was the case of Dilma Rousseff of the PT in 2010 (PEIXOTO; RENNÓ, 2011).

In addition to perceptions of social mobility, which if downward is a proxy for status threat, we control for income, age, gender, race and religion. Based on the demand-side literature on populism and prior studies on Brazil,

we expect support for Bolsonaro and for his positions towards the pandemic to be associated with rich, white, older men. However, those who are members of the covid-19 risk group based on age, the only indicator available in our dataset, might be contrary to the President's positions towards the pandemic.

Finally, we control for perceptions of corruption, the economy, or the pandemic as the worst national problem. We expect that those who view the economy and corruption as the worst problems in the country will be more likely to support the government, because these are issues that Bolsonaro mentions with particular emphasis. On the other hand, he has been criticized by the opposition for his positions towards the pandemic, so those who place greater saliency on this issue are more likely to disapprove of his performance in government. Hence, seeing the pandemic as a national problem may increase rejection of Bolsonaro's positions towards the covid-19 disease.

Analysis

First, we will focus on how views about the pandemic affect government evaluation in Brazil. Table 1 shows the frequencies for the main variables discussed. We recoded the variables regarding the pandemic as dichotomous indicating positions favorable to the president's controversial positions. The data shows that most of the population does not follow the president in his views about the pandemic. In fact, the patterns of response are: around a quarter to a fifth of the population have opinions congruent with those of President Bolsonaro. Views about the Brazilian Health System and behaviors on social distancing are the exceptions, as they tend to be even lower. A significant majority of the population is supportive of SUS and has abided to social distancing measures. Social desirability bias may have attenuated the likelihood of responding to these items truthfully, so they should be seen as a conservative measure of these opinions.

With respect to social mobility, as expected, a higher proportion perceived downward mobility than perceived upward mobility over the time span of eight years. In the short period of the pandemic, three months, the data show a significant downward movement. In both cases, twice as many people perceived reduced social and economic status than perceived an improvement. Most citizens, however, experienced social stagnation. This is very different from

the recent past. Looking back at the results from Peixoto and Rennó (2011), regarding the period prior to the 2010 elections, 54 per cent declared at the time that they experienced upward mobility and only 7 per cent, downward. This is clear testament to the reversal of expectations that occurred over the first two decades of the Twenty-First Century in Brazil. The first ten years were a period of tremendous excitement and hope; the second ten years were characterized by frustration and disappointment. Public perceptions reflect the performance of the economy and of politics in the country in those two decades.

Table 1 – Percentages for selected variables

Variables	Percentage
Positive Government Evaluation	24
Critical of the Brazilian Health system	14
Favorable to Centralization in Federal Government	20
Negationist Position	21
Leaving Home Normally	04
Leaving Home Carefully	50
Leaving Home only when Inevitable	37
Not Leaving Home at All	09
Upward Social Mobility – long-term	09
Downward Social Mobility – long-term	18
Upward Social Mobility – short-term	04
Downward Social Mobility – short-term	08

Source: INCT, 2020.

Opinions towards the pandemic and government evaluations may converge, for a portion of the Brazilian electorate. To verify this possibility, we test first the determinants of government evaluation based on views about the pandemic, controlling for other explanatory factors, including views about national problems (economy, corruption, pandemic), partisanship favorable to PT, rejection of the PT and a measure of affective polarization between Bolsonaro and Lula da Silva, captured through differences in feeling thermometers between both. The variable "Difference between Lula and Bolsonaro" has positive values for voters who prefer Lula over Bolsonaro. Correlations between the political variables are -0,50 for the difference between Bolsonaro and Lula and rejection of the PT and of 0,35 of supporting the PT. This suggests the

existence of a relation among the variables, but not a perfect correlation. This indicates that polarization in Brazil has multiple dimensions.

Table 2 presents the results for logistic and ordinal logit regressions for the selected dependent variables related to government evaluation and to President Bolsonaro's positions towards the pandemic. Even though a minority of the population tends to support his government and to share his views about the pandemic, clear patterns at the individual level explain variations in these positions. In other words, the President has a group of supporters that identify with his positions and back his government. Thus, the main hypothesis of the paper seems to be corroborated, namely, that Bolsonaro is not acting irrationally during the pandemic. On the contrary, as he has done before, his actions target the group that supports his positions strongly. Furthermore, our data show that perception of economic mobility also matters for government evaluation.

Table 2 – Odds Ratios from logistic and ordinal logit regressions

Variables	Government evaluation	Critical of SUS	Centralization in Fed. Gov.	Negationism	Social distancing
Downward Mobility Long-Term	1,12	0,87	0,64*	1,14	1,28
	(0,349)	(0,229)	(0,165)	(0,302)	(0,240)
Upward Mobility Long-Term	0,55	1,02	0,96	1,24	1,07
	(0,235)	(0,332)	(0,295)	(0,405)	(0,241)
Downward Mobility Short-Term	0,84	1,33	0,85	0,69	1,24
	(0,328)	(0,459)	(0,310)	(0,272)	(0,334)
Upward Mobility Short-Term	4,12**	2,87***	0,92	1,24	0,96
	(2,441)	(1,150)	(0,382)	(0,585)	(0,369)
Critical of SUS	1,27	.			
	(0,415)	(.)			
Centralization in Federal Government	1,78*		.		
	(0,539)		(.)		
Negationism	1,93**			.	
	(0,552)			(.)	
Social Distancing	0,66**				.
	(0,121)				(.)
Economy as national problem	0,80	1,80*	1,50	0,98	0,72
	(0,408)	(0,577)	(0,463)	(0,390)	(0,193)
r2_p	0,528	0,0534	0,140	0,331	0,0822

Variables	Government evaluation	Critical of SUS	Centralization in Fed. Gov.	Negationism	Social distancing
Pandemic as national problem	0,86	1,13	0,88	0,85	1,37**
	(0,258)	(0,265)	(0,198)	(0,200)	(0,211)
Corruption as national problem	0,79	0,94	0,80	1,18	1,12
	(0,233)	(0,248)	(0,188)	(0,291)	(0,205)
Female	1,03	1,09	0,76	0,83	2,32***
	(0,261)	(0,209)	(0,134)	(0,162)	(0,311)
2.gr_age – 18-24 years old	0,65	1,73	1,06	1,05	0,38**
	(0,590)	(1,182)	(0,615)	(0,746)	(0,145)
3.gr_age – 25-34 years old	1,21	1,51	0,76	1,11	0,52*
	(1,087)	(1,022)	(0,439)	(0,758)	(0,196)
4.gr_age – 35-44 years old	0,65	1,63	1,31	1,54	0,40**
	(0,593)	(1,094)	(0,723)	(1,052)	(0,152)
5.gr_age – 45-54 years old	0,87	1,38	1,25	2,04	0,61
	(0,794)	(0,945)	(0,706)	(1,397)	(0,233)
6.gr_age – 55-64 years old	0,55	1,86	1,28	1,31	0,96
	(0,519)	(1,282)	(0,741)	(0,903)	(0,367)
7.gr_age – Over 65 years old	0,87	0,69	0,54	1,35	3,06***
	(0,854)	(0,521)	(0,348)	(0,978)	(1,274)
African-Brazilian (*preto e pardo*)	0,99	0,87	0,92	0,79	0,89
	(0,245)	(0,171)	(0,169)	(0,164)	(0,116)
Evangelical	1,13	0,84	1,19	1,71***	1,14
	(0,297)	(0,190)	(0,227)	(0,353)	(0,179)
2.gr_income – 1 to 2 minimum wages	0,82	0,61	0,60*	1,10	1,09
	(0,378)	(0,190)	(0,179)	(0,383)	(0,229)
3.gr_income – 2 to 3 minimum wages	0,54	0,71	0,82	1,14	0,99
	(0,231)	(0,227)	(0,238)	(0,413)	(0,222)
4.gr_income – 3 to 5 minimum wages	0,60	0,89	0,60*	1,16	1,12
	(0,259)	(0,271)	(0,180)	(0,425)	(0,255)
5.gr_income – 5 to 10 minimum wages	0,90	0,92	0,76	1,08	0,89
	(0,381)	(0,298)	(0,235)	(0,417)	(0,209)
6.gr_income – 10 to 15 minimum wages	0,77	0,72	0,59	0,65	1,35
	(0,440)	(0,401)	(0,275)	(0,343)	(0,502)
7.gr_income – 15 to 20 minimum wages	1,04	0,73		0,31	1,17
	(0,847)	(0,580)		(0,417)	(0,598)
8.gr_income – Over 20 minimum wages		2,50	0,55	1,22	1,27
		(1,832)	(0,525)	(1,202)	(0,687)
r2_p	0,528	0,0534	0,140	0,331	0,0822

Variables	Government evaluation	Critical of SUS	Centralization in Fed. Gov.	Negationism	Social distancing
Difference between Lula and Bolsonaro	0,61***	0,95***	0,87***	0,76***	1,05***
	(0,028)	(0,019)	(0,018)	(0,021)	(0,016)
Anti-PT	0,78	1,31	1,73***	1,59**	1,16
	(0,228)	(0,313)	(0,362)	(0,338)	(0,212)
Pro-PT		0,68	2,04*	1,31	1,17
		(0,301)	(0,775)	(0,917)	(0,277)
/cut1					0,09***
					(0,043)
/cut2					3,37**
					(1,605)
/cut3					38,80***
					(18,846)
Constant	0,34	0,11***	0,40	0,11***	
	(0,370)	(0,090)	(0,272)	(0,091)	
Observations	884	977	961	977	977
r2_p	0,528	0,0534	0,140	0,331	0,0822

Source: Data collected by the authors.
Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
Legend: *** p<0,01, ** p<0,05, * p<0,1.

Government evaluation is strongly affected by upward short-term mobility: those who have fared better in the short-term seem to credit the Bolsonaro government for it. This is the variable with the strongest impact on positive evaluations of the government, increasing four-fold the odds of supporting the Bolsonaro government. This is an interesting predictor to keep in mind for future analysis of election results in 2022 – the next presidential election.

Government evaluation is also related to positions on issues regarding the pandemic, especially those that more clearly discriminate positions in the population. Hence, positions towards the SUS don't affect government evaluations, as this item did not really differentiate the public; it is practically consensual that the public health system has played a very positive role in the pandemic. But views on the centralization of power in the presidency and favorable to his negationist positions, which are more divisive, clearly lead to more governmental support. In sum, issue positions about the pandemic affect government evaluation. Behaviors towards social distancing also predict government evaluation in the expected direction: as

one moves to more acceptance of social distancing, the likelihood of government support decreases by approximately 35 per cent. Finally, only the measure of polarization between Lula and Bolsonaro affects government evaluation: *petismo* and *antipetismo* have no influence. It's also worth mentioning that government evaluation is not affected by any social-economic characteristic – indicating that support for the government is cross-cutting across social groups.

Positions towards the Brazilian Health System are not well explained by the model, as indicated by the Pseudo R-squared coefficient. In part, this is due to a lower variance in this variable, 0.12, in comparison to the others. Still, upward short-term mobility increases the likelihood of being more critical of the public health system. We also verify that those more concerned with the economy as a national problem are also less likely to support SUS. Finally, those who like Lula better tend to be less critical of the public health system. Read differently: *bolsonaristas* who improved their short-term social status and who are concerned primarily with the economy are the only respondents who criticize the public health system during the pandemic.

The model fares slightly better on the second pandemic issue: the centralization of powers in the presidency. The main explanatory variables affecting these views are *(i)* a negative effect of having experienced long-term downward mobility; *(ii)* those with low income also tend to oppose strengthening the president; *(iii)* again the *lulismo/bolsonarismo* divide; and d) partisan variables associated with the PT. However, in this last case, those who are against and in favor of the PT vary in the same direction: both favor more centralization. It is interesting to note that partisan variables are only significant in this case, but in a convergent way.

The last issue position associated with the pandemic refers to explicit negationist behavior, favoring the president's position. Explained variance is 33 per cent in this case, the second highest and again the Lula/Bolsonaro cleavage is relevant and in the expected direction: those who like Bolsonaro adopt his denialist positions. Being an *antipetista* also affects this choice, in the expected direction. *Antipetistas* favor Bolsonaro. Finally, evangelicals, a strong supportive group of Bolsonaro, also embrace his defense of denialism.

Adoption of social distancing measures presents very interesting results: women are much more likely to adopt social distancing, which could indicate

that women are more concerned with covid impacts, aligned with gendered roles in health care. Younger Brazilians, up to 44 years of age, are more likely to take to the streets normally. On the other hand, those 65 years old and over strongly abide by social distancing. This confirms expectations that risk groups are more likely to stay at home and corresponds with what has been observed in the country on a daily basis.

Finally, politics also plays a role in adopting social distancing: those who like Bolsonaro are more likely to defy social distancing. Hence, *bolsonarismo* plays a role in ingraining political cleavages over the pandemic across society.

Conclusion

In this paper we tried to associate both dimensions of populism, one related to the elites and other to the masses – through a supply and demand conception of populism. According to the approach defended in the paper, demand for populist policies allows Jair Bolsonaro to have a competitive proposal that attracts those who see their status or economic condition deteriorating. However, surprisingly, despite his anti-establishment discourse, the rebellious army captain was able to get the support of the financial market, of the middle class and of moral conservatives for his proposals, at least until the beginning of the pandemic. Bolsonaro no longer has this broad alliance behind him, but he continues to defend denialist positions because they mobilize a part of his grassroot basis.

What we have shown in this paper is that at the public opinion level, a majority of Brazilians disagree with Bolsonaro's policies during the pandemic. Most of the public does not support the president. Bolsonaro took strong positions and established some of the main issues in the public debate, namely criticism of the health system; power centralization; denialism; and challenging social distancing. Such positions are defended by a minority of Brazilians, but the data show that those who do defend them also fervently adopt Bolsonaro's positions and coherently align with denial of the virus, opposition to social distancing and preference for federal government centralization. In this group, demand and supply populist sides align.

Another question this article explored is how such positions affect government evaluation. The data show that government support is not affected

by specific socio-economic characteristics, strongly suggesting that government support cuts across social groups. However, the most striking result regards those who experienced short-term upper mobility, those who we may assume have benefitted from the short-term economic incentives provided by the Bolsonaro administration. These respondents positively evaluate the federal government at a rate four times higher than other Brazilians. Hence, we see a high propensity of those who are benefiting from short-term economic gains to favor the concentration of power in the federal government, which implies sidelining classic check and balance institutions.

This may suggest that although Bolsonaro's positions do not reach a majority of the population, they are supported by a coherent group of voters, many of who experienced recent surge of upward mobility. This points out, once again, to the economic features of the demand side of populism. Finally, until the moment of the survey Bolsonaro's denialist positions had not changed the previous scenario of polarization, since ideological differences (expressed as support for Lula against Bolsonaro) remain a relevant determinant for all five variables under study. This signals that the pandemic has not necessarily altered the broader historical trend towards political polarization and populist politics in Brazil. Rather than reorganizing political patterns, at least in the short run, it seems to have entrenched previous tendencies. We will need, however, longer time periods in order to observe other possible changes in this scenario.

Downplaying the virus and challenging social distancing may reorganize the unlikely coalition that brought Bolsonaro to power. Though market forces and the middle class may distance themselves from *bolsonarismo* due to the president's position on the pandemic, another path for building a populist coalition may be opening up. This is a path that brings together the demand side of populism with its denial of institutional checks and balances and its pursuit for power centralization. The post-pandemic horizon in Brazil may be a mix of the government's attempt to create new venues of support though the expansion of emergency income for the poor versus the reorganization of gatekeeping institutions and actors who joined the populist wave. The pandemic in Brazil reorganized both populism and the dynamics of the crisis of democracy without pointing out a new path for the reorganization of democratic forces.

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Entrenching right-wing populism under covid-19: denialism, social mobility, and government evaluation in Brazil

Abstract: This paper analyzes how President Jair Bolsonaro's attitudes and policies towards the covid-19 pandemic reverberated in the population as a way of exploring the microlevel congruence between voter and representative positions. We investigate popular support for Brazilian president positions denying the covid-19 pandemic, bringing together supply and demand sides of right-wing populism. Using public opinion data from a survey applied in mid-2020, we focus on how support for the public health system, positions on which government level should lead the responses to the pandemic, perception of risks associated with the virus and adoption of social distancing varied among citizens. Results show low levels of support to denialist positions, except among core Bolsonaro supporters. However, perceptions of social mobility, as an indicator of status threat or gain, were important to explain support of the Bolsonaro government in the period.

Keywords: pandemic; right-wing populism; denialism; public opinion; Brazil.

Enraizando o populismo de direita sob a covid-19: negacionismo, mobilidade social e aprovação do governo no Brasil

Resumo: Neste artigo, exploramos como atitudes do presidente Jair Bolsonaro sobre pandemia – que caracterizamos como populistas – reverberaram na população. Trata-se de uma forma de explorar se há convergência, em nível micro, entre posições de representantes e da cidadania. Investigamos o apoio popular às posições negacionistas do presidente do Brasil reunindo aspectos de oferta e de demanda do populismo de direita. São analisados dados de pesquisa de opinião aplicada em meados de 2020 para explorar os seguintes temas: apoio ao sistema de saúde pública, qual nível de governo deve liderar respostas à pandemia, percepção dos riscos associados ao vírus e adoção de distanciamento social, e como preferências são distribuídas pela sociedade. Os resultados mostram baixos níveis de apoio às posições negacionistas, à exceção dos apoiadores fiéis de Bolsonaro. No entanto, as percepções de mobilidade social, como um indicador de ameaça ou ganho de status, foram importantes para explicar o persistente apoio ao governo Bolsonaro no período.

El afianzamiento del populismo de derecha bajo covid-19: negación, movilidad social y aprobación del gobierno en Brasil

Resúmen: En este artículo exploramos cómo las actitudes del presidente Jair Bolsonaro sobre la pandemia – que calificamos de populistas – repercutieron en la población. Es una forma de explorar si existe convergencia, a nivel micro, entre las posiciones de los representantes y la ciudadanía. Investigamos el apoyo popular a las posiciones negacionistas del presidente brasileño reuniendo los lados de la oferta y la demanda del populismo de derecha. Con datos de una encuesta de opinión pública aplicada a mediados de 2020 se analizan los siguientes temas: apoyo al sistema de salud pública, qué nivel de gobierno debe liderar las respuestas a la pandemia, percepción de los riesgos asociados con el virus y adopción de la distancia social. Los resultados muestran bajos niveles de soporte a las posiciones de negación del riesgo del virus expresadas por el presidente, a excepción de los fieles apoyadores de Bolsonaro. Sin embargo, las percepciones de la movilidad social, como indicador de amenaza o aumento de estatus, fueron importantes para explicar el apoyo persistente al gobierno de Bolsonaro en el período.