

# Assessing the fourth wave of the populist radical right: Jair Bolsonaro's voters in comparative perspective<sup>1</sup>

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Lisa Zanotti<sup>2</sup> 

José Rama<sup>3</sup> 

Talita Tanscheit<sup>4</sup> 

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This article analyzes the individual factors that help explain the electoral support for Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 Presidential elections in Brazil in light of the findings for the Populist Radical Right (PRR) in Western Europe. The present article contributes to the comparative literature on the determinants of the vote for the PRR in a non-European country. Analyzing the rise of the PRR in Latin America is particularly relevant since structural constraints limit its chances. To carry out our analysis, we rely on survey data from the Brazilian Electoral Study (BES). Beyond some specificities due to differences in the articulation of the PRR's main ideologies, we found that while certain determinants of the vote for the PRR in Brazil are in line with the hypothesis based on the European experience, others respond to country and region-level indicators like negative identity toward the PT.

*Keywords:* populist radical right; Brazil; Western Europe; negative identities; democracy

## Introduction

Populism has been a perennial feature in Latin America (de la Torre; Arnson, 2013; Madrid, 2012; Roberts, 2006). However, except for a few relevant studies (see Mudde; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Meléndez; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), the contemporary comparative literature that takes the ideational approach to populism has mainly focused on Europe (Hawkins; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). This has occurred for two main reasons.

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<sup>2</sup> Diego Portales University, Department of History and Social Sciences. Santiago, Chile. The author acknowledges receiving support from Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Científico y Tecnológico (FONDECYT Project 3210352) and the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion (COES) ANID/FONDAP/15130009. E-mail: <lisa.zanotti@mail.udp.cl>.

<sup>3</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Department of Political Science and International Relations. Madrid, Spain. The author acknowledges receiving support from Comunidad de Madrid – Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Project: Descomponiendo el Voto a Partidos de Derecha Radical entre los Jóvenes: Precariedad Laboral, Insatisfacción con la Democracia e Inmigración. Reference: SI3/PJI/2021-00384). E-mail: <jose.rama@uam.es>.

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Hurtado University, Politics and Government Department. Santiago, Chile. The author is grateful for the support of the Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Científico y Tecnológico (FONDECYT Project 3220199) and the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ Process 204.238/2021). E-mail: <talitastt@gmail.com>.

First, due to the presidential features of the region and the low levels of party institutionalization, the populist discourse in Latin America has been mainly articulated by political personalities. This is why the so-called political-institutional approach has been used to analyze the phenomenon in the region. This approach defines populism as a “political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). In distinction from the political-institutional approach, the ideational approach conceives of populism as a set of ideas that can be articulated by different kinds of political actors, such as leaders, political parties, or social movements (Mudde; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 42). Indeed, in Western Europe, the populist discourse is mainly articulated by parties that last beyond the rise and fall of their charismatic founders. Parties such as the National Rally (formerly National Front) in France, The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the (Northern) League in Italy are examples of long-lasting political parties that survived their founding leaders<sup>5</sup>.

Second, studies on populism have mainly focused on a specific party family, the populist radical right (PRR). The PRR combines at least three ideological traits: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). Therefore, even if populism has been a feature of Latin-American politics for decades, this is not the case with the PRR, which has only achieved limited diffusion in Latin America. This is due to the specific characteristics of the region, where high levels of inequality and poverty limit the political right’s potential to attract a broader range of voters (Luna; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; Zanotti; Roberts, 2021).

Historically, scholars have identified three waves of populism on the continent that differ with respect to the so-called “host” ideologies to which populism is attached, such as socialism, neoliberalism, or nativism (Mudde; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Depending on the “host” ideology, the categories of “the people” and “the elites” assume different connotations. With respect to this, scholars have referred to these categories as floating signifiers (i.e., a symbol whose referent is not fixed). Looking at the three waves of Latin American populism, we can see differences in the conceptualizations of “the people” and “the elites” (Laclau, 2005; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014).

The first wave, between the 1930s and the 1960s, saw the rise of populist leaders such as Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil. The people comprised mainly the natural base of the left, the urban, and the poor. At the same time, the elites were depicted as those who “opposed the expansion of the state, the nationalization of the economy, and the implementation of protectionist trade policies” (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 498).

The second wave, between the 1980s and the 1990s, was characterized by the neoliberal discourse of leaders such as Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in

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<sup>5</sup> The National Front since 1972, the FPÖ since 1956, and the (Northern) League since 1991.

Peru. On the one hand, the people were seen as a passive mass of individuals. On the other hand, the elites were represented by “those actors who profited from the state-led development model and were opposed to the implementation of the policies of the so-called Washington Consensus” (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 498).

Finally, in the third wave, beginning at the end of the 1990s, populist leaders strongly opposed neoliberal discourse and free-market policies, appealing to the ideology of *Americanismo*<sup>6</sup>. The discourse of leaders like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador shared a radical left host ideology. Therefore, the people then became all those discriminated against and excluded, while the elites became “the defenders of neoliberalism and the political actors who support a Western model of democracy that is not suitable for Latin America” (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 499).

In sum, even if in Latin America populism combined with a rightist ideology such as neoliberalism in the 1990s, populist leaders did not articulate radical ideas in a populist fashion. Things started to change in 2017. In Chile, the former Independent Democratic Union (UDI) congressman José Antonio Kast left the party to run for president as an independent. With a discourse not unlike the European PRR’s, he surprisingly obtained almost eight percent (8%) of the vote share in the presidential election. In 2021, Kast was the most-voted candidate in the first round, with nearly 28 percent of the vote, being defeated in the second round, but obtaining 44 percent of the vote. In Brazil in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, a former army captain with a similar discourse, became the first PRR president in the region. Bolsonaro won the presidency by obtaining more than 46 percent of the vote in the first round and around 55 percent in the second round.

Though the rise of Bolsonaro has been the object of several studies (see Hunter; Power, 2019; Santos; Tanscheit, 2019; Rennó, 2020; Layton et al., 2021; Setzler, 2021), Bolsonarismo has not been analyzed in a comparative perspective. This study aims to contribute to bridging an important gap in the literature on the determinants of the vote for PRR parties or candidates by analyzing a non-European case and comparing it with the literature on the vote for the PRR in Western Europe. This is relevant because, in Cas Mudde’s words, “today, we need research which more explicitly acknowledges and theorizes the diversity within the far-right party family and goes beyond the paradigm of the outsider-challenger party” (2017, p. 1). The article takes a step in this direction, relying on the literature on the determinants of the vote for the PRR in Europe and analyzing the similarities and differences to the PRR in Brazil. In this sense, it is crucial to examine the individual determinants of the only PRR leader who came into power in a region where this party family has severe structural limitations. In summary, this article is a relevant contribution to the existing literature because it goes beyond the analysis of the determinants of the vote for Bolsonaro, using the literature developed to study European cases to set a benchmark for analyzing the case of the vote for the PRR in Brazil in 2018.

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<sup>6</sup> This ideology emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century in a number of Latin American countries in connection with the anti-colonialist struggles against the Spanish and Portuguese empires.

Moreover, it contributes to the study of the PRR outside Europe and helps understand the different forms of articulation of the core ideologies of the PRR in Brazil as well as the ways in which these translate at the demand level to explain the determinants of the vote for Bolsonaro.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we deal with the literature on the emergence of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) and the commonalities of their electorate in Western Europe. In the second section, we analyze the Latin American context and the characteristics of Bolsonaro's discourse. In the third section, we analyze the determinants of the vote for Bolsonaro. Finally, in the conclusion, we summarize our findings on the support for Bolsonaro and interpret them in the light of the literature on the vote for the PRR in Western Europe.

### **Party system transformation in Western Europe and the emergence of populist radical right parties**

The decline of traditional parties (Ignazi, 2017) as the principal actors that articulate the traditional cleavages (Franklin et al., 1992) and respond to voters' demands started decades ago and relates to long-standing processes of sociological *dealignment* and *realignment*. The populist radical right established itself as a family of parties in European democracies by politicizing cultural identities and channeling discontent with the dominant political parties (Ignazi, 1992).

In many respects, the PRR was a cultural reaction against the diffusion of postmaterialist values in wealthy European societies, such as individual freedom, personal autonomy, self-expression, and social equality. In other words, the emergence of the PRR was a consequence of what Inglehart (1971) called the "silent revolution" which, in a context of economic globalization and deepening of integration of European politics, came to be associated with support for liberal, cosmopolitan, universalist, and multicultural values. While the European green parties or left-libertarians helped to articulate these new postmaterialist cultural values, the PRR emerged as a political expression of the cultural reaction against them (Ignazi, 1992; Kitschelt; McGann, 1995).

As Ignazi (1992) explains, the emergence of PRR parties in the European party systems was the result of a "silent counterrevolution" among those who rejected postmaterialist values. The PRR appealed to voters with strong ethnic or religious cultural identities, along with attachments to moral traditionalism and an aversion to immigration, economic globalization, and transnational European institutions (Bornschieer, 2010). They politicized cultural issues that were largely ignored by the dominant parties and harshly criticized those parties for not representing the truly authentic people. This explanation of the PRRPs' success in Western Europe is directly connected with some of the explanations at the individual level (i.e., those demand-level factors that help to understand the probabilities of voting for such political options).

### *Who votes for the populist radical right in Europe?*

With respect to the profile of PRRPs, two main theories have been developed to explain the parties' increasing support and induction into the so-called fourth wave of the far-right that is currently underway (Mudde, 2019). On the one hand, the rise of PRRPs has been explained by the decline in economic conditions at the aggregate level (Funke et al., 2016). On the other hand, other studies pointed out the role of cultural rather than economic factors in understanding the decline in the support for mainstream parties and the boost in the vote share for fringe political options (Hernández; Kriesi, 2016).

The first explanation – the economic one – for supporting PRRPs entails a sort of economic anxiety whereby the poorest sectors of society feel unprotected by the structural changes caused by globalization. These sectors have been described as “losers of globalization” because they have been largely left out of its socioeconomic changes. Thus, they vote for PRRPs to protect their own well-being from labor migration (Betz 1994; Arzheimer 2018). The second explanation for support for the PRRPs takes cultural factors into consideration. In this sense, the main driver of support for the PRR is rejection of multiculturalism and postmaterialist values. This is linked to the so-called “silent counter-revolution thesis”, which represents a cultural backlash against the diffusion of postmaterialist values by nostalgic individuals with an idealized view of the past (see Norris; Inglehart, 2019; Bornschieer, 2010; Emanuele et al., 2022).

Even if the debate between these two sets of explanations is not completely settled, it is fair to say that most scholars place stronger emphasis on the cultural than the economic explanation or a combination of the two. Indeed, empirical analysis shows that poor economic performance is not a determinant of the vote for the PRR (see Rama et al., 2021). Besides the debate between economic and cultural explanations, some factors have received empirical support across several countries.

The first and most established factor has to do with the role of nativism. As Mudde points out, nativism, which results from a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, is the key ideology of the PRR party family, at least in Western Europe. Nativism “holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native (or national) group and that nonnative (or alien) elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state” (2019, p. 27). Nativism tends to translate into preferences for harsher immigration policy proposals in order to “save” the allegedly homogeneous nation-state. In line with this, various studies have demonstrated that anti-immigration feelings are a driver for voting for the PRR (Ivarsflaten, 2008). Using data from the United Kingdom, Kaufmann (2017) contends that changes in levels of immigration, instead of immigration *per se*, boosted support for the PRR. However, as Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) have remarked, populist right-wing parties have gained ground not only in countries that have experienced rapid and profound ethnic shifts like the United Kingdom, but also in those with much lower levels of immigration, like Hungary

and Poland. This has led to distinguishing between objective immigration figures and the subjective perceptions associated with them. As Norris and Inglehart put it: "what matters for cultural attitudes and electoral behavior is not just the number of migrants who arrive, but public perceptions of them" (2019, p. 181). Also, in a meta-analysis of 326 quantitative models from 46 studies of Western Europe, Stockemer et al. (2018) found that both attitudes toward immigration and racial attitudes were by far the most important variables to predict the vote for the PRR and have had the second-highest success rate as explanatory factors, surpassed only by gender.

The second factor that explains the support for the PRR has to do with the other its other core ideology, namely authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950). Authoritarianism is "the belief in a strictly ordered society in which infringements to authority are to be punished severely" and tends to translate into preferences for stricter measures of "law and order" (Mudde; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 34). At the individual level, Donovan's (2019) study shows that in multiparty systems, people with authoritarian attitudes were more likely to be supporters of smaller radical right parties. Importantly enough, he demonstrates that authoritarian attitudes were a notable predictor of support for Donald Trump in 2016, which clearly reveals the effects of ramping up "law and order" and embracing authoritarianism on the support for radical right-wing political options.

A third factor that is quite consistent in explaining support for the PRR is gender. The literature on the vote for the PRR reports a significant gender gap: men tend to vote for the PRR more than women. The fact that men perceive gender equality as a zero-sum game and PRR actors mobilize supporters by focusing on their perceived loss of status with respect to women (Immerzeel et al., 2015) explain this finding.

The fourth factor that has received significant attention in efforts to explain the vote for the PRR is perceived socioeconomic status. As mentioned before, whereas, at the aggregate level, some studies find a relationship between the economic downturn of the post-2008 Great Recession and the rise of support for radical (including populist) options, at the individual level, this relationship is apparently more difficult to demonstrate (Funke et al., 2016; Dalio et al., 2017). Conversely, support for the PRR seems to be related more to a sense of status loss than to the actual deterioration of the individual economic condition. For example, Rico and Anduiza (2019) emphasize that the perception of the poor performance of the country's economy leads voters to listen to the siren songs of populist leaders. On this same note, Mols and Jetten (2016) find that perceptions, more than real difficult economic conditions, explain the support for PRRPs. Going a step further, combining macro- and micro-level explanations, Rooduijn and Burgoon (2017, p. 18) argue that those individuals who experience economic difficulties are only more likely to vote for a populist radical right party if the unemployment rate of a country is low, the gross domestic product per capita is high, and inequality levels are low.

Finally, scholars have examined the relationship between attitudes toward democracy and the vote for the PRR. Mudde (2019, p. 7) clearly distinguishes between

extreme right parties and radical right formations, both belonging to the far-right category. Thus, whereas the “extreme right rejects the essence of democracy”, the “radical right accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, the rule of law, and separation of powers”. However, empirical evidence shows that in certain contexts the PRR can mobilize individuals with a weak appreciation for democracy (Rama et al., 2021). Over long periods of time, this can set in motion a process of democratic erosion that might result dangerous for the regime.

### **The populist radical right in Latin America**

The question now is to what extent the existing literature can explain the vote for the PRR in Latin America. As mentioned above, in Europe the appearance of the populist radical right has been linked to the reaction to the spread of post-material values since the 1970s. In that sense, in most European countries there was a convergence on these issues, leaving aside others that were important to voters, like immigration or security. In Latin America, the structural conditions are different, due in large part to the high levels of poverty and inequality. This limits the emergence of populist right-wing parties in a region where material values are still central (Roberts, 2017).

However, recent years have been marked by the rise of the PRR in Latin America – not only in Chile and Brazil, where the PRR has been most successful in the region, but also in countries such as El Salvador under the current president Nayib Bukele and Argentina with the rise of Javier Milei as leader of the right-wing coalition *Libertad Avanza*. All in all, there are quite a few indications of a growing presence and electoral relevance of the PRR in Latin America. To a large extent, the rise of the PRR in the region has been associated with the loss of emphasis of economic factors and antagonism between the “market” and the “state,” with a discourse centered on non-distributive themes, in particular moral issues and “law and order” measures (Luna; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). In this way, it is possible to identify a significant reformulation of the political positions of the right-wing leaders in Latin America, finding in little-explored themes fertile soil for an agenda closer to their ideas and interests (Monestier; Vommaro, 2021).

Given this background, we are interested in exploring whether the individual factors that explain the support for PRRPs in Western Europe and Bolsonaro are the same, given that the structural constraints for the emergence and success of the PRR in the two regions are quite different. In this sense, let us first understand the political context and the dynamic that led to the rise of the PRR in Brazil in 2018.



## Jair Bolsonaro and the rise of the Brazilian populist radical right

Since the return to democracy, the Brazilian party system was structured around the leftist Workers' Party (PT). This means that a relevant portion of the Brazilian electorate in the country votes based on two attitudes toward the PT: sympathy (*petismo*) or antipathy (*antipetismo*) (Samuels; Zucco, 2018). In this context, between 1994 and 2014, political and electoral competition was organized around the PT on the left and the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) on the center-right. The presidential contest between the two parties involved two first-round victories for the PSDB in 1994 and 1998 and four second-round wins for the PT in 2002, 2006, 2010, and 2014, with the PSDB having clear difficulties in attracting a broader electorate.

This dynamic of competition started to change in the mid-2010s. The main events that marked this change were the impeachment of PT's former President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the arrest of the PT's other former president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – the favorite presidential candidate in 2018 until his disqualification – and the massive corruption scandal known as *Lava Jato* ("Car Wash Operation"). If these events directly affected the PT, the involvement of PSDB leaders in corruption scandals, as well as their participation in the government of Michel Temer, who succeeded Rousseff and eventually became the most unpopular president in the country's history, also affected the mainstream right. While the Brazilian left was able to protect itself, the precarious structure of the mainstream right ended with the latter being supplanted by the populist radical right (Hunter; Power, 2019; Santos; Tanscheit, 2019). In sum, with the election of Bolsonaro in 2018, the PT–PSDB duopoly that structured the system since the return to democracy came to an end (Santos; Tanscheit, 2019).

The results of the 2018 presidential elections meant a complete transformation in the dynamics of competition within the Brazilian party system and a partial breakdown of traditional alignments between parties and voters. The victory of Jair Bolsonaro, who headed a coalition of two small right-wing parties, the Social Liberal Party (PSL) and the Brazilian Labor Renewal Party (PRTB), disrupted the pattern of political and electoral competition that had structured the system for more than three decades, generating the conditions for the PRR to win power for the first time in the country (Zanotti; Roberts, 2021). As Santos and Tanscheit (2019) pointed out, these events resulted in the collapse of the mainstream right, which was replaced by a populist radical right-wing led by Jair Bolsonaro. Indeed, the PSL not only won the presidential race but built the second-largest parliamentary bloc, losing only to the PT.

What changes in vote-choice drove the shift? To answer these questions and formulate our hypothesis on the determinants of the vote for Bolsonaro, we need to understand how the core ideologies of the PRR are articulated in the Brazilian context in terms of preferred policies and attitudes toward democracy.



### *Nativism in Bolsonaro's discourse*

When comparing populist radical right-wing voters in Western Europe to those in Brazil, we need to consider the contextual differences – especially the sociodemographic factors. As other studies have pointed out, while in Europe ideological nativism is articulated through the preference for anti-immigration policies, in Latin America this is hardly the case. This is because the Latin American PRR lacks minority groups of immigrants to single out as “the other.” Instead, it resorts to othering identities based on other markers of difference to identify others, for example: religious, racial, and ethnic minorities, persons who identify as LGBTI+, feminists, etc. (Zanotti; Roberts 2021, p. 39). In this sense, it is not surprising that the mix of nationalism and xenophobia that constitutes nativism (Mudde, 2007) is manifest in Bolsonaro's ideal of the nation, a vision notably averse to the constitutional protection of mainly racial and ethnic minority groups. Previous research has pointed out that Bolsonaro's supporters are more likely to be middle- and upper-class White men with high levels of income and education (Layton et al., 2021). From the ideological point of view, Rennó (2020) shows that the 2018 Brazilian elections were marked by “positional issue voting” whereby Bolsonaro's electoral manifesto matched the policy preferences of his voters. In general, those individuals who are more likely to vote for Bolsonaro are “oriented on an alignment of right-wing ideological positions unknown in recent Brazilian history” (Rennó, 2020, p. 5). For example, his constituency is predominantly conservative and opposed to affirmative action policies based on racial quotas. Since racism denies fundamental equality between all members of a society (Mudde, 2005), it goes hand in hand with the ideological nativism of the PRR. Regarding black people, following a visit to a *quilombo*, a rural settlement founded by escaped and African slaves whose descendants now reside there, Bolsonaro suggested the latter were all overweight and indolent, stating “They don't do anything. They're useless even to procreate” (AFP, 2019). Moreover, Bolsonaro resorts to racism to establish and promote an “us” (in-group / Whites) versus “them” (out-group / non-Whites) dynamic. This is relevant because there is limited research on the relationship between race and political behavior in Brazil.

*Hypothesis 1:* We expect that those voters who identify as White will be more prone to vote for Bolsonaro instead of other political options.

### *Authoritarianism in Bolsonaro's discourse*

While conservatism on moral issues is not a defining attribute of the PRR, some PRRPs express their ideological authoritarianism not only as a preference for stricter measures in terms of “law and order,” but also as support for morally conservative policies. While older Western European PRRPs tend to express authoritarianism only through “law

and order” policies (Mudde; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), some parties, such as VOX in Spain, also express it in a cultural sense (Rama et al., 2021).

In 2018 issues related to the suppression or expansion of the rights of minority groups – Bolsonaro’s platform opposed the latter and vice versa – marked the Brazilian elections. The Anti-Bolsonaro hashtag and slogan #EleNão (in English, #NotHim) was widely employed by women-led opposition groups and parties, many of which mobilized around Brazil and chanted the slogan at protests decrying Bolsonaro’s campaign. These demonstrations took place both on- and off-line and highlighted the misogynistic, homophobic, and racist statements made by the then-candidate.

To give a few examples of his attitudes toward women, Bolsonaro told Congresswoman Maria do Rosário that the only reason he did not rape her is because she “was undeserving” (Kayser, 2018). On another occasion, he boasted of his virility by celebrating that he first conceived four sons. Conversely, he lamented having had a daughter, attributing her conception to a moment of weakness (Lehman, 2018). Regarding the LGBTI+ community, he also claimed that he would rather die in a car accident than have a homosexual child. He claimed that “90% of the boys adopted by a homosexual couple will grow up to be homosexuals and male escorts” (Londoño, 2019). In sum, Bolsonaro embodies the growth of neoconservatism and its attempts to prevent access to equal rights, especially for women and members of the LGBTI+ community, though the defense of “traditional family values”.

Concerning traditional moral values, Bolsonaro stressed two popular themes, the idea of “gender ideology” and “non-partisan education”. These views found allies in religious groups promoting censorship and mobilizing against, for example, the inclusion of sexual education in school curricula. This argument is relevant in Bolsonaro’s discourse as it attacks feminism and the detractors of the heteronormative family model. This is crucial if we consider Bolsonaro’s popularity among the evangelical electorate. In this context, Bolsonaro’s nomination of Pentecostal Evangelical pastor Damares Alves as head of the so-called Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights does not come as a surprise<sup>7</sup>. As Ferreira and Fuks pointed out, even during the electoral campaign of 2018, Bolsonaro approached central evangelical political leaders such as Bishop Edir Macedo, the leader of one of the largest evangelical denominations in Brazil (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus – IURD), seeking support and promising key offices should he be elected – Bolsonaro even provided Macedo with a diplomatic passport after the former assumed the presidency (2021, p. 2). Analyzing the relationship between religion and voting in Brazil

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<sup>7</sup> In 2015, President Dilma Rousseff consolidated the National Secretariat for Human Rights—first instituted in 1997—with the secretariats for Policies for Racial Equality and Policies for Women, thus forming the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, and Human Rights. In 2016, following President Rousseff’s impeachment, her successor Michel Temer dismantled the Ministry and in 2017 established the Ministry of Human Rights. During Bolsonaro’s government, the ministry was again reinvented as the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights.

from the electoral point of view, previous studies have shown that, historically, Evangelicals tended to reject the PT (see Peixoto; Rennó, 2011; Araújo, 2022). Besides the Evangelists' historical aversion to the PT, in 2018 polls showed a great difference between the vote intention of Catholics – which was equally divided between the PT's presidential candidate Fernando Haddad and Bolsonaro – and that of Evangelicals who declared their preference for Bolsonaro quite decisively – 67 vs. 33 percent (Ferreira; Fuks, 2021).

*Hypothesis 2a:* We expect that those voters with higher authoritarian values (i.e., those with more restrictive attitudes toward civil liberties) will be more prone to support Bolsonaro instead of other presidential candidates.

*Hypothesis 2b:* We expect that religious voters, especially Evangelical Christians, will be prone to support Bolsonaro instead of other presidential options.

#### *Support for democracy in Bolsonaro's discourse*

"Brazil above everything, and God above all" was the slogan of Bolsonaro's presidential campaign. Appropriately, his campaign was built on two main issues. First, he consistently and constantly harked back to Brazil's military dictatorship, praising the brutal military regime's most violent and controversial figures and extensively employing nationalist rhetoric. Second, he frequently alluded to God in order to mobilize Christian voters, who comprise the country's largest religious group with the strongest social and political linkages. These two issues are entrenched in the history of Brazil especially pro-dictatorship mobilizations, such as 1964's March of the Family with God for Liberty and those during the "Brazil, Love or Leave It" campaign. In Bolsonaro's discourse, the politicization of a nationalist sentiment goes hand in hand with authoritarianism and a reactionary nostalgia for the military dictatorship. The President expressed this view on different occasions saying that the dictatorial period "was not very different from what we have today" (Serra; Pitombo, 2021) and appraising the dictatorship as "a very good period" for Brazil during the electoral campaign (Reeves, 2018).

Furthermore, on the occasion of the vote for the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff, Bolsonaro voted in favor of her impeachment, stating "[T]hey lost in 1964, and they will lose now in 2016." He dedicated his vote to the Brazilian traditional family and to "the memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra... and to the Armed Forces" declaring, "for a Brazil above everything and God above all, my vote is yes"<sup>8</sup>. As Samuels and Zucco (2018) demonstrate, if Brazilians who value democracy are more likely to be supporters of the PT (*petistas*), the *antipetistas* are those dissatisfied with and showing lower levels of support for democracy. Prior to Bolsonaro's emergence from the political

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<sup>8</sup> Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36093338>>. Access on: 2 Feb. 2023.

fringes in 2018, no political party or candidate had managed to attract those Brazilians with low support for democracy; until then, the *antipetistas* only shared an antipathy toward the PT without a consolidated allegiance to any single leader or party in the system.

*Hypothesis 3:* We expect that those voters with a more negative view of democracy, and even those against democracy as a political regime, will be more prone to support Bolsonaro instead of other political options.

*Idiosyncratic features: negative political identities and the politicization of massive corruption scandals*

#### *Negative political identities*

Exploring the relationship between populism and negative identities, Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser (2019) have pointed out that populism can thrive when a strong negative political identity exists. In addition to an antipartisan political identity, Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser propose the existence of an antiestablishment political identity described as “an emotional and rational repulsion toward every established political party in a given country” (2019, p. 529). In this sense, it is when voters have negative feelings against all traditional parties and conditions are just right to transform this into a new political identity that there is room for the emergence of anti-system populist forces. The emergence of Bolsonaro as PSL leader fits this model well; the PSL’s so-called *antipetismo* and strong aversion to the voters of the PT was channeled into electoral support of the former’s anti-system presidential candidate. In fact, a vast literature shows that in recent decades the PT played a central role in structuring Brazil’s party system by producing high levels of positive (*petismo*) and negative (*antipetismo*) party identification among voters: *petismo* and *antipetismo* (Samuels; Zucco, 2018).

At the time of its founding, the PT gained supporters from all social classes. However, since 2002, there has been a marked decline in supporters from the most educated and wealthy sectors of society. Conversely, it is among the wealthy that *antipetismo* is most prominent (Samuels; Zucco, 2018). With respect to the role of antiestablishment attitudes, Brazilian voters (together with Salvadoreans and Peruvians) express the lowest level of confidence in political parties in Latin America, to the point that only 6 percent expressed trust (Latinobarómetro, 2018). This is partially because the *antipetista* voters historically did not positively identify with any other political parties in the system. Few *antipetistas* were sympathetic to the PSDB and no other party benefited from high levels of *antipetismo*, since detesting the PT did not necessarily imply supporting another option (Samuels; Zucco, 2018). Things changed in the presidential election of 2018, when the link between *antipetismo* and antiestablishment sentiments drove positive partisan identification in support of the PSL candidate. Indeed, as Fuks, Ribeiro and Borba

(2021) show, this entailed not only a case of *antipetismo*, but a rejection of Brazil's major parties: disaffection with two or more establishment parties jumped from 9.9% in 2002 to 29.2% in 2019. Before Bolsonaro managed to consolidate the votes of those with negative political identities regarding the PT, no political actor had profited from the high levels of both *antipetismo* and antiestablishment sentiment (Fuks; Ribeiro and Borba, 2021). In 2018, at a rally he declared that he would have liked to shoot *petistas* and litter the beaches with their corpses, alluding to the tortured and murdered victims of the military regime whose bodies would wash up on the beaches during the dictatorship.

*Hypothesis 4:* We expect that anti-PT sentiments will display a relevant role in driving support for Bolsonaro at the individual level.

#### *The politicization of massive corruption scandals*

If corruption has always been an issue in Brazil (Latinobarómetro, 2018), it is only with *Operação Lava Jato* (Car Wash Operation) that corruption became a major political issue with a significant effect on vote choice. It is worth noting that this scandal was not the first in Brazil's recent history. Indeed, in 2005 another scandal – the *Mensalão* (in English, the “Monthly Bribe scandal”) – burst when the deputy Roberto Jefferson accused the federal government, led by the PT, of paying a monthly allowance to parliamentarians to vote in favor of projects of interest to the Executive Branch. The trial began in 2012, and the PT was the main party affected, with the detention of President Lula's chief-of-staff, José Dirceu, the PT's president José Genoíno, and the party's treasurer Delúbio Soares. However, the *Mensalão* did not have the same impact as *Lava Jato* on the PT's electoral performance at that time, mainly due to the country's strong economic performance (Hunter; Power, 2019). In 2006, Lula was re-elected and in 2010 his support led to the election of his successor, Dilma Rousseff, as he left the presidency with a record 97% popular approval rating (Bonin, 2010).

It is worth noting that massive corruption scandals are functional to the populist discourse since they make it easier to depict the mainstream political establishment as both morally and financially corrupt. This blame attribution strategy has greater odds of success when corruption schemes are exposed and dismantled and the scandal affects most of the political classes (Zanotti, 2021). When people are dissatisfied with the entire political establishment, voters are attracted to political options that present themselves as outsiders and diametrically opposed to the corrupt, compromised, and self-interested political elite (Morgan, 2011). Indeed, Bolsonaro was able to present himself as an outsider and, therefore, “pure”, disconnected from the old and corrupt elite. In highly disaffected societies, massive scandals tend to fuel anti-establishment votes. This is the case in Brazil, and *Lava Jato* was decisive in enhancing both antiestablishment and anti-PT sentiments.

*Hypothesis 5:* We expect that those voters who perceive corruption as a major issue in the country will be more prone to support Bolsonaro instead of other political leaders.

## Data and methods

To perform our analysis, we use survey data from the Brazilian Electoral Study (BES). We rely on a binary dependent variable, coded 1 for those who voted for Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 Brazil elections in first round of the Brazilian presidential election. Abstainers, those who stated that they do not know whether or not they voted, and those who did not answer the question are omitted from this analysis<sup>9</sup>.

Regarding independent variables, we mainly focus on two different blocks: sociodemographic and political variables. Regarding the sociodemographic block, we regressed sex (1=female; 0=male), age (in categories: 18–24, 25–39, 40–54, 55–64, 65+), education level (1=lower; 2=medium; and 3=high), work situation (0=employed; 1=unemployed), income levels (continuous variable from the lowest to the highest value of monthly income); race (1=black; 2=brown; 3=white; 4=asian; 5=indigenous), and religious identification (1=catholic; 2=evangelical; 3=other or non-religious). The political block contains six variables: positive economic sociotropic evaluation (1=better economic situation; 0=worse economic situation), left-right scale (0=left; 10=right), satisfaction with democracy (0=satisfied; 10=unsatisfied), law and order (a coercive attitude goes against civil rights: 1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=disagree; 5=strongly disagree), essential to live in democracy (1=a democratic political system is preferable; 0=the political system is indifferent or sometimes an authoritarian regime is preferable), immigration positive (0=people from other countries make the country worse; 10=immigrants make the country a better place to live), the fact of corruption as something generalized in Brazil (1=very generalized; 2=well generalized; 3=little generalized; 4=it hardly happens), inequality as one of the major problems in Brazil (1=yes), and anti-PT sentiments (0=lower likelihood to cast a vote for the PT; 10=higher likelihood to cast a vote for the PT).

We simultaneously introduce these variables in our statistical models. This is possible because the VIFs of all variables are well below the level that would raise concerns of collinearity (1.08 is the highest VIF, belonging to the educational level variable=1.32). See Table 1 with the descriptive variables and the VIFs reported for each one of the variables.

<sup>9</sup> For a comparison of Bolsonaro's electoral base with that of other well-known PRRPs from Western Europe (e.g., German AfD, Austrian FPÖ, Italian Lega, and French NR), see Table A2 in the Appendix. It shows the extent to which these constituencies were similar and different.

**Table 1**  
**Description of variables**

<b>Bolsonaro</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>VIF</b>
Gender (1=Female)	2.506	0.5	0.5	0	1	1.07
Age	2.483	2.7	1.2	1	5	1.18
Education	2.506	1.8	0.8	1	3	1.32
Unemployed	2.488	0.2	0.4	0	1	1.04
Income	1.788	0.4	0.2	0.02	1	1.23
Race	2.445	2.3	0.9	1	5	1.02
Religion	2.506	1.7	0.8	1	3	1.03
Economic situation	2.446	0.3	0.5	0	1	1.05
L-R ideology	1.973	0.7	0.3	0	1	1.03
Satisfaction with democracy	2.440	0.2	0.4	0	1	1.06
Essential to live with democracy	2.506	0.7	0.5	0	1	1.04
Law and order	1.935	0.4	0.4	0	1	1.04
Immigration attitudes	2.403	0.7	0.3	0.2	1	1.07
Corruption	2.442	0.3	0.2	0.25	1	1.10
Inequality	2.449	0.3	0.2	0.2	1	1.09
Anti-PT	2.327	0.4	0.4	0	1	1.09

**Source:** BES 2018.

Figure 1 displays the results presented in Table A1 in the Appendix<sup>10</sup>. In addition to the above-mentioned dependent variable, we have created another variable (see Model 3) that compares Bolsonaro's electoral base (1) with Fernando Haddad's, during the presidential campaigns and elections in 2018 (codified as 0). Additionally, given the relevance of anti-PT sentiments (Samuels and Zucco, 2018), in the pair columns (2 and 4) we introduce a variable to capture it.

While *antipetismo* is the main explanatory variable (confirming Hypothesis 4), we found that even controlling for anti-PT sentiments, ideology, race (White), being Evangelical (confirming Hypothesis 1 and 2b) and having a lower level of attachment to democracy (confirming Hypothesis 3) and negative sentiments toward immigration help drive support for Bolsonaro over other political candidates. Furthermore, both income level and the perception of corruption in Brazil rise to the level of statistical significance in the first model (without anti-PT sentiments), with higher levels of income and the perception that corruption is generalized in Brazil, this translated into a higher likelihood among voters to cast their ballot for Bolsonaro. With respect to the role of the perception of corruption as a problem in driving vote-choice for Bolsonaro, Hypothesis 5 is partially confirmed since this variable loses its statistical significance when we control for anti-PT sentiments. Finally, the preference for *mano dura* (iron-fist) policies helps predict the vote for Bolsonaro in the first model but loses statistical significance when controlling for anti-PT sentiments (partially confirming Hypothesis 2a).

<sup>10</sup> The Appendix is available on the Cesop website, in the section "Revista Opinião Pública", on the page of this article: <[https://www.cesop.unicamp.br/por/opiniao\\_publica](https://www.cesop.unicamp.br/por/opiniao_publica)>.



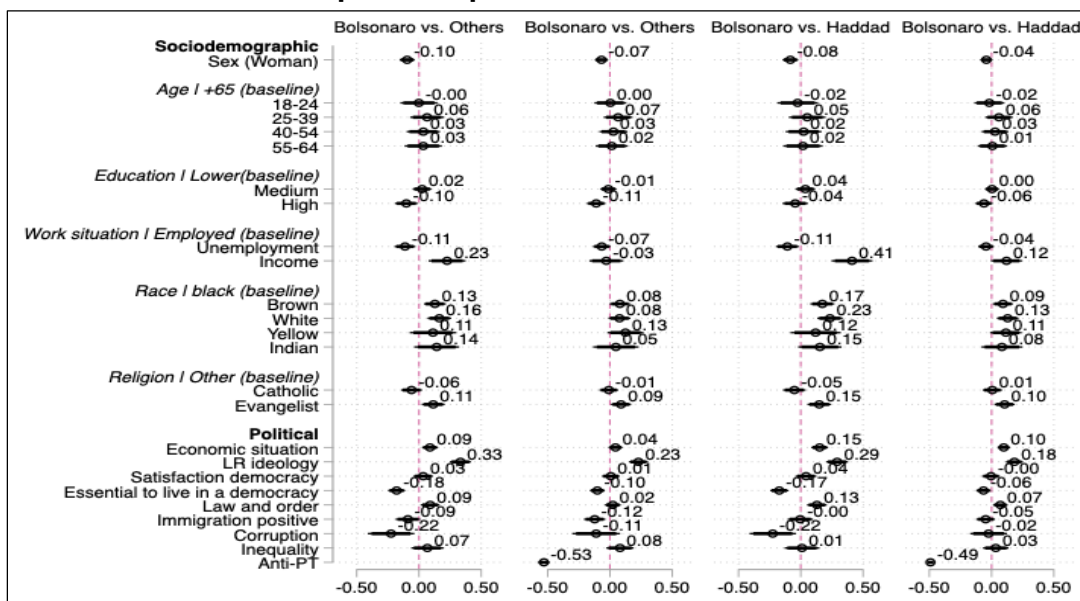
On the other hand, by trying to disentangle the factors that led a voter to support Bolsonaro instead of the PT candidate, Haddad, we found that income, race (White), religion (Evangelical Christian), indifferent or negative sentiments toward democracy, and preference for *mano dura* policies are the factors that best explain the vote for Bolsonaro (even in the fourth model which includes the anti-PT variable). Corruption loses its statistical significance when we control for anti-PT sentiment.

These findings highlight that the voters of the PRR in Brazil share some commonalities with the European PRR electorate: they tend to be White, Evangelical Christians, male, supporters of stricter public security measures, and dissatisfied with democracy.

With respect to income levels, extant data show a high degree of variation in Europe (Rama et al., 2021), but in Brazil, those individuals with higher incomes are most likely to vote for Bolsonaro. With respect to immigration, while in Europe, nationalist or anti-immigrant status is one of the main drivers for voting for the PRR, we observed that in Brazil it has an impact only under certain circumstances.

Besides the relevance of these factors, there are some idiosyncratic elements that help predict the vote for the PRR in Brazil, namely the perception of high levels of corruption in the country and the negative identity toward the system's main party: the PT.

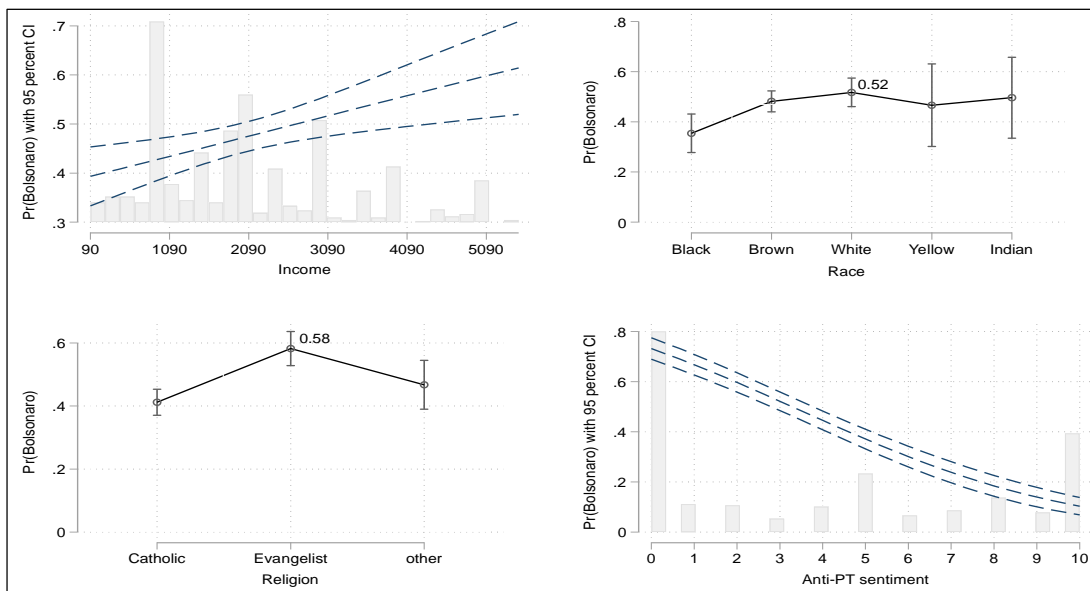
**Figure 1**  
**Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) for the sociodemographic, political, economic, and attitudinal factors to explain the support for Bolsonaro in Brazil vs other political options and vs Haddad**



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on BES 2018.

Figure 2 displays specific marginal effects for the most relevant explanatory variables for the vote for Bolsonaro (i.e., race, religious identification, income, and *antipetismo*). Additionally, this figure sheds light on the likelihood of electoral support for Bolsonaro over other candidate options. The results are clear and reinforce the Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) displayed in Figure 1: higher income and highly educated persons, Whites, Evangelical Christians, and anti-PT voters as well as individuals who prefer stricter measures regarding law and order and those with low levels of support for democracy were more prone to support the former army captain Jair Bolsonaro.

**Figure 2**  
**Marginal effects of the main independent variables to explain support for Bolsonaro**



Source: Elaboration of the authors based on BES 2018.

## Conclusion

The populist radical right (PRR) is, without a doubt, a global phenomenon. However, most studies analyzing either the supply or the demand-sides (or both) of the PRR focus on European cases. With the aim of broadening the comparative studies on the PRR, the present contribution analyzes the voter profile of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, relying on the literature on the determinants of vote choice for the PRR in Europe. Using BES 2018 survey data, we analyzed the first round of the Brazilian presidential election, in which PRR candidate Jair Bolsonaro won forty-six percent of the vote before becoming president in a run-off against PT's Fernando Haddad. In other words, this study assesses the congruence between the factors that explain support for the PRR in Western Europe and those that

explain support for Bolsonaro in Brazil. This is relevant because Bolsonaro managed to win power even in regions with structural constraints that should have limited the success of the PRR. We demonstrate that those supporting the PRR in Brazil, similar to their European peers, are predominantly male, self-identify as right-wing, tend to be Evangelical, and support *mano dura* (iron-fisted) policies. With respect to their relationship with the democratic regime, previous research in Europe and elsewhere has quite firmly established that those who are less satisfied with democratic performance are more prone to vote for the PRR. Like supporters of some PRRPs in Europe (Rama et al., 2021) and elsewhere (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., *forthcoming*), Bolsonaro's electorate is less loyal to the democratic regime than the supporters of other political options.

Moreover, Bolsonaro capitalized on both region – and country – specific issues. With respect to the former, while nativism in Europe often translates into more restrictive anti-immigration policies, in Brazil antipathy toward immigrants only partially explains the vote for the PRR. Instead, race represents a key criterion of distinction between the in-group and the out-group. In this sense, it is not surprising that those who identify as White tend to vote for Bolsonaro rather than for other political actors. In this sense, the PRR in Brazil has a strong race-driven, identitarian component very similar to Donald Trump's camp in the United States (see Cremer, *forthcoming*). All in all, with respect to the racist component, studying the rhetoric of the PRR in Brazil under Bolsonaro provides new insights into how PRR leaders articulate both the nativist and authoritarian discourse as well as shedding light on the determinants of the vote for these political options.

Finally, the vote for Bolsonaro is determined by two intertwined, country-specific factors. First was *Lava Jato*, which involved most of the traditional political class (mainly the PT). In this sense, Bolsonaro was able to politicize public frustration with the corruption running rampant throughout the country's political establishment. Furthermore, he was able to politicize the high levels of negative identity toward the PT and traditional parties in general and consolidate these voters into his very own electoral base.

These results contribute to the literature on populist and radical right parties in two ways. First, our findings extend to the Brazilian case the trend in recent scholarly works to explain the rise of the PRR in terms of the ideological aspects that define the so-called fourth wave of the far right (Mudde, 2019). In this sense, we highlight the commonalities and differences between Bolsonaro's coordination of the core ideologies of the Brazilian PRR and the trends among PRR leaders in Europe. Second, our results show that Bolsonaro does not attract economic losers of globalization, suggesting that his success depended on his ability to capture voters with cultural-ideological grievances. To some extent this could partially explain the result of the first-round of the 2022 election in Brazil where Bolsonaro lost to Lula by a narrower margin than expected in the presidential race and where the PRR obtained the greatest representation (most seats) in both the Lower House and the Senate despite the poor performance of the national economy and the unfortunate management of the pandemic.

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**Resumo**

*Avaliando a quarta onda da direita populista radical: as e os votantes de Jair Bolsonaro em perspectiva comparada*

Este artigo analisa os fatores individuais que ajudam a entender o apoio eleitoral a Jair Bolsonaro nas eleições presidenciais de 2018 no Brasil, à luz das conclusões para a Direita Populista Radical (PRR) na Europa Ocidental. O artigo contribui para a literatura comparada sobre os determinantes do voto para a PRR em um país não europeu. Analisar a ascensão da PRR na América Latina é particularmente relevante, uma vez que as restrições estruturais limitam suas chances. Para realizarmos nossa análise, contamos com os dados da pesquisa do Estudo Eleitoral Brasileiro (ESEB). Além de algumas especificidades devido a diferenças na articulação das principais ideologias do PRR, constatamos que enquanto certos determinantes do voto para o PRR no Brasil estão de acordo com a expectativa baseada na experiência europeia, outros respondem a padrões do país e da região, como a identidade negativa com relação ao PT.

*Palavras-chave:* direita populista radical; Brasil; Europa Ocidental; identidades negativas; democracia

**Resumen**

*Evaluando la cuarta ola de la derecha populista radical: los votantes de Jair Bolsonaro en perspectiva comparada*

Este artículo analiza los factores individuales que ayudan a entender el apoyo electoral a Jair Bolsonaro en las elecciones presidenciales de 2018 en Brasil a la luz de los hallazgos acerca de la Derecha Populista Radical (PRR) en la Europa Occidental. El artículo contribuye a la literatura comparada sobre los determinantes del voto al PRR en un país no europeo. Analizar el ascenso del PRR en América Latina es particularmente relevante ya que las restricciones estructurales limitan sus posibilidades. Para llevar a cabo nuestro análisis, nos basamos en los datos de encuesta del Estudio Electoral Brasileño (EES). Más allá de algunas especificidades debidas a las diferencias en la articulación de las principales ideologías del PRR, encontramos que mientras ciertos determinantes del voto al PRR en Brasil están en línea con la expectativa basada en la experiencia europea, otros responden a nivel de país y de región, como la identidad negativa hacia el PT.

*Palabras clave:* derecha populista radical; Brasil; Europa Occidental; identidades negativas; democracia

**Résumé**

*Évaluation de la quatrième vague de la droite radicale populiste: Les électeurs de Jair Bolsonaro dans une perspective comparative*

Cet article analyse les facteurs individuels qui permettent de comprendre le soutien électoral à Jair Bolsonaro lors des élections présidentielles de 2018 au Brésil à la lumière des résultats obtenus par la droite radicale populiste (PRR) en Europe occidentale. L'article contribue à la littérature comparative sur les déterminants du vote pour la PRR dans un pays non-européen. L'analyse de la montée du PRR en Amérique latine est particulièrement pertinente puisque des contraintes structurelles limitent ses chances. Pour mener à bien notre analyse, nous nous appuyons sur les données d'enquête de l'étude électorale brésilienne (EES). Au-delà de certaines spécificités dues aux différences dans l'articulation des principales idéologies du PRR, nous avons constaté que si certains déterminants du vote pour le PRR au Brésil sont conformes aux attentes basées sur l'expérience européenne, d'autres répondent – au niveau du pays et de la région – à une identité négative envers le PT.

*Mots-clés :* droite populiste radicale ; Brésil ; Europe occidentale ; identités négatives ; démocratie

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