

I National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Buenos Aires, Argentina; La Plata National University, La Plata, Argentina; National University of San Martín, San Martín, Argentina.
gkessler@unsam.edu.ar
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4204-8961>

II Federal University of São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil; Nacional Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), Brasília, DF, Brazil.
richard.miskolci@unifesp.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6405-5591>

III National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Buenos Aires, Argentina; National University of San Martín, San Martín, Argentina.
gvommaro@unsam.edu.ar
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6582-4401>

Gabriel Kessler^I
Richard Miskolci^{II}
Gabriel Vommaro^{III}

THE IDEOLOGY OF BOLSONARO VOTERS

INTRODUCTION^I

The surprising rise of Jair Messias Bolsonaro—his triumph in 2018 and the consolidation of a broad electoral support in the 2022 presidential election—have attracted the attention of the social sciences (Avritzer; Kercher & Marona, 2021; Hunter & Power, 2019, Nicolau, 2020; Rocha, Solano & Medeiros, 2021). The January 2023 attack on the Executive, Congress, and Supreme Court buildings by Bolsonaro supporters showed the radicalization of his activist base and confirmed their detachment from democracy. Their virulence and content are consistent with previous analyses on the configuration of a new extreme right activism in Brazil (Alonso, 2019; Cêpeda, 2018; Ortellado & Solano, 2016; Solano & Rocha, 2019).

These actions also raised questions as to whether they are representative of the ideas and worldviews of Bolsonaro voters. Brazilian social science has shown that until the mid-2010s, this electorate expanded from a limited support base made up primarily of military and police to other sectors: mainly White, evangelical, and Pentecostal men. The Bolsonaro voter varies greatly in terms of age, education, income, gender, and religiosity (Layton et al., 2021; Nicolau, 2020; Rennó, 2020). Bolsonaro's campaign benefited from a general growing dissatisfaction with political elites (Krause et al., 2021). The first massive expression of this sentiment was the 2013 protests (Alonso, 2017; Barreira, 2014; Singer, 2013) and it quickly consolidated into a widespread rejection of the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) [Workers' Party] (Amaral, 2020; Nicolau, 2020). PT was associated with corruption after the 2006 "Mensalão" scandal—tried in 2012—and later the "Lava Jato" anti-corruption

operation. Anti-*petismo* became thus a negative identity that stood in opposition to the party identity constructed by PT (Meléndez, 2022; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). This opposition fueled Bolsonaro's electoral props (Setzler, 2021).

However, we know more about the ideology of Bolsonaro activists than we do about the worldviews of non-activist voters. Do they share an ideology beyond opposition to PT? In this article, we ask whether Bolsonaro voters share a common view of social order. Recent research based on survey data has identified aspects of this ideology, in particular conservative positions on cultural issues (Setzler, 2021) and support for authoritarian conceptions of law and order (Vidigal, 2022). But existing studies have not yet established the extent to which these ideas constitute an organizing worldview for Bolsonaro voters' positions on different agendas. In this article, we argue, first, that voters share ideological positions on specific issues: in terms of the general outlook on society, Bolsonaro voters perceive themselves as future-oriented. For them, this position stands in contrast to PT voters, whom they define as resistant to change or "backward"; in economic issues, they adopt an entrepreneurial ethos, which they oppose to the supposed dependence and abuse of state resources by *petistas*. In cultural-moral issues, they share a discomfort with what they see as an "ideological" agenda associated with the left, social movements and PT. Finally, the disqualification of Lula and PT as corrupt—and of their voters as accomplices—amalgamates these axes and defines an incipient common narrative.

We used a qualitative methodological design based on focus groups to understand the general ideological configuration of Bolsonaro voters². Between August and September 2021, we conducted 16 focus groups with Bolsonaro and Haddad voters (used here as contrast groups) during the 2018 presidential election. Participants resided in São Paulo and its metropolitan area, other cities of the same State, the city of Rio de Janeiro, and the state capitals of Santa Catarina, Rio Grande do Sul, and Paraná. In the groups, we discussed voters' ideas about the main agenda items in Brazilian politics focusing on three topics: distributional issues, cultural conflicts, and stance on security³. Although the emerging data are limited with respect to generalizability, as in any qualitative study, they are particularly useful for exploring ideas about controversial topics (Cyr, 2017) and for capturing thought matrices (Achentí, 2018). Voters' views are analyzed by the concept of framing, which, as collective action studies point out, acts as a mediating category between worldviews constructed by political elites and how voters elaborate their positions on various issues (Snow & Benford, 2005). From this perspective, frames can be considered as "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese, 2001: 11).

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, we present the methodology and conceptual design. Then, we present voters' ideological

positions on the issues addressed. In the conclusion, we point out the contributions of the research, its limitations, and future questions.

METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DESIGN

We conducted 16 focus groups with Bolsonaro and Haddad voters in the second round of the 2018 presidential election, between August and September 2021. Of the 96 participants, half had voted for Bolsonaro and half for Haddad in the election. Eight groups were composed of residents of São Paulo and its metropolitan area, three consisted of residents of other cities in the State of São Paulo (Campinas, Hortolândia, Leme, São José dos Campos, São Vicente, Ribeirão Preto and Santos); two included residents of the city of Rio de Janeiro and three were made up of residents of Florianópolis (Santa Catarina), Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul), and Curitiba (Paraná). We chose the Southern region and the two most populous states of Southeastern Brazil due to the number of votes Bolsonaro received in these areas. Data from the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) show that Bolsonaro received more than two-thirds of his votes in these regions during the 2018 election. We selected the three southern state capitals, the two most populous cities of the Southeast (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo) and some cities from the countryside and coast of São Paulo, the state with the most voters in the country, where he doubled Haddad's share of the votes in the 2018 ballot.

The focus groups were conducted via a virtual platform due to the pandemic, with six participants per group⁴. We established gender, age, and voting quotas to ensure profile diversity. We also tried to include people of different religious denominations and ethnic identifications. Participants were recruited offline by a specialized agency. To ensure a representative sample, individuals were not allowed to participate if they had participated in a focus group in the previous year, knew each other, or had any connection to the field of social science research. The groups were conducted by one team researcher with the other two present as observers. Regarding class, we formed two groups of middle and upper-middle class voters (having completed secondary education and above) and fourteen groups of middle and lower-middle class voters (having completed secondary education) from different occupations. To compare different conversational dynamics based on whether people interact with like-minded individuals or not, we created eight homogeneous and eight heterogeneous groups regarding voting.

Participants were asked to express their opinions on the country's main political, economic, social, and cultural agenda: security, migration, social welfare, taxes, corruption, gender issues, sexual diversity and reproductive rights, and the national and state governments' management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The groups were then coded using Atlas.ti software and a content analysis considering structural, socio-cultural, geographic, and

political variables was performed to compare the responses (Andreu Abela, 2002; Krippendorff, 2009; Piovani, 2018).

But why this method of data collection? Focus groups have a long history in sociological research (see Gamson, 1992; Merton, 1948) as they allow for the creation of conversational dynamics in which one can capture the nuances and tensions around controversial topics (Cyr, 2017). We can observe the exchange between participants, the mutual influence and the collective configuration of social meaning patterns (Archenti, 2018). Although caution is necessary in treating the results due to the limits of their representativeness, they enable researchers to formulate hypotheses about the similarities and differences in the ideological configurations of each voter profile.

Certainly, the concept of ideology is one of the most controversial in the social sciences. In this paper, we draw on political psychology studies that understand ideologies as “a set of ideas about what the desired order of society is and how it should be achieved” (Erikson & Tedin, 2003: 64 apud Jost; Federico & Napier, 2009: 309). Not every set of ideas is considered an ideology, but they must have some kind of interdependence among themselves (Converse, 1964)⁵.

These worldviews were captured using framing theory, which examines the different positions, diagnoses, and solutions that agents hold on key agenda issues. In line with collective action studies, the concept allows us to capture the effects of ideology—a highly abstract concept—on positions about central issues of public debate (Snow & Benford, 2005). The concept was first popularized by Erving Goffman (1974) echoing Heider’s (1958) attribution theory, for whom the complexity in which social life unfolds forces subjects to construct causal relations between events in order to understand them. As a result, frames give meaning to events in a dynamic process that is always open to tension, negotiation, and redefinition. From this perspective, frames can be viewed as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, 2001: 11). Similarly, frames do not function as isolated ideas; rather, they often form articulated interpretive schemes. These schemes are integrated into ideologies (Snow & Benford, 2005).

Since previous research has shown the centrality of anti-PT identity as a basis for voting for Bolsonaro, we also focused on the ideological components associated with the disqualification of the Other. We coined the concept of “moral disqualification” based on stigmatizing work. Since E. Goffman’s (1963) seminal book, the concept of stigma has been very productive in the social sciences; however, it has been criticized for being theoretically diffuse and individually focused. Link and Phelan (2001) reviewed the concept and suggested that stigma occurs when five components—labeling, stereotyping, segregation, loss of status, and discrimination—are combined within power relations. This requires a process of labeling via selection of certain character-

ristics in order to identify the whole with such characteristics. These are then associated with negative attributes, creating an imaginary or real separation between “us” and “them” as to cause a loss of social status. Moral disqualification involves the first two steps of the stigmatization process: labeling and stereotyping. As the stages of segregation, loss of status, and discrimination do not occur, it does not become a “successful” stigmatization process. However, labeling implies an oversimplification of category attributes for which it is first necessary to distinguish and name a group that can be homogeneously socially identified. This is where the second component comes in, the one Goffman focused on the most: stereotyping. For Link and Phelan (2001), the path to stigma is paved by attaching a label to a stereotype that associates the person with negative attributes.

THE IDEOLOGY OF BOLSONARO’S VOTERS

In order to identify whether there are common ideological traits among Bolsonaro voters, we analyzed their positions on three central agendas of Brazilian politics: the economic-distributive agenda, which defines positions on the distribution of economic burdens and benefits in society; the cultural-moral agenda, which proposes models of gender relations, family models, and sexual diversity; and the security agenda, which includes positions on criminal behavior and appropriate punishments for crimes. Our data show that although there are nuances in the positions of Bolsonaro voters in the three agendas, there are similarities that enable us to identify a shared ideological configuration. After presenting their positions on the three agendas, we describe the main axes that make up this ideology.

The distributive agenda and the view of the State

We studied two central issues at the time the groups were formed: social aid during the pandemic and a possible extraordinary tax on large fortunes to cover the expenses resulting from the health crisis. There are nuances among Bolsonaro’s voters from the lower and middle sectors with respect to social assistance that are expected: the poorest sectors tend to have a more positive view of social assistance. At the same time, there are clear ideological axes that bring them together. In general, Bolsonaro’s voters justify temporary aids due to the pandemic, but their positions are mostly critical of permanent social aid. As Priscila, a 46 year-old, White, Catholic, divorced, speech therapist from Curitiba, said: “It’s a public disaster, when this happens, it’s the government’s duty, yes, to protect the people. They had to receive the assistance, and the aid had to be much better than this, if possible. That is the reality. But this support should not be prolonged over time⁶.” “There are moments and moments,” said Gabriel, a 35 year-old evangelical and unemployed resident of São Paulo. For most of Bolsonaro’s voters, once the period of work inhibition is over,

subsidies are again an incitement to vagrancy and an advantage for profiteers who prefer to live off the public budget instead of making an effort for themselves. Luciana, also from São Paulo, 36 years old, White, Catholic, with a high school education, and a caregiver for older adults, explained the rationality behind these concerns: “We have to teach people how to fish, not just give them fish, because then they become lazy, they become comfortable, and that’s why the word is aid, take this ‘hook from aid,’ it’s not a benefit for the rest of your life, it’s just help until you get over it.”

There are those who are more in favor of extending such cash transfers programs beyond the pandemic, but even in these cases, they stated that aid should end at some point to make room for individual efforts. Paula, 37 years old, mixed race, Catholic, from São Paulo, a high school graduate and make-up artist, said: “Sure, for a while, yes. Not forever, because everyone has to struggle and care for their own well-being.” In sum, the majority of Bolsonaro’s voters’ positions on social aid are not completely negative, but their focus remains on individual effort and the exceptional nature of aid in times of emergency. Nuances have to do with the time of extension of assistance.

Regarding taxes, the dominant position is based on the idea of not “punishing” the rich. Although there are more extreme positions criticizing all forms of taxation, most of them consider it necessary to levy taxes, but in an “equal” manner for all, regardless of their income and wealth. This particular idea of equality is justified by the notion of merit: those who have more money are understood to have some merit, so they should not be “punished” with more taxes. In line with expectations, middle-class and more highly educated Bolsonaro voters were the ones who most consistently argued along these lines. Aline, 44 years old, White, Adventist, and a real estate agent with postgraduate studies from São José dos Campos, pointed out: “I am against [taxation], but I go in the opposite direction; if a person has large fortunes, I will give them money to invest in the country, invest in other things, instead of taxing them.”

Positions on taxes and social aids are connected: according to Bolsonaro’s voters, permanent social assistance pushes the State to collect higher taxes from society instead of promoting private activity. Lucas, 42 years old, White, Adventist, divorced businessman from Leme, with a complete higher education, asserted: “The State does not have to be paternalistic. It has to create methods encouraging entrepreneurs having companies to create more companies so that people have jobs.” Rodrigo, an industrial designer from Santos, aged from 35 to 55 years old, spoke similarly: “I believe that *Bolsa Família* (a Family Support Social Program), a social program for this, a social program for that, really should not exist. I believe that the government [should] help by reducing taxes.” That is why the tax increase is unjust since, as Priscila argued, “if a person worked, they would make what they deserved, that money is their own; if they work, then they don’t have to pay more than the person who is just sitting there waiting for their *Bolsa Família*.” In short,

taxes are perceived as a “punishment” for the person who tried and succeeded, which is understood within a notion of “equality” that is based on equal burden. Regardless of existing inequalities, Bolsonaro voters share views on these two topics⁷.

The cultural and moral agenda

When it comes to the distributive agenda, the variety of positions presented are clearly connected to a position that we can call individualistic. However, positions related to the cultural and moral agenda are more heterogeneous and contain both classic cultural conservative and moderate points of views that take part of the current progressive consensus in this domain. Thus, although there is an important concentration of voters with conservative positions on cultural issues, positions are neither unanimous nor monolithic. We find positions predominantly in favor of equality between men and women, White and Black people, and manifestations of respect for Indigenous people, immigrants, and the LGBTI+ population, including support for marriage and adoption of children by homosexual couples. On abortion, positions are also divided, with one-third of our respondents favoring the right to terminate a pregnancy, one-third agreeing with the right to abortion under certain conditions, and one-third strongly opposing it.

Among those with more moderate positions are persons who defend economic equality between men and women. Felipe, a 25 year-old, White, single, evangelical metallurgist with a high school education who lives in the metropolitan area of the city of São Paulo, stated in regard to this topic: “I think women need to be independent, have their own money, their own freedom.” Those identified with libertarian currents also defended moderate positions on cultural issues. Although they criticized the political and social movements that make cultural-moral demands, they didn’t oppose these advances completely. Thus, Maurício, a 26 year-old, White, single, Catholic resident of an elite neighborhood of São Paulo with higher education, who is also a follower of Olavo de Carvalho — a far-right thinker — expressed his positions on these issues:

Regarding gay marriage, I’m in favor. On the question of abortion, yes, I’m in favor. Legalization of drugs, yes, I’m in favor. Freedom, the State cannot be placing obstacles in people’s lives. So, if a woman wants to have an abortion, it is her choice. Logically, she has that limitation in gestation, up to a certain month, I do not know exactly until what month, but it is her choice, so yes, in favor of the LGBT issue, yes, everyone should have the same conditions to participate in political life, private sector, all of them, as long as they are not under an imposition through an affirmative action law. There must be investment in education, investment in conditions, so that, in the long term, people will be able to eliminate all these inequalities.

Participants’ positions did not always align on these issues. For example, Maria, a 54 year-old White evangelical with a high school education who

works as a caregiver for elderly people and resides in Porto Alegre, claimed to be in favor of racial and gender equality; she also said that homosexuals should be respected, but expressed her opposition to gay marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex couple. She criticized the feminist movement as “radical:” “I’m not very much in favor of feminism, of being very radical, but I am in favor of us conquering our space. That’s what I’m for.” In this case, social movements are seen as a source of social division, formed by interested people and, above all, linked to the left.

The differences between our findings—which complement more recent research that also uses focus groups (De Paula et al., 2021)—and previous literature on Bolsonaro voters and Bolsonaro conservatism probably stem from at least two issues. The first is that quantitative research identified statistical associations between attitudes and voting (Amaral, 2020; Layton et al, 2021; Rennó, 2020; Vidigal, 2022) but did not focus on identifying how these attitudes shape ideological configurations; second the qualitative data produced so far which allow us to better capture these configurations, generally come from fieldwork conducted during pro-Bolsonaro demonstrations (Kalil, 2018; Ortellado & Solano, 2016; Telles, 2016). It is very likely that these studies tend to capture the perspective of the most radical voters, mobilized to the point of taking to the streets. Hence, such research interpreted Bolsonaro’s electorate as more homogeneous (Abranches et al., 2019; Pinheiro-Machado & Freixo, 2019) than what we found in our work. Moreover, as we have pointed out, most of our sample stress that their support and votes do not mean a complete adherence to the agenda of the former Brazilian president. This was expressed by Adriana, a 43 year-old, White Catholic, with a university degree who lives in the eastern zone of São Paulo: “I am not in favor of everything he talks about, but there were many things he was talking about that I wanted to hear from someone. This extreme thing of homophobia is a matter of education, and I think it is totally wrong.”

The security agenda

Bolsonaro voters are generally punitive and in favor of hardliner positions. They support the possibility of prosecuting minors. Talita, a 39 year-old White, married evangelical, who has a high school degree and works as a house cleaner in São Paulo, affirmed: “I believe that the laws should be revised, be more rigid, anything [...] I am not in favor of the death penalty, but we should review these laws.” A narrative that identifies the causes of crime in individuals prevails, and therefore demands harshness toward those who commit crimes. The most extreme punitive positions support the death penalty and, to a lesser degree, gun ownership. Among those in favor of open access to guns are those who suggest that “good citizens” have the right to bear arms. In fact, support for carrying guns is not always linked to a willingness to make use of that right. Unlike the death penalty, which concerns moral and

religious convictions—and therefore many intensely religious Bolsonaro voters do not support it—the use of guns is associated with individual freedom. Other authors argue that fascination with guns is at the heart of Bolsonaro voters (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2020: 14) but in our groups, guns appeared more as a point of support for an exacerbated individualism and to a feeling of unprotectedness. Pedro, a 42 year-old White married Catholic with a high school education who works as a hairdresser, stated: “I am not in favor of the death penalty. I am a Christian and would never be in favor of the death penalty. On the right of owning a gun, I believe that even if it were a right, I believe that if people want to have the right to have a gun, they should have it, yes, but I would not buy one.”

In some cases, there is an association between good citizens/right wing/Bolsonaro vs. left wing/Lula/communism. In the words of Fernando, a 47-year-old White single Catholic, who works in a cellphone store and has a high school education stated: “I am very much in favor of good citizens carrying a gun. Exactly. Lula is against this. Why, exactly? He wants people to be unarmed, to be restrained. And I am very much in favor of the people, good citizens having a gun.”

Even a gendered view can lead to legitimizing the use of weapons. Ivania, a middle-aged Catholic woman who is married to a police officer and has a high school education, said:

I’m in favor [of carrying a gun]. I am totally in favor, as long as the person is a good person. Yes, I’m in favor of it. I’m totally defenseless. I’ve been mugged five times in the street. I am totally defenseless because I am a woman. A lot of women are raped these days, they’re assaulted because they’re women, and the guy is there with the gun, the thug, and I can’t have one.

In short, Bolsonaro voters have positions with class nuances in two of the agendas we studied—more clearly in the cultural than in the distributive one—and are quite homogeneous in their positions on security. Despite these differences, we find points of agreement serve to define elements of an ideology based on values such as individual effort, merit, and distrust of the State—even in security matters, in which a more punitive presence is demanded, support for individual self-defense is also growing—which form the basis, as we will see in the next point, of a series of moral disqualifications of the PT and its voters.

Moral disqualification and control of cultural agenda: the axes of opposition to PT voters

Once the positions on the agendas and their common points have been studied, we can ask: what organizes these positions and makes them, to a certain extent, a common ideology that gives cohesion to a more or less articulated constituency? In our analysis, we found three strong framing axes for this

ideology. Two of them are oppositions based on moral disqualifications of PT voters and are articulated with the frames on the issues presented in the previous section. The third organizing axis is a strategic narrative that promotes the need to take control of the cultural and moral agenda, which they consider to be in the hands of progressivism.

The first opposition is connected to economic issues: Bolsonaro voters consider themselves entrepreneurs, people who are self-sufficient, who work hard day after day to get ahead and improve their position without expecting anything from the State. On the contrary, *petistas* would be complacent, people accustomed to receiving help from the State or having positions in the public sector that do not require effort or self-improvement. This organizing framework is the most value-laden and is more closely linked to people's daily lives. Undoubtedly, this opposition is linked to the theology of prosperity that circulated in Pentecostal churches in Brazil (Almeida, 2019; Feltran, 2020; Mariano, 2004). However, it is a more encompassing ethos of Bolsonaro's voters that emerges as a shared frame and extends across religious variables, gender, and includes those who identify with both the ultra-conservative and moderate positions already described⁸. This was observed in the previous section insofar as some voters supported emergency social aid, as long as it was limited in time, and in regard to taxes, which were considered a punishment for those who made an effort and succeeded economically.

The second opposition is expressed in terms of a perspective on time: Bolsonaro voters are oriented to the future, while *petistas* are considered resistant to change or ideologically backward. This is not to say that the motivations for supporting Bolsonaro are only prospective since the rejection of the recent past (PT governments from 2002 to 2016) is part of what unites them. Instead, it is a rejection of the past in the name of an idea of the future with respect to which *petistas* would be antagonistic. Beyond the undoubtedly reactionary components of Bolsonaro's discourse, particularly on the part of activists and a good part of the most conservative voters, under this perspective, voters are not asking for a return to the past in terms of a reversal of achievements or in terms of decreasing inequality or a cultural backlash. Instead, they do identify Lula—and in some cases the mainstream right—with traits of the past that they do not want to see return, and which are largely viewed as marked by corruption. This can be seen in the following dialogue held in a group of lower class Bolsonaro voters from São Paulo and its periphery, ages from 35 to 55:

What would Brazil be like if Lula had another term?

Talita [cleaner]: I believe it would go back to the way it was before [...]

Fernando [account manager at a cellphone operator]: It's a lot of corruption [...]

Talita: [...] Maybe worse. I believe that everyone will come back, as they say, that suckled at Brazil's teat, everyone will come back. He's going to come back much stronger and wanting to be even more in charge of everything.

The opposite of change can be corruption or the *petista* favoring the “complacent,” Paula argued: “I believe that Bolsonaro’s voters are in favor of change; and Lula’s voters desire to live in the same way.” In all cases, Bolsonaro’s voters see themselves as future-oriented, even during the pandemic, which was taking place as we conducted fieldwork. For Luis, a 52 year-old White single Catholic man who works as an e-commerce manager in Porto Alegre, “People have spent 20 years getting caught without air, without being able to breathe, do you understand? Because the people who were there at the top, besides bringing people down, still threw their feet in the air so as not to get up. At least now Brazil has stopped walking backward. It is not walking forward, but the country is not walking backward.”

In short, Bolsonaro opens a future perspective in the face of the perception that PT was damaging the country and heading it to the past. Undoubtedly, this perception has an ideological component: PT and *Petistas* are viewed as corrupt and backward because they embrace a perished ideology, which Bolsonaro voters label as leftist and sometimes even communist. Bolsonaro voters were not only more optimistic about the future because they were supporting the ruling party or the opposition, but also because they believed that under Bolsonaro’s government they could continue to move forward on the right path, that is, they could leave the PT behind.

The third axis is the dispute for the control of the cultural and moral agenda, particularly the gender agenda. The argument is as follows: there have been many changes in relation to women, sex education, and the LGBTI+ population carried out by the PT governments in alliance with social movements. The dispute for the control of the agenda is defined by an attempt to re-discuss the different changes made and eventually to be made from a general conservative perspective with different nuances. As noted, this is by no means a generalized backlash that seeks to return to the past in all its dimensions. In some cases, controlling the agenda means putting an end to changes under the idea that “enough is enough;” in other cases, the objective may be to produce modifications or nuances in changes already made.

The statements of our interlocutors express an attempt to find a middle ground to deal with gender and sexuality issues without losing control over them, which is evident in many positions that seek to separate what would be learned at home and what would probably be addressed at school. Pedro, a Black married evangelical man, who works as a computer technician, has a high school education and is the father of a six-year-old girl, spoke about the issue of sex education in school:

I am not in favor of it, I believe that sexual education is at home. Each family has its values, each family has its beliefs of faith, of respect for the elderly. So, I believe that this is taught at home and obviously, from the moment the child is a child, who is no longer a child, when people talk to children, I would understand that up to 15, 16 years old.

In the discourse above, as in many others, in addition to the division between what should be taught in the family and in school, a definition of the age for exposure to the subject is demanded. Other voters were in favor of sex education, but only focused on combating and preventing child sexual abuse and were reluctant to address issues of sexual or gender diversity.

In short, it is not possible to say that Bolsonaro voters are all against human rights claims. For most of them, it is a matter of approaching issues differently, choosing priorities, forms of implementation, and rhythms that differ with those associated with the left, its social movements, and, in particular, the PT governments. Their priorities are summarized in the most concrete and tangible manner and in ways that imply an implementation that would not destabilize their values, daily practices, and, above all, does not threaten the family unit.

Rejection of corruption as a central organizing issue

In focus groups, the central axis articulating different dimensions of opposition to PT was the rejection of corruption. As is known, during the PT government, corruption was gaining a central place in public debate. This began with the *Mensalão* scandal in 2005 in which it was alleged that the government purchased the legislative support of federal deputies. From there, a series of claims of corruption and debates escalated, culminating in the anti-corruption Operation Lava Jato in 2014, which led to the imprisonment of Lula, in 2018. Brazilian social sciences have analyzed various angles of this process in relation to democratic institutions, justice, the economy, and public opinion (Kerche & Feres Jr., 2018; Telles, 2016).

For Bolsonaro voters, corruption was a central issue. It was also reflected in several dimensions. First, it was understood as a crime (Lula's imprisonment was the most reliable proof of the crime and his subsequent release did not modify this judgment); more generally, corruption was understood as a number of ways of taking advantage of the State either individually by means of social policies or positions in Government or as "wasting" funds in feminist and LGBT social movements; in some cases, it was considered part of public policies linked to sexual and reproductive health, among others. Corruption (particularly among political elites) is, in this sense, understood as in opposition to individual effort, the standard-bearer of Bolsonaro's voters. As Fernando has expressed, his concern was so great that it generated a generalized suspicion of all public spending by PT. It became a primary reason to prevent Lula's return:

In my opinion, corruption is a very serious problem, which is not a current problem, that people do not know where our taxes go. People pay a lot of taxes, but people do not see it reverted into roads, into schools. That is a very serious problem, that is one of the reasons why people are worried about the next elections, exactly. [...] A return to corruption. If Lula wins, [...] he will not win, but what people imagine, corruption will return.

Bolsonaro is the leader that can replace the owners of the corrupt system. This is true in cases of typically conservative voters. Eduardo, a lower-class married 60 year-old Catholic White man, put it thus:

I am a right-winger, so I am a conservative guy too, so starting from that principle, when they voted for Bolsonaro, everyone who voted for Bolsonaro voted with the intention of throwing the PT's gang out of government. Why throw PT's gang of thieves out of government? Because it is simple. To look for matters regarding what happened within the 12 years, 16 years that they had in the PT government, nobody got out of misery, nobody got out of poverty, nothing was done in relation to anything and there was only embezzling of public money.

This judgment was shared even by less ideological voters. Sofia, an evangelical 28 year-old Black married with a high school education echoed the centrality of corruption in her choice for Bolsonaro:

In truth, because of the number of crimes that the PT committed: active corruption, payroll, gang formation, ideological falsehood, passive corruption, money laundering, the receipt of the undisclosed money laundering. It is the greatest corruption we had, which was PT's Mensalão scandal. So, taking into consideration so many crimes and corruptions, that is why I voted for Bolsonaro.

Even many of those who accept that there is corruption in Bolsonaro's government believe that this corruption is less than in the times of the PT government. Márcia, a 42-year-old White married Catholic high school graduate who works as a cosmetics saleswoman in the São Paulo Metropolitan area told us:

One thing that I consider wrong with Bolsonaro, who was a person I admired and stopped admiring, was when he began to defend his corrupt sons, and he ended up defending them. [...] So, he is also corrupt, but I believe he is a little less corrupt than Lula and PT's leaders.

Faced with the corruption of PT and the complicity of its voters, Bolsonaro embodied the promise of a "clean-up" of government. Marcos, a 53-year-old dentist from São José dos Campos who is White, married, and a Spiritualist, said:

The cleaning of the government machine, in a general way. In order to make the functioning of the country fairer, more founded, more capable, you need to clean up the whole structure of the machine, which is contaminated. It is rotten due to the last governments, not only of the PT but also of several other governments that have had this objective of contaminating the machine for their own benefit, so that only those who have benefited from this contamination can make the most of it.

In other words, corruption is not only a matter of public morality, but also an organizing expression of discomfort both with the present-day situation of the country and with the economic-distributive and cultural agenda promoted by the PT. Not unlike the desire to control the cultural and moral agenda, the rejection of corruption is also articulated with an entrepreneurial ethos: corruption appears as the ultimate moral perversion of the ideas of effort, merit, and justice, particularly in terms of rewarding those who have earned as a result of hard work. In this light, aid that is maintained over time also emerges as a form of corruption insofar as it complacent citizens. Therefore, beyond differences among voters and with Bolsonaro's actions and worldview, corruption, understood in this broad sense, continues to be a decisive factor when choosing who to vote for. It was also one of the main reasons why many of our interviewees who were critical of Bolsonaro's administration continued to vote for him.

CONCLUSIONS

Even with the limits inherent to a qualitative study, we found that most Bolsonaro voters disagree with some of the former president and his activists' extreme positions. We also confirmed differences among voters on key agenda issues, corroborating other studies (Rennó, 2020; Setzler, 2021; Vidigal, 2022). Despite such heterogeneity, the electorate shares a certain consensus both in terms of the agenda analyzed, as well as the moral disqualification of the out-group. In this regard, this article contributes to the debate by providing an overview of the ideology of Bolsonaro voters near the end of his term from a qualitative perspective, highlighting the nuances among Bolsonaro voters and locating points of rupture with Haddad voters. Our analysis has pointed out a common ideology among voters that does not follow all the positions of their leader but rather, as compared to the Haddad voters, has its own defined contours. We find that the ideology of Bolsonaro voters is characterized by three core features. Firstly, a point of cleavage in all agenda items that differentiates them from the PT voters interviewed: the rejection of continued social aids, the understanding of taxes as punishment, support for gun carrying and the death penalty, as well as dissatisfaction with what they consider a loss of control over the cultural and gender agenda. Although not all Bolsonaro voters share all of these ideas, none of the PT voters interviewed expressed any of these positions; thus, we consider them as points of cleavages with the out-group. Secondly, corruption identified with PT takes a central place and is the convergent axis of values contrary to those they ascribe to themselves. At the micro level, corruption organizes an opposition between the complacent versus the deserving, and at the macro level, between living off state aid versus living off one's own efforts. These ideological positions crystallize and reinforce themselves in a strong anti-PT sentiment both against Lula and against his voters, whom they see not only as embodying the negative flip

side of their own values but also as trying to return to a past they want to leave definitively behind. Thus, with all the differences they may have with the leader, Bolsonaro voters believe he is the only guarantee that the past will not return, and that Brazil can finally change.

To conclude, we can pose future questions for research on Bolsonaro voters. First, we must remind ourselves of the limitations of our study. This is a qualitative exploratory study, so more studies with different approaches and in different regions and social groups are needed to further investigate the ideology of Bolsonaro voters and how they organize their worldviews along different agendas. The primary question lies on the future of this electorate. So far, we can claim that they do not constitute an electorate who subscribe to all of their leader's positions. However, this may change. Studies on the so-called party-driven sorting in the United States (Mason, 2015) have shown how a large part of Republican voters have followed the radicalization process of their leaders over the last two decades. The Brazilian situation is distinct in that there is no right-wing party equivalent to the Republican party in the United States. However, a recent study showed that Bolsonaro's figure attracts such voters to position themselves as right-wing (Russo; Pimentel & Avelino, 2022) in what they call "reverse causality." The changing political landscape and the ups and downs of Bolsonaro's status in the party will undoubtedly have an impact on a constituency that follows a leader rather than a movement or a party. It is still too early to predict what will happen, so it is necessary to continue investigating the ideological universe of the voters of the extreme right in order to avoid simplified views on a phenomenon in which a large part of the future of democracy in Brazil is at stake, which, as it is often said "(is still) at risk."

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Gabriel Kessler holds a PhD in Sociology from École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS). He is a senior researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) and full professor at the La Plata National University and National University of San Martín. He is the editor of *International Sociology*. His research focuses on inequality, social structure, crime, and political polarization in Latin America. His most recent books are *Uneven Trajectories: Latin American Society in the XXI Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) and *La ¿nueva? estructura social de América Latina: cambios y persistencias después de la ola de gobiernos progresistas* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2020), both with Gabriela Benza.

Richard Miskolci is full professor of Sociology at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp), and researcher of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq, Brazil). He was a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago, University of Michigan, University of California, and Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests include political communication and disinformation on public health. Last publications are “Beyond Science Denialism: Disinformation During the Covid-19 Pandemic” (*Sociologias*, Porto Alegre, v. 25, p. 1-26, 2023), and, with F. Figueiredo Balieiro, “The Moralization of Politics in Brazil” (*International Sociology*, Thousand Oaks, v. 38, p. 1-17, 2023).

Gabriel Vommaro is a professor of political sociology at the National University of San Martín and a National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) researcher in Argentina. He works on party organization and political activism, state-popular relations, and political communication. He recently published *Diminished Parties: Democratic Representation in Contemporary Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, co-edited with J. P. Luna, R. Piñeiro and F. Rosenblatt), and *Conservatives Against the Tide: The Rise of the Argentine PRO in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

NOTES

- 1 The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers. Their suggestions contributed greatly to improve the article.
- 2 The fieldwork conducted in Brazil is part of a broader comparative research project that also includes Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, and Mexico. In addition to the focus groups, we conducted an analysis of the historical series available for these five countries (5 waves from 1991 to 2018) on the World Values Survey, focusing on questions about the cultural and economic-distributive agendas. With this data, we reconstruct the evolution of society's opinions on these issues, allowing us to identify the backdrop against which the conversational dynamics of the focus groups were expressed (see Kessler et al., 2024).
- 3 De Paula et al. (2021) adopted a similar methodological approach. Based on 24 focus groups with Bolsonaro voters in large cities, this study focused on the perceived economic and health situation, as well as the view of Bolsonaro's figure held by his voters. However, it did not address the ideological question.
- 4 The literature on the subject considers that virtual focus groups are equally valid as in-person ones, and even allow sensitive issues to be addressed more easily. Cf. Boydell et al. (2014).
- 5 In this sense, we do not discuss the ideological self-positioning of voters on the left-right spectrum. A discussion of the effects of adherence to Bolsonaro on ideological positioning can be found in (Russo; Pimentel & Avelino, 2022).
- 6 We have changed all the names of the focus group participants. All those we quote are Bolsonaro voters. We only detail sociodemographic data the first time we mention them and according to their relevance for understanding that person's position on each issue.
- 7 In contrast, these positions were not found in any of the PT voters interviewed.
- 8 Some works linked Bolsonarist entrepreneurialism to a threatened masculinity (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2020) but we did not find this in our interviewees.

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THE IDEOLOGY OF BOLSONARO VOTERS

Keywords

Ideology;
Voters;
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Polarization;
Bolsonaro;
Brazil.

Abstract

Studies on Bolsonaro voters, based mostly on survey data, have identified sociodemographic profiles and attitudes that define them by their negative identity and cultural conservatism. However, we do not yet know if Bolsonaro supporters have a common ideology—understood not as left-right positioning but as a set of worldviews that organizes these positions. This article identifies an ideology based on three components: first, a series of moral oppositions in relation to PT voters, namely, future-oriented vs. resistant to change; entrepreneurial ethos vs. state dependency. Second, a demand for revising the cultural agenda to grant their political side control of change. Finally, a critique of corruption and a general framing of shared worldviews. The data comes from research with focus groups conducted in 2021 in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, Florianópolis, and Porto Alegre.

A IDEOLOGIA DOS ELEITORES DE BOLSONARO

Palavras-chave

Ideologia;
Eleitores;
Extrema-direita;
Polarização;
Bolsonaro;
Brasil.

Resumo

Os estudos sobre eleitores de Bolsonaro, baseados predominantemente em dados de pesquisas de opinião, identificaram perfis sociodemográficos e atitudes que os definem, em especial em relação à sua identidade negativa e ao seu conservadorismo cultural. Não sabemos ainda se existe entre eles uma ideologia, entendida não como posicionamento esquerda-direita, antes principalmente como um conjunto de visões de mundo que organiza esses posicionamentos. Este artigo identifica tal ideologia por meio de três componentes. Primeiro, uma série de oposições morais em relação aos eleitores do PT: orientados ao futuro versus resistentes à mudança; ethos empreendedor versus dependência do Estado. Segundo uma demanda de revisão da agenda cultural que outorgue o controle das mudanças ao seu campo. Finalmente, uma crítica à corrupção, enquadramento geral das visões de mundo compartilhadas. Os dados provêm de uma pesquisa com grupos focais realizada, em 2021, na cidade e no Estado de São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, Florianópolis e Porto Alegre.