

## **When Right-Wing Populism Becomes Distorted Public Health Communication: Tracing the Roots of Jair Bolsonaro’s Epidemiological Denialism**

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This article delineates key links between right-wing populism and epidemiological denialism. Building on a comparative analysis of central tropes from Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro’s 2018 campaign and his public-facing response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we argue that his engagement during both periods employs two key elements of right-wing populism: Anti-elitism, or the view that the political establishment is irredeemably disconnected from the citizenry, and anti-pluralism, or the blaming of political and social problems on scapegoat populations. During the COVID-19 outbreak, this denigration of public trust fuels denialism or the systemic attempt to downplay severity to minimize public response. Developing a thematic analysis around Bolsonaro’s speeches, interviews, and personal social media, we address how anti-elitist and anti-pluralist strategies from the 2018 campaign inform the pandemic response. These include the discrediting of governmental bodies, the villainization of progressive activists, and the assignment of blame on foreign actors. Our goal is to provide an in-depth case study of how communication bolstering epidemiological denialism is propagated—an increasingly vital conversation as right-wing populism and health misinformation proliferate.

*Keywords: populism, public health communication, COVID-19, Brazilian studies*

Since its rise to pandemic status in March 2020, the SARS COVID-19 outbreak has been accompanied by an “infodemic” (World Health Organization [WHO], United Nations, and International Federation of the Red Cross, 2020), in which actors with competing motivations attempt to win influence over public perception. Communicating the health risks posed by the virus, the severity of the epidemic, the

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Date submitted: 2022-04-03

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efficacy of vaccination and other mitigation efforts, and other crucial elements of the public health response to the COVID-19 outbreak has turned into a struggle between national governments, multilateral organizations, news outlets, and issue-oriented activists. Within this struggle, two narratives have served to define an *epidemiological denialism* objecting to the muscular public response to the coronavirus: *Attempted minimization of public intervention*, or the position that the virus's severity (or lack of severity) does not justify mitigation efforts like lockdowns and masking mandates; and *vaccine skepticism*, the belief that contraindicating factors associated with vaccine adoption outweigh health benefits. These two narratives have fueled oppositional attitudes regarding epidemiological guidance.

As we will delineate, epidemiological denialism shares key representational tropes with "right-wing populism," a political phenomenon on the rise in the past few decades. In particular, two key ideational features link these perspectives: *Anti-elitism* and *anti-pluralism*. Anti-elitism is defined at the core by the belief that elected representatives and government bureaucracies are fundamentally not responsive to the demands and desires of the "average" citizen (Schulz et al., 2018). In the context of epidemiological denialism, anti-elitism is linked to the denigration of medical science's epistemological authority, including "a lack of trust in medical authorities, a misunderstanding of the scale of human suffering that infectious disease can impart, and ignorance of science" (Berman, 2020, p. ix). Anti-pluralism is built on the conceptualization that a certain identity group (often linked to ethnic, gender, or cultural divisions) occupies a position of superiority over others. Opposed to the foundational beliefs in equality among different identity groups that characterize pluralism, anti-pluralism attempts to deny differences in favor of a single identity category. Fundamentally anti-democratic in nature, anti-pluralism is fueled by sentiments of resentment and fear of other identities. For proponents of right-wing populism this privileged identity group is perpetually caught in an "unending moment of crisis" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 11) instigated by potential threats minority groups raise to its dominance and stability. In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, anti-pluralism has taken a variety of forms ranging from blaming China for purposefully amplifying contagion to arguing that mitigation measures like social distancing are employed by leftists to curtail freedom of assembly.

Linking right-wing populism and epidemiological denialism, this article focuses on central right-wing populist tropes mobilized by Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro during *both* his 2018 presidential campaign and roughly the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that his communication offers a veritable playbook for learning how right-wing populist tropes fuel epidemiological denialism. Drawing on a comparative analysis of the president's public interviews, campaign speeches, and personal social media communication during the 2018 campaign and the first two years of the pandemic, we argue that these distorted messages attempt to disincentivize Brazilian citizens from appreciating the severity of the virus, pushing them instead to distrust the public health establishment and blame cultural outsiders for the COVID-19 outbreak.

### **Theorizing Bolsonaro's Brand of Populism**

To draw out continuities in Bolsonaro's populist rhetoric between the 2018 presidential campaign and the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, we will first address in more theoretical specificity what form of populist communication he mobilizes. While many commentators critique Bolsonaro on the grounds of his "populism," the question of what it is about his particular form of populism that attracts followers is underdiscussed.

### ***The Ambiguities of Populism as an Analytical Category***

The vagueness of labels of "populism" is linked to fundamental ambiguities within the concept. As scholars addressing the so-called "ideational nature" of populism have argued, populism has been defined as a political logic that designates one individual or group as the authentic representation of "the people" at the exclusion of other competing groups (Laclau, 2005). The semiotic malleability of "the people" at the core of populism has led to its labeling as a "thin ideology" (Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). This conceptual thinness poses at least two serious problems. Firstly, it is almost impossible to transform populist ideational politics into either a coherent political platform or actionable policy items (Stanley, 2008). Secondly, its conceptual thinness lends populism a discursive flexibility, as Reinmann, Aaborg, Strombeck, Esser, and de Vreese (2016) find in their recent multinational study of populist parties in Western Europe: "Populism is a general abstract concept about politics and society that is open to a diverse set of more concrete political ideas and programs, depending on both national and historical contexts" (p. 2). Examples of this thinness are rampant. In 2016, the *Guardian* (the United Kingdom) compared the presidential campaign of Donald Trump in the United States and the campaign of Jeremy Corbyn for British prime minister as "identical cults of personality akin to the Manson Family" (as cited in Hochuli, Hoare, & Cunliffe, 2021, p. 65). In a similar flattening, Block and Negrine (2017) ground their theory of "populist communication styles" by looking at similarities between Venezuelan former president Hugo Chavez (a self-identified Marxist-Leninist) and British politician Nigel Farage (an ethno-nationalist). In the Brazilian context, researchers found that during the 2018 election, elite publications like *Folha de São Paulo* referred to both Bolsonaro and his opponent Fernando Haddad as "populist threats" to democracy to the degree that each candidate engaged in ideational appeals to the general population for support (Araújo & Prior, 2020). As these examples illustrate, a conceptual label capacious enough to include centrists, Marxists, ethno-nationalists, and right-wing authoritarian leaders under the same umbrella is not of particular explanatory value. In his ambitious meta-analysis of research on populist communication, Sengul (2019) reinforces this position by arguing that broad attacks on populism regardless of its ideational content reflect a political commitment to preserving the principles of liberal democracy, which construes any challenge to these values as a potential threat. Resultingly, those that pose a Manichean binary between populism and liberalism produce a definitional looseness that begs more nuance and description.

Adding definitional specificity, many ideational theorizations of populism often situate the phenomena along two broad categories of grievance: Anti-elitism and anti-pluralism (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Jagers and Walgrave (2007) develop a four-tiered typology of populist communication around these two forms of grievance that includes "empty populism," "anti-elitist populism," "excluding/anti-pluralist populism," and "complete populism." "Empty populism" refers to a form of populist communication that references "the people" without any stated antagonist. "Anti-elitist populism," on the other hand, is defined as a form of populism that invokes a notion of "the people" in explicit struggle against political/institutional elites. "Excluding/anti-pluralist populism" pits "the people" against one or more excluded "out groups." This type of populism characteristically orients itself against certain ethnic, gender, or political groups. "Complete populism" is a form of populism that includes both anti-elitist and excluding/anti-pluralist forms of populism, offering a robust form of identity politics for its adherents.

As we will outline, Bolsonaro's populist campaign rhetoric and subsequent response to the COVID-19 outbreak are oriented around a form of populist identity politics that could be best described as "complete populism." It is both anti-elitist and exclusionary in orientation; these very elements provide the primary orientations for his communicative style of engagement.

### ***Anti-Elitism and Anti-Pluralism***

The tension between "the people" and "the elites" provides one of the core pillars of populist communication, highlighting the fissure between elite social visions built around technocracy, population management, and popular disengagement and populist visions invoking an organic sense of political and cultural identity grounded in notions of authenticity and rootedness in shared histories. Within populist frameworks, bureaucratic institutions are conceptualized as a structural impediment to developing the will of the people. This anti-elitist angle has been addressed by a number of provocative recent works, including those by Frank (2020) and Lind (2020). These texts theorize populism (particularly its right-wing variants) as a symptom of the increasing distance between everyday citizens and what Lind (2020) calls, following James Burnham, "the managerial elite" (p. 5). Writing largely about the United States, Frank (2020) and Lind (2020) conceptualize right-wing populism as a symptomatic response to the perceived replacement of technocratic management for political engagement *and* economic opportunity in recent decades. Instead, institutional bureaucracies administer many segments of a population through "a joyless politics of reprimand . . . that regards the public as not a force to be organized but as a threat to be scolded and disciplined" (Frank, 2020, p. 246). In opposition to this, anti-elitist populism offers adherents a path for achieving the perception of political relevance through its repudiation of centrist political parties in power, the institutional bureaucracy that supports them, and the cultural milieu that surrounds them. As we will see, Bolsonaro's anti-elitist populism specifically is founded on his position as an "outsider," free from the corruption endemic to the Brazilian political establishment.

Anti-pluralism or exclusionism, the second central animating element of Bolsonaro's populism, is characterized by identity-based exclusion in the form of a cultural politics drawing consistent lines between his supporters who occupy a space of authentic "Brazilian-ness" and other group identities threatening its coherence. Exclusionary populism, as an ideology deeply informed by the rejection of liberal notions of civic pluralism, attempts to position immigrants, women, and other "nontraditional" identities as an obstacle to perceived stability within a given society (Galston, 2018). In this way, anti-pluralist populism positions pluralism as the root cause of economic or political aggrievement. Bolsonaro's form of anti-pluralist populism places the responsibility for Brazil's problems on the shoulders of racial minorities, feminist or queer activists, progressives and politicians, and foreigners (particularly from China).

The combination of an anti-elitist attack on the institutions of Brazilian civil society and an anti-pluralist attack on racialized and gendered others provides the foundation for Bolsonaro's populism. Honed during his 2018 presidential campaign, these populist tropes deeply inform his response to the COVID-19 outbreak. While our analysis of Bolsonaro's brand of populism draws heavily on the ideational approach, it also acknowledges other scholarly traditions in populism research—particularly the political/strategic approach (PSA). In particular, Bolsonaro's ability to turn his position as a populist leader into material outcomes is highly resonant with *leader-centrism*, one of PSA's central contributions (Weyland, 2017, 2021).

From a leader-centric perspective, Bolsonaro's position as a leader both at the command of a national bureaucratic infrastructure and in a position of reverence for his followers amplifies the ability of his idiosyncratic populism to wreak havoc on the Brazilian health system.

### **Research Approach**

To substantiate our claim that Bolsonaro's public-facing COVID-19 responses mobilized central right-wing populist themes from his 2018 campaign, we will address how Bolsonaro mobilized anti-elitist and anti-pluralist tropes during both periods. In this pursuit, we use a qualitative textual analysis oriented toward addressing relevant tropes within multiple types of media sources, including public-facing elements of Bolsonaro's presidential campaign (specifically public speeches and press events) and his personal communication (as captured in public speeches and through his personal social media accounts) during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and March 2022. Mobilizing a thematic analysis of categories generated through our literature review around anti-elitism and anti-pluralism, we analyzed 38 social media posts including tweets, YouTube videos, and Facebook messages shared by Bolsonaro along with one tweet of a Bolsonaro speech shared by Mayra Pinheiro, a controversial member of his national public health team. Within this corpus of Bolsonaro's social media posts addressing the pandemic, the category "anti-elitism" was used to identify stories that presented critiques of epidemiological interventions and attacks on both public health institutions and individual public health figures in Brazil. For the category of "anti-pluralism" we looked for COVID-related posts that also referenced minority groups (particularly Afro-Brazilian and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ] communities) in Brazil frequently targeted by Bolsonaro, other nations outside the United States and Western Europe (particularly China), and progressive politicians/political parties namely the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party or PT) but also other leftist parties like O Partido Socialismo e Liberdade). Our analysis supplements these social media artifacts with direct quotations from Bolsonaro during press conferences regarding COVID-19. The process of locating individual speeches and process was guided by close attention to Brazilian news outlets: We often looked to the press to point us to especially controversial messages and—in one case, we drew on a cache of archived social media posts collected by the Spanish outlet *El País* (Brum, 2021).

Our aim in this project is not to exhaustively address the entire universe of Bolsonaro's commentary on the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, we used a purposive approach that explicitly sought out instances where anti-elitist or anti-pluralist themes were raised in Bolsonaro's communication. With this in mind, we construct our analysis around a central research question:

*RQ1: How did certain right-wing populist themes developed during Bolsonaro's presidential campaign influence the way he framed his communication regarding the COVID-19 outbreak and linked epidemiological response?*

### **Building the Bolsomito: Right-Wing Populism in the 2018 Presidential Election**

Garnering comparisons with the U.S. presidential campaign of Donald Trump to the point where some journalists dubbed him "the Trump in the Tropics," Bolsonaro's image was constructed along similar right-wing populist lines. When analyzing Bolsonaro's specific form of ideational populism, commentators

have emphasized the welding of anti-elitism and anti-pluralism: "His anti-pluralism is memorable. It not only questions elite policies or the role of the State in general . . . but also a version of gender ideology defended by the left that values some groups to the detriment of the traditional family" (Ricci, Izumi, & Moreira, 2021, p. 10). Congruently, Tamaki and Fuks (2020) find that Bolsonaro's campaign speeches foreground an anti-elitism that defines the primary enemy as political parties within Brazil's ruling coalition and an anti-pluralism that uplifts "good citizens" conceptualized primarily along the lines of race (White), culture (religious fundamentalist), and gender (heterosexual). Galvanizing support against elites who he claimed caused the instability facing "regular" Brazilians, Bolsonaro presented himself as an antidote to a panoply of problems from the rise in public security issues to hyperinflation to the declining influence of religiosity in Brazilian cultural life.

### ***Anti-Elitism and Antipetismo***

Bolsonaro's embrace of anti-elitism in his presidential campaign was most clearly expressed in vitriolic attacks on perceived "establishment" figures across the political spectrum. The primary target of his invective was the center-left the PT, the governing party in Brazil from the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002 until the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016. The PT was especially open to attack in the years following the nationwide scandal dubbed Operação Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash), a highly mediatized federal investigation into corruption that started in 2014 and affected all levels of the government. Fueled by extensive coverage by major news outlets, the multiyear operation engendered extensive rifts between the Brazilian government and its citizenry, particularly among the upper-middle and upper classes. This in turn fueled a political phenomenon labeled antipetismo, or the belief that every problem facing Brazil was the result of mismanagement by the PT government (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020). Hochuli and coauthors (2021) draw a clear line between the anti-corruption movement and Bolsonaro's electoral popularity as he was able to leverage antipetismo to reinforce his distance from political corruption. While serving in the army for most of his professional career, Bolsonaro never held a position of prominence in any major Brazilian party. Instead, he remained on the fringes of Brazilian politics. Consequently, he was never pulled into any national-level corruption scandal. As the fight against corruption began to overdetermine any ideological distinctions between left and right in Brazil (especially between the beginning of Dilma's impeachment process in early 2016 and the national elections in October 2018), Bolsonaro's anti-elitism became a powerfully motivating force. While aiming at the PT, Bolsonaro used his 2018 campaign to depict himself as against *all* major political parties in Brazil. This created the image of Bolsonaro as a candidate in opposition to institutional politics tout court.

Bolsonaro's presidential campaign tapped directly into this disgust with politics as he painted PT politicians as communists, radical atheists, and pedophiles. For example, during a campaign rally in Acre (a remote western Brazilian state with a large evangelical population), he simulated a gun by holding a camera tripod and said, "Let's shoot the 'petralhada' here in Acre" (as cited in Bezerra, 2021, p. 28). The term "petralhada" is a pejorative wordplay between "PT" and the Brazilian translation of Disney characters "The Beagle Boys." At another rally during the presidential campaign, Bolsonaro referred to the PT saying, "These red thugs will be banished from our country. Petralhada, all of you are going to the Ponta da Praia" (as cited in Reuters, 2018, para. 1). Ponta da Praia was an execution site of the military dictatorship in Rio de Janeiro. Though PT figures drew the most extreme ire, Bolsonaro also targeted centrist politicians, including Michel

Temer (who replaced Rousseff after her impeachment) and leaders of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira, a center-right party traditionally associated with the financial elite. Positioning criminality as the constitutive center of the Brazilian state allowed Bolsonaro to position himself as a “true” political outsider (de Almeida, 2019). Bolsonaro’s campaign plugged itself into this anti-corruption discourse with him as a fundamentally *anti-political figure* working against the bureaucratic machinery of the Brazilian political system. This, in turn, fueled a mistrust in the federal bureaucracy and its institutions on the part of the president and his followers—a crucial element in Bolsonaro’s attack on the Brazilian public health sector during COVID-19.

### ***Anti-Pluralism as Campaign Tactic***

The anti-elitist repudiation of the political establishment prominent in Bolsonaro’s presidential campaign was wedded to an *anti-pluralist* form of identity politics concentrated on what Lapper (2021) and others label the “beef, bible, and bullets” (BBB) constituency. In a manner remarkably resonant with shifts in the U.S. Republican Party, Bolsonaro’s campaign thrived on a “culture wars” narrative influenced by Steve Bannon’s work as chief executive officer on the 2016 Trump campaign. A clear example of this influence came through his embrace of Ernesto Araújo, a conservative Brazilian politician who would go on to become Bolsonaro’s minister of foreign affairs. Araújo claimed to see in Bolsonaro a path to bring back a lost Western patrimony: “Bolsonaro, like Trump, proposes a vision of the West not based on capitalism and liberal democracy, but on the recovery of the symbolic past, history and culture of Western nations” (Araújo, 2017, p. 11). The explicit casting of Bolsonaro’s campaign through the identarian language of “Western culture” served to differentiate between the kind of constituent on whose behalf he was speaking and those whom he was fighting. Afro-Brazilians, Marxists, feminists, and others beyond the BBB constituency became obstacles in the fight for recovering Brazil’s mythical chauvinist past. Bolsonaro himself echoed this notion of Occidental Christian exceptionalism in his campaign: “There is no such thing as this secular state. The state is Christian and the minority will have to change, if they can” (as cited in Purdy, 2018, para. 3).

Bolsonaro explicitly registered his repulsion for minority communities on several occasions during the 2018 campaign. Days before the election’s second round, he criticized affirmative actions during a national television interview: “This cannot continue to exist. Everything is poor. Poor Black people, poor women, poor gay people, poor people from the Northeast, poor people from Piauí. Let’s get this over with” (as cited in TV Cidade Verde, 2018, 0:6:17). During a campaign speech, he adopted a similarly pejorative position regarding Afro-Brazilian minorities: “I went to a quilombola in Eldorado Paulista. The lightest Afro-descendant there weighed seven arrobas. They do nothing. I don’t think they serve even for procreation anymore” (as cited in Congresso em Foco, 2017, 0:46:01). Referencing these Afro-Brazilian communities, Bolsonaro claims that those who live there are overweight, characterizing their weight in “arrobas”—a unit of measurement used to weigh cattle. During the same speech, Bolsonaro also attacks women, claiming that having a daughter represented a form of personal weakness: “I have five children. Four are men . . . and then in a moment of weakness the fifth came out a girl” (as cited in Lehman, 2018, para. 2).

Melding these two elements of right-wing populism, Bolsonaro presented himself as a messianic outsider who would use his military prowess and his spotless record in corruption to reforge Brazilian society. Encapsulated in the term “Bolsomito,” a portmanteau of “Bolsonaro” and “mito” (myth), this neologism was

adopted by Bolsonaro's supporters to describe the way he would act in a messianic fashion to cleanse the right and the left corruption, rampant security issues, and the decline of "authentic" White Brazilian identity (Bianco & Azevedo, 2019).

Before addressing the permutations of these anti-elitist and anti-pluralist tropes in Bolsonaro's COVID-19 response, it is worth noting that previous researchers have found his presidential campaign to reflect a relatively low frequency of populist language compared with other well-known populist leaders. In this vein, Tamaki and Fuks (2020) note that the frequency of invocation of ideational populist themes in Bolsonaro's campaign speeches was relatively low compared with those of noted populist leaders in Latin America such as Hugo Chavez. Nonetheless, we maintain that the campaign trail provided a crucial testing ground for Bolsonaro to hone his anti-elitist and anti-pluralist messaging. Furthermore, following PSA's prioritization of leader-centrism, we also argue that Bolsonaro's communication as president served as the single most influential input driving his supporters to undermine public health authorities and the public health system.

### **Bolsonaro's Attempt to Undermine the Epidemiological Response to COVID-19**

Historically, Brazil has had one of the most muscular public health research and patient care systems in the western hemisphere, particularly through A Sistema Único de Saúde (Unified Health System), its national public healthcare network. Framed in the 1988 constitution as a constitutional right, tax-subsidized, and often free, health care has been a bipartisan priority for decades. Uncoincidentally, this highly developed public health sector has allowed the country to successfully address serious epidemics in the past. Public health communication concerning the prevention of AIDS proved extremely successful in lowering transmission rates in the 1990s (Porto, 2007), and media-oriented campaigns managed to combine the discourses of the WHO, scientists, and official authorities to fight a Zika virus epidemic in the months leading up to the 2016 Olympic Games. Despite having cultivated what Hochman (2011) has characterized as a robust "immunization culture" since the end of the 19th century, Brazil's public health infrastructure experienced extensive cuts and priority shifts under the Bolsonaro administration.

Bolsonaro's communication via social media and public speeches mirrored this disregard for public health as he attacked public health institutions, mocked epidemiological countermeasures, and attempted to shift blame for the pandemic's negative impact onto China, the LGBTQ community, and his political opponents.

### ***Anti-Elitist Populism and the Undermining of Epidemiological Interventions***

This section will address how anti-elitist populism informed two of the central aspects of Bolsonaro's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: His attempt to delegitimize public health and vaccination efforts and his attempts to undermine the authority of the Brazilian epidemiological community through tactics ranging from issuing public insults to encouraging his supporters to commit violent acts against COVID-19 researchers whose findings contradicted his own messaging.

Bolsonaro's explicit attempts to impede or disrupt public health communication during the early stages of the pandemic came through his vocal engagement in "anti-hygienic activism" (Vieten, 2020, p.



2), a kind of advocacy directed toward pushing institutions to diminish public health restrictions to preserve "normal" social and economic practices. In this vein, Bolsonaro's initial response to the pandemic was to label it a "fantasy" and a "little cold" (Lopes & Leal, 2020). The president consistently defended the "herd immunity" position, claiming that the only way to fight the pandemic would be to spread the virus until the Brazilian population achieved herd immunity. For example, he stated in a radio interview early in the pandemic: "What's wrong is hysteria, like it's the end of the world. A nation like Brazil, for example, will only be free when a certain number of people are infected and create antibodies" (as cited in Rádio Tupi, 2020, para. 1). In this vein, he refused to engage in promoting mitigating practices, even going as far as removing face masks from children during his public appearances (Globo 1, 2021). Similarly, the president also claimed that his "athletic history" would guarantee that his contracting COVID-19 would be similar to contracting a "little cold" (as cited in Universo Online, 2020a). These statements ultimately led to a report by the human rights organization Conectas finding that Bolsonaro's public communication promoted a consistent attempt to *intentionally spread the virus* so the nation could "get it over with" and quickly resume economic activity and protect his approval ratings (Ventura & Reis, 2021, p. 4).

His social media activity reflects this intentional attempt to undermine public health measures. For example, when the Supreme Court gave governors and mayors autonomy to decide isolation rules (after the president's refusal to implement national lockdowns), he stated in a live Facebook broadcast that lockdowns "would impoverish and kill the population" (Bolsonaro, 2020a, 0:09:30). The conflict between Bolsonaro and the Supreme Court intensified when the court prohibited in-person religious meetings. The president attacked the court in a televised appearance (Globo 1, 2021) and appointed a new justice, Kassio Nunes Marques, who permitted meetings after a lawsuit proposed by the National Association of Evangelical Jurists. Bolsonaro announced this decision on Twitter, writing "the STF [Brazilian Supreme Court] provides a precautionary measure to determine that: states, DF and municipalities refrain from issuing or demanding compliance with decrees or local administrative acts that prohibit the holding of in-person religious celebrations" (Bolsonaro, 2021b). Bolsonaro's dispute with state governors over restrictive measures also led to clashes with the military. The president implied that he could use the armed forces to forcefully end social isolation measures. On March 19, 2021, he told reporters, "My army doesn't go to the street to force people to stay at home" (as cited in Jeantet & Biller, 2021, para. 21).

Bolsonaro's battle against public health actors took an explicitly anti-elitist turn as he attempted to rally his supporters against various public health organs from the international to the state level. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro justified his refusal to adopt lockdown measures by attacking the international epidemiological community, particularly the WHO. In a widely shared post on his Facebook profile, he accused the WHO of encouraging masturbation and homosexuality in children (Universo Online 2020b). These claims were grounded in a distorted interpretation of educational materials that the Federal Centre for Health Education created for parents in Germany. Though Bolsonaro deleted the post a few minutes later, it nonetheless spurred his supporters to question the motives of the WHO (Universo Online, 2020b). During another live broadcast on Facebook, Bolsonaro said that he could not follow the WHO's recommendations because their director-general, Tedros Ghebreyesus, was not a physician (Universo Online, 2020a). A few weeks later, Bolsonaro said that Brazil would potentially leave the WHO because the organization was not trustworthy. He said, "Brazil will think about [leaving] it as soon as this pandemic

problem is over. We will seriously think about whether to leave it or not, because it no longer conveys confidence" (as cited in Paraguassu, 2020, para. 3).

In his attacks against national-level public health institutions, Bolsonaro particularly denigrated the Ministry of Health. In another Facebook post from the same day, he first dismissed and then publicly mocked Luiz Henrique Mandetta, health minister during the pandemic's outset, for encouraging social distancing and for refusing to approve hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment (Bolsonaro, 2021d). Along with pushing it to approve hydroxychloroquine, Bolsonaro also pushed the Ministry of Health to cover up the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths (Bolsonaro, 2021f). Consequently, major news outlets and companies in the country including *O Globo*, *A Folha de São Paulo*, and Universo Online, formed a consortium to report pandemic numbers. Suspicious of the press, Bolsonaro incited supporters to break into hospitals. During a live Facebook broadcast from June 2020, he told his followers, "Find a way to get inside and film it. Many people are doing this, but more people have to do it to show whether the beds are occupied or not, if the expenses are compatible with reality or not" (as cited in Brum, 2021, para. 39).

Bolsonaro's social media assault on the national public health community reached a crescendo in April 2021, when he attacked the Brazilian National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa) for authorizing the vaccination of children. He even threatened to "doxx" (or publicize the personal information and home addresses) of the doctors involved in this process during a live broadcast on Facebook on April 22, 2021:

Anvisa is not subordinate to me. Make that very clear. I don't interfere there. I asked, unofficially, for the name of the people who approved the vaccine for children from 5 years old. We want to publicize the name of these people, so that everyone knows and, of course, forms their judgment. (Bolsonaro, 2021c)

Bolsonaro's weaponization of social media to brutally intimidate epidemiologists had a material impact on the work of the Brazilian public health community. Echoing Weyland's theory of "leader-centric" populism (Weyland, 2021), the president's attack on the perceived "elitism" of the public health community had a documented chilling effect. This effect is clearly reflected in a letter published in the *Lancet* in January 2021 by Pedro Hallal, the director of EPICOVID-19, Brazil's largest serological COVID-19 survey. The letter presents a sobering narrative on the interrelatedness of the failure of epidemiological response and Bolsonaro's social media activism:

In 2020, I was summoned to Brasília on three separate occasions for meetings with the ministry of health. Four days after my last visit [December 2020], I started presenting with COVID-19 symptoms. My SARS-CoV-2 infection was revealed to the public by the media, and I was accused of hypocrisy and a "do as I say, not as I do" attitude. On January 11, 2021, in a radio interview, I was criticised [*sic.*] by a congressman and by a journalist: the reason being that if I had been infected with SARS-CoV-2, it meant I did not follow the very advice I disseminate. On January 14, 2021, Bolsonaro tweeted the link to the specific segment of the radio interview in which my infection was mentioned. (Hallal, 2021, p. 374)

EPICOVID-19, whose research on the virus's high mortality rate threatened the president's attempted diminution of the virus's virulence, was already a target of presidential ire. After Bolsonaro

amplified the story, Hallal and his institute became targets of coordinated attack from Bolsonaro's supporters, who moved offline: EPICOVID-19 became subject to a federal audit, and Hallal's identity eventually became public—leading Bolsonaro supporters to surveil his home and take photographs of his family members in public.

In analyzing Bolsonaro's social media attacks on Brazilian epidemiological experts, the distrust of bureaucratic institutions that characterized his presidential campaign takes on a more sinister character. The rejection of institutions that helped codify his "outsider" status in 2018 set the epistemological stage for him to both reject any and all public health perspectives that did not fit his personal ideological or political economic perspectives and receive support from his followers in this rejection.

### ***Anti-Pluralism as a Weapon Against Public Health Communication***

A central anti-pluralist current embedded in Bolsonaro's invocation of "cultural Marxism" during the pandemic was the claim that federal and state public health programs were furthering the mission started by the PT to feminize the "traditional" (i.e., cisgender) male population. Bolsonaro's anti-pluralist scapegoating of LGBTQ+ communities continued during the pandemic. The clearest example of this was the president's amplification of the so-called penis-at-the-door scandal associated with Mayra Pinheiro, secretary of labor management and education under Bolsonaro. Faced with criticism for using her official position to promote the use of hydroxychloroquine (her embrace earning her the nickname "Capitã Cloroquina"), Pinheiro responded by accusing the Ministry of Health itself of promoting the embrace of "deviant" sexual identities—emblemized by her claim that there were giant inflatable penises at the door of the headquarters of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, Brazil's national public health research center. Bolsonaro used the "penis-at-the-door" scandal to argue that public health authorities were overplaying the severity of the pandemic to obscure their own culpability in promoting feminization and homosexuality at the societal level (as cited in Ferraz, 2021, para. 1). In an August 2022 tweet, Pinheiro shared a video of a 2022 presidential debate where Bolsonaro claimed that the PT was spreading misinformation about her work to help fuel a witch hunt against him (Pinheiro, 2022). As this scandal illustrates, Bolsonaro's anti-pluralist attacks on the left reflect ideational continuities with his 2018 presidential campaign. Correspondingly, Bolsonaro argued that the "radical left" was keeping him from promoting hydroxychloroquine, stating in an interview, "Those on the right take chloroquine [*chroloquina*], those on the left take Tubaina [a popular soda]" (as cited in Estadão, 2020, para. 2). Bolsonaro further used social media to accuse progressive parties and administrations, particularly the PT. In this vein, during a live broadcast on Facebook in May 2021, Bolsonaro accused left-wing governments of enforcing lockdowns, stating, "Imagine if the other one was sitting here. We would have had a national lockdown for consecutive months, like we had in other left-wing countries in South America. It did not help to decrease the number of deaths, quite the opposite" (Bolsonaro, 2021e, 0:2:14).

Bolsonaro's communication during the pandemic also invoked racialized anti-pluralism, specifically through the repetition of unconfirmed claims blaming China for the production and spread of COVID-19 and by furthering claims that the PT was interested in social control. Similar to Trump, Bolsonaro's attacks on China initially took the form of initially painting COVID-19 as a biological weapon commissioned by the Chinese government to promote its geopolitical agenda. In Fall 2020, Bolsonaro added another layer to this Sinophobic

narrative by suggesting that the Chinese government was also attempting to blackmail the Brazilian government into using a COVID-19 vaccine they developed. This comment by the president was occasioned by the contracting of the Chinese pharmaceutical company SINOVAC by the state government of São Paulo work with the Butantan Institute to create what would become the first vaccine brought to market in Brazil. Referred to by the president as “Vachina” (a play on the Portuguese version of the phrase “made in China”—a derogatory phrase often used in Brazil to signify low-quality products), the SINOVAC vaccine became a regular target. In opposition to the “Vachina,” Bolsonaro championed a form of vaccine nationalism by arguing that he would only take a vaccine that was developed “by Brazilian scientists on Brazilian soil with Brazilian ingredients” (Gaspar, 2021, para. 28). During a live broadcast on Facebook, Bolsonaro praised the agreement made for Brazil to acquire 100 million doses of the Oxford Astrozenca vaccine against COVID-19 precisely because it was not made in China: “We joined that Oxford consortium, and it seems [the vaccine] is going to work. One hundred million units will arrive for us. It is not from that other country [China], no!” (Bolsonaro, 2020a). In mid-2020, Bolsonaro also attacked specific state governments (like São Paulo) for negotiating vaccine trials with Chinese pharmaceutical companies, stating via Twitter, “JOÃO DORIA’S CHINESE VACCINE. The Brazilian people WILL NOT BE ANYONE’S GUINEA PIG” (Bolsonaro, 2020b). Antifeminist and Sinophobic elements combined in a video shared on Facebook on February 07, 2021. This video, created by his son Flavió, attempts to frame enforced social distancing and other elements of the Chinese COVID-19 response to a widescale attempt to feminize its male population (Bolsonaro, 2021a). When sharing the post, Bolsonaro further commented that China is strategically designing its public health measures to destroy masculinity in the West.

In opposition to purported threats by pluralists who used COVID-19 as a smokescreen for pushing their minoritarian agendas, Bolsonaro appealed to the institution of evangelical religion. When the country counted more than 300,000 deaths due to COVID-19, Bolsonaro posted a call on Facebook for his followers to have “a day of fasting and prayer for the good and freedom of our nation . . . We will continue to fight with all our strength against the virus and unemployment; for life, but without giving up the dignity of each one” (Bolsonaro, 2020b). The references to “freedom” and “dignity” are linked to the lockdowns perpetrated by the states’ governors. Bolsonaro repeatedly appealed to the evangelical community within Brazil to support his COVID-19 response. Again echoing Trump, he claimed that social distancing measures were not only an attempt to undermine the strength of religious gatherings but also a threat to religious freedoms.

Like anti-elitist attacks on public health actors and institutions, Bolsonaro’s anti-pluralist populism serves to rationalize his own mishandling of the pandemic through diversion and the mobilization of indignation among his core supporters. Social media played a significant role in amplifying these tropes. As we will address briefly in the conclusion, his social media activism during the pandemic is part of a strategy modeled to preserve political capital among his base of support to bolster his chances for achieving reelection in the 2022 presidential contest. This strategy is clearly reflected in his communication during the pandemic as he drew on his campaign playbook to first impede the epidemiological response and then shift culpability away from himself.

### **Conclusion: The Continued Struggle Between Right-Wing Populism and Epidemiology**

Our analysis tracks how anti-elitist and anti-pluralist tropes pioneered in Bolsonaro’s 2018 presidential campaign profoundly shaped the president’s public-facing response to the pandemic. Crafting a

narrative around the illegitimacy of institutions set the stage for a response that pilloried scientists and caricatured leftists, China, and other racial and political bogeymen as a more pernicious threat to Brazil than COVID-19 could ever pose. The material impact of this rhetoric was felt in a response that was at best lackadaisical and at worst actively negligent—with mortal and perhaps even genocidal consequences, particularly for Afro-Brazilian and indigenous communities, geographically isolated populations, and the poor (Milanez & Vida, 2020). As right-wing populist demands to disregard institutional authority and blame those deemed “Other” became the epistemological ground for Bolsonaro’s COVID-19 response, they hampered the ability of epidemiologists, elected officials, and other institutional actors from providing the medical resources and policy responses needed to keep the Brazilian citizenry safe. This point is of central material importance for researchers investigating right-wing populism. By leveraging mass support for their attacks on institutions, populist leaders like Bolsonaro create what Block (2022) labels “discursive disruptions,” delegitimizing the foundations of institutional order to the degree that it impedes the ability of public health or other governmental bodies to engage in daily activities, let alone spearhead the fight against a once-in-a-century pandemic. As Waisbord (2018) argues, these disruptions augur a broader epistemological shift toward “an opposition to the possibility of truth-telling as a collective effort to produce agreed-on facts and reach consensus on the correspondence between assertions and reality” (p. 19).

Despite these alarming trends, there are some signs that Bolsonaro’s denialism has not completely undermined faith in public health institutions in Brazil. Specifically, there have been conflicting reports regarding the impact of Bolsonaro’s anti-vaccination posturing on public support for inoculation. Samuel Câmara, director of the influential National Convention of Assembly of God Congregations, participated in a public interview in April 2021 where he opposed Bolsonaro’s lack of support for vaccination and position against masking (Schmitt & Roxo, 2021). Given the pastor’s influential position and his previous support of Bolsonaro, this shift in position potentially signals a fissure between Bolsonaro’s denialist narrative and the mitigation strategies proffered by public health institutions. Furthermore, in spite of Bolsonaro’s messaging, Brazil has remained at one of the highest levels of indicated public support for vaccination of any nation-state (Mazzo, 2021). Conversely, there have also been recent reports that the vaccine rollout has stalled among certain segments of the population—particularly those who supported Bolsonaro in the 2018 election.

This ambiguity signals two crucial points. First, it shows that the interactions between right-wing denialism and public health communication vary greatly depending on the national context. Relatedly and more importantly, this predicament necessitates further research on the impacts of populist discourse on effective communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. This article hopes to set the stage for this endeavor—at least in the context of Brazil.

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