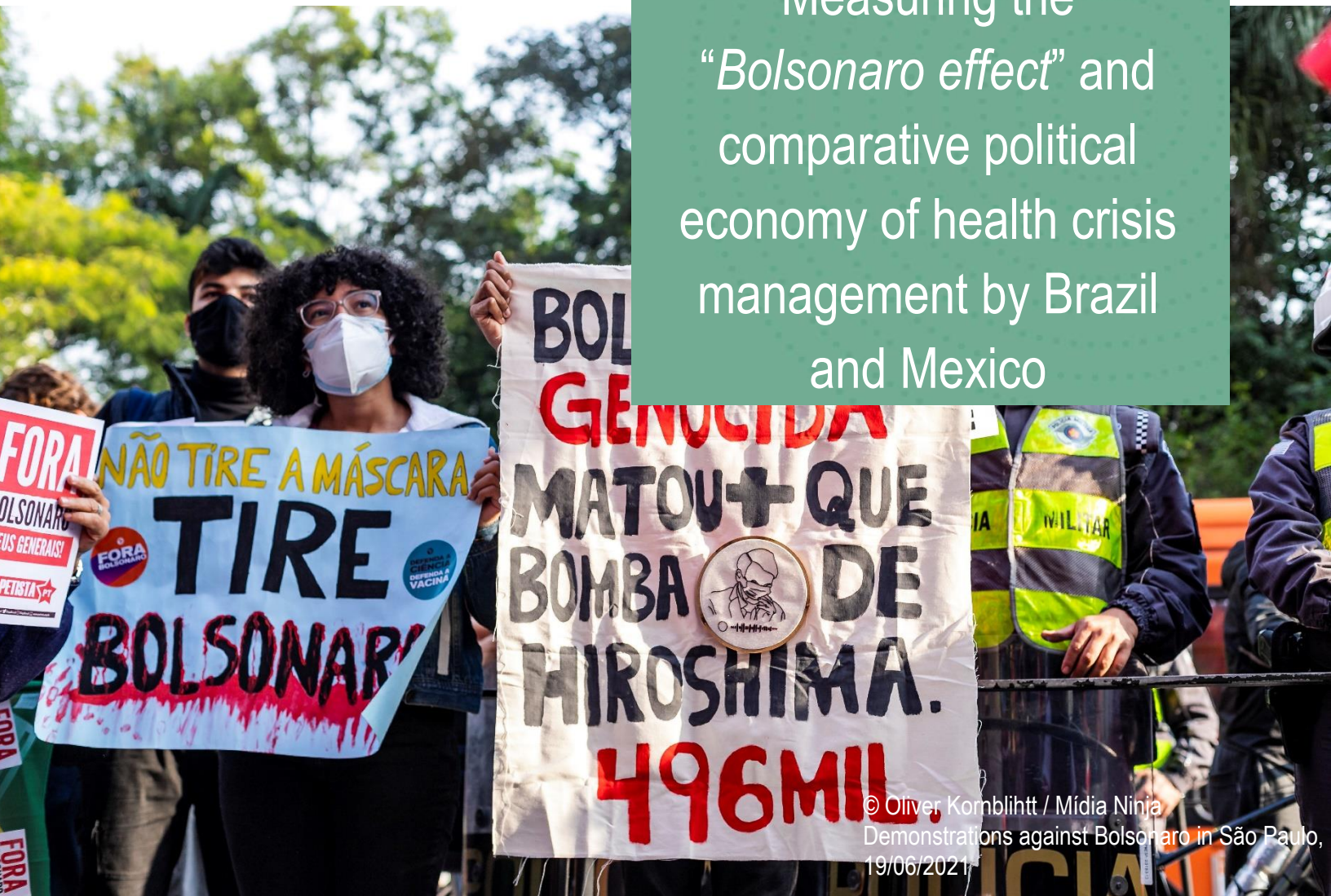


Focus:

Brazil during the
pandemic:
Measuring the
“Bolsonaro effect” and
comparative political
economy of health crisis
management by Brazil
and Mexico



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Demonstrations against Bolsonaro in São Paulo,
19/06/2021

Focus:

Brazil during the pandemic: Measuring the “*Bolsonaro effect*” and comparative political economy of health crisis management by Brazil and Mexico

There have been numerous analyses of the effects of national leaders’ political speeches on the spread of the pandemic. In this category, a certain number of studies have focused on President Jair Bolsonaro’s role in Brazil. However, relatively few studies have sought to measure the precise impact of his negationist attitude. At the same time one can examine the reasons that might explain the positions he adopted during the health crisis.

This FOCUS presents the results of two studies that help to answer these questions. They were carried out as part of the partnership between IRD researchers from DIAL and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) Economics Institute. The first is an empirical analysis that seeks to estimate the effects of Bolsonaro’s attitude on the spread of the pandemic. The second study adopts a political economy approach, comparing the role of the Brazilian and Mexican presidents, both described as populist, in order to understand their respective motivations in managing COVID-19.

Measuring the “*Bolsonaro effect*” during the pandemic

Brazil is among the countries most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is all the more surprising because the country is reputed for the universal scope of its public health system (the SUS, *Sistema Único de Saúde*), its experience in managing infectious diseases (dengue, chikungunya, zika, etc.) and its globally renowned National Immunisation Programme (PNI).

At the end of 2022, the country was ranked second to the USA in terms of mortality due to the pandemic, official sources reporting nearly 700,000 deaths. It was possible to observe the negative impact on the death rate of President Bolsonaro’s decisions and attitude right from the start of the pandemic. As head of the federal government, the president’s negationist position was marked by the rejection of scientific proofs and above all by contesting the effectiveness of lockdown and vaccination measures against the pandemic (Fonseca et al., 2021).

President Bolsonaro’s first reaction was to minimise the seriousness of the virus, describing the disease as a “light flu” and discouraging the social

distancing and other measures adopted by infranational authorities (states and municipalities) (Razafindrakoto et al., 2021). His main argument was that the consequences would be worse for the economy than for health. The measures taken by the Brazilian federal government to combat the pandemic suffered from policy inconsistency and lack of coordination between the different government bodies (Abrucio et al., 2020). This led to delays and disorganisation in implementing the measures. But it also sowed confusion among the population: some people failed to understand – or contested – the measures adopted by municipalities and states. In their analysis of Bolsonaro’s “negationism”, Fonseca et al. (2021) highlight the fact that the infranational authorities ended up leading the fight against the pandemic crisis, notwithstanding the president’s opposition to their initiatives. Nevertheless, the president’s negationism spread to other levels of government, generally in states whose governors were politically aligned with the president (Touchton et al., 2021).

Thus, alongside the various characteristics usually taken into consideration to explain the effect of COVID-19 on mortality (pre-existing illnesses, age, colour/race, housing and working conditions, etc.), political factors linked to the management of the pandemic could also have an impact. In concrete terms, the mechanism at work, observed mainly in the USA and Brazil, associates the population’s behavioural response to the pandemic with political leaders’ words and actions. These factors have an influence on the population’s risk perception and thus on the extent to which they respect measures introduced to fight the pandemic. In the literature, a certain number of studies have shown that political leaders’ words and actions can influence support for public policies and individual behaviour in representative democracies (Argentieri Mariani et al., 2020; Peci et al., 2022; Ringe & Renno, 2023).

Brazil was struck by the pandemic at a time of strong political polarisation. In this context several academic articles dealing with political science and public health underline Bolsonaro’s responsibility in the catastrophic management of the pandemic. Among them, the article written by the IE/UFRJ-DIAL/IRD team (Razafindrakoto, Roubaud, Castilho, Pero and Saboia; hereafter RRCPS, 2023) aims to evaluate the effect of President Bolsonaro’s behaviour on the development of the pandemic in Brazil, which the authors call the “*Bolsonaro effect*”, echoing Razafindrakoto et al. (2021).

Argentieri Mariani et al. (2020) produced one of the pioneering analyses of the influence of the president’s behaviour on the development of the

pandemic in Brazil. The authors carried out an econometric analysis of the rate of COVID-19 contamination in municipalities where Bolsonaro obtained more than 50% of all votes in the first round of the 2018 elections. They used the difference-in-difference method to compare the situation in the municipalities before and after the pro-Bolsonaro demonstrations on 15 March 2020. The authors show that the municipalities where the demonstrations took place recorded more hospitalisations and deaths than the others. The authors consider that this effect is due both to people coming together for the demonstrations and the laxer attitudes to social distancing, in accordance with the president's rhetoric and position.

Other articles, which go beyond the first phase of the pandemic, confirm the existence of a "*Bolsonaro effect*". Some of them establish a positive relationship between political orientation – alignment with the president's position – and COVID-19-related mortality, after controlling for inequalities, the relationship between the regions and the quality of health services, etc. Razafindrakoto et al. (2021) analyse a wide range of determinants of the incidence and the number of deaths due to COVID-19, including the "*Bolsonaro effect*", i.e. political orientation, measured by the results of the first round of the 2018 presidential election. The study was carried out taking all 5,500 plus municipalities as analytical units. It takes into account several determinants of the disease (health-related, demographic and socioeconomic) for each *municípios*, including the political factor. The "*Bolsonaro effect*", which this paper was the first to identify, is one of the most robust factors in explaining pandemic-related death rates. From a methodological viewpoint, it is based on the processing of millions of observational data points, aggregated by municipality, from numerous paired sources. Although it does not enable the formal measurement of a causal impact (in the absence of a credible identification strategy), this approach has many advantages. It is the only one that can encompass the whole country and that takes into account the fact that policies were implemented at that scale, while benefiting from a wealth of control variables that do not exist at the individual level.

On the basis of the previously-mentioned studies, RRCPS (2023) concentrate on the impact of the Brazilian president's negationist stance. They contribute to the literature by consolidating and going into greater depth than previous studies in this field, in three ways. First, they cover the whole period of the pandemic (2020-2022) which makes it possible to study the persistence of, and variations in, the "*Bolsonaro effect*" over time. The article goes on to shed light on the main mechanisms through which political factors affected COVID-19 death rates. They estimate the

“Bolsonaro effect” on the two main measurements of protection, non-pharmaceutical and pharmaceutical, namely: the rate of mobility of the population, which reflects the effectiveness of lockdown and social distancing policies; and the vaccination rate, which evaluates the rate of conformity with international recommendations. Finally, a wide range of robustness tests, including analytical extensions, are carried out to consolidate the results. First, different substitution variables (particularly political) are taken into account to establish the reliability of the data and the indicators, while contributing to the discussion. Second, RRCPS try to distinguish the *“Bolsonaro effect”* from the effects of the behaviour of right-wing voters and anti-scientific movements, given that the latter effects would have occurred without Bolsonaro’s intervention.

To summarise, the analysis leads to three conclusions. First, the results support the idea that the impact of the president’s negationist position persisted over time. The effect seems to have been more pronounced during the COVID-19 waves when contamination rates shot up. Second, the study shows that the *“Bolsonaro effect”* affected mortality through reduced respect for social distancing and vaccination recommendations, which were the two main protection measures against the pandemic. Examining these results more closely, it turns out that the president’s anti-vaccine stance had a greater effect on young people and whites in pro-Bolsonaro municipalities.

Various robustness tests were carried out to ensure that the results did not suffer from data reliability problems or from endogeneity (although only in a partial manner). In particular, RRCPS used other data sources (such as abnormally high mortality rate instead of deaths from COVID-19). The tests enabled the authors to exclude the idea that the observed effects were uniquely due to a simple conservative ideological positioning or to anti-vaccine positions in general, which already existed before Bolsonaro came to power.

Finally, Brazil is faced with longer-lasting harmful consequences than the effect of Bolsonaro’s rhetoric on COVID-19 vaccinations. The results of the estimations show that the *“Bolsonaro effect”* had an impact on vaccination campaigns in general (and not only on those against COVID-19), thus compromising the success of Brazil’s national vaccination programme. It would be appropriate to test its persistence over time, to better identify the most reluctant groups and to look into what kinds of policy should be introduced to remedy the situation.

The role and motivations of presidents in managing the pandemic: a comparison between Brazil and Mexico

The previously-quoted studies made it possible to shed light on Bolsonaro's role and responsibility in the Brazilian disaster during the pandemic. To extend this work, we have sought to understand his motives and what led him to act as he did, action that led to an accusation of crime against humanity by the parliamentary commission set up to that end. To go beyond the Brazilian case and to broaden the analysis, Mexico was used for comparative purposes. The two countries do indeed have many points in common. Apart from the fact that they are Latin America's two biggest economies and are among the countries worst affected by the global pandemic, these two federal states were run by presidents, Andres Manuel Lopes Obrador (known as AMLO) and Jair Bolsonaro, both considered to be "populist",¹ the former categorised rather as left-wing and progressive and the latter as extreme right-wing. In the specific case of this pandemic, the two presidents played key roles in both policy choice and implementation in their respective countries. In fact, the choices they made were both singular and counterintuitive (Razafindrakoto & Roubaud, 2021; Roubaud et al., 2022).

From the health viewpoint, they both opposed, to differing extents, social distancing and lockdown policies in the name of economic primacy. While Bolsonaro's attitude on this subject is not unexpected, although the degree to which he pushed his negationism raises questions, it was more surprising on the part of the Mexican president, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. The latter alternated a *laissez-faire* policy with statements in line with international recommendations, particularly those of the WHO (Dunn & Laterzo 2021). Nevertheless, numerous articles comparing Mexico and Brazil associate the two presidents in their catastrophic handling of the health situation, supposedly explained by their "populism" (Knaul et al., 2021; Bennouna et al., 2021; Bertholini, 2023; Ringe & Renno, 2023). The *Lancet* Commission's latest report on COVID-19 (Sachs et al., 2022) quotes both as examples among the three symbolic presidents (alongside Donald Trump) describing their attitudes and declarations as irresponsible.

From the economic standpoint, the Brazilian president implemented the biggest and most redistributive policy of transferring money to households

¹ This term is the subject of controversy in the academic literature. It is, nevertheless, systematically applied to the governance of the two presidents, particularly in analyses of COVID-19 pandemic management in both Brazil and Mexico.

ever undertaken in the country and one of the most ambitious in Latin America. On the other hand, AMLO, from whom we might have expected more active support for households, particularly the poorest, contented himself with ensuring essential services, only marginally adjusting his previous electoral programme (Lustig & Trasberg, 2021; Salama, 2021).

A study carried out by DIAL researchers in close collaboration with researchers from Sorbonne-Paris Nord University and the UFRJ Economics Institute aimed to explain these paradoxes (Roubaud, Razafindrakoto, Salama & Saludjian, 2022; hereafter RRSS). It set out to describe and explain the roles and motives of these two major players on the Latin American political stage. Adopting a political economy approach, it asks three main questions. On the one hand, how did two leaders with completely opposing political viewpoints and who adopted economic policies opposite to what might have been expected both end up with catastrophic healthcare outcomes? On the other hand, why did the terrible healthcare situation in the two countries not lead to wholesale rejection of the two presidents by their people or even appear to have been attributed to them? Finally, what led them to promote economic policies seemingly diametrically opposed to their supposed ideological orientations?

The analysis covers the whole period from 2020 to 2022. It sheds new light on the existing literature on this subject. On the one hand, this is due to the length of the period covered: indeed the majority of previous studies concentrate on the early phases of the pandemic, thus failing to correctly appreciate the dynamics of a rapidly changing process such as vaccine development in 2021, or the change in attitude of President AMLO. On the other hand, the majority of political economy studies of the pandemic look at the health aspects of the policies that were implemented. Economic policies have been less studied and the links between the two even less so. Finally, apart from the mobilisation of the existing literature, the work is based on secondary treatment of original data such as socio-economic surveys of households and a wide variety of opinion polls from the two countries.

In the first place, it appears that the lax health management of the pandemic by the two presidents had a proven negative impact on the terrible death rates in the two countries, even if that impact was greater and longer-lasting in Brazil. Paradoxically, although Bolsonaro was directly responsible for the deaths of many of his fellow citizens, he also contributed to saving lives and improving Brazilians' living conditions through the introduction of the massive emergency aid programme. The *Auxilio*

Emergencial had a triple effect: it enabled better respect of social distancing rules, it compensated for the loss of revenue due to the destruction of jobs, particularly informal jobs among the poorest people, with significant redistributive effects, and it supported macroeconomic growth. Finally, and even if no measurement system exists to attribute a “coefficient of responsibility” in the loss of well-being (including death) of their people, the two presidents were guilty of negligence in managing the pandemic. It is no doubt desirable that this be recognised and the two men held to account.

This is, however, unlikely for several reasons. To bring them to account, numbers are necessary: obtaining such numbers is methodologically impossible. In more concrete terms, RRSS (2022) show that the two presidents’ disastrous management of the pandemic had only a marginal effect on their popularity. This is really astonishing given how much the pandemic dominated the daily lives of Brazilians and Mexicans (and the whole world) for at least two years (2020 and 2021), with unprecedented dire economic and social effects. RRSS (2022) provide explanations for this enigma: on the one hand a certain degree of fatalism and a low level of attention paid to health in environments where violence and death are part of daily life; on the other hand the confusion, partly deliberate, between the different sources of information (including fake news) and the different levels of power (federal, state, municipal), which affected people’s cognitive ability to make judgements and diluted everyone’s responsibility.

The analysis also enables us to understand why the death rate was higher in Mexico than in Brazil. Without claiming to provide a definitive answer to this particularly complex question, the convergence of factors of demand (a population more affected by pre-existing conditions, less aware of vaccination and paying less attention to health issues in general) and of supply (poorer and less well-financed health infrastructure and more limited “anti-COVID” policies – vaccination programme and emergency transfers) operated against Mexico.

The question of the opposing economic policies – which were also the opposite of their promoters’ apparent political convictions – implemented in the two countries then remains. Although no political or economic theory (particularly that of populism) offers convincing arguments to explain the paradox, a political economy reading taking into account the interaction between the national contexts and the two leaders’ personalities gives an original reading of the question. RRSS (2022) show that the two presidents were motivated by different, and in many respects opposing, logics. These

logics can be read in the light of the relationship they have with their political popularity scores. The Brazilian president was guided by short-term political opportunism. Suffering from low popularity and with all the opinion polls predicting a significant defeat by Lula at the forthcoming presidential elections, he used extravagant economic measures, above all the transfers to households targeted on the most recalcitrant groups (the poor, those in the north-east, etc.), to try and win (political) popularity and get himself re-elected, but in vain. In so doing he was following the hackneyed principals of Brazilian *politica velha* (good old politics). AMLO, on the other hand, convinced of the merits of his “transformative” policy, with more time before the next elections – at which he could not stand – and benefiting from very high popularity, used his popular legitimacy to push through structural economic measures.

In more general terms, the abrupt and unexpected eruption of COVID-19 was an exceptional historical event from all points of view. As far as research is concerned, this exogenous shock represents a unique observation point from which to remove guesswork, question certainties and shake theories, allowing researchers to go beyond a simple intellectual exercise. In those circumstances, who could have predicted AMLO’s and Bolsonaro’s reaction to the crisis? Will it have a lasting impact? No-one can answer with certainty, and opinion is divided on the subject. At most we can express astonishment at the speed with which this episode, which dominated the world’s tempo for more than two years, has been swept aside – and with it all the debates about “the world before and the world after” – in a sort of collective amnesia and a return to “business as usual”.

In this context of uncertainty, Lula’s election in October 2022 by a narrow margin, where we might think (without being sure; it is only an intellectual exercise) that Bolsonaro’s disastrous management of the pandemic played a role, makes a big difference. In political terms, Brazil and Mexico are coming closer together in the aftermath of this election. However, there is nothing to say that Lula and AMLO will follow the same path, neither in the content of their policies nor in how they govern. This environment provides particularly stimulating perspectives to pursue reflections based on the comparison between the two countries, both involved to their “fourth transformation”. We could moreover enlarge the study to the whole of Latin America, with the arrival of a new progressive wave on the continent in recent years, where for once Brazil and Mexico are in phase, which was not the case during the previous wave, at the beginning of the 2000s, when Mexico remained on the margins of this reversal. How will Latin American left-wing governments react to the national and global issues of the

moment and avoid the gradual downgrading of the region? What forms will government take in the different countries and also what is the future for populism in Latin America? A whole raft of open theoretical and empirical questions, representing a fascinating research agenda for the forthcoming years.

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