
Democratic Erosion in Brazil: The Bolsonaro Phenomenon

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Abstract: *The erosion of democracies has become a critical focus of study in political science. Following the fall of communism and the rise of liberal democracies—often labeled as the "end of history"—the world is now grappling with a troubling pattern of democratic backsliding. This paper decisively examines the dynamics of democratic decline during Jair Bolsonaro's rise and subsequent fall in Brazil. The country's democratic history reveals a complex narrative of deterioration and instability, characterized by the collapse of republics and the imposition of military rule, which persisted until 1985. This research highlights the state of democracy in Brazil from 2013 to 2021, an era defined by what we term the Bolsonaro phenomenon. We must confront a pivotal question: will a Bolsonaro 2.0 emerge, triggering further regression of Brazilian democracy, or is this the definitive end of Bolsonarism? This paper aims to provide a profound understanding of this pivotal phenomenon.*

1. Introduction

Brazil's unique history with democracy is embroiled in controversy and coups. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed autocratic and military governments controlling the narrative. However, democracy still prevailed with the election of Brazil's first president in 1985 and respectively in 1992. Yet, while democracy prevailed it was not without backsliding. This paper seeks to examine democratic backsliding and erosion of Brazilian Democracy during the rise and fall of Jair Bolsonaro. In this work, I aim to establish a baseline of democratic history within Brazilian politics and analyze Democratic backsliding and erosion from 2013 until today. This work will shed light on Brazilian politics and democratic attitudes in the pre- and post-Bolsonaro era.

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Democratic Roots

Brazil is the second largest democracy in the Western Hemisphere and has a unique history of shifting between democratic and military-style governments. In its early history as a colony of the Portuguese, Brazilian society followed a feudal one with class systems and slavery up until the 1880s. (Graham, pg. 123). In 1889, the first republic (1889-1930) was established under a military coup. (Sabatini and Wallace, 2023). In the interim periods of the second (Vargas Era 1930-1945) and third republic (Populist Republic 1946-1964) respectively Brazil was under autocratic rule until a military coup in 1945. (Sabatini and Wallace, 2023).

The establishment of the fourth republic and the creation of a Brazilian constitution seemed promising for this evolving democratic system, but eventually, it fell back to a military government due to foreign influence (U.S.) and internal turmoil which would soon be known as the military dictatorship (1964-1985). “The United States launched Operation Brother Sam, a plan to lend logistical support to the Brazilian military’s effort to take control of the Brazilian government....On March 31, 1964, Brazil’s military once again put its constitutional powers into action, put an end to the Fourth Republic, and began 24 years of military dictatorship.” (Cowan et al, 2023).

The first constitutional republic evolved from the military dictatorship in 1985, with Brazil’s first President (Fernando Collor) becoming impeached. (Sabatini and Wallace, 2023). This led to the rule of Vice President Franco, and the ascension of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995). Cardoso, the former minister of finance ushers Brazil into the 21st century and enjoys a period of economic growth (1995-2002). Luis Ignacio “Lula” da Silva, (2003-2011) a member of the worker's party, and a former presidential candidate wins the Presidency. Lula, a candidate who was seen as a champion for the impoverished and working class took on the challenge of mass hunger and social services. Following the popularity of Lula and being seen as the torch bearer for the workers Dilma Rousseff was elected the first woman President of Brazil in 2012. Dilma faced economic turmoil during a recession and political backlash for extending the Lula era war on hunger and expansion of social services. Dilma was re-elected in 2015 yet faced backlash over her social policies and un-popularity which led to her ultimate impeachment in

2018. Michel Temer, (2016-2018) took over the Presidency but with the fallout from the nationwide corruption case Operation Carwash, the Brazilian populace voted for a new kind of Brazilian candidate. Enter, Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer/member of Congress who ran on a Trump-like candidacy ascended to the Presidency. The Bolsonaro years are the primary foci of analyzing democratic backsliding for this work. Bolsonaro was notorious for giving speeches that were deemed politically incorrect and similar to that of his American Presidential counterpart, Donald Trump. Much of the campaign similarities in division mirror both of these candidate's campaigns. Ultimately, Bolsonaro was unable to return the economic prosperity or contend with the political backlash of his direct rhetoric with the Brazilian population. Also, Lula served time in prison for his involvement in the Operation Car Wash scandal. However, Brazilians look back to the economic prosperity that followed the Henrique and Lula administrations respectively. As of 2023, Lula was re-elected for his third term in office.

2. Democratic Erosion, Recovery, and Polarization

Democratic backsliding is defined by Nancy Bermeo as “At its most basic, it denotes the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy.” (Bermeo, 2016). The definition is the erosion of the political institutions that are in place as safe gaps in protecting democratic governance. Brazil could be considered a case study for democratic backsliding and the example that could be used is the judiciary and its role in prosecuting corruption during the “Operation Lava Jato” (Operation Car Wash) period during the Dilma Presidency and the eventual return of Lula to public office. Brazil is a good case study of a country built off strong democratic principles post-military government and examples of different actors and factions chipping away at competing institutions to ensure longevity in office or financial enrichment at the judicial and executive levels.

Democratic backsliding also entails the rise of an executive or oligarch, and the dissolution of the democratic institutions that are the safeguard to democratic rule. Haggard and Kaufman's associate backsliding with a “collapse in the separation of powers”. (pg. 4) Haggard and Kaufman sum up what democratic backsliding is in the following insertion:

“To sum up, we define backsliding as the result of the purposeful effort of autocrats, who come to power through electoral means, to undermine the three constitutive elements of democracy just outlined. Such regress may take place within regimes that remain democratic- a process we label erosion, or it can result in regress to authoritarian rule or reversion.” (pg4).

Brazil as a case study experienced Democratic backsliding during the Lula, with the rise of right-wing populism and social media influence in Brazilian politics.

Democratic collapse is defined as democracy overtaken by either an oligarchy or autocratic regime. Democratic backsliding is the starting point for democratic collapse. This is best explained in the following insertion by Reidl et al “Democratic decline is occurring gradually and sequentially, limiting the checks and balances of legislatures, courts, media, civil society, opposition parties- and eventually, the electorate. (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). The timeline for this project will be from 2013 until the present day. 2013, represents the first major protest by the population against the government in recent history and goes into the rise and fall of Jair Bolsonaro’s Presidency.

2.1 Precursors of Erosion

Bachelorismo of Brazilian Society

To understand the erosion of democracy in Brazil one must first understand the *Bachelorismo* of Brazilian society. The precursors of democratic erosion must first be taken into account in analyzing how Brazilian society evolved from a Portuguese colony with indentured servitude to a separate but unequal nation that still grapples with identity politics today. Within early Brazilian society, elitists sought to conserve the judicial powers of the country through a dedicated system of nepotism in which wealthy elites ensured their longevity through the legal system. Bruno Passadore explains this in his work “*Unraveling democratic erosion in Brazil: exploring the impact of the “New Bachelorismo”*”. Passadore postulates “There was a close relation between the landowners

of the interior and the law graduates of the city, where landowners at the time had two aspirations: to obtain for themselves a patent in the national guard and to obtain a Law degree at least for one of their descendants.” (Passadore, 2019 pg. 1265). In this system, Passadore, emphasizes how the system becomes corrupted through this relationship between formal and informal corruption. Passadore even states this has an overwhelming effect on the real polity “Not surprisingly, this new bacharelismo begins to resist the longest period in Brazil’s history of left-wing governments (2003-2016) and starts to use an entire institutional framework precisely to undermine the continuity of this project of social valorization, which despite many difficulties, had been developing.” (Pg 1271). Passadore associates the abuses of prosecutorial misconduct by these intelligencias to be associated with the rise of right-wing political forces including Jair Bolsonaro. (pgs. 1269,1271).

Authoritarianism

The precursor to democratic erosion finds its roots in the authoritative period of Brazilian politics in the 19th and 20th centuries. Much of this is contributed to a byproduct of the Cold War era influence by the U.S. in instigating regime changes throughout the Latin American space. Benjamin Cowan, Henry Widener, and Suzanne Schadl examine this phenomenon in their work *The United States and Brazil’s Military Coup*. Cowan et al postulate:

The “Ever anxious to guarantee pro-American, anticommunist government in Brazil, the United States made common cause with its longtime allies in the Brazilian military. Led by General Humberto Castello Branco, by 1964 this conservative segment of the military had made clear its intentions to overthrow Jango’s government. In response, the United States launched operation Brother Sam, a plan to lend logistical support to the Brazilian military’s effort to take control of the Brazilian government.” (Cowan et al, 2023).

The U.S. involvement in Brazilian politics contributed to the military takeover of the government and the eventual military dictatorship experienced by Brazil up until 1985. “In the end, additional material support proved unnecessary to complete Jango’s ouster. On March 31, 1964, Brazil’s military once again put its constitutional powers into action,

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put an end to the Fourth Republic, and began a 24-year period of military dictatorship.” (Cowan et al, 2023).

Populismo

The phenomenon of *Bachelorismo* therein also lies with race relations within Brazilian society. Much of Brazil’s poorest populations are of African descent and have had a challenge in integration and social mobility. Christopher Sabatini and Jon Wallace examine this issue in their work *Democracy in Brazil: Explaining the Challenges to Democracy in Brazil, the Continuing Influence of the Military in Politics, and Division in the Age of Bolsonarismo*. Sabatini and Wallace emphasize how race relations play a part in the overall psyche of Brazilian society in the following insertion: “But the country has a lingering legacy of racism. It was one of the last countries in the world to abolish slavery, and its class structure remains very clearly demarcated by race. This is reflected in standards of living and in sectors like education where schools serving populations of African descent are generally significantly poorer than those serving other communities.” (Sabatini and Wallace, 2023). Much of what the backlash against left-wing governments in Brazilian politics is intertwined with right-wing populism, against a backdrop of corruption. The discontent is best examined under the Rhodes-Purdy et al model.

Matthew Rhodes-Purdy, Rachel Navarre, and Stephen Utych explain how discontent within democracies happens in their work *The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Contemporary Democracies*. Rhodes et al divide discontent into four categories: Broadening, Deeper, Cumulative, and Vague. The broadening discontent makes citizens feel demoralized and distrusted in institutions and leadership. “To be discontented, all policies are bad, all leaders are crooked, and democratic institutions are woefully insufficient.” (Rhodes-Purdy et al, 2023 pg. 2). In the Sabatini and Wallace study this broadening discontent arose in populist fervor against the status quo of the left-wing government that has come to dominate Brazilian politics from the *Petrobras* scandal.

“Operation Car Wash’ (2014-19) was an investigation that exposed corruption at state-owned oil firm Petrobras and contracting companies. The prosecution, led by judge Sérgio Moro, saw former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) jailed for accepting services from companies involved in the scandal. The case drained faith in Lula’s Workers Party, which had promised a cleaner form of politics in the early 2000s. But it also created division and suspicion of the justice system and, by extension, Brazil’s democratic institutions. Moro, briefly hailed as a hero, was later revealed to have communicated with the prosecutors investigating the case. This, combined with his decision to briefly join the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro as justice minister, stained his reputation as an objective jurist.” (Sabatini and Wallace, 2023).

Discontent is not something that just happens overnight, in fact as Rhodes-Purty states: “Discontent, on the other hand, builds over time as repeated disappointments become disaffection.” (Rhodes-Purdy et al, 2023 pg. 2). This led to the all-out populist assault against Lula’s predecessor Dilma Rousseff, who was seen as the torch bearer of the Lula administration.

“Dilma Rousseff succeeded Lula, representing his Workers Party, becoming Brazil’s first woman president. She held the position from 2011 until her impeachment and removal from office in August 2016. A member of a Marxist guerrilla group during the military dictatorship, her government removed taxes on energy and food staples and enjoyed high approval ratings throughout its first term. This declined rapidly in her second term, a time of increasing unemployment and inflation, until, in 2015, Rousseff was accused of budgetary trickery. After large protests swept across Brazil, she was impeached and convicted. She was succeeded by her vice president from a more centrist party.” (Sabatini and Wallace, 2023).

Avritzer and Renno in their work *The Pandemic and the Crisis of Democracy in Brazil* support this notion of discontent and rise in right-wing populist sentiment that ultimately led to the election of Jair Bolsonaro. Avritzer and Renno explain how this sentiment brought back memories of more stable support from the military government. “We operationalize authoritarian attitudes in the Brazilian public through support for military intervention, given its role in regime breakdown in

Latin America. (Passos, 2018, Stepan, 1971). In Brazil, views favorable to military intervention have gained significant mass support in recent years- as expressed in political protests and demonstrations- and are in line with the declared and manifest sympathies of the current president.” (Avritzer and Renno, 2021). In the Avritzer and Renno article, the authors study the effects of the Pandemic and the actions by the Bolsonaro regime to erode the democratic process. The authors created this study based on the “Public opinion and mass-political behavior. Anti-democratic attitudes have gained increased salience in the country following two impeachment processes, repeated corruption scandals, and the election of an outsider with clear authoritarian tendencies.” (Avritzer and Renno, 2021).

2.2 Symptoms of Erosion

Election of Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro wins the 2018 Presidential election off of a wave of populist support and anti-corruption. “Bolsonaro took advantage of the failures of the system- economic crisis, rampant corruption², and endemic violent crime and turned these grievances into political mandates, which allowed him to justify all his aggrandizement (Kirby, 2018).” (Balbuena, 2024). Delgado Thornhill, in his work *Conjunctures of Democracy Erosion: Is Brazil Global Paradigm of Resilience*. Thornhill postulates:

The government established under Bolsonaro in Brazil belongs to the broad family of populist governments, albeit with strong manifestation of the undemocratic aspects that appear in populist polities. Core features of this regime mirror features of other recent or existing governments that we can reasonably categorize as populist. Moreover, the background to Bolsonaro’s emergence was shaped by structural conditions observable in other social settings, in which populist governments have been formed.” (Thornhill, 2024, pg. 133).

The populist fervor that led to the rise of the Bolsonaro phenomenon finds its roots aforementioned with the social order of *Bachelorismo* and push back against the welfare state instituted by Lula’s war on poverty and continued by the Dilma administration.

“In sum, years before the rise of a far-right autocratic populist, there occurred an intensified politicization, and polarizing debate about social welfare arrangements, which meant that welfare policies were subject to deep retrenchment even before Bolsonaro appeared as a presidential candidate. The institutional prehistory of the last period of authoritarian populism trend was shaped by a process of democratic formation in which welfare state construction was subject to deep political controversy.” (Thornhill, 2024, pg 135).

What made Bolsonaro appealing was a very similar political approach that his American Presidential counterpart employed which was divide and conquer. President Trump employed an America-first agenda, and Bolsonaro soon followed with a Brazilian-first agenda, one that pitted the corrupt welfare state against the nostalgia of a law-and-order-first, type of regime. “Further, Brazilian authoritarian populism draws capital from an idea of national sovereignty, which is manifest in strategic opposition to international normative constraints imposed on popular agency, and its discourse depends on the separation of the sovereignty of the Brazilian people from the international order.” (Thornhill, 2024, pg 140).

As Bolsonaro presided right-wing nationalists supported the anti-corruption agenda. To cater to this support Bolsonaro appointed the leading justice for the Petrobras scandal into his administration as a ploy to demonstrate his tough-on-crime policies. Yet, as time progressed investigations or rumors of corruption of Bolsonaro’s family members led to allegations of financial crimes. (Thornhill, 2024, pg 140). The eroding of democracy comes to the forefront with the use of social media. Marie Lamensch expands on this in her work *In Brazil, “Techno-Authoritarianism” Rears its Head*. Lamensch states:

Since 2018, Bolsonaro has also used his presidential powers to pass several decrees and laws that have steadily eroded data privacy and freedom of expression online. The Brazilian Law of Freedom, Responsibility and Transparency on the Internet introduced in the Federal Senate of Brazil on May 13, 2020, sought to restrict and penalize legally protected speech, making it a crime to create and share content that posed a serious risk to “social peace or to the economic order” — a vague definition. The Global Network Initiative writes that the bill’s provisions also included “requiring users to register for social media and private

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messaging services using government identification documents, together with ... data retention requirements.” In June 2022, the Brazilian Congress rejected the fast-tracking of the bill and its future is now uncertain. (Lamensch, 2022).

Bolsonaro not only went after his enemies in the political and social media space but also carried over some of the right-wing propaganda that helped him get elected by going after minority and at-risk groups that were already had a struggle to integrate into Brazilian society. “Bolsonaro frequently attacked press freedom and the political rights of Brazil’s LGBTQ+ population during his presidential term. By weaponizing Brazil’s National Security Law, Bolsonaro launched criminal investigations against anyone publicly criticizing him, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Bolsonaro gave Brazil’s military courts full license to try journalists accused of ‘attacking the honor of military institutions.’” (Langhorne, 2024). Much of this pushback against the LGBTQ community occurred in the first weeks of office with the removal of these groups that were part of Brazil’s human rights directives. This was a travesty considering these minority group’s history as victims of violent crime. Yet, the writing was on the wall. “Given Bolsonaro’s history of homophobic remarks, including statements about preferring his son to be dead rather than gay, it is evident that he aimed to disenfranchise the LGBTQ- community intentionally. (Langhorne, 2024).

The Unravelling

It took a tragedy to save a democracy from tragedy. Bolsonaro faced a lot of popular support and backlash from his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, Bolsonaro never regained the momentum that he enjoyed in the run-up to his election due to the number of COVID-19 deaths. “The COVID-19 pandemic derailed Bolsonaro’s original plans for governing and for managing the economy. As his approval rates shrunk down to some 20-25% by mid-2021, he deployed the old-time tools Brazilian Executive mobilize to secure congressional support and, in this case, avert any potential threats of legislative impeachment.” (Baker, 2023 pg.5). Facing potential re-election and an ever presence of the judiciary courts, Bolsonaro sought ways to hinder the court’s abilities to counter his executive power. This democratic backsliding is best explained by Azul Aguiar in her work *Courts and the Constitutional Erosion of Democracy*

in Latin America. Azul Aguliar examines the judiciary's role in allowing Anti-democratic candidates to use the court system to erode democratic elections in democratic systems.

Contrary to autocrats that blatantly de-activate the courts by curtailing their powers in episodes of democratic breakdown, elected anti-democrats in democratic backsliding follow a gradual pace. The process of capturing the judiciary usually unfolds in three interactive steps: a) public threats or attacks on the judiciary. b) judicial purges; and /or c) packing of the courts. Actions in this process evolve slowly, covered by a democratic mantle and a veneer of legality and they can be interrupted only in the presence of strong democratic institutions and actors. (Aguliar, 2020 pg. 11).

Taking another page from the playbook of his American counterpart, Bolsonaro used the rhetoric of a rigged election to counter his failing poll numbers and potential to get re-elected. This rhetoric and the push for military influence in the voting process scared many into thinking whether Bolsonaro would completely erode the institutions that kept Brazilian democracy stable. “For months, President Bolsonaro has questioned Brazil’s voting systems, casting doubt on their security, and claiming they are vulnerable to vote rigging, although no evidence of this exists. The Brazilian military has reinforced the president’s arguments, claiming that hacking software could be installed on voting machines. Bolsonaro has also suggested the need for a parallel vote-counting system that would involve the armed forces, an idea supported by a naval commander.” (Lamensch, 2022).

Bolsonaro’s entire Presidency from its rise in infancy to its ultimate demise in not winning re-election shares a lot of similarities to that of President Trump. Both candidates were divisive in their rhetoric and as well as their tone on going after their political enemies. Brazil and the U.S. both shared an event that demonstrated overwhelming demagoguery and populist uprisings. In the U.S. it was January 6th, in Brazil it was January 8th. “On 8 January 2023, a week after Lula’s inauguration, thousands of Bolsonaro supporters stormed and vandalized government buildings, including the Congress and Supreme Court. The insurrection appeared to echo the events of 6 Jan 2021 in Washington, DC. But unlike in the US, rather than trying to disrupt the certification of the election

results, Bolsonaro supporters were calling for the military to intervene.” (Sabatini and Wallace, 2023).

2.3 Resistance to Erosion

Judicial Activism

In his USAID report titled *Opening up Democratic Spaces*, author Matthew Baker explains how Brazil has experienced democratic erosion and ultimately recovery. Baker makes note of how the judiciary put a check on Bolsonaro during the COVID pandemic. Bolsonaro, sought to use his authority as President to limit many of the decisions that local/federal judges were making regarding public safety.

“The Supreme Court was the most prominent of institutions to push back against Bolsonaro (Aguilar Aguilar 2023). The trigger for this was the COVID-19 pandemic (Biehl, Prates and Amon, 2021). Justices ruled against the Executive’s attempt to concentrate authority over lockdowns on several occasions and transferred responsibility for social distancing policies to governors and mayors. The Supreme Court in April 2021 mandated the Senate to establish a committee to probe the administration’s response to the pandemic, unveiling a series of scandals involving bribes and other misdemeanors.” (Baker, 2023 pg. 6).

Baker emphasizes just how judges themselves sought to hinder Bolsonaro’s ability to be re-elected.

“Progressively, justices became key political actors in coping with Bolsonaro’s backsliding push (Da Ros and Taylor, 2022; Taylor 2022; Taylor 2022; Taylor 2014). As the 2022 election approached, they united against Bolsonaro because they saw him as a threat not only to democracy but a threat to themselves.” (Baker, 2023 pg.6).

2021 Protests

In January 2021, a massive country-wide protest erupted throughout Brazil demanding the impeachment of Bolsonaro. This represents a backlash against Bolsonaro’s image as a man of the people. “In cities such as Belo Horizonte, Sao Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, this mobilization of the

left is converging with the call initiated last week by members of the Acredito movement a political renewal group that does not position itself as right or left but as a progressive organization.” (Schreiber, 2021). According to Schreiber, a reporter from the BBC, these organizations collectively united as a testament towards change, which was nostalgically the Diretas Ja from the 1980s. (Schreiber, 2021). The Diretas Ja movement was a collection of academia, industry, and civilian protest movements to bring about an end to the military regime in Brazil during the 1980’s. Bolsonaro’s presence re-ignited this movement in the eyes of some, yet popular support for the brash President remained relative to middle- and upper-class Brazilians who rejected the years of left-wing, welfare-style governments of Dilma and Lula.

Re-election of “Lula” da Silva

Lula who was serving a prison sentence for his prosecution of the *Petrobras* scandal under Operation *Lava Jato* was able to get his prison sentence overturned. Much like his American counterpart Joe Biden, Lula sought to reapproach Brazilian polity as the alternative to the brashness of the Bolsonaro administration. Baker explains the 2022 Presidential elections in the following insertion:

“In October 2022, Brazilians elected a new president, a new lower chamber and a third of the senate, and new governors for all its 27 federal states. These were clean, highly competitive elections. Lula of the Workers Party unseated President Bolsonaro with a tiny two percent advantage. The Bolsonaro coalition lost the presidency but elected the largest number of legislators and secured half the governorships for his allies. Brazil emerged from the election a house divided alongside regional and class markers, between the wealthier South and Southeast (which went for Bolsonaro) and a poorer North and Northeast (that went for Lula).” (Baker, 2023 pg. 9).

Lula’s return to politics brought Brazil back to some sense of normalcy. Brazilians that supported Bolsonaro remained supportive in the aftermath of the election which led to the biggest raid on the capital in recent history on January 8th. Ultimately, the election of Lula is a veto from the people as to what they want which is not a divisive figure that Bolsonaro represents. There are a lot of similarities between the U.S.

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Presidential election of 2020 and the Brazilian Presidential election of 2022. Both countries shared similar economic and political issues from the COVID-19 pandemic and also shared a return to “normalcy” type of political leadership of previous administrations. Also, what cannot be overlooked was the election denial that both losing candidates: Bolsonaro and Trump employed to rally their supportive bases and influence the massive destructive protests of January 6th and 8th respectively.

The End of Bolsonaroism?

Much of the debate as to whether Bolsonaro can return rests mainly on appealing to the decision made by Brazil’s election court to ban him from public office for eight years. (Saric, 2024). As mentioned previously therein lies a lot of similarities in the political gamesmanship of Bolsonaro and Trump. Ivana Saric a reporter for Axios states “Bolsonaro suggested that Trump could wield his influence possibly via sanctions to pressure Brazil to delay enforcement of the court ruling.” (Saric, 2024). One specific observation can be made from this statement. This assumes that President Trump is interested, why I make this case because the popularity of Trump in Brazil is very similar to that of Bolsonaro. President Trump does threaten other countries with sanctions or tariffs to push his economic agenda, yet I have not seen a case in which he uses these threats to push his political agenda. Yet, Bolsonaro might know more than anyone about his relationship with Trump, so to state otherwise it remains to be speculative and one will have to just wait and see what happens. This also assumes of course that Bolsonaro does not get prosecuted and put in prison before the election as the most recent news coming out of Brazil is that he is under investigation for a potential coup de tat of the Lula government. (Saric, 2024).

3. Polarization Rise and Fall

Brazil, much like its U.S. counterpart remains politically divided. In the U.S. it’s the MAGA movement, in Brazil it is Bolsonaroism. Both movements share similar ideologies: tough on corruption, rebuilding the economy, and putting their country first above everything else. Yet, no one can overlook the role that social media plays in the real politics of both societies. “Using one of the classical mechanisms of democracy, civil society demonstrations, Bolsonaro called his supporters to take the streets

in large cities across Brazil to protest against the judicial and the legislative branches. In his fight to get his preferred policies, Bolsonaro shared a video through WhatsApp that claimed to rescue the country, the power of the people and provide the President with the tools to defeat his enemies; The National Congress and the Judiciary.” (Aguilar, 2020 pg. 17). What makes social media a dangerous tool for the polity is the amount of disinformation delivered by the respected parties.

“Lastly, disinformation plays a crucial role in mobilizing public support for Bolsonaro. According to research by de Albuquerque & Alves, Bolsonaristas feed on hate speech and false information disseminated in social media spaces such as Facebook to propel Bolsonaro’s popularity. The disinformation network also showed resilience amidst social media bans, as they moved towards more permissive spaces such as Telegram and WhatsApp to spread Fake news and promote mobilizations.” (Balbuena, 2024).

Another example of similarities in the polarization of both the U.S. and Brazil is the use of religion as a backdrop to the rhetoric of restoring greatness to their respected societies. “Bolsonaro’s regime was illustrated as extremist populism with a religious, exclusionary, and anti-pluralist background, which has undermined the democratic institutions of Brazil, and his anti-establishment government is a typical example of democratic backsliding.” (Balbuena, 2024). The challenge for both societies is to turn down the temperature. January 6th, and 8th respectively demonstrate just how far supporters of these two brash leaders will go to win elections and assume power.

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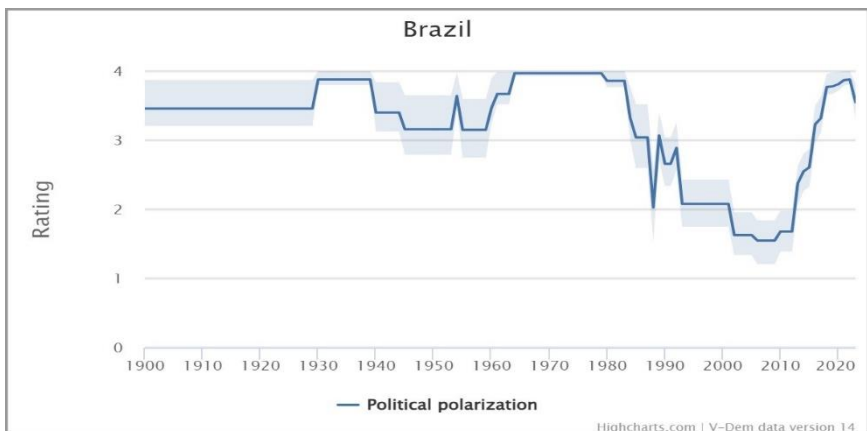
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The election denying and the call to arms protests, share similarities within their respected camps. This leads to democratic erosion, due to the labeling of elections as being rigged and the proactive protests to overturn the results of such elections.

The attack on Brazil’s capitol was a stain on its democracy and democratic principles. The spread of disinformation is a key cause of Brazil’s conspiracy theories that have been gaining traction and what also was part of the capitol attack in Brazil. According to Nicas, many Bolsonaro’s are spewing disinformation about Bolsonaro’s election loss through apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. This is a problem we face in the United States as well, were we have “election deniers”, who still falsely belief through disinformation that the 2020 election was stolen. Lack of trust in our institutions, elections, and government leads to downfalls in democracies, which Brazil is facing as we speak. (O’Donnell, 2024).

The following figure from V-DEM.net demonstrates the political polarization score of Brazil. The scoring is determined by the relationships between people becoming more civil or more adversarial. “Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces.” (V-DEM.NET, 2024).

Figure 1

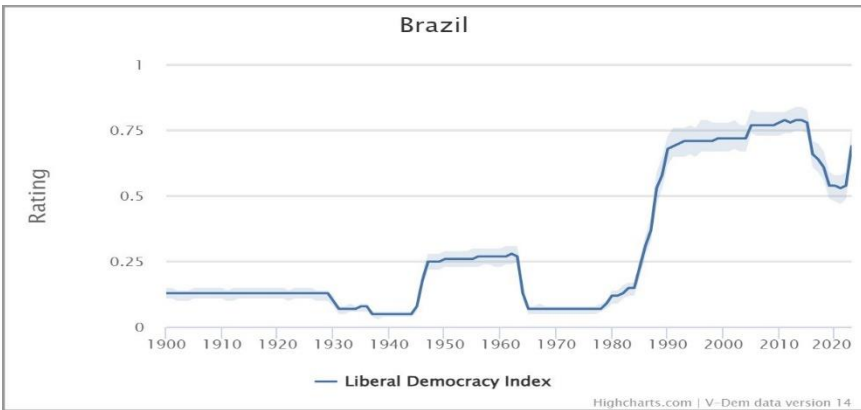


Brazil's V-Dem score for polarization in Figure 1 demonstrates the fluctuations in polarization in Brazil since 1900. The key indicator that a country is becoming more polarized is demonstrated with a score closer to 4. As one can observe the Bolsonaro phenomenon from 2015 until 2021, you see a steady rise in polarization toward the 4-point scale. This indicates that the country experienced a high amount of polarization during the Bolsonaro tenure.

3.1 Subjective Democratic Ranking

Figure 2 is the Liberal Democracy Scoring index by V-DEM. The scoring is based off how a democracy protects minority rights. “The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a ~negative~ view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government.” (V-DEM.NET, 2024).

Figure 2



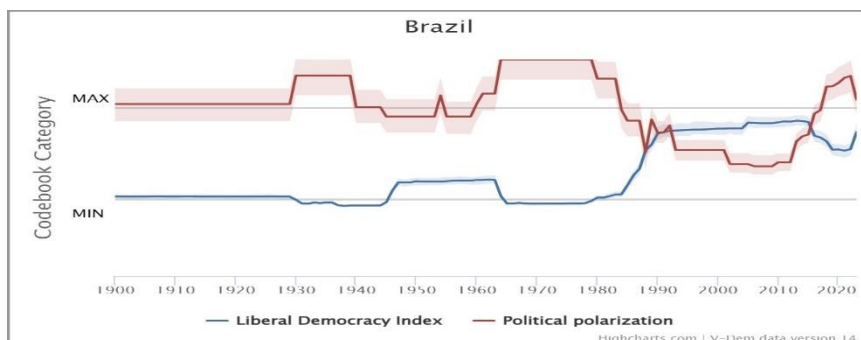
The scoring criteria is based off a 0 to 1 scale. The closer a country is to a score of 1 the more democratic that country is. Figure 2 encompasses Brazil's democracy scores from 1900 until 2020. One can observe how Brazil's score is further away from one early on in the 1900's and starts to increase in the early 1950's then decrease back down until the mid-1980's. this could be attributed to the overthrow of the democratically elected

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government and the institution of the military government until the drafting of the Brazilian constitution in 1985. In the Bolsonaro period one can observe that score dropping between 2015-2020. This is contributed to the democratic backsliding under Bolsonaro's reign. Bolsonaro was notorious for his stances against minority groups such as LGBTQ community in Brazil.

I constructed Figure 3 to compare the Liberal Democracy Index and the Polarization score from V-Dem to try understanding if therein lies a relationship between a polarized Brazilian society and a drop in Liberal democracy. This is not state that one causes the other but a related in some way.

Figure 3



The relationship between the years 2015 within the LBI and PP demonstrates the Bolsonaro phenomenon. It represents a time in which democracy backslides and polarization within society increases. Much of the research presented in this report supports this. “Brazilian’s belief systems became more coherent in the wake of the perfect storm. Since then, Brazil appears to be a divided society, with pushbacks against democracy and an embrace of alternative government structures on the one hand and growing niches of democratic reaction on the other.” (Carlin et al, 2023). In closing, will democracy ultimately prevail in Brazil? Will Bolsonaro return to the Presidency? There are so many different factors that are at play, and to speculate one way or another would not be prudent. What is important is to understand that democracy is a delicate

balance between tyranny and human rights, Brazil much like the U.S. has to maintain this dynamic if it wants to endure in the future.

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