

# Bolsonaro's Governance Model: Movement-Government against Public Policies

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## Abstract

This paper examines the governance model of President Jair Bolsonaro, which is distinguished by a movement-government approach that gives precedence to ideological agendas and social mobilization over the formulation and implementation of public policies. The tenure of President Jair Bolsonaro is characterized by a consistent disregard for effective governance principles, with a focus on the dismantling of long-standing policies and state bureaucracy. The paper elucidates the interrelationship between ideology and public policy, underscoring the cultural war as a central aspect of Bolsonaro's governance. Furthermore, the paper examines the coexistence of two extremist perspectives within the government: the neoliberal agenda of reducing the state apparatus and the anti-systemic objective of destroying the institutional structure established by the 1988 Constitution. The analysis illuminates the distinctive features of Bolsonaro's model, contrasting it with other populist movements globally, and examines the implications for public administration and policy continuity in Brazil.

## Keywords

Populism, Public Policies, Public Administration, Cultural War, Democratic Backsliding

## 1. Introduction

During his first visit to the United States in March 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro had dinner with prominent far-right figures, including ideologue Olavo de Carvalho and strategist Steve Bannon, during which President Bolsonaro made the following statement: "I have always dreamed of freeing Brazil from the nefarious ideology of the left (...). Brazil is not an open terrain where we intend to build things for our people. We have to deconstruct a lot of things, undo a lot of things,

and then we can start to do things. If I can at least be a turning point, I'll be already very happy" (Amaral, 2019; Mendonça, 2019).

During his tenure, President Bolsonaro demonstrated a consistent disregard for the principles of effective governance. Instead of pursuing a positive public policy agenda that was clearly defined and supported by a well-structured program of priorities and strategies, he established a *movement-government* (Couto, 2021; 2023). The government has been more engaged in the promotion of its ideological agenda and mobilization of its social base than in the formulation, implementation, and improvement of government policies. Instead, it sought to disorganize and deinstitutionalize long-standing policies, as well as the sectors of the state bureaucracy responsible for their implementation and continuity (Cardoso Jr. et al., 2022) because its primary source of legitimacy was the so-called cultural war. The key to understanding Bolsonaro's governance model is the interplay between values and public policies.

The cultural war is a pivotal element of this movement-government, though not the sole factor. The inverse of this is the dismantling of government policies and bureaucracy. Two distinct extremist perspectives present in the government contribute to this process. On the one hand, the neoliberal agenda of dismantling the state apparatus, personified by Economy Minister Paulo Guedes and based on reducing spending and eliminating government agencies and public services. On the other hand, the president has made his anti-systemic objective clear: to destroy the inherited institutional structure, especially the model of rights and public policies that was set forth in the 1988 Constitution. Despite the differences in the underlying motivations of the neoliberal and anti-systemic agendas, there were *elective affinities*<sup>1</sup>. These agendas intersected and mutually reinforced each other, creating a symbiotic relationship that made it challenging to determine the relative importance of every factor.

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyze the process in question and to shed light on the nature of Bolsonaro's governmental experience. It will be shown that there are characteristics common to the various populisms that have emerged around the world in recent years, but it will also be shown that there are peculiarities in the model constructed by Bolsonaro, and understanding these peculiarities can be important for a comparative understanding of the phenomenon.

In our analysis, we employ a qualitative approach, utilizing process-tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) to examine the dismantling and capture of public policies and bureaucracies during Bolsonaro's administration. Following a comprehensive discussion on populism, we delineate the principal characteristics of Bolsonaro's administration and provide illustrative cases, focusing on specific sectors of the federal public administration in Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup>"Elective affinity" is a notion used by Max Weber in his major work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 2013), and it means that "two cultural forms—religious, intellectual, political or economic—who have certain analogies, intimate kinships or meaning affinities, enter in a relationship of reciprocal attraction and influence, mutual selection, active convergence and mutual reinforcement" (Löwi, 2004: p. 103).

## 2. Populism and Public Policies

A substantial body of recent literature has been devoted to examining the populist phenomenon in the context of contemporary democracies. This is accompanied by a process of erosion of these regimes, marked by a significant proportion of citizens expressing dissatisfaction with the performance of their representatives. (Mounk, 2019; Stefan & Mounk, 2017). This is due either to transformations that worsen their relative situation, or to the lack of solutions to concrete problems of various kinds.

The reasons for this are not unique, but vary significantly according to the different national realities. In the United States and Europe, populist appeals have been aimed above all at those who—in fact or according to their perceptions—are relative losers: the white middle and working classes who feel threatened by economic, demographic and cultural changes. The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 serves as a clear example of this phenomenon.

As a result, the immigration of ethnic and religious groups that are different from the local majority population becomes an easy and convenient target for populist mobilization against the established order, which is denounced as coniving with this process or even producing it. It's no coincidence that far-right-wing populists have had greater electoral success with their discourse against immigrants in general and Muslims in particular. If this xenophobic and discriminatory appeal has been the starting point, the result is the disqualification of traditional politics with its parties and leaders. In other words, although catapulted by chauvinism and fear of cultural transformations, populist rhetoric strategically targets the political and administrative *establishment*, which is apparently inoperative in the face of these phenomena.

In a different context, Latin America, space was opened up for populist discourses which, although also focused on attacking traditional politics, were driven by other motives—in this case, the historic economic and social exclusion of large sectors of the population. Thus, left-wing populist leaders, movements and parties were able to mobilize a discourse contrary to the established elites as an instrument to gain large electoral support, proposing transformations that would lead to the inclusion of marginalized segments—such as the poor, the indigenous population, subalternized ethnic groups, etc. The distinction between these two forms of populism—one more prevalent in Europe, the other in Latin America—led Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) to speak of *exclusionary* and *inclusive* populisms.

While these factors provide unique context to the various national manifestations of populism, they do not negate a core, underlying attribute that unites them: the perception of societal divisions between “good” and “bad”, though the reasons for this distinction may vary. The most common formulation of the opposition is between a “good people” and a “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2017). Of course, when attacking the *establishment*, the conventional politics, it is easier to identify an elite on the bad side—in this case, the political elite and their associates (such as

powerful economic groups). However, in the case of exclusionary populism, it is inaccurate to speak of the “bad side” as an elite. Are the African immigrants and refugees who arrive in Europe members of an elite? Certainly not. It follows that the “bad part” would be composed not only of these “unwanted elements” arriving from abroad, but also of the sectors of the national elite that would allow (or even encourage) this to happen. This, for example, is at the heart of Donald Trump’s speech against the Democratic Party (CBS News, 2024).

Mudde establishes the opposition between “the good people” and “the corrupt elite” as a crucial aspect in defining populism, also observes that “the essence of the populist division” concerns *morality* (Mudde, 2017: pp. 29-30). In his words:

*“The essence of the people is their purity, in the sense that they are ‘authentic,’ while the elite are corrupt, because they are not authentic. Purity and authenticity are not defined in (essentially) ethnic or racial terms, but in moral terms. It is about ‘doing the right thing,’ which means doing what is right for all the people. This is possible, because populism considers ‘the people’ to be a homogeneous category. By determining the main opposition to be between the pure people and the corrupt elite, populism presupposes that the elite comes from the same group as the people, but have willingly chosen to betray them, by putting the special interests and inauthentic morals of the elite over those of the people.”*

Those who do or don’t do the right thing may not only be people or the elite, but also groups not considered people, like immigrants and those of other ethnicities. Or it could be people in the national community who don’t “do the right thing” because of their religion, morals, or way of life. This makes some groups seem strange and different from the “real people”. Deviants are not a people.

In Brazil, this idea has been expressed by the far-right wing populism of Jair Bolsonaro on several occasions. For example, in a speech during the 2017 election campaign in the state of Paraíba (Agência France Presse, 2018):

*“God above all! There’s no such thing as a secular state. The state is Christian and the minority that is against it must change. Minorities have to bow to majorities.”*

Five years later, already in the Presidency, during the 2022 campaign, the same notion was reiterated at a meeting between Bolsonaro and evangelicals in the Minas Gerais municipality of Juiz de Fora (Behnke, 2022):

*“The other day I said that my mother wants Johnny to stay Johnny. ‘Oh, that’s a homophobic statement’. My God in heaven! Where will we go if we give in to minorities? The laws exist, in my opinion, to protect the majorities. Minorities have to adapt.”*

The idea that laws should only serve majorities (and therefore their moral principles and various preferences, including religious ones), subjugating minority sectors, is clearly anti-pluralist—consistent, therefore, with the populist notion of the people as a homogeneous group that excludes those who are different. This is

a central and defining aspect of populism: anti-pluralism. From this perspective, only part of the population is entitled to be recognized as a people and, therefore, to be duly represented and cared for by the government. The rest just have to submit.

This is masterfully pointed out by [Urbinati \(2020: p. 156\)](#):

*“I argue that populism identifies the people with ‘a part’ of society, making the majority the ruling force of that part against the other part(s). This is certainly a radical disfigurement of representative democracy, because it violates the synecdoche of pars pro toto, pitting one part (which is assumed to be the best one) against the other(s). The logic of populism, indeed, is the glorification of one part, or merelatria (from the Greek words méros, or ‘part’, and latreía, or ‘cult’), with no pretense of universality or generality. It occupies the institutions in order to further the interests of a part, which does not act ‘for’ and in the name of the whole but in its place; the part erases the whole and makes politics a question of partiality. Populism is an essentially factional government, the government by a part of society that rules for its own good, needs, and interests.”*

It should be noted that exclusionary populism is exercised by extirpating segments of the population from the condition of people through the combination of two interrelated factors: one *numerical*, the other *moral*. Minorities are excluded, firstly, precisely because they are minorities (even if in competitive regimes this is only a transitory condition, due to the volatility of electoral preferences) and, secondly, because they are branded as morally bad. In Bolsonaro’s two speeches quoted above, moral badness is determined, in one case, by religious affiliation (of non-Christians or, perhaps, “bad Christians”) and, in another, by sexual orientation.

The question thus arises as to which individual or entity is responsible for determining which individuals are or are not qualified to be considered part of a given population, based on their moral criteria and various personal preferences. In populism, the designation of who is and is not qualified to belong to the people is at the discretion of the leader and his supporters. Those who align themselves with the leader’s principles are accepted as members of the collective; those who do not are excluded. This leads to the conclusion that a comprehensive list of those subject to exclusion can be compiled, which extends beyond population minorities and also includes political groupings such as oppositionists, critics, and dissidents.

What are the implications of this for the government, the administration, and public policies? The fundamental issue is that a public administration and public policies subject to a populist government lack the pluralist character that is essential to a democracy ([Bauer et al., 2021](#); [Bauer & Becker, 2020](#)). After all, in Bolsonaro’s terms, “the laws exist to protect the majorities” and, therefore, in a (populist) government of the laws, it is for them that one governs. This provides greater clarity regarding the context of Bolsonaro’s frequently repeated assertion that there is a need to “play within the four lines of the Constitution” ([Moliterno et al., 2022](#)).

However, the issue extends beyond the realm of anti-pluralist governance and legality. The prioritization of cultural warfare over the public policy agenda is a hallmark of strongly ideologized or extremist populist governments. Such governments prioritize the political and ideological conflict over the practical aspects of governance and the delivery of tangible outcomes. This topic has been less extensively discussed in the existing literature than the preceding ones. This is an example of populism, particularly in its far-right iteration<sup>2</sup>. This is manifested in the form of an ideology and a broader conceptualization of the function of government. However, it is not evident in the actual governance and operations of the government. This article's primary focus is on this central theme, which will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

### 3. The Movement-Government against Public Policies

Jair Bolsonaro's presidency was marked by constant agitation. He and his government often confronted other state agents, civil society organizations, the press, individual journalists, foreign governments, and international organizations. It was also marked by denialism, which rejects science, experts, and universities (Szwako & Ratton, 2022). As will be demonstrated, this group represents a fundamental antagonist of Bolsonaro's governance model.

The President's proclivity for bellicosity and his tendency to launch verbal attacks on political opponents and critics were a common feature of his public appearances. These occurred in a variety of settings, including his customary Thursday addresses, interactions with supporters in a venue situated in front of the presidential residence (which came to be known as the "Alvorada huddle"), and remarks made at official administration events, both domestically and abroad.

Although it has become common to attribute this presidential behavior to an attempt to create "smoke screens" that would obfuscate the government's problems and its most unpopular actions, the evidence suggests that such behavior had the effect of maintaining the support base of Bolsonaro on social networks and, on occasion, in the streets. In this regard, it is notable that President Bolsonaro exhibited similar characteristics to those he displayed as a congressman and presidential candidate. He was a prominent figure in Brazilian politics, known for his outspoken and confrontational style, which often resulted in controversial statements that gained him notoriety. This reputation led to frequent appearances on entertainment television programs, which he often approached with a sensationalist approach. According to a survey by Piaia & Oliveira (2022; p. 88), Bolsonaro made 34 appearances on 18 different television programs between 2010 and 2018, even though at the time he was a federal deputy who was hardly representative of

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<sup>2</sup>For the idea of far-right, we take as a reference, although not literally, the definition established by Mudde (2017; p. 7). However, he divides the far-right into two groups: the extreme right, which "rejects the essence of democracy, i.e. popular sovereignty and majority rule", and the radical right, which "accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, the rule of law and the separation of powers". As we believe that Bolsonaro is halfway between these two positions, with clear extremist traits, we have chosen to classify it as a populist far-right movement.

the congressional elite.

The use of aggressive behavior, the absence of limitations on verbal expressions, and the utterance of outrageous statements constituted the ammunition that enabled Bolsonaro to portray himself to the electorate as an outsider, despite his 30-year tenure as an elected politician prior to his ascension to the presidency and the involvement of his three adult sons in professional political activities over several terms.

Nevertheless, Bolsonaro had always occupied a marginal position in Brazilian politics, lacking centrality in the decision-making processes of Congress and the political parties he belonged, and his anti-system discourse allowed him to position himself as an outsider, although actually lacking such characteristics. His supporters were impressed by this trajectory and behavior, and referred to him as “*Mito*” (myth) and to his bombastic statements as “mitadas” (“mytheds”) (Dieguez, 2022: pp. 70, 172). Since this behavior was the fundamental factor in his consecration as the triumphant candidate of anti-politics in 2018, it seemed useful to him to maintain this discursive model as President. And so he did.

It is notable that this approach was not exclusive to Bolsonaro, but was also adopted by members of various ministries. While they did not engage in discourse to launch attacks on those perceived as adversaries or their agendas, they did not actively disassociate themselves from the presidential outbursts either. To cite just a few examples, in health they spoke out against vaccination and the restrictive sanitary measures adopted during the pandemic, as well as recommending unsuitable medicines to deal with the disease; in the environment they spoke out against environmental protection measures and in defense of social and economic actors whose practices are clearly illegal and harmful to the environment; in indigenous policy they spoke out against the demarcation of native peoples’ lands and disqualified their way of life. In the field of education, there were repeated criticisms of the school system and universities, as well as of teachers. Instead, there was a focus on promoting homeschooling and disdaining the importance of university education for young people. At the Palmares Foundation, which is responsible for racial issues and affirmative action, there was opposition to the quota policy, criticism of the black movement, and a denial of the seriousness of racism in Brazil.

Generally, these speeches did not result in concrete government action in line with what was being said, and this for two reasons. Firstly, because pressure from public opinion and other political agents compelled the government to take a different course—as in the case of vaccination against Covid-19, which began against Bolsonaro’s express wishes, and he had to give in to pressure (Abrucio et al., 2020). Secondly, because the very administrative structure of the Brazilian state ensured, to some extent, the continuity of public policies that had already been implemented and in operation for a long time.

However, such speeches were effective in the political struggle waged by Bolsonaro, despite external pressure and internal resistance from the state apparatus.

The reason for this is that such rhetoric lent itself to the *cultural war* carried out by the president and his aides, characterizing the administration as a *movement-government* (Couto, 2021; 2023). The main objective of the populist government was not to achieve an agenda of public policies, but to continuously activate, keep mobilized and radicalize its social support base, relying on a legitimacy based on values and the identification of enemies to be destroyed (whether they were issues, political actors or democratic institutions themselves, such as the 1988 Constitution and the Supreme Court).

To achieve this, the delivery of substantive public policies is less important than the constant mobilization of the *affections*, *identities* and *beliefs* of this social base—corresponding, in the populist’s understanding, to the “one true people”. This dynamic gives rise to the phenomenon observed by Carlin & Love (2020: p. 24): populist leaders manage to maintain a higher level of popularity throughout their terms in office than normal rulers—even though there is also a tendency for their approval rating to be lower—even with a mediocre government performance in relation to the deliveries made. After all, the segment of the population that makes up the social base of populist rulers evaluates them less for their governing performance than for their effectiveness as leaders of a political movement.

With regard to the substantive evaluation of economic policies, Carlin & Love observed that:

*“whereas populists’ approval ratings are unrelated to economic outputs, their disapproval ratings respond to growth and inflation as expected. The upshot for accountability is, therefore, mixed.”* (Carlin & Love, 2020: p. 24)

In other words, citizens who are in tune with the leader due to their affections, identities and beliefs maintain their support for him if they are rewarded for these factors, despite the concrete results of his management in public policies. However, for the part of the population that disagrees with the ruler, or is just less in tune with him, what really matters is the government’s perceived performance in policies, resulting in their greater sensitivity to factors such as the functioning of the economy, considered by Carlin & Love in their analysis.

#### **4. Neoliberalism and Anti-System Politics**

Despite what was observed in the previous section, a movement-government is not inert or indifferent in relation to public administration, something that Bolsonaro’s four-year term makes very clear. The striking features of this period were the discontinuity of various policy areas, the attack on certain sectors of the state bureaucracy (Cardoso Jr. et al., 2022) and the capture of others. Bolsonaro sought in combination to achieve the goals that Bauer & Becker (2020: pp. 22) point to those pursued by populist leaders in government. The authors say:

*“Populists with a negative view of the state will preferentially seek to dismantle the bureaucracy. Yet this will only be immediately possible if existing administrative orders are fragile. If they are robust, anti-state populists must first seek to*

*sabotage the bureaucracy so to limit the established bureaucracy's capacity to counteract the new populist government. Populists with a positive view of the state will preferentially seek to capture its institutions, including the administration, to fully realize their political agenda. Again, however, this will only be immediately possible when facing fragile orders. If the administrative orders in place turn out to be robust, pro-state populists must pursue incremental reform”.*

There are then four basic goals pursued by populist rulers in their relationship with the administrative machine: (1) *dismantle*, (2) *sabotage*, (3) *capture* and (4) *gradual reform*. Although Bauer & Becker initially point to each of these goals as characteristics of certain general visions of the state, they note that it is more accurate to consider that different populist leaders and movements have different conceptions of the state apparatus depending on the area of public policy. In other words, it is possible to have a negative view of state action in one sector, but not in another, depending on the substantive ideological perspective of that particular populism (Bauer & Becker, 2020: pp. 22-23) and its broader political objectives (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Goals of populist public administration.

		Administrative order	
		Fragile	Robust
Populist view of the State	Positive	Capture	Reform
	Negative	Dismantle	Sabotage

Source (Bauer & Becker, 2020: p. 22).

The pursuit of these goals requires the adoption of certain strategies. Bauer & Becker (2020: p. 20) point out that populist governments use five strategies: (1) centralization of structure, (2) centralization of resources, (3) politicization of personnel, (4) politicization of norms and (5) reduction of accountability.

During Jair Bolsonaro's administration, it is possible to clearly identify—in different public policies and with varying depth—the combined mobilization of these five strategies in an attempt to achieve three of those four goals—we have excluded *reform* here, as we have not identified it as a goal pursued by this administration, even though reforms may have been approved by Congress during his term. We will demonstrate this through some cases, which will be discussed below. Through these categories, the place of Bolsonaro's governance model in possible international comparisons of populist governments, especially those of the far right or extreme right, will become clearer.

#### 4.1. Participatory Councils: Dismantling and Sabotage

In its political-ideological crusade, one of Bolsonarism's express aims from the outset was to carry out what its leaders referred to as the “depetization” (weeding out the Workers' Party—PT) of the government, i.e., to remove from it everything related to the long period in which the Workers' Party was in power (2003-2016).

The intention was announced unequivocally at the beginning of the administration by the then Chief of Staff of the Presidency of the Republic, Onyx Lorenzoni:

*“It is important to remove from the administration all those who have a clear ideological imprint. We know what has been done in the almost 14 years that the PT has been here. It’s about ‘depetizing’ the federal government.”* (Uribe, 2019).

Among the government bodies that the Bolsonaro supporters most identified with PTism were the participatory institutions—or, more specifically, the many public policy councils within the executive branch, created over the course of different governments and multiplied during the PT administrations of Lula (two terms) and Dilma Rousseff (one and a half terms). That’s why they were targeted as bodies to be abolished by the new administration. The justification for abolishing them was that they were expensive and served as instruments for the Workers’ Party to capture the state. Minister Lorenzoni said of them:

*“These 700 councils created by the PT government brought payments of per diems, airline tickets, hotels, food, resources for these people, resources that were loaded onto people who had no reason to be here, just to consume public resources and rig the Brazilian state.”* (Saconi et al., 2019)

The minister’s initiative was in line with Bolsonaro’s discourse, for whom such collegiate bodies were “soviets of the PT” (Fernandes & Fernandes, 2019). In such a view, there was therefore a need to extinguish them so as not to become “hostage” to them (Mazieiro, 2019).

This was the purpose of decree 9.759 of April 2019, when the president ordered the abolition, in one fell swoop, of hundreds of councils (Redação Conjur, 2019). However, two months later, in June 2019, a decision by the Federal Supreme Court (STF) suspended the effect of the decree for collegiate bodies created by laws approved by the National Congress, restricting its scope only to entities established by decisions within the executive branch itself (Barbiéri & Oliveira, 2019).

Anticipating this decision by the STF, the executive itself anticipated it and, about a month after the original rule was issued, produced a new decree, restricting extinction only to “collegiate bodies established by: I—decree; II—normative act inferior to a decree; III—act of another collegiate body”. (Presidency of the Republic, 2019).

In instances where the legal status of the collegiate body permitted its complete dissolution via presidential decree, the government proceeded to dismantle it. In other cases where the collegiate body was established by statutory law, the administration chose to undermine its effectiveness.

Although the dismantling would only be effective for a portion of the participatory public policy councils within the federal executive, the number of collegiate bodies that could be abolished would not be small. A survey carried out by the government at the time pointed to the possibility of terminating 734 bodies, which would leave only 32 in existence (Saconi et al., 2019). At the end of the day, however, according to a survey by Farranha et al. (2021: p. 156), “only” 446 collegiate

bodies were abolished – indicating that 320 bodies survived.

The government’s attack on participatory councils has not had homogeneous effects in the various policy areas. As [Bezerra et al. \(2024\)](#) point out ([Silva et al., 2023](#)), collegiate bodies in areas such as the environment and human rights, seen as particularly adverse to Bolsonarism and enjoying less resilience—because they are institutionally less robust, as they are not organized in the form of Public Policy Systems—were more affected ([Silva et al., 2023](#)). This results in weaker epistemic communities and a more fragmented and less stable institutional structure.

Since the dismantling was not possible in the case of the collegiate bodies provided for by statutory law, the government chose to sabotage them “through more subtle measures of institutional change aimed at limiting the functioning of the collegiate bodies and guided by the guidelines of Decree No. 9.759/2019—reductions in composition, number of meetings, appeals; changes in the ways of selecting councilors and the president of the collegiate bodies, etc”. ([Bezerra et al., 2024: p. 11](#)).

The sabotage can be illustrated with the case of the Deliberative Council of the National Environment Fund. All the representatives of civil society were removed, leaving only those appointed by the government. In addition, for at least three years (from 2019 to 2021), the budget funds earmarked for it were not executed ([Bezerra et al., 2024: p. 30](#)). In this way, even though it formally survived the extermination, it became inoperative and ceased to exercise its attributions as a participatory body, fulfilling the presidential purpose, announced during the election campaign, of “putting an end to all activism in Brazil” ([Band Jornalismo, 2018; Folhapress, 2018](#)).

To enable sabotage in this body, three strategies were followed, among the five listed by Bauer & Becker as those that populist leaders set in motion to submit the administrative structure of the state to their political project: (a) centralizing and (b) partisanizing the composition of the collegiate body, by excluding all representatives of civil society and keeping only those from the government itself; and (c) cutting the funds that would enable it to function. Thus, although the council continued to exist on paper, it became completely innocuous.

## 4.2. Federal Highway Police: Capture

Throughout his seven terms as a federal deputy (preceded by half a term as a Rio de Janeiro city councilor), Jair Bolsonaro has had the military and police at the heart of his electoral constituency. In 1986, the then Army captain made a name for himself when he published an article in *Veja* magazine in which he stated that “the salary is low”—referring to the salary of the military ([Redação Veja, 2017](#)). Although the publication triggered a disciplinary process that culminated in his dismissal from the army, it was also the beginning of a political career based on defending the class interests of the armed state corporations, also constantly defending the military regime, adding to this an extreme right-wing discourse.

In reality, the extremist discourse and the defense of corporate interests were

combined, since one of the important elements of Bolsonaro's rhetoric has always been the apology for police truculence and the encouragement of the security forces to act as extermination groups for "vagrants", ensuring that police officers who kill alleged criminals should not be punished (Redação Exame, 2015) but rewarded. In Bolsonaro's own words, the police officer, "if he kills ten, 15 or 20, with ten or 30 shots each, he has to be commended and not prosecuted" (Soares, 2018).

Bolsonaro's strong relationship with the police forces was reflected in his government, particularly with one corporation, the Federal Highway Police (PRF), which is responsible for the safety of roads maintained by the Federal Government. If, for Bolsonaro, participatory institutions were anathema to be extirpated, the police and military forces would be the quintessence of the state—something to be not only reinforced, but made a fundamental instrument of his political project.

During Jair Bolsonaro's four-year term, the PRF became one of the state agencies most valued and benefited from by the government. One of the indicators of this was the substantial increase in its budget, which rose from an annual average of R\$137.2 million between 2015 and 2019 to R\$722.1 million between 2020 and 2022—an increase of 426% (Gama, 2023). In addition to this large increase in financial resources, including a salary policy more advantageous than that of other sectors of the civil service (Fagundes, 2022), the president also provided symbolic gains for the corporation, giving special prestige to the PRF by participating in celebrations (Melo, 2020), inaugurations of facilities (Redação Pioneiro, 2019) and police graduations (Verdélío, 2020).

In addition to the pecuniary and symbolic reinforcement, the Bolsonaro government also granted new powers to the PRF by decree, giving the corporation the prerogative to draw up Circumstantial Terms of Occurrence. Until then, this power had been the exclusive preserve of the civil and federal police forces (Santos, 2019). Although this decision was questioned as to its constitutionality by entities representing the judicial police, it was later ratified by the Federal Supreme Court (STF, 2023).

The aim was to turn the PRF into an armed instrument of Bolsonaro, a kind of "praetorian guard" for the president. This was evident on polling day for the second round of the 2022 elections, when the corporation set up roadblocks on highways all over the country, hindering the movement of voters to the polling stations. The PRF's actions were especially intense in the Northeast of the country, where the opposition candidate, Lula, was known to enjoy a large electoral advantage over Bolsonaro. The action was made all the more serious by the fact that the Superior Electoral Court had expressly forbidden PRF operations on election day (Serapião, 2022). The court's decision did not come about by chance, but in response to a request made by the Workers' Party, in the face of news that, on the eve of voting day, already announced a possible interference by the corporation in the electoral process in the service of Bolsonaro—which did indeed happen (Santos, 2022).

The operations were only halted after the president of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), Justice Alexandre de Moraes, summoned the director general of the PRF, Silvinei Vasques, to his office and informed him that arrest would be imminent if he did not cease the blockades. (Abreu, 2022; Roubicek, 2022). Vasques was subsequently charged with criminal misconduct and held in pre-trial detention for one year.

### 4.3. Operation Dismantling Public Policies: Successes and Limits in Social Assistance, Education and Health

A central strategy of the Bolsonaro government model was to dismantle public policies based on the principles of the 1988 Constitution and the result of efforts to improve public management over the last few decades, aimed at building structured public policy systems, with clear funding rules, federative coordination and the definition of technical and universal criteria in the decision-making process (Silva et al., 2023).

The dismantling operation was conducted in two ways, which correspond to three of the five populist strategies identified by Bauer and Becker (2020). The first issue was the failure to respect the existing institutional framework and the position of the technicians and specialists working on each public policy. This resulted in the politicization of norms and personnel. The second strategy was to reduce public spending and the existing state capacities of the affected sectors (strategy of centralizing resources). Furthermore, these three strategies assumed that the dismantling would not be accompanied by institutional reform, i.e., the definition of a new model for that area. As previously noted, the goal of reforming policies or the administration was not a priority in the Bolsonaro government. This decision marks a departure from the conventional logic of public policy that has traditionally guided the direction of governance.

The social area is the one that receives the most electoral attention and has the largest volume of resources and professionals in the Brazilian state. Its three main systems are Social Assistance, Education and Health. In two of them, both dismantling strategies (resources and regulations) were used. In the case of the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), in addition to the budget reduction, the main conditional cash transfer program was also disconnected from the logic of public policy. The Emergency Aid, paid to families during the pandemic and then continued in the form of the so-called “Brazil Aid” (*Auxílio Brasil*, which replaced Bolsa Família Program, created during the PT governments), became detached from the Unified Social Assistance Registry (CadÚnico) and the provision of assistance services (Abrucio et al., 2023). CadÚnico was central to this policy, because in addition to defining the families in vulnerable conditions who should actually receive the cash transfer, it also stipulated the conditionalities needed to remain in the program, encouraging children to stay in school and take care of their health.

In education policy, the biggest impact of the dismantling was the reduction in spending by the Ministry of Education (MEC) between 2019 and 2022. According

to an assessment made by the civil society organization Todos pela Educação (All for Education), the MEC ended 2020 with the lowest allocation in real terms and the lowest budget execution since 2011 (Todos Pela Educação, 2021), and this was the pattern followed during the next two years of the Bolsonaro government. In addition, the path of dismantling went through the reduction of government programs and the disarticulation of joint activities with states and municipalities, which greatly impacts Education due to the cooperative federalism that governs the sector (Abrucio, 2021).

In health, Bolsonaro was less successful than in other areas. In relation to public spending, the strategy of reducing resources failed and there were abundant funds secured by constitutional norms and by the contingencies of the pandemic, which forced the government to inject resources into this sector, albeit begrudgingly. The increase in spending in this area was made possible by the approval of two constitutional amendments in the National Congress—PEC 17/2020 and PEC 27/2020. This new legislation (in addition to the pre-existing constitutional rule that determines minimum spending on health) forced the federal executive to provide more money for states and municipalities to act against Covid-19. There has also been an increase in spending due to the need to buy vaccines, despite the fact that the Bolsonaro government has postponed this process as long as possible, reaffirming its denialist orientation.

Faced with the greatest difficulties in promoting the dismantling more effectively, Bolsonaro also resorted to sabotage in health. This was done through two strategies. First, the *politicization of personnel*—with the government not respecting the positions of specialists and, more than that, gradually dismantling the Ministry of Health in its technical and professional capacity. It filled the ministry's main posts with military personnel and denialist political activists, who replaced politicians with experience in the sector and technicians in the field.

The second strategy was to *politicize the rules*—ignoring the resolutions of the federative forums that make up the governance institutions of the Unified Health System (SUS). However, a decision by the Federal Supreme Court safeguarded the autonomy and powers of states and municipalities to implement appropriate policies in line with the SUS model and those recommended by experts in the field and the World Health Organization. This highlighted the system's greater resilience (Massuda et al., 2021).

In short, if there was resilience in Health, there was less capacity to resist the weakening of policies in less robust systems, such as Education and Social Assistance, not to mention others that were even more fragile, such as the Environment. As a result, state effectiveness was reduced without new (Bolsonaro-esque) models of management and public policies being implemented to replace those in force until then.

## 5. Conclusion

We have shown in this article that Jair Bolsonaro's far-right populist government

is clearly reflected in administration and public policies. He has carried out his plans to discontinue public policies in those areas perceived as adverse to his principles and objectives.

This was the case with participatory policies, where he promoted the dismantling of the less resilient bodies—either due to a fragile institutional framework, or because they were less well-integrated into the public policy communities—and the sabotage of those with some capacity to survive. The dismantling was also effective in Social Assistance, a sector with a policy system that is still poorly institutionalized. With this, Bolsonaro was able to replace the hitherto successful *Bolsa Família* cash transfer policy with aid that had no basis in an organized register of beneficiaries and without the counterparts that would enable a sustained improvement in the living conditions of the most vulnerable segments of the population. Something similar happened in Education, with the decrease in funds allocated to the sector to the lowest levels in more than a decade, the discontinuity of programs and the disarticulation of intergovernmental cooperation spheres in an area where federative arrangements are essential for the success of the policy.

In Health, the more robust institutionalization of the SUS, the circumstances imposed by the pandemic and the existence of a strong public policy community were decisive in curbing the government's attempts to dismantle the sector. However, the damage did not stop, as evidenced by the large number of deaths from Covid in Brazil (which had proportionally large numbers in a global perspective) and the administrative confusion caused by the politicization of personnel in the ministry, as revealed by the Joint Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry set up in Congress to investigate the government's reckless conduct during the pandemic (Gama, 2023).

One area in which, instead of dismantling or sabotaging, the government sought to capture—and succeeded—was the security forces, highly valued by Bolsonaro and perceived by him as crucial instruments of his authoritarian political project. In the case discussed here, the co-opting of the Federal Highway Police allowed the government to mobilize its apparatus in an attempt to manipulate the electoral process in regions of the country that were electorally hostile to it. It is well known that this same type of capture also took place in the Armed Forces, the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) and was attempted, with less success, in the Federal Police.

In the context of participatory policy, ideological factors undoubtedly played a pivotal role. Far-right conceptions, which vehemently opposed participatory politics, were a salient factor. Additionally, the involvement of civil society members with progressive agendas and their connections with the partisan left, particularly the Workers' Party, were significant elements in this regard.

In social areas such as social assistance, health, and education, neoliberal economic conceptions have played a role, as reducing expenses in these areas was a central concern of an economic policy focused on reducing governmental expenses. The consequences of this approach were similar in both cases: a

deterioration in key policy areas. This is the foundation of our discussion about elective affinities when considering the combination of anti-systemic populism and neoliberal economics.

The populist attack on public policies, however, has exacted a high political price from Bolsonaro. The unfavorable assessment of the government's performance by a significant portion of the electorate posed a challenge for the president in his reelection bid, making him the first incumbent to fail in his reelection attempt in Brazil since the presidential reelection process was established in 1997. Although the movement-government succeeded in retaining the loyalty of a not insignificant and radicalized contingent of voters, appealing to *affections, identities* and *beliefs* more than to objective evaluation of governmental performance, it also ended up alienating another large portion. This was a key factor in Lula's victory in 2022 and in the perception among Brazilians that his administration outperformed his predecessor's (Marcelino, 2024)—however, Brazilian society remains highly polarized, and it is likely that this radical polarization will have an impact on the upcoming national elections.

The Brazilian case during Jair Bolsonaro's four-year term sheds light on how populist governments can be dangerous not only for democracy, but for the very quality of governance and, therefore, for the well-being of its citizens. By subordinating government policies to its project of anti-pluralist political dispute, the Bolsonaro government fearlessly sacrificed those areas that it felt were not relevant to its support base—those it considered to be the “real people”. To what extent do other populist governments operate in the same or similar ways?

Finalistic areas such as Health, Education and Social Assistance are perceived as sacrificable if their priority recipients are not part of a majority that is more fictitious than real—that is, if they are not functional to the populist political project. Or even, if the established way in which these areas work in some way conflicts with the affections, identities and beliefs held by the populist leader and his movement. This is why policies based on evidence and science are often attacked, because in order to move forward with the mobilization, it is necessary to deny them. In the same way, other policy areas, such as public security, are instrumentalized for the ongoing authoritarian project. In short, populist *politics* prevails over *policies*.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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