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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Populist Communication During the Covid-19 Pandemic: the Case of Brazil's President Bolsonaro

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ABSTRACT: Brazil has been one of the hardest hit countries by the Covid-19 pandemic. Far-right populist president Bolsonaro promoted social polarisation and politicised the crisis, while neglecting the seriousness of the health emergency. Despite the consequences of the lack of response by the federal government to contain the high infection rates, Bolsonaro's approval ratings remained stable and slightly increased during the outbreak. Against this background, this article turns to the question on how populist politicians in government have used communication to frame the Covid-19 pandemic and navigate the crisis. Looking at the case of Brazil, we ask: how was the Covid-19 pandemic framed or used by a populist leader like Bolsonaro? How did he communicate the pandemic in his social media speeches? By mobilising literature on populism from both the ideational and discursive perspective, we formulated a rubric and analysed Bolsonaro's speeches on social media according to a "populist-crisis" approach, using the holistic grading method. Our findings suggest that, aligned with the literature, populists like Bolsonaro use crises to advance some strategies that can help them maintain support: the creation and blaming of enemies, an alleged proximity to "the people", and the projection of a paradoxical image of "exceptionality" and "ordinariness" of the populist leader.

KEYWORDS:

Bolsonaro, Communication, Covid-19, Social Media, Populism,

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has put pressure on governments around the world. Most countries led by populists have particularly struggled with managing the outbreak for several reasons. Generally, populists expressed scepticism towards science and lacked transparency to communicate decisions and information. They relied on divisions and social polarisation, instead of promoting national unity to face the pandemic. Although it remains unclear to what extent actions by populists have been associated to more harm caused by the pandemic, one can notice some patterns of crisis management and communication in populist regimes. In particular, populist governments represented a higher risk to democracies in the context of the outbreak, either by eroding institutions, centralising executive powers, shrinking the space left to the opposition, manipulating the media, or fostering social polarisation¹.

We look into populist communication during the outbreak as one potential tool employed by populists to maintain popular support despite poor crisis management performance. Brazil is governed by a far-right populist president since 2019 and has suffered drastic consequences of the rapid spread of the coronavirus. According to our adopted definition, the populist worldview separates society between “the people” and “the elite” on moral grounds and considers them homogeneous and antagonistic. Bolsonaro is considered a populist as he simplifies politics as a Manichaeist struggle between “the good” and “the evil”. His idea of “the people” is grounded on good morality in contrast to the essentially corrupt elite. The notion of “good citizen” (*cidadão do bem*) plays a central role in Bolsonaro’s definition of “people” (Maitino 2020) and is associated with Christianity and family traditionalism. Such values are used to draw the boundaries between those who do and those who do not belong to “the people”. Bolsonaro evokes religious and conservative values to distinguish between the “good people” and the others, the out-group. Even if he has been an elected congressman for almost three decades and embraced a pro-market position in his campaign, Bolsonaro frames himself as an outsider, as a fighter against the “establishment”. His anti-elitism revolves around framing the political and media elite as enemies, holding them responsible for deceiving and usurping the power from the people.

Brazil has been one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic. By mid-November, it ranked third in number of infections, with more than 5.8 million cases and more than 166 thousand Covid-19 deaths (Johns Hopkins University 2020). Brazil’s central government did not provide an effective, coordinated response to contain the virus’ spread. Instead of taking action, the president underestimated the seriousness of Covid-19. His government’s response was inconsistent and limited to a temporary cash transfer aid² targeting the poorer population, not combined with a strategy of testing and tracking to prevent contamination. Two health ministers left the office in the middle of the outbreak.

Worldwide, Bolsonaro has been described as a president who has poorly managed the pandemic. He has denied the seriousness of the health emergency and blamed regional and local authorities for taking political advantage of the situation and causing unemployment with the confinement measures they adopted. Bolsonaro explicitly opposed social-distancing measures in nationally televised speeches. Despite this ineffective response, Bolsonaro’s approval has slightly improved during the outbreak. In October 2020, he reached his highest approval level since the beginning of the term in 2019. This was unexpected, particularly considering

¹ This trend appears in the analysis “Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index” of the V-Dem Institute that concludes that populist governments’ responses to Covid-19 may have accelerated anti-democratic trends (see: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/our-work/research-projects/pandemic-backsliding/>). Many populist-led countries have experienced major violations to democracy and are under high risk of backsliding, including Brazil, the USA, Hungary, the Philippines and India.

² The temporary cash transfer aid was an emergency financial support provided by the government to informal workers, microentrepreneurs, self-employed and unemployed to cope with the pandemic. Legislation approved in April 2020 established that the cash transfer would amount to monthly payments of BRL 600 during three months. Amidst social and political pressure, the emergency aid was extended until December 2020 with monthly payments reduced by 50% for three additional months.

that analysts predicted that populists would lose support due to their unpreparedness in dealing with a crisis of such dimension (Rachman 2020).

In this paper, we analyse Bolsonaro's communication on Covid-19 to understand the extent to which populists can rely on a "populist-crisis" framing. We argue that the pandemic represented an opportunity for populists like Bolsonaro to mobilise support, keep their popularity and political strength relatively stable, despite their crisis mismanagement. Bolsonaro's communication played an important role, although it is not the only explaining factor. His strategy relied on denying the seriousness of the health crisis, shifting the blame to the media, state and local authorities, coupled with making propaganda of his government's achievements on issues unrelated to the pandemic. Hence, our analysis focuses on describing the crisis' framing by Bolsonaro and, thus, answering two questions: How was the Covid-19 pandemic framed or used by a populist like Bolsonaro? How did he communicate the pandemic in his social media speeches?

Our paper offers a partial contribution to the understanding of current populist leadership in pandemic times, given that our perspective focuses on the role played by populist discursive components, and by studying one particular leader. Additionally, we acknowledge that the emergency cash transfer may have an effect on securing Bolsonaro's approvals among low-income citizens, as some analysts have raised³ (Smith 2020). However, this financial aid program also appeared in Bolsonaro's social media communication, as he tried to claim all credits for it, despite the role played by the parliament in its implementation⁴.

Drawing from literature on populism and crises, we rely on two theories to elaborate a set of criteria to assess the tone of "populist-crisis" mode in Bolsonaro's social media discourses. The first is the "populist superhero" style of leadership. Schneiker (2020) defines the "populist superhero" as a type of political leader that borrows elements from Weber's charismatic leader combined with the "everyday political celebrity" style (Wood, Corbett, and Flinders 2016). He relies on social media to promote his message and highlights his "exceptional qualities" to save the people from crises. The second is elaborated by Moffitt (2015), who argues that populist leaders amplify and rely on the performance of crises to mobilise support. Based on these theoretical frameworks, we create a rubric to analyse Bolsonaro's social media discourses from March to August 2020, using a holistic grading methodology. We aim at examining the extent to which Brazil's President relied on a "populist-crisis" tone in his communications with the public – especially his supporters – during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against the idea that populists will invariably be punished for mismanaging a crisis, such leaders can use outbreaks to further some of their strategies that help mobilise support, particularly politicisation, polarisation, and the projection of the "exceptionality" of the leader. One crucial element is creating an "alternative approach" to the crisis, based on the populist's direct connection with his supporters, established via social media. This paper, therefore, contributes to the growing literature on populists in power and on the links between populism and crises by arguing that communication is an integral part of populist style and support, and vital for them to navigate crises. By looking at Brazil, we bring insights from a Global South country, beyond the "usual suspects" from Western Europe that mainly feature the populist literature.

In the next section, we present our theoretical framework. After that, we provide context on the Brazilian case. Next, we explain our data collection and methodology. We then discuss the findings around three observed dimensions of the "populist-crisis" discourse: amplification of the (economic) crisis, alleged

³ Some studies found evidence for changes in Bolsonaro's support since the beginning of the cash transfer aid: regionally, from areas where he was previously approved towards poorer regions where he was mainly disapproved; individually, the aid has prevented a further drop in the president's popularity among the lowest income groups (see: <https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/quaest-opiniao/quem-e-o-pai-do-auxilio-o-congresso-ou-o-presidente-tanto-faz-09072020>)

⁴ See: <https://www.poder360.com.br/poderdata/48-acham-que-bolsonaro-criou-auxilio-emergencial-42-atribuem-ao-congresso/> access March 04, 2021.

proximity to the people, and creation and blaming of enemies. We conclude and suggest some areas for future research.

2. Populism, Communication, and Crises

This paper aims at making two contributions. First, to theoretical discussions on populist communication by looking at the discursive traits and tools used in the context of crises, and by studying a Global South case. Second, we make a methodological and empirical contribution by creating a rubric to systematically analyse populist discourses during crises and by measuring the use of a “populist-crisis” mode. Our rubric is based on a set of criteria identified in the populism literature, and the method can be applied to other cases and contexts. While other textual methods have been used to systematically and empirically analyse populist discourse, their focus is not on populist communication during crises. Based on the theory, we argue that populist communication should have some specific traits and purposes in the context of a crisis. Our methodology is designed for this situation.

Our definition of populism combines elements from political science and communication studies approaches. First, drawing from the ideational approach (Mudde 2004; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018), populism is understood as a set of ideas that divides society between into an antagonistic and a homogeneous group. As a thin ideology, populism is often combined with other thick host ideologies. According to the moral division imposed by populism, “the people” is considered essentially good, and “the elite” is seen as evil. “The elite” corresponds to a broad definition due to the all-encompassing vision of politics held by populists. It can refer to political elites (parties, government, ministers), but also the media (media tycoons, journalists), the state (administration, civil service), intellectuals (universities, writers, professors), or economic powers (multinationals, employers, trade unions, capitalists) (Mudde 2007; Jagers and Walgrave 2007); these are articulated as one homogeneous entity, corrupt and evil, that works against the monolithic interests of “the people,” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Second, this set of ideas has a discursive manifestation, since, according to De Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann and Stanyer (2018: 425), “populist ideas must be communicated discursively to achieve the communicator’s goals and the intended effects on the audience”. Political agency is necessary to convert ideas into effective support: the message needs to echo within those who feel and think the same way (Meléndez and Kaltwasser 2017). Communicative tools and style used for spreading populist ideas are central to populism itself.

Third, populist communication has some characteristics or frames, as identified by the literature. The emphasis of the communication-centred perspective is on populist messages rather than on features of particular political actors sending the message. Populist communication refers to messages expressing the populist ideology. In terms of message, the discursive articulation of populism can have three key components: reference to “the people” (the basic component of populist communication), a struggle against the “corrupt elite”, and the identification of an “out-group” (Aalberg and De Vreese 2017; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Mudde 2004).

Drawing from the political-strategic definition of populism, we consider that populists rely on a direct, unmediated communication with their followers (Weyland 2001). This allows them to have more control over their message and to overpass potential filters imposed by the mainstream media and journalistic gatekeeping. Furthermore, scholars have identified that populist leaders usually have a conflictive relationship with the mainstream or traditional media. In this sense, the social media has offered an opportunity for populists to spread their message (Moffit 2016; Schneiker 2018). New social media platforms create an illusion of proximity by means of direct communication and interaction between the leader and followers (Engesser,

Ernst, Esser and Büchel 2017). Besides, they are easily accessible by the audience, without mediation. Since populists express radical, sometimes fringe ideas that are not part of the mainstream agenda and often display a hostile and conflictive relation with the mainstream media, it is easier for them to access social media than traditional media channels. The so-called “great media” is allegedly biased in favour of or even part of the establishment, and, therefore, considered as an enemy of “the people”.

The literature on populism tends to discuss its links with crises from the perspective that outbreaks can help explain the emergence of populism (Moffitt 2015). Crises are often conceived as external to populism and some scholars consider that they can drive or at least open opportunities for populism to thrive. For instance, the Laclauan approach defends that the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis (Laclau 1977: 175). Others also see crises as providing an opportunity for strong and populist leaders to emerge (Weyland 1999; Mouffe 2005; Levitsky and Loxton 2012). However, Moffitt (2015, 2016) advances the idea of crises as being an integral part of populism. Populists can also create a sense of crisis to mobilise public support. Disruptions would allow populists to pit “the people” against a dangerous enemy, to drastically simplify the political debate, and to advocate for strong leadership.

Moffitt (2015) explains that populists can use six steps in their language, framing, and presentation, to explore the idea of a crisis and to divide “the people” from the enemies, who are pitted as responsible for the crisis. Relying on crises also allows populists to come up with simple solutions to complex problems and legitimate their strong leadership to end the crisis. First, *populists identify or choose a failure* in the system and bring attention to it as a matter of urgency. They tend to choose a failure on a topic that already has some level of political salience. This increases their chances of being successful. Second, they *elevate the crisis level* by placing it in a wider framework and adding a temporal dimension. In other words, populists link the chosen failure to other failures to make that problem appear symptomatic of a wider problem.

Third, *populists pitch “the people” against those responsible for the crisis*. At this stage, the populist denounces those responsible for the crisis. In addition, “the people” is portrayed as particularly suffering from the consequences of the crisis. The fourth element in Moffitt’s scheme is the *use of media to propagate performance*. Fifth, populists present *simple solutions and strong leadership*. By framing solutions to the crisis using a simplistic approach and neglecting the complexity of political processes, the populist presents himself as the one having *the right* solution. He is the only one to see it. Sixth, populists tend to *continue to propagate the sense of crisis*, by switching the notion of crisis they employ, or by extending the scope and size of the emergency.

The concept of “populist superhero” (Schneiker 2020) provides the notion that the populist aims at projecting “exceptional” qualities to solve the crisis. Central to this is the use of social media and entertainment techniques. The “populist superhero” has similar characteristics to the ideal type of charismatic leadership theorised by Weber (1947), notably the idea that charismatic leadership depends on the recognition of the “exceptionality” of the leader by followers. This concept is adapted to the 21st century with the use of social media and entertainment tools. The “populist superhero” closely connects to the understanding of populism as a “performative style” (Moffitt 2016), according to which the populist is a performer, “the people” is “the audience” and “the stage” are the media and the crisis fostered by the populist. As Schneiker (2020) elaborated, the “populist superhero” projects the idea that his exceptional qualities grant him power to solve a crisis and save his followers from an emergency.

Nevertheless, the exceptional qualities of the “populist superhero” build upon a paradox. On the one side, he presents himself as an ordinary man, as part of the common people, and, for this reason, as embodying the “common sense”. His ability to find the best solution to real problems comes from the alleged proximity to “the people” and the “common man”. The populist possesses “everyday knowledge”, in contrast to the elite that is far from the ground and cannot connect to the needs of “the people”. On the other side, the populist

needs to convince followers of his “exceptionality” and capacity to solve an imminent threat. Thus, he must present himself as a “problem-solver” and the only one capable of putting an end to the crisis. Social media, where the populist can directly speak to his followers, contributes to this. One tactic used by populists to prove their “problem-solver” capacity is by providing evidence of popular support. In the era of social media, this means getting and showing off reactions on the platforms: likes, shares, retweets, and number of followers. Entertainment techniques, such as “agitation, spectacular acts, exaggeration, calculated provocations, and the intended breach of political and socio-cultural taboos (Heinisch 2003, 94)” can also be used for calling attention.

In summary, we consider that populism can manifest itself in the communication of political actors. The populist message has specific characteristics and frames. In the context of crises, populist communication attempts to forge the idea of a saviour during hard times, with the populist leader having exceptional qualities and being someone close to the people, therefore capable of solving issues. On the one side, the literature on populism as political communication makes important contributions in terms of analytical frameworks, identifying style and features, as well as how it manifests empirically (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Block and Negrine 2017; De Vreese et al. 2018). On the other side, part of the literature linking populism and crises considers that populists can benefit from outbreaks by exploiting the sense of urgency and blaming others. Economic, social or political outbreaks can foster support for outsider, anti-establishment and populist leaders. However, crises are also an internal aspect of populism. Populists build an idea of emerging threats to “the people”, they identify those to be blamed, and present themselves as strong leaders with the ability to solve problems - the “superhero”.

There is scope to better understand the use of communication by populist leaders in the context of crises, in particular when they are in power. A crisis imposes considerable challenges to governments in general, and to populists in particular, especially a health crisis of the dimensions of Covid-19 that affects multiple policy dimensions and requires trust in science and experts, which are seen with hostility by most populists. It is, therefore, relevant to unfold how those leaders use communication in such contexts and whether it can be a tool for them to maintain support.

3. The Covid-19 in Brazil and the Reaction of Bolsonaro

Brazil represents an interesting case to analyse populist communication in the context of a crisis. First, Brazil was particularly hit by the Coronavirus outbreak, ranking among the top countries in number of infections and deaths. By mid-November 2020, the country registered more than 5.8 million cases of Covid-19 and more than 166 thousand deaths. Brazil has been internationally criticised for ineffective Covid-19 crisis management and President Bolsonaro’s open neglect. Second, Bolsonaro is considered a far-right populist politician who displays higher levels of populism in his discourses compared to previous Brazilian presidents (Tamaki and Fuks 2020). Bolsonaro frames the mainstream media as an evil, judged responsible for deceiving the people with false information to diminish his government’s credibility. He blames the broad political opposition, ranging from local governments to Brazil’s Supreme Federal Court, all seen as corrupt and self-serving. Once in power, Bolsonaro managed to partly redefine “the elite”, detaching his federal government from what is defined as the rest of the political class - nothing unusual for populists to do (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Castanho Silva 2019).

On 26 February 2020, the first Covid-19 case in Brazil was confirmed. The health minister at the time, Luiz H. Mandetta, had taken an early administrative measure declaring a nationwide state of health emergency already on 03 February 2020, but this remained only an administrative act without endorsement by the executive branch. Bolsonaro played down the pandemic from the early stages. On 06 March, he went on

national television to address the pandemic for the first time, stating an ambiguous message to the population. In his speech, Bolsonaro referred to Covid-19 as a “world problem” and vaguely mentioned that the government was putting some actions in place - such as strengthening the health units and the surveillance system at ports and airports -, while simultaneously stating that there was no sense of urgency and no reason to panic. A similar denial mode appeared in subsequent nationwide statements. The Coronavirus was described as a “fantasy” and not “all that big deal that the media was making out of it” (Paraguassu 2020). In his communications, Bolsonaro engaged in rhetoric of blaming the media for spreading “hysteria” and fear and referred to Covid-19 as a “measly cold” (Phillips 2020).

When the coronavirus reached Brazil, the country was already experiencing other pressing events. Street protests were happening, and conflicts between the executive branch on the one side, and Congress and the judiciary on the other emerged over corruption investigations. When subnational units started to impose confinement measures, Bolsonaro tried to intervene in favour of economic sectors that are part of his support basis, using unilateral executive powers. On 25 March, the President authorised religious activities to run again by changing a decree regulating essential public services and activities during the pandemic, previously published in February (Presidência da República 2020). The tension between the branches increased over a dispute about the responsibilities and competencies concerning the management of the pandemic. Bolsonaro encouraged and personally joined popular protests against confinement measures adopted by subnational governments. Such protests carried a dual agenda: they demanded an end to the lockdown measures and called for Brazil’s Congress and the Supreme Court to be shut, in a clear authoritarian tone praising the military dictatorship.

In May, Bolsonaro once again tried to open up some economic sectors using presidential decrees. In reaction, the Supreme Court determined, on 11 May, that states and municipalities had the competencies and ability to adopt normative and administrative measures to control Covid-19 (Supremo Tribunal Federal 2020), thus recognising their autonomy to take decisions to cope with the pandemic. In the meantime, two ministers of health were fired over disagreements with the president. One of the main points of conflict was the authorisation of the indiscriminate use of chloroquine to treat Covid-19, which was openly defended by Bolsonaro despite the lack of scientific evidence about its efficacy.

To some extent, Bolsonaro’s behaviour and messages resonated and affected the attitudes of citizens. A study conducted by Ajzenman, Cavalcanti and Da Matta (2020) showed that Bolsonaro’s communications indeed had an impact on peoples’ behaviour with regards to compliance with social distancing. The authors conclude that after Bolsonaro’s public dismissal of the risks associated with Covid-19 and his messages against isolation measures, the social distancing adopted by citizens in pro-government localities weakened compared to places where political support for the president was less prominent. In other words, supporters of Bolsonaro felt more encouraged to disrespect social distancing measures when they listened to the president’s message opposing such measures and minimising the danger of the Coronavirus. In addition, despite the ineffective crisis management, Bolsonaro’s approval ratings remained stable and slightly increased (Da Silva and De Campos 2020), even in a context in which the pandemic added to other ongoing crises, such as the Amazon fires and record levels of deforestation rates under Bolsonaro’s administration, corruption investigations involving Bolsonaro’s son, and the allegation of a former minister of Justice about the interference of the president in the Federal Police. One survey conducted by Datafolha (17 August 2020) showed that 47 percent of Brazilians did not blame Bolsonaro for the 100 thousand Covid-19 deaths reached by then. Thus, he did not seem to be identified as responsible for the crisis management and the damage caused by the pandemic.

4. Data and Methods

Borrowing one of the main ideas from the ideational definition of populism, which sees populism as a discourse (Hawkins 2009), we approach the central question of this paper by coding and analysing Bolsonaro's speeches during the pandemic. We rely on the Holistic Grading method of textual analysis, which is based on having coders to read and interpret whole texts instead of counting content at the level of words and sentences. We opted for this technique as it is best suited for diffuse, latent textual meanings, often found in political messages and discourses⁵.

The first step was to create a simplified guide for evaluating the speeches, a rubric that would allow capturing the main elements of this so-called “populist-crisis” style. Building mainly on Schneiker’s (2020) and Moffitt’s (2015) theories, we identified and focused on seven components judged central for the communication of populists during a crisis:

- 1) *Identify a Failure*: dramatically point out a systemic (or institutional) failure that precedes the crisis;
- 2) *Elevate the Crisis*: creating, exaggerating, or heightening a crisis and linking it to a broader framework, sometimes blaming a scapegoat;
- 3) *Framing oneself as a “common man”*: creating the idea that he (the leader) is the only one that understands and shares the same concerns as the common man;
- 4) *Creating and Blaming Enemies*: foster a Manichaeian division between “the people” versus the “self-centred elite”, who is responsible for aggravating the crisis. Use of an anti-elitist rhetoric which vilifies a group or minority;
- 5) *The “Only Saviour”*: adding to the image of a “common man,” the populist frames himself as the only one who can save the people. He can evoke the idea of being in a “mission” to protect and rescue the people. He highlights his exceptional skills and frames himself as the “problem-solver”. Critiques, accusations, and attacks are dismissed as fake news or conspiracy against him;
- 6) *Attest for his Popularity and Support*: the populist needs to show or to provide evidence of his popular support. The leader can do this by appearing next to important people or summoning his supporters for manifestations or a popular display of support; concerning social media, it consists in showing off his audience and number of followers;
- 7) *Simplifying the Political Debate*: making political terms, debates, and even the political space simplified. Defending and proposing quick, simplistic, and centralised actions to deal with the crisis. Sometimes he can use bellicose language, cursing, and throw tantrums to show that he says things people think, but do not dare to say, things that do not fit “political correctness”.

After preparing the rubric, we selected Bolsonaro’s speeches, delivered in the format of Facebook and YouTube Live Streamed videos, which he conducts weekly as a form of direct communication with his supporters. We first narrowed our time window to include live streams from March (the beginning of the pandemic in Brazil) until late August. In total, we selected and analysed twelve Live Streamed speeches, two per month. We selected one in the middle and one at the end of each month, to have some space between them. All speeches were longer than 25 minutes⁶.

Regarding the selection and format of the speeches, we believe that videos, especially Bolsonaro's live streams on social media, allow for better control of the persona and character he displays. Since these channels contain no institutional restraints nor chains, live streams on personal channels constitute the ideal channel, where one has total control of his image and message - crucial for populists. Notwithstanding, throughout his

⁵ We analyse discourses as a whole, and those that focus on or at least mention the pandemic. We do not categorise individual themes in the discourses.

⁶ Except the first speech, from March 19.

campaign and the first year of government, Bolsonaro forged the idea that mainstream media channels are strongly biased, fraudulent, and engaged in a constant war against him and the country he claims to represent. Therefore, his official channels would allegedly serve as an unbiased, direct, and “trustworthy” source of information.

Lastly, we recognise that the usual procedure would be to code written speeches where the coder cannot see the emotions and, therefore, cannot receive all the non-verbal communication from the speaker⁷. However, since our methodology is the same as Hawkins’ (2009), there should be no issues in coding videos. As Hawkins and Castanho Silva (2018) demonstrated, there are no significant differences between groups that coded videos and written speeches.

The next step was to conduct the coding procedure and analysis, performing reliability tests along the way to ensure the validity of our results. We designed our rubric on a continuum scale ranging from zero to two, where zero means a speech with absence or inconsistent use of a few elements from our rubric. A score of one would indicate the strong presence of some “populist-crisis” components. A score of two, in turn, would indicate the “perfect” “populist-crisis” discourse, with only few and inconsistent use of non-populist-crisis elements and a predominance of “populist-crisis” traits. Both authors took part in the coding process following the same procedure.

4.0 Krippendorff’s Alpha

To ensure inter-coder reliability, in other words, to be sure that the results are not a product of sheer luck, we use the Krippendorff’s alpha. The Krippendorff’s alpha is a coefficient developed to measure the agreement achieved between observers. Highly used in content analysis, it helps to determine if the results are the product of chance or represent a more consistent assessment.

According to Krippendorff (2011), an alpha of one indicates a “perfect reliability”, and an alpha of zero would be the absence of reliability. We opted for this method to test the consistency of our results as it applies to any number of observers, categories, scale values, measures. It works with intervals, nominal, and ordinal data (Krippendorff 2011).

In social sciences, we should rely on data with a reliability above an alpha (α) of 0.8. Data with reliability between $\alpha = 0.667$ and $\alpha = 0.8$ should be used only for “drawing tentative conclusions” (Krippendorff 2004: 241). Our coding results displayed an alpha of 0.82, which indicates: (i) alignment between coders regarding theory and the content of the speeches; and (ii) our data and analysis are trustworthy. Table 1 shows the individual scores given to each discourse, by each coder, as well as their average score. The list of analysed speeches is available on the online Appendix.

⁷ Non-verbal language is considered an added-value, some elements are mentioned in this discussion.

Table 1 – The score of Bolsonaro’s speeches on the “populist-crisis” scale ranging from zero to two

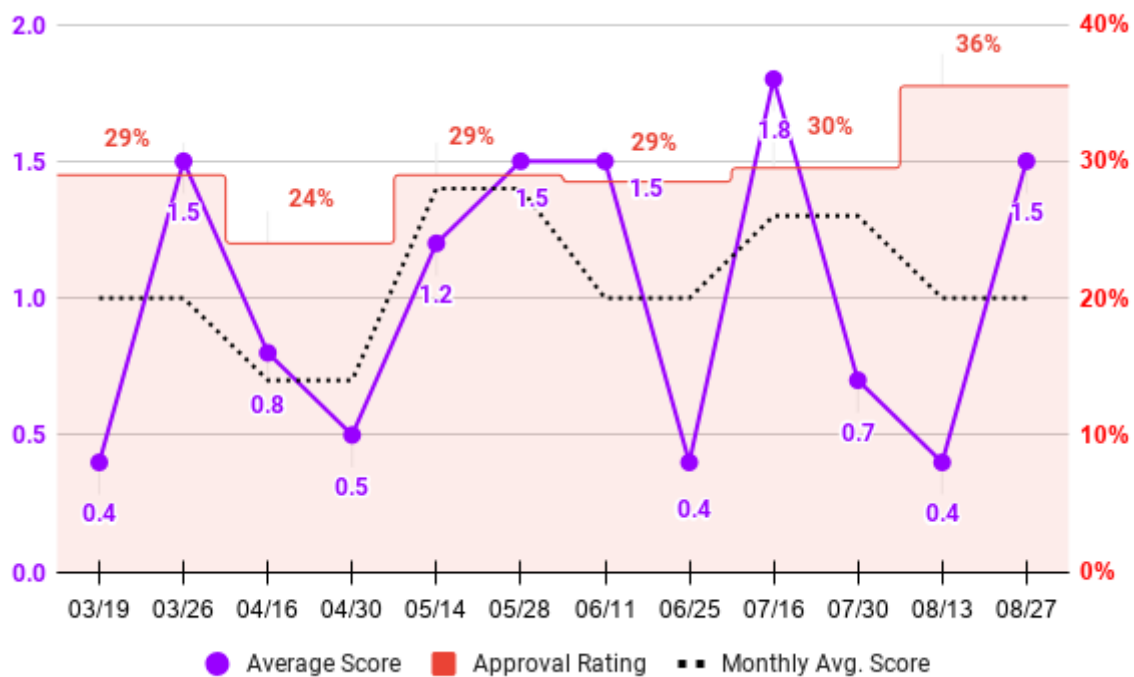
Speech Number and Date	Coder A	Coder B	Average Score:
01 - March 19	0.5	0.3	<i>0.4</i>
02 - March 26	1.5	1.4	<i>1.5</i>
03 - April 16	1.0	0.6	<i>0.8</i>
04 - April 30	0.5	0.5	<i>0.5</i>
05 - May 14	1.1	1.2	<i>1.2</i>
06 - May 28	1.5	1.4	<i>1.5</i>
07 - June 11	1.5	1.5	<i>1.5</i>
08 - June 25	0.5	0.2	<i>0.4</i>
09 - July 16	1.8	1.8	<i>1.8</i>
10 - July 30	1.0	0.3	<i>0.7</i>
11 - August 13	0.5	0.3	<i>0.4</i>
12 - August 27	1.7	1.3	<i>1.5</i>
Total Average:	1.1 (A)	0.9 (B)	<i>1.0</i>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5. Analysis and Discussion

We present a graph with the average score of Bolsonaro's discourses along with his approval ratings in the first six months of the pandemic in Brazil (March to August 2020). We see that Bolsonaro's speeches started with an average of 0.4, following a bumping road with highs and lows until reaching a score of 1.5 in the last discourse coded. The highest rating is of his July 16th's speech (1.8). Monthly, on average, Bolsonaro displayed both a medium to high (with a score higher or equal to 0.8) and a moderate to low (below 0.8) "populist-crisis" rhetoric, except for May, when he remained above 1.0. In May, Brasilia was the stage of street protests against the Supreme Court and Congress in which Bolsonaro took part. In the climax of this inter-institutional confrontation, Bolsonaro seemed to be testing the strength of his popular support. Overall, Bolsonaro's approval ratings appeared to be not affected by his strategy for dealing with the pandemic.

Graph 1 – The average score of Bolsonaro's speeches and the evolution of approval rating (March to August 2020)



Source: Elaborated by the authors. Bolsonaro's Approval Rating collected from Quaest/Jota, Data Poder 360, and Band/Poder Data.

The graph shows the monthly average score of his speeches. On average, there is not a big variation within the same month. However, individual discourses vary significantly, going from very low to very high scores. Two reasons could account for this. First, Bolsonaro is not always the only one nor the main speaker in his videos. He often brings in other personalities to talk about specific issues. In some cases, issues are unrelated to Covid-19, such as when the Minister for Women, Family and Human Rights talks about a twisted notion of human rights, or when the Minister for Infrastructure talks about the realisation of construction works. In other cases, issues are related to the crisis, but only to its economic dimension. This happens when the Minister for

the Economy talks about the state of the economy, or when the president of the public bank 'Caixa' explains the cash transfer emergency aid.

Second, the ups and downs in the tone of speeches may be a deliberate choice of Bolsonaro to emphasise and then further de-emphasise the issue of Covid alternately. He emphasises the pandemic as a "response" to the salience of the topic in the mainstream media. This allows him to offer his supporters an alternative interpretation of the events. He then de-emphasises the pandemic in order to discredit traditional media channels (framed as exclusively talking about the same negative topic), to bring the attention of his supporters to other issues - such as the alleged accomplishments of his government, and to other core concerns of the far-right ideology (e.g. cultural wars). The observed difference in the intensity of the "populist-crisis" tone reinforces the "performative" nature of the crisis to populists: under his controlled communication, a crisis can be strategically emphasised and de-emphasised.

Below, we present the main findings of our discourse analysis along three key dimensions that aggregate the seven criteria of our rubric. The first dimension is the *amplification of the crisis*. The second is the *proximity to "the people."* The third is the *creation of enemies*.

5.0 Defining and Amplifying the Crisis

Bolsonaro expressed very little concern with Covid-19, the high potential of the virus to spread, and the number of deaths caused by the disease. From the beginning, he insisted that only elderly people and patients with comorbidities should be concerned and stay home. Thus, we notice that the health crisis has not been amplified or overstated by him. On the contrary, Bolsonaro minimised the seriousness and urgency of the pandemic itself, referring to Covid-19 as a "measly cold". However, we identify two elements that have been overplayed: the alleged role of the media to "create panic" among the population, and the economic impact of confinement measures. Bolsonaro highlighted those two as failures of the system and the elites, amplifying them in his communications. He attempted to establish a clear division between the economy and health, portraying himself as the defender of the economy - and therefore, "the people" who rely on going to work to afford a living.

"Brazil can no longer stand this great blockade of the economy from the part of some states"⁸

"You remember back then, when I was saying that we have two problems to solve, the question of life, the maintenance of life, and the maintenance of jobs, these things are married. What did most of the media do all the time? Criticised me! (...) Suicide has increased because of unemployment, depression, other illnesses, there are people who have other health problems and do not go to the hospital [because they are] afraid of [catching] the virus. Then these numbers start to appear. And now the press starts to show what I was talking about back then, but I was not aligned with the mood, I wasn't in line with the political correctness."⁹

⁸ Bolsonaro, May 14. Original quotes at the Online Appendix.

⁹ Bolsonaro, July 16.

5.1 Proximity to the People

When addressing the pandemic, Bolsonaro often tried to establish that he was the only one concerned with “the people”, the only one who shared the same worries as the “ordinary man”, the “good citizen”. This illusion of proximity is further enhanced when Bolsonaro defended the end of lockdown measures based on the argument that he was concerned with the wellbeing of “the people”, especially the popular strata who work under precarious and unstable conditions, and therefore cannot afford to stay home. Defending that the “economy could not stop”, he focused on the idea that shutting the economy would cost many lives. This would mean a sacrifice to the economy, but one that would not be worth in light of the alleged harmless nature of the virus.

“Imagine the agony of these people [who lost their jobs] willing to sell, willing to work, to produce. In addition to no longer having a market [in the sense of finding a demand for their products], they are punished by some governors and mayors with a fine, with imprisonment! Look at the situation we are at!”¹⁰

“They even closed the restaurants on the highways. How is a man [truck driver] supposed to drive for thousands of kilometres in order to bring food to a place, how will he feed himself? This is absurd!”¹¹

Bolsonaro's communications dismissed the importance of political debate, and the complexity of policy decisions aimed to address the pandemic. By stating, “less is more”, he opposed government action and interference. He avoided taking responsibility for and getting into detail when addressing the pandemic and its implications. Bolsonaro highlighted his “problem-solving” skills by claiming to possess the right solution to Covid-19, and it was a simple one. The most prominent example was the defence of the chloroquine drug, supposedly used to cure himself and his cabinet members from Covid-19. As anecdotal evidence of the harmless nature of Covid-19, Bolsonaro highlighted the absence of serious symptoms when he and others from his entourage were contaminated. In July, Bolsonaro announced he tested positive for Covid-19 and made propaganda of hydroxychloroquine as his cure, including in his social media appearances, when he often displayed boxes of the drug. He announced that his government was distributing chloroquine pills over the country, and encouraged people to change doctors in case theirs would refrain from prescribing it. In combination, all this contributed to forging a saviour, the image of someone who is not only extraordinary – as he stands apart from the old, corrupt mainstream politics – but also someone who is on a crusade to save the people, despite all criticism. He advocated for simple solutions, solutions that would work because he and his entourage had tried them.

5.2 Creating Enemies

Another central dimension of any subtype or populist strategy is the creation of enemies. Since populism relies on a relational construction between in- and out-groups (Laclau 2005), populist agency is key to mobilise those groups and to attribute a meaning to otherwise empty signifiers.

¹⁰ Bolsonaro, July 16.

¹¹ Bolsonaro, August 27.

In this sense, Bolsonaro framed the mainstream media (especially the biggest TV and newspaper channels) and subnational governments as enemies acting against “the people”. By blaming them for politicising the crisis with the aim of weakening his government, Bolsonaro used depreciative nicknames and words to refer to the media. He called one TV broadcaster the "Funeral TV," claiming it was only interested in announcing deaths and installing panic. Besides, he stated that the media was not committed to the truth, that there was an "informational war" with him. One side was considered to represent “honesty and accuracy”, while the other spread fake news, conspiracies, and attempts to undermine the government at any costs.

“We are bombed 24 hours a day, not because we are losing the informational war, [but because] it is a part of the [traditional] media; or [because] most of the media is taking advantage of this moment to criticise the government.”¹²

Bolsonaro stuck to a strategy of claiming that his enemies were behind what he referred to as "inflated" figures of Covid-19 deaths. Other politicians were allegedly manipulating the numbers by changing the causes of peoples' deaths. Bolsonaro even encouraged his supporters to go check and film if hospitals were indeed occupied.

“Now, it is worth remembering that we are investigating! We have received a lot of data - and people have been complaining [about it] - the individual [has] a series of health problems; he/she dies, (...) [but] as far as family members knew the person hadn't been infected by the virus and the cause of death states ‘Covid-19’. This is not one person or an incident; there are dozens of occurrences by day that we receive. I don't know what is happening, what they want to gain from that. ‘Those guys’ have a political gain [to expect], this is the only explanation; [they are] taking advantage of the people who passed away to have a political gain and [to] blame the government!”¹³

5.3 The Superhero

Contradicting the "end of populism" prediction, Bolsonaro has been, to some extent, able to secure his position by controlling the framing of the pandemic in his social media. In the first months of the crisis, there were 39 formal requests to impeach Bolsonaro (Câmara dos Deputados 2020) accusing him of supporting anti-democratic demonstrations, interfering in the Federal Police, and threatening public health, but none of those thrived. Since the campaign in 2018, Bolsonaro has constructed an image of an outsider and an "ordinary" man at a time. Employing a delimited socio-cultural repertoire (Casullo 2019; Ostiguy 2017) that resonated with his constituency while reinforcing his image of a military man, Bolsonaro cemented an idea of a "normal" person with a patriotic military profile (Tamaki and Fuks 2020). When the crisis arrived, he claimed to be ready to "lead" the nation through it.

Once in power, Bolsonaro further developed and pushed forward his "celebrity politician" status, often relying on a performative style of communication, employing bad words and bellicose language. Reliance on non-traditional social media allowed him a two-way unmediated communication, and the illusion of proximity and personal connection with followers. He managed to circumvent the traditional media and journalistic gatekeeping, creating an “alternative” facts reality on his personal channels. Not only did Bolsonaro accuse

¹² Bolsonaro, July 16.

¹³ Bolsonaro, June 11.

the “big media” of chasing him, lying and negatively affecting “the people”, but he also delegitimised traditional channels of communication as information providers. His official social media channels were presented as the only legitimate source of information. His weekly videos were used as an alternative to the traditional daily news, a channel where he could fully control his character and message, and directly communicate with supporters.

In the terms of Wood et al. (2016), by performing a role that highlights authenticity and displays one’s non-perfect flawed side, Bolsonaro was capable of reaching and connecting to an audience “unreached” by his opposition. He also managed to expose the failures of the elite, undermining its credibility, while appearing himself as authentic. As argued by Sorensen (2018: 2) as something that populists do, Bolsonaro’s incitement of distrust in politics was accompanied by a “promise of efficacious representation which takes the form of identification with the people and the equation of authentic self-representation to truth telling”. His live streams were surrounded by elements aiming to validate his connection to the “common man”: the use of a cheap pen from a national brand; ordinary clothing, wearing simple shirts (often of soccer teams) and avoiding formal attire, using pieces of paper with personal notes about what to report - which he manually checks as he goes through them.

As the pandemic stroked, at the same time that Bolsonaro’s anti-elitism increased (he targeted state and local officials), his need to distinguish himself from the “corrupt and self-centred elite” became higher. His narrative relied on the idea of being someone with “exceptional” qualities. Bolsonaro evoked his murder attempt in the 2018 presidential campaign to emphasise that a flu would not kill him - it was his mission to save “the people”. His authority shared commonalities with Weber’s charismatic leader: there was a constant need to prove his claimed exceptionality to his followers. In fact, in almost all live-streamed speeches, Bolsonaro mentioned the audience of the videos, live. Bolsonaro clashed with all the political actors that would disagree with him, framing those disagreements not as different opinions, but as a difference of morals. Allies and opposition alike, as soon as they diverged from Bolsonaro’s solutions, they became enemies. This happened to his former health ministers when they left the administration.

The paradox of appearing “common” and “ordinary” while displaying and reinforcing his “exceptional” qualities, however, is something difficult to juggle. A solution to this paradox is developing what we could call the “Clark Kent’s Complex”, which involves conciliating his alter ego with his mundane, ordinary persona. The coordination of public demonstrations of strength and “extraordinary” qualities - what distinguishes him from the ordinary and corrupt politics-, together with the maintenance of a personal and direct connection with his followers (including the physical appearance in rallies) were elements used to boost the people-centric dimension, while at the same time allowing Bolsonaro to maintain an “ordinary” image as president.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that the Covid-19 crisis represented an opportunity for the populist president Bolsonaro to advance a “populist-crisis” mode of communication in an attempt to keep his basis. In line with the idea that populists can benefit from the “performance” of crises by propagating a division between “the people” and a “dangerous elite” (Moffit 2015), and creating the image of a “superhero” that can save the nation (Schneiker 2020), we developed a set of criteria and empirically analysed Bolsonaro’s social media communication in the first wave of the pandemic. Our method can also be applied to other cases.

From the use of a holistic grading method of textual analysis, our findings indicate that Bolsonaro employed a communication strategy that revolved around three key dimensions of a “populist-crisis” rhetoric, which contributed to the creation of a “superhero” image among his followers and helped him keep support:

- 1) amplification of the context of crisis, highlighting its economic impact, while minimising the health effects; blaming the media for creating panic and trying to shift the focus from the problem towards the responsible “enemies”;
- 2) construction of a people-centric message and an idea of proximity to the people by forging closeness to the common man, and his own position as an “ordinary man”, while also highlighting his own exceptionality and problem-solving skills, evoking the idea of “the saviour”;
- 3) opposition to the elites and the “establishment”, by blaming and vilifying elites (political, international, health authorities, scientists, etc.), framing them as evil, corrupt, and self-interested.

Our work studies populism from a communicational-strategic approach. By developing the idea of a “populist-crisis” rhetoric as a communication strategy to deal with crises, we hope to contribute to better understanding how populists can create or mobilise a sense of crisis in order to garner public support, and how they can use communication tools to keep their support while in power, despite an ineffective crisis management. Whereas common sense and some analyses argue that the Covid-19 pandemic would mean the end of populism, we consider that populist actors can potentially rely on communication to resist outbreaks. Bolsonaro is a clear example of how a rhetorical frame can be used to influence the perception of supporters about the crisis, and shield approval ratings.

One possible implication of our findings is that populist communication can foster or aggravate divisions and politicisation in societies, which can be amplified in a context of crises. The pandemic revealed that in many countries, like Brazil and the USA, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours have been largely driven by political and partisan orientations, further polarising societies (Gadarian, Goodman and Pepinsky 2020). Different partisans do not only tend to get information from different sources, but are also likely to perceive the crisis and behave in response to it in contrasting ways.

While populists in opposition could be better placed to profit from crises because of their advantage to blame it on “the elite”, populists in power can also frame the crisis in a profitable way. One way is by blaming it on “new” enemies and by amplifying discursive strategies already in place, like cursing the media and international organisations, or appealing to nationalism. The denialism of leaders like Bolsonaro and Trump, their anti-science rhetoric, and their strategy to blame the pandemic on enemies like China, the World Health Organisation, or the media, opened the way for conspiracy and anti-vaccine movements to rise, including in countries where they used to be inexpressive. Not only have the causes of the outbreak been politicised, but also the solutions to it.

Moving forward, future research could investigate how populists manage to reconcile the paradoxical image of having “exceptional” and “ordinary” qualities. Do they emphasise one trait over the other in an emergency? In addition, studies could assess to what extent populist communication is able to change the perception of a populist leader or even the perception of a crisis. Is strategic communication only effective to keep core populist supporters, or also to amplify the basis of support? How long can populists rely on communication strategies to maintain their support, and how do they combine it with other strategies? Future research could systematically investigate the similarities and differences of communicational responses to the pandemic by different populists. To which extent do other populists rely on a “populist-crisis” mode? Our framework can offer some tools to studies towards this direction.

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Online Appendix available at:

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