

# Government and Congress

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## Introduction

How can one explain the Bolsonaro administration to someone who has not lived in Brazil for the last three years? It is not an easy task. In addition to being an authoritarian and extremely conservative presidency, the Bolsonaro government is led by someone who does not behave in a way a president would normally be expected to. It is doubtful that he understands what being the President of a country means and asks.

Jair Bolsonaro, a backbencher for almost three decades and a grotesque political figure, was elected president in 2018 when political parties and coalitional presidentialism – and any kind of political bargaining – were highly discredited and equated by pundits with corruption and wrongdoings. Bolsonaro campaigned on an anti-party platform and promised to distance himself from parties if elected (Rennó 2020; Borges, Casalecchi, and Rennó 2020). Yet he presented no clear policy agenda to voters. At most, he made a few vague promises to privatize public companies, dismantle social rights, reduce environmental control mechanisms, and facilitate access to firearms.

The President misses no opportunity to manifest his nostalgia for the military regime. His authoritarian inclinations and despise of democratic regimes are beyond doubt. He does not try to hide his preference for the military dictatorship. He even goes as far as denying the positive advances made on health care, education, and poverty alleviation after the return to democracy. In his misconceived view, these reforms and policies are but manifestations of the advances made by the left after the return to democracy. President Bolsonaro's top political priority is to reverse these trends – to undo what democracy has done. In this sense, his platform can be defined as a negative one.

This negative stance has suited the neoliberal agenda. For Paulo Guedes, Bolsonaro's Minister of Economy and the one responsible for connecting the ex-soldier with so-called market

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forces, to dismantle the gigantic and highly inefficient Brazilian state is the priority. Guedes' mantra is to privatize, cut expenditures and liberate market forces. In his view, the market, not the state, should provide health care, education, and pensions.

Since the return to democracy, Brazilian presidents have relied on coalitions to govern. In other words, to secure the support of the majority in the legislature, the president distributes ministerial posts (Figueiredo 2007; Santos 1997; Figueiredo and Limong 1999; Power 2010). In Brazilian parlance, this practice leads to “coalitional presidentialism”, a term that has a pejorative, negative tone. Since Brazilian parties tend to be weak, non-ideological, and pragmatic (Mainwaring 1992; 1999; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 1997), the bargain entailed in the government formation process is usually associated with illicit practices. In this view, parties join the government to gain access to patronage and to appropriate public resources (Bersch, Praça, and Taylor 2017). In a nutshell, relying on a coalition to govern has become associated with corruption. Bolsonaro holds this view as well, and promised in his campaign to distribute posts without consulting the parties. He asserted that he would select his team according to their capacity, technical knowledge, and merit.

During the first two years of President Bolsonaro's administration, he repeatedly stated that he would not engage in political deals as his predecessors did, that in doing so he would avoid engaging in illicit exchanges<sup>5</sup> (UOL 2021). The presidential stand was hailed by pundits as a positive break with coalitional presidentialism, as a way to circumvent the pragmatic and illegal dealings that had allegedly prevailed since re-democratization. The consequence was a president who had no qualms in asserting his lack of knowledge of technical and specific issues, claiming that he would use knowledge and capacity as criteria in choosing his assistants.

The ministerial posts were divided among military officers, a few ultraliberal economists, and individuals called *ideológicos* (ideologues) by Brazilian pundits – anti-vaxxers, climate change skeptics, and science deniers in general.<sup>6</sup> Yet the main criterion seems to have been detachment from previous administrations. Anyone with ties to PT governments was vetoed. It is not clear that the President shared a common agenda with most of the ministers he nominated. Other than his flagrant reactionary insistence on moral and gender issues, little was known of Bolsonaro's ideas before the election. Notably, the President hand-picked individuals who had never held political positions or been elected to office, without any experience in public administration or policy matters. To put it bluntly, the ministers were all outsiders without connections to the political or expert community. While it is the president's prerogative to nominate his ministers, these choices have consequences. In this case, the lack of a partisan majority in Congress and a government of right-wing extremist amateurs.

For the President, this basic political fact was of no consequence. Bolsonaro asserted that he did not intend to interfere in the Legislative Branch. His role, he repeatedly affirmed, was only to introduce bills. Whether these bills became law or not was not his business. The legislature, as an

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5 Illicit here indicates only the negative stance Bolsonaro gives to any form of negotiation that leads to coalition formation.

6 Some of the ministers appointed to form the first Bolsonaro cabinet were followers – or perhaps even disciples – of Olavo de Carvalho, a self-proclaimed philosopher and astrologer who is known for his extreme right-wing views and capacity to produce and spread conspiracy theories.

independent body, should deliberate and pass policies completely on its own. Bolsonaro once said: “I don’t own the agenda. I am not the owner of the laws. I can’t interfere” (Estadão Conteúdo 2019).

This is a strange conceptualization of the Chief Executive role in a presidential or any other type of political system. While this is not the place to delve into debates over the *Separation of Powers* doctrine and its evolution since it was first formulated, suffice it to say that Bolsonaro’s conceptualization does not square with the text of the 1988 Constitution. The Constitution places the President at the center of the legislature, vesting in him or her the right and duty to define the agenda of the Legislative Branch. In short, the role of the President is to lead, to take the political responsibility to define what, when, and how the legal status quo is changed. This is clearly not the case of the current administration. Since Bolsonaro’s inauguration, Brazil has been governed by a politically irresponsible leader, a president who states that his role is not to govern.

To appease certain political forces that supported him, the President and his ministers publicly stated that reforming the state would be a top priority. Despite this promise, the government has not been able to formulate and introduce the promised structural, neoliberal reforms. Its record is slim and inherited from the previous administration, like the public pension reform.<sup>7</sup> Even with this reform, it should be noted, the government avoided any action to get it approved. Rodrigo Maia (Democratas, DEM), the chamber speaker, was the main one responsible for the negotiations and for striking the deals to gather support for it. President Bolsonaro refused to participate, to use his political power, both institutional and non-institutional, to help the reform pass the Congress. His public speeches and general behavior, often contradicting the Minister of Economy, made negotiations harder rather than easier.

The role of Rodrigo Maia in this matter left observers with the impression that the legislature would assume a leading role vis-à-vis the Executive, relegating the President to a secondary role. In other words, it would place Bolsonaro in the same grotesque role that he had been in as a congressman. During Maia’s speakership, the Lower House checked the authoritarian impulses of the President, often undoing actions of dismantling public policies such as gun control and the public health care system.

Instead of governing, the President seems to have opted to extend his electoral campaign. In his speeches, he made no effort to hide his authoritarian, anti-democratic inclination. Instead, he elevated the tone and the threats whenever reports of corruption and wrongdoings involving him or his family surfaced. Invariably, these attacks were followed by setbacks and promises of moderation.

It is said that no matter how bad things are, they can always be worse. As the second year of the Bolsonaro administration started, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic hit the country. The President reacted with his usual hands-off approach, refusing to take any initiative to combat the spread of the virus. As with all policy issues in his government, the reaction to the pandemic was driven by his ideological lenses. Initially, he blamed the Chinese communist regime for creating the threat, adopting a conspiratorial stance. Like Trump in the US, Bolsonaro minimized the public health crisis, asserting that it was nothing but a small flu and that it would disappear in no time

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<sup>7</sup> A constitutional amendment was required in this case. In Brazil, the president can initiate proposals to amend the constitution.

and with a small number of casualties. Denying the facts, Bolsonaro took issue with social distancing recommendations, the use of masks, and vaccination policies. He termed these policies threats to individual liberty. His do-nothing approach during the pandemic, and his attempt to blame governors and mayors for all the problems, his behavior during the pandemic once again confirmed his irresponsibility and his refusal to act as the President of Brazil.

While it is true that fighting the pandemic in the Global South was already difficult, it became even harder given the lack of technical training and capacity of the top government personnel hand-picked by Bolsonaro. The Brazilian government simply refused to set policies in response to the public health emergency. The government publicly announced that the response was to sit and wait, to let “nature” act. The President opposed measures as simple as social distancing and the use of masks and refused to buy vaccines for a long time. For instance, the pharmaceutical company Pfizer contacted the Brazilian government multiple times proposing a deal to sell their vaccine, but they were all left unanswered. The Butantã Institute, a public research center, struck a deal with the Chinese drugmaker Sinovac to produce a vaccine in Brazil, but Bolsonaro and his entourage insisted this vaccine was no good because it was Chinese – a xenophobic statement that led to a diplomatic crisis, which, in turn, delayed the production and delivery of the vaccine (Gadelha and Arbex 2021; Oliveira 2021).

Policies to deal with the pandemic were taken by state governors and mayors under heavy criticism of the Bolsonaro government, who more than once went to court to prevent local administrators from imposing mask mandates and lockdowns. Bolsonaro also started a campaign to incentivize early treatment with chloroquine, azithromycin, and ivermectin.

At the beginning of 2021, the pandemic escalated to the point that the health system collapsed. The government’s lack of leadership in dealing with the crisis was one of the main reasons why almost 600,000 people in Brazil died from COVID-19 by the end of September. The striking scenes of patients dying from the lack of supplemental oxygen in crowded public hospitals motivated the creation of the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry (Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito, CPI) in the Federal Senate to investigate Brazil’s response to COVID-19 and the President’s liability for one of the worst death rates in the world. The relationship between the Executive and the other branches, which was already less than civil, quickly deteriorated.

Bolsonaro realized that his misconduct might lead him to an impeachment process – and/or ultimately to jail. To avoid this, he decided to break his promise of non-intervention in legislative affairs in the election of the Speakers of the Lower and Upper House.<sup>8</sup> The President used and abused the resources at his disposal to elect Arthur Lira (Partido Progressista, PP) and Rodrigo Pacheco (DEM) respectively as the House and the Senate’s speakers. Lira has no qualms about stating his alignment with the President and up to now has shelved all the impeachment requests presented. As repayment, Lira’s political group has gained free access to pork barrel and patronage.

Bolsonaro’s “coalition” does not resemble the previous government coalitions set up by the post-re-democratization presidents. Yet, ironically, his coalition appears to be sustained by the type of deals he had previously criticized and asserted he would break with. Lira and Pacheco are

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8 The Chamber of Deputies’ speaker has the right to open impeachment proceedings.

supported by pragmatic parties, formed by politicians that depend on patronage and pork barrel policies to survive. For Bolsonaro, all that matters is that they block any attempts to prosecute him. The deal is simple: you protect me and I let you run the Country and extract rents from it as you wish. For Bolsonaro, this is a small price to pay. The outcome, however, is a chaotic government composed of right-wing zealots and rent-seeking politicians. There is no coordination, no common purpose, no leadership.

In our study, we rely on data concerning legislative activity to characterize this negative, irresponsible government. To shed light on the relationship between the Executive and the legislature in the last two and a half years, we analyze what happened with the legal initiatives Bolsonaro did propose and compare them with the performance of those put forth by previous presidents. The data speaks for itself. Bolsonaro has not been able to advance his agenda.

In our analysis, we devote special attention to the “Medidas Provisórias” (MPV), or provisional decrees. The 1988 Constitution endows the president with the right to issue provisional decrees. While “Medidas Provisórias” are supposed to tackle urgent issues that require immediate action, all previous presidents have used them to deal with a myriad of cases. Yet whatever its purposes, it is important to highlight that once a provisional decree is issued, it has the status of law for sixty days. If Congress does not consider its passage into law in this period, the President may reissue the decree for an extra period of sixty days. After 120 days of its introduction, if Congress has not approved the provisional decree, the decree is considered void, that is, it is considered repealed. That being said, a provisional decree is a powerful tool in the hands of presidents, allowing the Chief Executive to unilaterally alter the status quo. Yet, since its validity beyond 120 days depends upon the explicit manifestation of the majority, it cannot be used without the anticipation of congressional behavior. It is only reasonable to suppose that when the president issues a provisional decree, he will take action to ensure that it is converted into law.

Bolsonaro issued as many or more provisional decrees as his predecessors. Yet, his rate of conversion into law fares well below any of them. This provides direct evidence of Bolsonaro’s political irresponsibility. The roll call data we collected show that this failure to pass legislation is not the result of the existence of strong opposition. On the contrary, most legislators in Congress support his views. In other words, if he were to negotiate his agenda and seek support for it, most probably, a great deal of his agenda could have been transformed into law or policies. Bolsonaro does not lead the process; instead, he leaves public policy adrift.

### **Lawmaking under Bolsonaro**

In this section, we present descriptive data relative to the lawmaking process and legislative behavior. We focus on executive-legislative relations to give an overview of the two and a half years of Bolsonaro’s administration in comparison with his predecessors. We show that Bolsonaro does not face a belligerent legislature. The right controls the majority of seats and shares the government’s main political inclination. Yet the approval rate of the executive bills sent to Congress is low compared to that of other presidents. The only reason we find to explain his performance is his resistance to form a government and to rely on deals and bargains with parties to have his agenda approved.

Before reviewing our data, it is necessary to note that we compare the two and a half years of the Bolsonaro government with the same period of the previous governments, starting with the first president elected after the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution. For completeness, we provide data for all elected presidents (we do not provide data for Itamar Franco and Michel Temer, who took office after the impeachment of the elected presidents), but we do stress that the appropriate comparisons should be circumscribed to the first term of each one of them. This comparison allows us to take presidents at the same moment of their electoral cycles. Note also, that Dilma Rousseff was ousted in the middle of the second year of her second term.

**Table 1 – Administrations analyzed**

President	Inauguration	Conclusion	Months in office	Months considered in the analysis
Collor	1990-03-15	1992-09-30*	30.5	30
Cardoso	1995-01-01	1998-12-31	48	30
Cardoso II	1999-01-01	2002-12-31	48	30
Lula	2003-01-01	2006-12-31	48	30
Lula II	2007-01-01	2010-12-31	48	30
Rousseff	2011-01-01	2014-12-31	48	30
Rousseff II	2015-01-01	2016-05-11*	16.3	16.3
Bolsonaro	2019-01-01	2021-12-31 (expected)	48 (expected)	30

Source: Brazilian Legislative Dataset – CEBRAP, <https://bancodedadoslegislativos.com.br/> (8 December 2021)

Note: \*Date the president was removed from office due to the impeachment process.

Table 2 depicts the legislative initiative of the presidents. One first notices that President Bolsonaro sent fewer bills to Congress than his predecessors. Moreover, provisional decrees (MPV, “Medidas Provisórias”) and budget proposals (PLN, “Projetos de Lei Orçamentária do Congresso Nacional”) dominated his agenda. These two types of legislation can only be initiated by the Executive. Provisional decrees, as we stated before, must be explicitly approved by Congress within 120 days. If they are not, they are considered rejected. Whereas his predecessors balanced those initiatives, proposing on average one bill for each provisional decree, the ratio for Bolsonaro is more than three provisional decrees for each ordinary bill.

**Table 2 – Bills Initiated by the Executive**

President	PEC	PLP	MPV	PL	PLN	Total
Cardoso	22	8	84	140	248	502
Cardoso II	9	14	84	130	255	492
Lula	8	6	157	121	228	520
Lula II	8	10	125	131	191	465
Rousseff	2	4	102	60	116	284
Rousseff II	4	1	58	31	35	129
Bolsonaro	3	9	190	54	107	363

Source: Brazilian Legislative Dataset – CEBRAP, <https://bancodedadoslegislativos.com.br/> (8 December 2021)

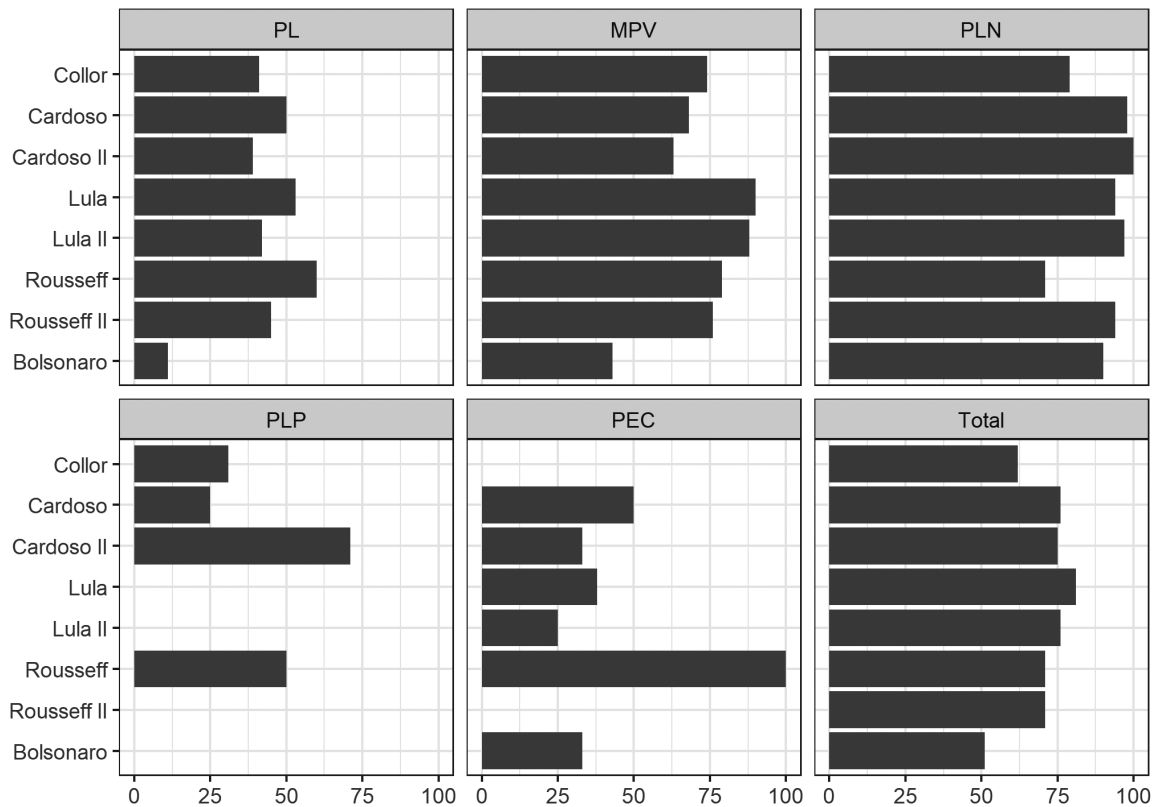
Note: PEC: “Proposta de Emenda à Constituição” (Constitutional Amendment Bill). PLP: “Projeto de Lei Complementar” (Bill of Supplementary Law). MPV: “Medidas Provisórias” (Provisional Presidential Decree).

PLN: “Projeto de Lei do Congresso Nacional” (Budgetary Bill of the National Congress). PL: “Projeto de Lei Ordinária” (Bill of Law).

Turning now to the approval rates, as Figure 1 shows, the contrast between Bolsonaro and previous administrations is even stronger and telling. His performance, measured by his rate of success, is well below the average. Overall, of all his initiatives, only about 50 % of them were approved, a percentage even lower than in Dilma Rousseff’s troubled second term. His performance is even worse than it appears. If we ignore the budgetary bills (PLNs), rarely rejected given that they are necessary to keep the government running, Bolsonaro’s approval rate drops to 34 %, meaning that he has been able to convert into law one out of every three propositions. In sum, he proposes fewer bills and approves a lower proportion of them than any president since re-democratization.

Provisional decrees’ (MPVs) approval rates present an even worse scenario. The burden of letting a decree lapse is considerable since it has already changed the status quo. Congress and the President incur costs if the decree is rejected. Therefore, provisional decrees tend to be converted into law. Both actors want to avoid being accused of causing legal instability. A responsible president would resort to this tool when he anticipates that Congress will go along and convert the decree into a standing statute. This, however, does not seem to be the case with Bolsonaro. He issues decrees as his predecessors did, but, in contrast to them, fewer of them have been approved. 41 % of the decrees Bolsonaro issued have expired without any congressional action. For the other administrations, this lapsing and or rejecting rate did not exceed 10 %.

**Figure 1 – Approval rates of bills introduced by the Executive**



Source: Brazilian Legislative Dataset – CEBRAP, <https://bancodedadoslegislativos.com.br/> (8 December 2021)

Before concluding, we will consider an alternative explanation, namely, that congressional obstruction explains Bolsonaro’s failure. The Brazilian National Congress is one of the most fragmented parliaments in the world. As a result of the 2018 election, marked by rising polarization, the number of effective parties (NEP) in the lower house increased from 13.4 to 16.5. In the Senate, the NEP reached 14.1, an increase of six points. Building a majority in this scenario, one may argue, may be next to impossible. Yet, this is not the case for three reasons. First, congressional procedures favor party leaders and the Chief Executive. Second, the Partido Social Liberal (PSL), Bolsonaro’s party at the time of the election, is the largest in the Lower House. Third, according to the *Brazilian Legislative Survey* (Zucco & Power 2019), 55% of the house seats are controlled by extreme right-wing and right-wing parties, many of them elected on the anti-party Bolsonaro platform.

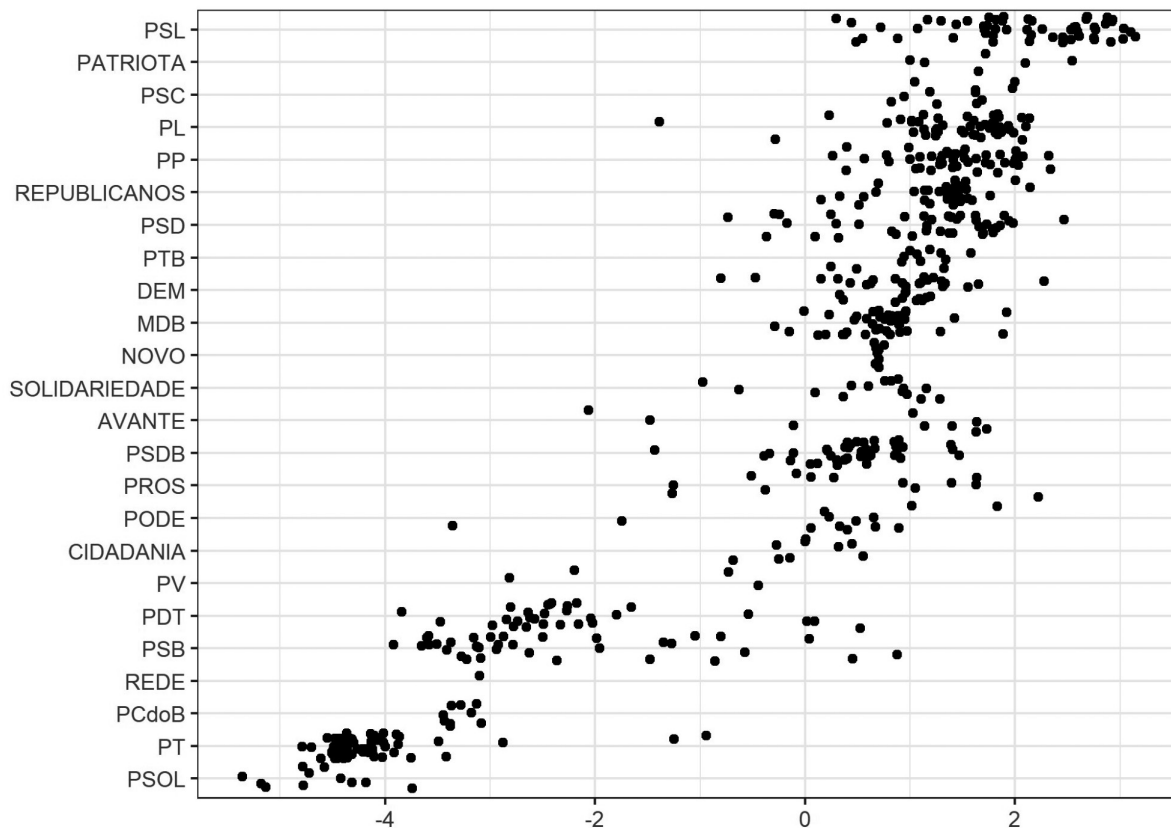
To assess the relationship between Bolsonaro and the current legislature we can analyze legislative behavior based on roll call data. We adopted three strategies. First, we estimated legislators’ ideal points – a measure for federal deputies’ policy preferences – using item response theory models (Imai, Lo, and Olmsted 2016; Martin and Quinn 2002; Poole 2005). This enables us to analyze individual behavior during the Bolsonaro administration. Second, we calculated partisan support for the government position. Here we relied on the government’s public statement to their followers as to whether they were supposed to vote YES or NO at each given roll



call.<sup>9</sup> With this information, we can assess whether the Bolsonaro administration was or was not able to gather support on the floor. Third, we created an indicator of whether the position of the government leader in roll calls is backed by the majority of (voting) deputies.

Figure 2 depicts the representatives' ideal points grouped by party in the first two and a half years of Bolsonaro's presidency. Remarkably, about 70 % of the chamber is located at the center or on the right of the continuum.

**Figure 2: Federal Deputies' Ideal Points during the Bolsonaro Administration by Party**



Source: Brazilian Legislative Dataset – CEBRAP, <https://bancodedadoslegislativos.com.br/> (8 December 2021)

One should note that right-wing parties associated with *Centrão*, including PSL, the party that elected Bolsonaro, were at the center of the first corruption scandals of his administration. After that episode, Bolsonaro left the party and some members of PSL publicly split with the President. Nevertheless, the party stands out as being far-right and is accompanied by a block of medium-sized parties (like PP) that seems very loyal to the President's policy positions. Then there is an intermediate cluster (Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, MDB; Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira, PSDB; and other smaller parties) that tends to the center-right and flirts with government support. To the left, there is a small declared opposition group (Partido dos

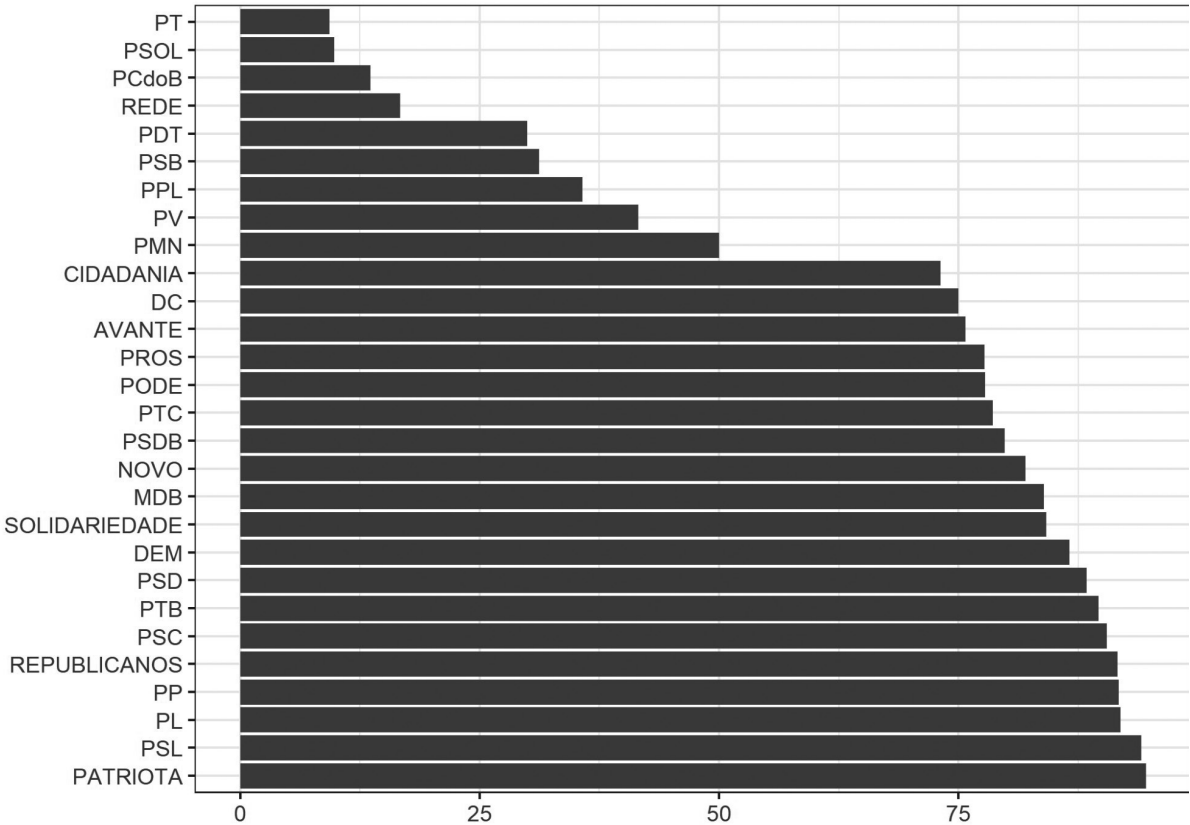
<sup>9</sup> Party and government leaders can indicate the party (or the government) preference for each roll call. They can vote yea or nay. By doing so, they let the rank-and-file know what the party (or the government) line is on all issues that reach the floor. It is a strategy to facilitate keeping tabs on rank-and-file discipline. Leaders might also allow their partisans to vote freely or also indicate a vote to obstruct the roll call.

Trabalhadores, PT; Partido Socialismo e Liberdade, PSOL; Rede Sustentabilidade, REDE; Partido Socialista Brasileiro, PSB; Partido Comunista do Brasil, PCdoB; and a faction of Partido Democrata Trabalhista, PDT).

In sum, the government seems to have majority support in the lower chamber, which should be enough to pass its agenda. Yet, Bolsonaro has not taken advantage of this support. The analysis of Bolsonaro’s MPV shows that having most of the legislators’ policy positions aligned with the Executive’s ideology does not guarantee that the presidential agenda will pass easily in Congress. The Executive must use its muscles. Figure 2 demonstrates that President Bolsonaro – if he wanted to – would find considerable support for most of his policy preferences.

To gain a better understanding of which parties have supported Bolsonaro’s positions, we compare the vote indications of the government leader in roll calls with the actual votes of federal deputies. As shown in Figure 3, by grouping them by party, we have a measure for the mean support for the government. Again, Bolsonaro hasn’t faced an angry opposition. Most parties have offered, on average, more than 50 % of the votes in support of the orientation of the government leader.

**Figure 3: Percentage of mean support for the government in roll calls in the Chamber of Deputies by party**



Source: Brazilian Legislative Dataset – CEBRAP, <https://bancodedadoslegislativos.com.br/> (8 December 2021)  
 Note: The measure includes only roll calls that were valid and not unanimous. The point of reference for the government position in each roll call was the vote indication of the government leader in the Chamber of Deputies (when one was expressed).

However, to come back to Figure 1, Bolsonaro has been the least successful president in passing his legislation since re-democratization. Bolsonaro refuses to assume his role in coordinating the lawmaking process. Table 3 backs this. The second column indicates the percentage of roll calls in which a majority of deputies (50 %+1 of the recorded votes) follows the recommendation of the government leader. The third column follows the same logic, but presents the percentage of roll calls in which the Executive fell on the minority side. Finally, the fourth column indicates the percentage of roll calls in which the government leader left the deputies free to cast their vote or simply refused to recommend any action. The data, again, show that Bolsonaro has no problem finding majority support. Indeed, his government leader cast votes on the majoritarian side of 76.1 % of roll calls, an outcome similar to the performances of Presidents Cardoso and Lula.

**Table 3: Position of the government leader on roll calls regarding the majority, by presidency**

President	% Majority	% Minority	% in which leader allowed members to cast their own vote or remained silent on
Collor	42.1	14.3	43.6
Cardoso	70.4	2.9	26.7
Cardoso II	79.2	1.4	19.4
Lula	89.3	3.8	6.9
Lula II	77.0	8.0	15
Rousseff	61.9	14.4	23.7
Rousseff II	48.5	21.1	30.4
Bolsonaro	76.1	6.6	17.3

Source: Brazilian Legislative Dataset – CEBRAP, <https://bancodedadoslegislativos.com.br/> (8 December 2021)  
 Note: This measure includes only roll calls that were valid and not unanimous. The point of reference for the government position in each roll call was the vote indication of the government leader in the Chamber of Deputies (when one was expressed).

Why does a far-right president who promised to make everything different from his precursors simply refuse to govern? The most obvious answer is that he does not have anything to propose. One might say that this is a simplistic answer, but to show that it is reasonable, we resort to a text analysis of the thematic classification<sup>10</sup> of the bills introduced by the President.

Most of Bolsonaro’s agenda focuses on employment and work, about 40 bills. These deal with labor market regulation, as his main concern is to protect jobs and income for the poor. Bolsonaro never lied about this. During his campaign and after his inauguration, Bolsonaro stated that it is better to have fewer rights and more jobs than fewer jobs and more rights. This emphasis on working as a right was reinforced during the pandemic.

<sup>10</sup> We rely on a thematic categorization of bills offered by the Chamber of Deputies.

Figure 4 – Word cloud of the thematic classification of Bolsonaro’s bills



Source: Brazilian Legislative Dataset – CEBRAP, <https://bancodedadoslegislativos.com.br/> (8 December 2021)

The words “procedure”, “law”, “civil” and “criminal” point to his “law and order” agenda, represented by Sergio Moro, his first Minister of Justice. Sergio Moro was the judge in charge of “Operation Car-Wash” and a symbol of the anti-corruption agenda. As a minister, Moro connected his fierce stance on corruption to combating crime in general. For Bolsonaro’s followers, this meant reducing (eliminating it altogether if possible) gun control.

The reference to education is entirely due to bills that intended to introduce permission for homeschooling and to increase government control over the universities (specifically, granting the Executive greater leeway to appoint rectors). Finally, transport and mobility refer to the reduction of penalties related to traffic violations and the withdrawal of the mandatory use of a safety seat for transporting children in vehicles. That is the crux of Bolsonaro’s agenda – a meager and negative agenda in which the dismantling of state policies is presented as enhancing freedom and liberty. For Bolsonaro, to order children to be educated is to infringe on parents’ liberty, to provide the state too much power over their education/upbringing. To impose speed limits is also a threat to drivers’ freedom. And above all, the poor’s income should exclusively come from their own work.

Perhaps the absent terms, those that do not appear in the word cloud, are more important and revealing of Bolsonaro’s agenda. The terms that have dominated the agenda since re-democratization – poverty, inequality, environmental protection, and many others – that point toward the extension of citizenship are conspicuously absent.

## Conclusion: A Grotesque Government

The word grotesque derives from grotto. In art and literature, it denotes figures who are uncomfortable, bizarre or invoke pity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as “strange in a way that is unpleasant or offensive” or as “extremely ugly in a strange way that is often frightening or funny”. Grotesque is the best word for the two and half years of Bolsonaro’s administration.

To put it bluntly: Bolsonaro has not governed, he does not care to take responsibility for decisions. He avoids supporting the approval of positive policies, engaging in defining priorities and setting the agenda. His most important political goal is the dismantling of the policies adopted after re-democratization, all that he identifies as the leftist agenda of the PSDB and PT governments. This is a negative political agenda in the sense that he does not propose an alternative. For Guedes and staunch neo-liberals, however, this is a positive agenda since they see the state’s excessive intervention in the economy as the problem. Their agenda is also a negative one. For all their talk of structural, market-oriented reform, they have nothing to offer. At least, so far, the Guedes team of neoliberal-minded reformers has failed to do so. They see the state as the problem, but they have to run the state, and they do not know what to do. The pandemic has aggravated this problem. When the state proved indispensable, a band of state haters had to run it.

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