ARGUMENT

It’s Not Just the Right That’s Voting for Bolsonaro. It’s Everyone.

Brazil’s populist firebrand is relying on conservative values, fear of crime, anger about corruption, and rampant fake news to gain support from across the political spectrum.

BY MATIAS SPEKTOR | OCTOBER 26, 2018, 4:04 PM

When polls closed on the evening of Oct. 7, the results of Brazil’s first-round presidential vote left pundits and experts in shock. Jair Bolsonaro swept the floor with an astounding 46 percent of the vote and carried dozens of candidates for state and national legislatures on his coattails. In the second round of voting on Sunday, he is poised to win the presidency.

Bolsonaro’s rise seemed to surprise everyone. An obscure congressman whose extremist policy proposals and thuggish style sit well beyond what was assumed to be acceptable in Brazil’s political mainstream has run a campaign that will likely land him in the driver’s seat of one of the world’s largest democracies. More shocking still is that he will not win it on the back of a minority of radical crazies but on a wave of support from the majority of the electorate.

For all of his appalling rhetoric and actions, Bolsonaro has managed to appeal to voters beyond his hardcore, right-wing base. Millions of voters who would have normally cast their ballots in favor of centrist candidates are planning to vote for him this time around.

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Consider the results from the first round of the election in the state of São Paulo.
percent of the vote. After winning the governorship on successive landslides in 2010 and 2014, Alckmin saw a large chunk of his base defect and vote for Bolsonaro.

Something similar happened to the center-left candidate Marina Silva. Back in 2014, Silva, who is black, won the first round of the election in states such as Acre and the Federal District. In 2018, Bolsonaro took both states by wide margins (62 percent and 58 percent, respectively), and Silva ended up commanding only 1 percent of the total vote.

Equally impressive was Bolsonaro’s showing in the northeast, one the country’s poorest regions and the core geographic base of the Workers’ Party (PT). Although the PT candidate Fernando Haddad won eight out of nine northeastern states in the first round of the election, Bolsonaro outperformed him in the five largest capital cities in those states. The results surprised many observers, given Bolsonaro’s recurrent insults to black Brazilians, who make up a large proportion of the population there.

Bolsonaro also won almost 53 percent of the vote in Rio Grande do Sul, which four years earlier had given the left a clear victory in the first round. His appeal beyond the extreme right points to a more profound transformation in Brazilian politics. In an election year where the dominant popular sentiment is anger at the political class, he is riding a wave of popular discontent.

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The wave Bolsonaro is riding has four elements to it.

First, the electorate seems to be ready for a more conservative set of policies than in the past, coinciding with the rapid growth of evangelical denominations across Brazil (accounting for 30 percent of the electorate in 2015, most of them Pentecostals). Issues of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality have come to the fore, with culture wars raging in ways that are unusual in Brazil. Bolsonaro wants to regulate morality.

He says he will defend “family values” and that “homosexual propaganda” threatens the innocence of children in school. He is a staunch opponent of the decriminalization of abortion and drugs. Strangely, his brand of conservatism has

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LGBT people, blacks, and indigenous Brazilians in ways that were unacceptable in the Brazilian public sphere not long ago.

Second, the wave comes about as economic decay and growth in unemployment in recent years created a backlash against income redistribution and affirmative action policies benefiting poor and black Brazilians that were introduced by former administrations.

Third, the violence epidemic that has turned Brazil into one of the most dangerous countries in the world has given rise to widespread support for tougher policing. Bolsonaro has supported the use of torture against criminals and has spoken favorably of killing squads—and many voters don’t seem to mind. Memories of police abuse back in the country’s dictatorial days have faded among voters who are too young to have any recollection of authoritarianism or firsthand experience with a police state.

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Fourth, as is the case in many countries, the populist surge thrives on misinformation, fake news, and hearsay. This election cycle has been dominated by lies coming from both the right and left via WhatsApp. And crucially WhatsApp, rather than Facebook or Twitter, is now the main conduit for heated political debate among families and friends in Brazil. Whereas Twitter and Facebook have made some efforts to uncover trolls, vet posts, and crack down on fake news, WhatsApp is completely unfiltered. There is no intermediary stopping users from sending lies to their relatives.

This is particularly worrying because it comes at a time when Brazil’s traditional media institutions are in crisis. The once influential media group Abril filed for bankruptcy this year, and other major national newspapers either accumulate growing deficits or rely on sister companies to make ends meet. Media companies have also had a hard time adapting to online news and new technologies, and they seem to be developing a severe credibility problem. In the last few weeks of campaigning, abuse and violence against journalists has been commonplace, and Bolsonaro has fueled anger against the press.
reform to curb unemployment and falling incomes, a conservative turn in social mores, and unquestioned support for anti-corruption measures.

Of all the candidates on offer, Bolsonaro is the only one who has signaled his commitment to honor those promises. Both the style and content of his signals are abhorrent, but they do show an unwavering commitment to change. Consider, for instance, his pledge to fight crime: He has spoken highly of extrajudicial killing squads and has told security forces they will find protection under his watch to unleash violence against criminals.

On economic reform, he has appointed the University of Chicago-trained economist Paulo Guedes, who has made wild promises about a maximalist neoliberal agenda. On social issues, he has attacked minorities and has screamed on more than one occasion that they need to bow before the majority. Bolsonaro has also fed a type of homophobic hysteria that seems to be testing Brazil’s renowned tolerance of difference. And when it comes to the rule of law, one of Bolsonaro’s sons threatened to abolish the Supreme Court during a campaign rally. (He later retracted the statement.)

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In a country where support for political parties and democratic norms has fallen to historic lows, Bolsonaro has cleverly tailored a message that appeals to the few institutions that still command popular respect: the family, the church, and the Armed Forces.

Brazil’s democratic regime was crafted in the 1980s by a generation that worked to weaken the extremes and strengthen the center. Convergence to the middle did in time help curb inflation and economic instability, lay the foundations for a minimalist welfare state, and even generate some modest growth at home.

But it was not all positive. A string of scandals lifted the veil on the political system. Brazilians now know that vote buying, clientelism, and patronage are essential features of the existing system. Collusion among political dynasties, party bosses, and interests groups is the rule of the game. To make matters worse, representatives to the lower chamber of the National Congress are elected on open-list proportional elections that severely reduce accountability to their voters.
Things began to unravel in 2013, when millions of people took to the streets to protest a string of corruption scandals implicating politicians across the political spectrum. As prosecutors unveiled a kickback scheme whereby large business conglomerates purchased political favors through bribes and secret campaign finance funds to the tune of some $10 billion, the country was caught up in a polarizing political crisis. The Lava Jato (Car Wash) probe revealed how former presidents of Brazil purchased support from Congress to pass legislation and has landed several politicians in prison—including former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, popularly known as Lula.

Then came President Dilma Rousseff’s divisive impeachment in 2016. Her detractors accused her and her party of concocting a scheme of large-scale graft to rob the public coffers. The factions working to impeach her took advantage of popular dissatisfaction with the government to come to power and implement policies that had not won popular support at the polls. Finally, in early 2018, Lula was sentenced to prison over corruption charges.

Taken together, these events opened the field for a more ideological, militant type of politics. Economic hardship, corruption scandals, and lack of government accountability paved the way for an anti-system message. And Bolsonaro fit the bill with his brand of polarizing populism.

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Bolsonaro has proved to be a cunning campaigner who knows how to occupy the empty space that opened up as the old Brazilian order imploded. Like Donald Trump in the United States, he is not the cause of popular anger but its symptom.

Whether Brazilian institutions will be able to curb Bolsonaro’s authoritarian instincts is not a given. Indeed, according to the pollster Latinobarómetro, the percentage of Brazilians stating that “democracy is always preferable” is low.

If Bolsonaro wins, he can either try subvert the old system by abandoning the give-and-take that has been the hallmark of political culture in the country, in which case he will have to appeal directly to the people, or he can try to restore the old ways of doing things and face the consequences. Either way, Brazil faces a depressing, bumpy road ahead.
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