

# **The Military as a Moderating Power: a study with Bolsonaro supporters in São Paulo<sup>1</sup>**

*Caio Marcondes Ribeiro Barbosa (University of São Paulo)*

**Abstract:** The election of far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro as president in 2018 marked the end of the two-party (PT and PSDB) dominance in presidential elections since 1994 and the return of a self-declared right-wing politician to power, which has not occurred since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. In the city of São Paulo, a region that stretches from the beginning of its East Zone towards the North Zone, has been identified as a stronghold for the conservative right-wing vote, by Pierucci (1999), since the 1985 mayoral elections and 1986 governor elections. While this trend disappeared in subsequent elections with the lack of competitive conservative right-wing candidates, this region returned as a main area of support for Bolsonaro in São Paulo for the 2018 presidential elections. This research returned to this region and sought to understand the views of this electorate and what their motivations to vote for Bolsonaro were. For this purpose, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with voters who canvassed for Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections, and who are residents in the aforementioned region, as well as ethnographic observations from right-wing demonstrations, which were performed to recruit interviewees and to learn more about their agenda. This presentation discusses some of the findings of this research, in particular the role of the military in the view of these interviewees. Overall, they see the military regime period as positive; associating it with virtues such as “order”, “discipline”, “honesty”; and attribute to the armed forces a sort of “moderating power”, which means that, in their view, they can – and should – interfere in politics if the situation demands it, even at the cost of democratic institutions.

**Keywords:** moderating power; ethnography, São Paulo; 2018 presidential elections, far-right supporters

## **Introduction**

Since the 1994 election, the competition for the presidential seat in Brazil was between only two parties: PSDB (Brazilian Social Democracy Party) and PT (Workers’ Party). Therefore, it came as a surprise to most political analysts that Jair Bolsonaro was elected as president. Even with countless other candidates participating in the election, the unity of the electorate around Bolsonaro was so great that the candidate, running for a party that was then inexpressive – the PSL (Social Liberal Party) – almost ended the race in the first round, obtaining 46.03% of the votes. In the second round, Bolsonaro won the election with 55.54% of the valid votes, defeating the

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candidate from PT, Fernando Haddad. Explaining Bolsonaro's meteoric rise is not an easy task, especially with his aggressive, conservative rhetoric, and after four consecutive elections with victories by left-wing candidates. Therefore, the question arises as to where this electorate, came from and how they think, as they decided to support a candidate so radical in his ideas and positioned so much to the far-right.

Bolsonaro's rise is part of a resurgence of the right in Brazilian politics. After more than a decade of PT's electoral hegemony in the presidential elections, the right – mainly supported by *antipetismo* – sought to reorganize its forces, which led some authors (CODATO; BOLOGNESI & ROEDER, 2015; ORTELLADO & SOLANO, 2016; ROCHA, 2019) to talk about a “new right” in Brazil. However, it would not be the first time that this term had been used in Brazilian social sciences.

Antônio Flávio Pierucci, a sociologist conducting studies in the first years after the country's re-democratization in the 1980s and 1990s, performed a case study in the municipality of São Paulo regarding the elections of Jânio Quadros for mayor in 1985 and Paulo Maluf for governor in 1986. Interviewing these candidates' canvassers, Pierucci (1999) found what he called a “new right”, a new wave of conservative voters, who would have emerged with the end of the military regime. And in order to carry out his research, he geographically delimited where Jânio Quadros had obtained the highest concentration of votes (and roughly where Maluf would as well in the following year), establishing a threshold of one third of the votes in the election (which only had one turn), which would be the region at the beginning of the East Zone to the North Zone of São Paulo, an area with middle-class, or lower-middle class residents.

Another interesting aspect to be raised from the mapping realised by Pierucci is that he identified a trend in the São Paulo capital of a *Janista* vote among social classes in the form of an “inverted V”. This means that Jânio would have a lower vote among the poorest, which would rise in the middle classes – such as with residents of the forementioned region –, but which would decrease again among the wealthy.

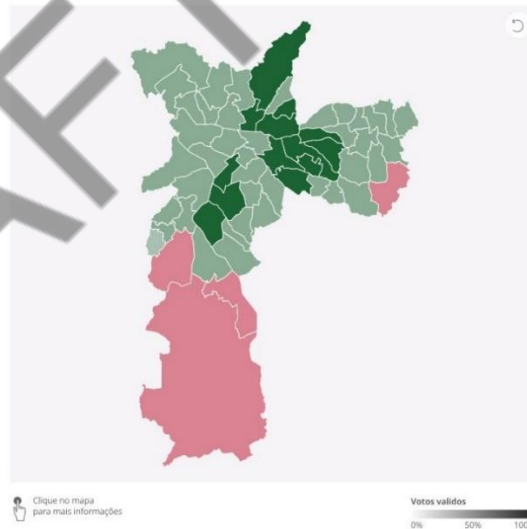
Jumping in time for the 2018 presidential election, it is noteworthy to highlight the similarity of some findings that Pierucci identified more than 30 years ago in the election of Jânio Quadros for mayor. In Image 1 below, it is possible to see the 20 regions of the municipality of São Paulo where Jânio Quadros was most voted in 1985, while Image 2 illustrates the electoral

map of the municipality of São Paulo, divided by electoral zones, in which the zones in dark green show where Bolsonaro got more than 50% of the votes already in the first round of 2018<sup>2</sup>.

**Image 1: Map of the municipality of São Paulo with the 20 regions with the highest vote in Jânio Quadros in the mayoral election in 1985<sup>3</sup>**



**Image 2: Electoral Map of São Paulo in the 1st round of the 2018 election for President<sup>4</sup>**



<sup>2</sup> Light green areas are where Bolsonaro had more votes, but did not reach 50%, while light red areas are where Haddad had more votes.

<sup>3</sup> Map taken from Pierucci (1988).

<sup>4</sup> Source: G1.com.br

As seen in the images, the contiguous zone that extends from the districts of the East Zone, close to the city centre, to the North Zone, is almost the same as the regions where Pierucci found the *Janista* base. In addition, this same region, in the second round of the elections, also guaranteed Bolsonaro more than two thirds of the vote. In other words, there is a strong similarity in the geographic base of the *Janista* right of 1985 with the *Bolsonarista* right in 2018 in the municipality of São Paulo.

Although one can argue that the similarity of the electoral map of the election of Jânio Quadros in 1985 for mayor and the election of Bolsonaro in 2018 for president is purely coincidental, Pierucci (1988) had already reiterated a certain constancy in the vote of these regions in different elections. In 1982, a similar region in the East Zone was where Lula obtained the fewest votes; and in 1986, Maluf obtained an expressive vote for governor in the same regions. Moreover, Sousa (1986) argues that voting for Jânio Quadros in 1985 followed the same pattern it did in the 1950s, when he also ran for mayor in São Paulo. Is it possible, therefore, that, more than 60 years later, the presence of a competitive candidate from the conservative right has revived the same electoral geographic base?

This research, therefore, returned to the neighborhoods surveyed by Pierucci (1999), where Bolsonaro was most voted, to try to understand how his more ardent supporters think and what motivated their decisions to vote for Bolsonaro in the 2018 election, just as Pierucci did with Jânio's electoral cables in 1985 and Maluf in 1986. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, this research hopes to help in understanding the phenomenon that was the election of Bolsonaro and the emergence of this Brazilian "new right" in the early 21st century. At the same time, ethnographic research was also conducted in right-wing demonstrations in the year of 2019, initially in order to recruit interviewees, but which also proved useful to understand more about this political movement.

The main hypothesis of this study is that there was a "hidden right" in Brazil. That means that there was a considerable part of the electorate who held conservative values and did not feel represented by the main political parties (i.e., PT and PSDB). The introduction of a competitive conservative candidate, such as Jair Bolsonaro, reactivated this electoral base, which opened a rift in the whole political system, formerly stabilised by the two-party dominance for the presidential seat for over 20 years.

This paper is part of this broader research for a PhD dissertation. In the findings, it was possible to identify strong links between the support for Bolsonaro and support for militarism. In fact, many of these voters were motivated to vote for Bolsonaro due to his links with the military (as he was a former army captain). These voters not only associated the military with good virtues – such as “order”, “discipline”, “honesty” – but demonstrated positive impressions about the military regime period from 1964 to 1985, which, in turn, also meant they presented more authoritarian views. In the following sections, these findings will be described, along with the methodological procedures to collect them.

### **Methodological procedures**

As aforementioned, this research involved ethnographic observation in right-wing street protests and semi-structured interviews. One of the purposes of participating in street rallies would be to find and recruit residents of regions where Bolsonaro was most voted to conduct in-depth interviews with these more engaged voters. Nonetheless, the ethnography of these demonstrations also contributed to a better understanding of these groups, providing important material that supports this work.

The ethnographic method proved to be fundamental for understanding the phenomenon of right-wing street demonstrations throughout 2019. Although it is a method that has limits – after all, the space to be observed is not (and should not be) controlled (HARRINGTON, 2003), and a researcher alone cannot be present throughout the occupied space at all times, witnessing everything that happens throughout an entire manifestation – a participant observation reveals nuances that a distant look does not allow. As De Volo and Schatz (2004) point out, what ethnography loses in method due to its statistical reliability, it gains by the validity of its findings.

This paper presents a part of the findings from the research carried out during all the major right-wing demonstrations that occurred in 2019 in the city of São Paulo; that is, the demonstrations on April 7th, May 26th, June 30th, August 25th, November 9th, November 17th and December 8th. It is noteworthy that on all these dates, rallies also took place in several cities in the country. Thus, it is necessary to emphasize that it is not possible to attest that the findings during the São Paulo protests can be purely replicable for demonstrations in other cities. However,

São Paulo is, in general, the most numerous and important stage of these demonstrations, so that it is not possible to minimize its relevance in the national context. At the same time, these rallies were called around the country by the same groups; therefore, it is to be expected some reasonable similarity to be found for all.

The average length of stay in each rally was around four hours, and their observation was divided into two moments. In the first hour, “in disguise”; that is, without anything that characterized this author as a researcher, and only as one more in the crowd. Thus, it was possible to pay full attention to speeches and other elements during the protests without altering the observed object. In a second moment, after circulating throughout the protests, I would put my badge of postgraduate researcher from the University of São Paulo (USP) around my neck, which allowed people to know my role there for the remaining three hours. Timothy Pachirat (2009) discusses the theoretical hypothesis of what it would be like if it were possible to take an invisibility potion to perform an ethnography without the researcher interfering in the object. Thanks to the nature of the demonstration, at first, it would be as if, in fact, I had taken the invisibility potion, as there would be nothing to stand out from other demonstrators. On the other hand, as soon as I put the badge on, it would be as if the potion's effect disappeared, people would note my presence and I would thus interfere in the observed space.

As one of the objectives was to find possible new interviewees, besides going through the demonstrations, listening to the speeches in the sound cars and reading the different banners and placards raised by the protesters, the study took the initiative of approaching those present with a simple questionnaire in order to identify whether the individual fit the desired profile for the interviews. Although the questionnaire had no intention of assuming the role of a quantitative survey of the manifestations, in addition to helping in obtaining contacts, it also allowed to know a little more about those present in each of the protests. The questions in the questionnaire inquired about name, age, profession, neighborhood, number of people in their household, family income, vote for president in 2018, if they had campaigned for that candidate, their evaluation of the Bolsonaro government thus far, and a contact number, if applicable, for the in-depth interviews.

The number of successful approaches in the demonstrations ranged from 40 to 50 people. This does not include protesters who refused to answer the questionnaire questions, which were roughly about the same amount of people. In total, that meant that over 300 people were

approached successfully. In general, most people were limited to just answering questions when approached; others, however, took the opportunity to give their opinions – sometimes in an extended way – on different topics, such as the evaluation of that march, the results of the government, dissatisfaction with opponents of the president (PT, press, Congress, the Supreme Court, etc.), among others. All, in some way, contributed to a better understanding of the panorama of these *Bolsonaristas*.

For the interviews, the approach was similar to Pierucci (1999). Over 35 interviews have been performed so far from a target of 40 in total. The interviewees were selected from the districts that extend from the East Zone - in the electoral zones of Vila Prudente, Vila Matilde, Vila Formosa, Tatuapé, Penha de França, Mooca - up to the North Zone - in the electoral zones of Vila Maria, Santana, Vila Sabrina and Tucuruvi, all where Bolsonaro obtained more than 50% of the votes already in the first round of the 2018 presidential elections. These districts are the same surveyed by Pierucci (1999), with the exception of neighbourhoods such as Limão, and Lapa de Baixo in the West Zone. Their exclusion is justified only by the fact that their respective electoral zones (Limão in the Electoral Zone of Casa Verde, and Lapa, in their own Electoral Zone), despite expressive results for Bolsonaro, did not reach 50% in the first round of the elections. The exclusion of neighbourhoods in the electoral zones of Jardim Paulista, Indianópolis and Santo Amaro, where Bolsonaro also obtained more than 50% of the votes in the first round, is justified because they are districts that were not surveyed by Pierucci at that time, they are not in the same contiguous area, in addition to having an average income well above the other neighbourhoods that are part of this research.

The selection of respondents followed two criteria, the same also adopted by Pierucci (1999). First, a regional one, selecting residents from the electoral zones mentioned above. The second criterion was voters who, in addition to voting for Bolsonaro in both rounds, were canvassers, voluntary activists of the candidate. As Pierucci (1999) did in his research, this kind of voter is in an intermediate category, between the one who is an occasional voter – who voted without much thought into it – and the party members, using as a simple parameter for this characterization the fact that the interviewee tried to convince at least one other person to vote for Bolsonaro. As the research extends under Bolsonaro's presidency, another parameter we considered was to classify voters who participated right-wing demonstrations from 2019 onwards

in support of the government as activists. Some voters, although they were frequent participants in the demonstrations, declared that they had not tried to convince others to vote for Bolsonaro. We believe that it would not be appropriate to exclude this type of person, as they still fit strongly into the concept of activists.

Despite the relevance of the interviewees' income, an income criterion was not established to select the interviewees. Pierucci (1988) demonstrated in his research that the geographic base was more relevant than income to explain the vote of his “new right”, with different groups of similar income presenting different votes depending on the region where they lived. Thus, this study also remained primarily with the geographic criterion.

Unlike Pierucci (1999), the empirical research was performed outside the electoral campaign period, which changes the dynamics of the selection of interviewees, due to the absence of a campaign on the streets. However, even if it was during the campaign, it is also true that many voters no longer campaign on the streets, but on social networks. Thus, the recruitment of respondents followed two methods. The first method, as mentioned, involved recruiting participants from demonstrations carried out by right-wing groups, using small questionnaires to identify voters who may be of the profile desired by the survey and to get their contacts to later conduct more in-depth interviews. The second method, on the other hand, was through the snowballing method, seeking references from other people who knew voters in the desired profile of the survey who, once they were interviewed, could also refer more other friends, acquaintances, neighbours or family members who also fit the same profile.

Although the interviews followed a script, as mentioned, they were semi-structured. This means that, in order to test the hypotheses of the work, the interviews were not structured in such a way that the answers are already assumed. As Leech (2002) suggests, there are benefits to following a middle path, allowing the interviews to be open enough to involve other topics being cited, as well as other types of more basic questions to be added, such as “why”, “how”, “when”, “where”, among others. In this way, the interview allows you to test hypotheses without failing to explore the interviewees' statements whenever possible. In the impossibility of asking all the questions present in the script due to the limited time, questions were asked according to the flow of the interview, with the aim of maintaining the duration of the interview in about 1 hour and 30



minutes, although it usually exceeded this period, depending on the availability and receptivity of the interviewee.

Unfortunately, due to the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, ethnographic observation in right-wing demonstrations only occurred in 2019. About half of the interviews were conducted at the respondents' homes, before the pandemic. After the pandemic started, the remaining interviews were performed by video calls or by phone, while one agreed to answer questions only via WhatsApp. The interviews lasted an average of 2 hours, and the names of all interviewees were changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

### ***Intervencionistas: ethnography in right-wing demonstrations in São Paulo***

After the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of the Republic in 2018, different right-wing groups that contributed to his election remained strongly mobilized. Even with the right in power, the movements that promoted large demonstrations for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff continued to carry out street demonstrations during the first year of Bolsonaro's government.

Although the demonstrations were reasonably plural, it is true that there were more people in certain categories. This is in line with the findings of a Datafolha survey<sup>5</sup> released in September 2019. According to the survey, the hardcore support for Bolsonaro - those who consider the government to be good or great and who say they trust the president too much - would be 12% of the population, composed mainly of men, half of whom would be over 35 years old, and almost a third would be over 60 years old. The number of whites and retirees was still well above the population average, about half have an income above three minimum wages, and around one third have a higher education.

And, in fact, in the demonstrations, there was a greater presence of white, older and retired men. In terms of profession, it was possible to find a large number of people with higher education degrees; as for income, there was a higher proportion of people with a family income above R\$ 5,000.00, that is, about 5 minimum wages. Thus, as the questions about the vote in the 2018

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<sup>5</sup> Folha de S. Paulo, September 4th. 2019. *Núcleo duro de apoio a Bolsonaro é de 12% da população, aponta Datafolha*. Available on: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/09/nucleo-duro-de-apoio-a-bolsonaro-e-de-12-da-populacao-aponta-datafolha.shtml>. Last access on: May 20th, 2021.

election and about the government's assessment revealed, it was clear that the demonstrations brought together, for the most part, this base of hardcore Bolsonaro supporters.

All the demonstrations attended were held on Paulista Avenue, the most well-known avenue and the usual stage of protests in São Paulo. In all rallies, after an initial scouting period, I put a badge with a researcher identification from USP in order to facilitate the approach and then clarify what I was there for. In the distance, a few watched my badge with curiosity, pointed at me, between whispers and giggles, highlighting my presence. The majority (but not by large) of the protesters approached were cordial and accepted to answer questions. The rest reacted in different ways: some were suspicious of the intentions of the questions and preferred not to answer; others treated with scorn, saying that they would not speak to someone from the left, since USP was a den of leftists, among other things; and a few were still a little more aggressive, and took the opportunity to speak out against universities and the left in general. It must be noted that no physical aggression ever happened, and although there was some hostility, the negative reactions were more playful and mocking than truly aggressive, despite the occasional rudeness, and no attempt was made from my part to confront or discuss the beliefs that the protesters might have had about the research, universities or my purpose there.

The rallies were called by two main groups: one group was composed of movements that supported Bolsonaro in his election, but were more aligned with the anticrime and anticorruption agenda of the Lava Jato Operation<sup>6</sup>, hence named in this research *Lavajatistas* (these included Movimento Brasil Livre, VemPraRua, Movimento Direita Digital, among others)<sup>7</sup>. The other group of movements was strictly connected to Bolsonaro and acted solely in his support, hence named *Bolsonaristas* (they included NasRuas, Movimento Conservador – former Direita São Paulo –, Movimento Avança Brasil, among others). While they had much in common – such as being outspokenly right-wing, opposed to PT and everything that came from the left, and in support of the government, especially in its neoliberal economic programme and morally conservative discourse – their main agendas differed, being the former more focused on anti-corruption topics, and having as their reference who was then the Justice Minister – Sergio Moro – while the latter

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<sup>6</sup> “Car Wash Operation”, a corruption investigation that led to the arrest of high-profile businessmen and politicians, including former president Lula, whose main figureheads were judge Sergio Moro and prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol.

<sup>7</sup> These groups, especially Movimento Brasil Livre and VemPraRua, were the main ones involved in the rallies for Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment. For more information on these groups, see Rocha (2018).

were more interested in just showing support to the government and Bolsonaro as a leader. Throughout the year of 2019, while they shared the streets most of the time, these two groups had increasing animosity amongst themselves until they had a falling out in November. They still held a joint demonstration in December, but clearly distant from one another. Still, it would be the last time these different groups would be together. This rift was a harbinger of the relationship between Bolsonaro and Moro, which ended with the latter asking for his resignation in April 2020 and helped leading *Lavajatista* movements to declare outspoken opposition to Bolsonaro.

Among participants in the rallies, the differences between these groups seemed less important, despite the fact they were still visible. In the few protests in which only one of the groups called its followers, it was possible to note a few differences in their public. Demonstrations called by *Lavajatista* movements were usually whiter, with a higher average family income and less enthusiasm for the government (more people declaring it was “good” or just “regular”. On the other hand, protests called by *Bolsonarista* movements, while still whiter than the average population, had visibly more non-white participants than in the former and also with an lower average family income. Enthusiasm was also higher, with participants responding on average more times that the government was “excellent” or “good”. Still, all participants approached – with very few exceptions of those who did not vote in 2018 for some reason – had voted for Bolsonaro, the vast majority in both rounds. Also, overall support for Bolsonaro was high, and many of those who rated the government was “regular” or “good” emphasize that it was not “excellent” because the media, the Supreme Court, Congress, left-wing parties, among other enemies, did not allow Bolsonaro to govern. Moreover, they were not very influenced by the rifts of these groups. In fact, as found in the in-depth interviews, when Moro left the government and *Lavajatista* movements declared opposition, very few interviewees followed them, and most declared that Moro and these movements were “betraying” Bolsonaro.

Every demonstration had a particular reason or main theme, but overall, they were mostly to show support for the Lava Jato Operation (and its political agenda) and for the government, which actively or covertly encouraged them in order to show strength. In all rallies, there were groups and individuals with their own agenda, different from the ones called by the organizing groups. And one of the most striking ones was of the *intervencionistas*; that is, groups and individuals who called for a military intervention.

A military intervention meant, according to them, using the military to fight against those who opposed Bolsonaro. That usually implied closing Congress and the Supreme Court with the help of the military, or arresting Bolsonaro's political enemies. Many of them felt there was nothing wrong or even authoritarian about that, as – according to their own erroneous interpretation – the Article 142 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution gives the president the power to use the military for these purposes. In fact, this was an important theme for them: they did not want the military to take power, they merely wanted them to consolidate Bolsonaro's unopposed rule.

The *intervencionistas* were present in all demonstrations, in varying numbers. In solely *Lavajatista* demonstrations, they were usually less present, while in solely *bolsonarista* rallies they were clearly more comfortable in being there. On one occasion, for the May 26th demonstration, *Lavajatista* movements decided to not go to the rallies because many of the calls for the protests were considered antidemocratic, calling for the closure of Congress and the Supreme Court. Bolsonaro publicly asked his supporters not to take banners calling for this agenda, and his followers acquiesced, although a few such banners and placards were still present on the day.

Overall, *intervencionistas* were accepted, tolerated or, at better, ignored by the leading organizing groups. While their sound cars were usually apart from their main groups, banners and placards calling for military intervention could be seen all throughout the protests. From the sound cars, different people would give speeches, some of them dressed in military outfits, and although one man introduced himself as an Army sergeant, it was unclear if they were really members of the armed forces, or just dressed in a costume. This man spoke freely about how that rally was important to “kill for once and for all these communist, left-wing nutjobs”, among other things, to which the usually smaller crowd would reply “we want intervention!” or “Aço!” (“Steel” in English, a sort of military greeting).

Even when they did not mention military intervention, antidemocratic speeches were not particularly uncommon during the rallies. On April 7th, one of the activists giving a speech in a sound car argued that calling for the “end of the Supreme Court” – as many banners and placards frequently said – was not antidemocratic, as they did not want to close it completely, but substitute it for a “more representative” Court, since the current one was not “democratic”. On December 8th, Carla Zambelli, a federal congresswoman and leader of the NasRuas movement, replied from a sound car to a question asking for the end of the Supreme Court. She argued that the idea “was

good in practice” but was not the best path to take “now”. According to her, doing that would lead to “a great legal uncertainty”, especially in a moment “when Brazil is recovering its image abroad”.

### **The military in the view of interviewees**

While ethnographic observation in right-wing rallies helped to understand the plurality of the right-wing groups that supported Bolsonaro, the in-depth interviews with Bolsonaro canvassers allowed a deeper understanding of their motivations. Furthermore, it allowed to confirm the hypothesis that these voters felt disenfranchised from the main political parties. Differently from *Janistas* and *Malufistas* that Pierucci (1999) found, the interviewees of this study were proudly and outspokenly conservative or right-wing. This was a major change from a political phenomenon that occurred after the end of the military regime, which was the “embarrassed right” (SOUZA, 1988; MAINWARING; MENEGUELLO & POWER, 2000). This meant that conservative political parties and its corresponding electorate avoided declaring they were right-wing, even if they clearly held such values. That was entirely different for these *Bolsonaristas*, and supported the idea they were seeking a candidate that was just as outspokenly right-wing as they now were.

Besides seeking an outspoken conservative candidate, these supporters were motivated by their opposition to PT, or *antipetismo* (which encompassed a wide spectrum of ideas, including being against handouts to the poor, a reacting towards corruption scandals from PT, their economic policies, etc); by a cultural backlash to the advances that political minorities (women, African-Brazilians, LGBTs) had in the recent decades<sup>8</sup>; but also by their views on the military and the relationship they formed between Bolsonaro and the Brazilian armed forces.

As Bolsonaro was a former army captain and campaigned most of his life defending the military regime and the rights for lower ranking officers, the question of militarism naturally arises in interviews. Indeed, the military has established a constant presence in the direction of Brazilian politics at least since the time Brazil was an Empire. After the end of the military regime, there was a retreat of the military participating in different instances of government. However, especially after the government of Michel Temer, after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, a significant number of military personnel were called to participate in the government. With Bolsonaro in

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<sup>8</sup> Also found in the different studies in different countries, see Hochschild (2016); Norris & Inglehart (2019).

power, the participation of members of the Armed Forces in his government was even greater, occupying at least 2,500 positions<sup>9</sup>.

Bolsonaro canvassers, in general, see in a positive way that military personnel participate in the government. In fact, some voted for him thinking just that. In the imagination of this electorate, the military has an important role in the country to impose order and respect. Also, the military was seen as a bastion of honesty and discipline. For voters worried about crime and disillusioned with the political system, especially in the aftermath of the Lava Jato operation, the military seemed a safe choice for troubled times.

- [...] thinking about this order, honesty thing; you think that a military man, a policeman ... you have this sweet illusion that they are going to put order, right?

- *Order in what sense?*

- Order of things to be fairer, to be more honest, of him not accepting these alliances out of interest, although politics is an alliance of interest and you do one thing for one, for another to do for you.

- *Is that the image you had of the military?*

- That was the image I had of the military, and today, from what I can see... [...] it is a mess because they are fighting amongst themselves, it will not get anywhere. (Mariana, 36, commercial manager - resident of Vila Prudente).

- [...] because among the other candidates he [Bolsonaro] was the one we had the most hope for, right?

- *And what gave you hope?*

- Ah, because he was in the military, those things ...

- *What is the importance of having been in the military?*

- A more honest, more disciplined person, right? More rigid, right? The rest... (Griselda, 73, retired - resident of Vila Sabrina).

The positive view of the military was likely influenced by their view of the military regime. The vast majority of the interviewees corroborated the story that the 1964 coup was necessary to prevent Brazil from becoming a communist country. And many of the respondents highlighted positive points about the regime, even in a nostalgic way, claiming that they or their parents had not had any problems with the regime. A repeated word was the idea of "respect". "At that time, there was respect", or else, that things "worked". Others also mention patriotic values, which were mostly lost in the democratic transition. Most acknowledged, though, that there had been excesses from the military, either in torture or for having been in power for too long.

Military regime. I think it is funny that many people from that time, who today, right, are older, obviously say like this "It was good during the Military Regime", you must have heard that,

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<sup>9</sup> Folha de S. Paulo, October 14th, 2019. *Bolsonaro amplia presença de militares em 30 órgãos federais*. Available on: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/10/bolsonaro-amplia-presenca-de-militares-em-30-orgaos-federais.shtml>. Last access on: May 20th, 2021.

right? People said "It was good in the Military Regime, because things worked, things, like, I had respect" (Marcelo, 25 years old, commercial manager – resident of Tucuruvi).

And I say, what was good about the Military Regime? The values. People had the respect of... I miss it. We marched on September 7th, put it on, put a green and yellow ribbon on the chest, the pinwheels in the cars, there was the civic parade, so we had that thing of encouraging love for the country, because it seems that when the regime was over, the homeland was over, there is no more love, there is nothing else. (People) only remember love for their country at the time of the World Cup, but after Neymar there, they stayed away because they lost by seven to one, so, not even to support the country. So, what I miss during the Military Regime was that, patriotism. And one of the reasons I also voted for Bolsonaro was because he wanted to bring this patriotism thing back. You ask people, "What does November 15th celebrate?" "I don't know, I just know it's a holiday and I'm going to the beach" "What is celebrated on September 7th?" "I do not know". (Lucia, 50 years old, police officer – resident of Tucuruvi).

Even with the transition to democracy, for the interviewees, the military retained an important role in politics. In the views of some respondents, the military had the responsibility of some sort of a “moderating power” in Brazil. That meant that, should the need arise – as it did in 1964 – the military has a duty of intervening in the affairs of the political regime. Therefore, it is as if they remained as guardians of order in the country, but domestic order, and not towards a foreign threat.

Because I think the military is the country's greatest power, like this. I think that if the country happens to be going into a political crisis or something, Civil crisis, civil war ... I think they need to intervene to put things in order. (Vitor, 25 years old, unemployed and self-employed - resident of Tucuruvi).

This also revealed a low democratic sentiment among these voters. There was strong discredit in relation to Congress, political parties and the STF. As mentioned, a recurring topic in right-wing demonstrations, but also in the social networks of these groups, is the idea of military intervention, some claiming that this would be supported by the Brazilian Federal Constitution. And, in fact, a few respondents openly supported the idea. This could come as a surprise: if they were asked which was better, everyone agreed that a democracy was better than a dictatorship. Nevertheless, it was easy for some to see a context in which a military intervention or just any authoritarian move would be justified or desirable.

- *Would you be in favor of military intervention?*

- I would be, without a doubt.

- *Why?*

- Why? To end this. To begin with, I studied in the military (period), you know, I studied. It didn't have all the shambles we have today, It didn't have as much theft as it does today. The country had Volks, it had ... the country was ... it was just Fernando Henrique (Cardoso) coming here, they got the good stuff ... so, I'm in favor of the intervention, yes. [...] If there's an intervention here, it's starting all over again, right? Is it not? Because there is no Congress. Close everything! Judiciary ... [...] What democracy is this? What about these pots, these gangs, PT, PMDB, yeah, PSD, they are just there to make the machine go and with each person's money ...

Did Quercia get poor? Is Fernando Henrique poor? Is Sarney, is Sarney's family poor? No ... they are all trillionaires.

- *But do you think it was different in the Dictatorship?*

- Ah, there wasn't this mess, there was respect. See if there was a student hitting a teacher on the news? (Luís, 66 years old, self-employed trader - resident of Belenzinho).

You know that, sometimes, I think [of a military intervention], especially in the Supreme Court (laughs). But I think that there must be respect for Congress even with all its defects. We can't intervene, no. I'm not very supportive of the intervention, no. It is a process of maturation, although we do not agree with much, but we are like that. That Congress is a portrait of us, if we want to improve Congress, we have to study more, the people have to study more, they have to evolve more, do you understand? (Nilson, 65, retired - resident of Tatuapé).

- It's like Bolsonaro said, there is no need for military intervention unless it is really an extreme (situation). I am not in favour of military intervention, I believe in Democracy, everything is talked about, right? But the corrupt must be punished, yes, they must be punished.

[...]

- *Do you think that if Bolsonaro defends that he needs to make a military intervention, do you think that you will support it too?*

- Oh yes, if making a military intervention is necessary, I will support it, because I think that if he goes this far it is because it really is a necessity. He made a statement - I have his statement there - that he said that he would never do such a thing, to use military intervention to be able to block some system, but only that it is extremely dangerous. This Supreme Court is really doing things ... that makes us very sad, supporting bad guys, letting bad guys go, it is too much. (Sindoval, 55 years old, electrician - resident of Vila Guilherme).

It should be noted that not all openly supported a military intervention. In fact, just a few declared so. Nonetheless, it was easy for many of them to consider it a possibility in certain circumstances, such as if Bolsonaro deemed necessary, or to arrest some supposedly corrupt politicians or members of the Supreme Court, to censor the press or to ban political parties, especially PT. These ideas were not necessarily seen as antidemocratic, as the same people clearly expressed preference for a democracy over a dictatorship, which also showed how they failed to defend or understand some basic principles of democracy.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is part of a broader research to better understand this “new right” that helped elect Bolsonaro. Focusing on the municipality of São Paulo, this study revisited a region that was previously considered a bastion of conservative vote in the city – and that again appeared as a conservative base for Bolsonaro in 2018 – and interviewed canvassers to investigate their motivations for supporting the current president. At the same time, ethnographic observation was conducted in a series of large demonstrations by Bolsonaro supporters during the year of 2019, both in order to recruit interviewees and to learn more of their agendas.



In the research, it was possible to confirm that this electorate felt disenfranchised by the political system, not feeling represented by the main political parties. These voters, differently from the “new right” found by Pierucci (1999), were now proudly conservative and right-wing, which meant they sought a candidate that thought just like them. It took a seemingly outsider with a radical speech like Bolsonaro to draw their attention and recognise in him their legitimate representative.

Among the reasons for supporting the former army captain, one that stood out was the association of Bolsonaro and the military, and how the latter still retained positive values in the view of this electorate. Attributing virtues to the military, such as “honesty”, “discipline”, “order”, added to a favourable view of the military regime that lasted from 1964 to 1985, the association between the two helped these voters to see Bolsonaro as the best candidate for president. It also demonstrated how some voters still see the armed forces as having a relevant role in politics, acting as a “moderating power” to intervene as they see fit when the country’s order is at risk.

These views reflect the inability that Brazil had, unlike its neighbours – such as Chile and Argentina – to overcome the close relationship between the military and politics in the country’s history. Furthermore, they bring to light the enduring authoritarian legacy in Brazilian history, particularly in the right, adhering to antidemocratic principles, even after 30 years of the end of the military regime. Therefore, it remains a challenge for Brazil to consolidate a competitive conservative right-wing party that is attuned to democratic values and keep the military away from the electorate’s mind as plausible alternatives.

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