

FOREIGN POLICY AS FAKE NEWS? BOLSONARO'S ELECTORAL FEAR-
MONGERING CAMPAIGN IN BRAZIL (2018)

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

My research examines the use of foreign policy in presidential elections. It approaches foreign policy as a fertile site for the faking and making of news that presidential candidates employed during elections. Specifically, I analyze how and for what purpose(s) Bolsonaro framed Venezuela and the United States during his 2018 presidential campaign in Brazil. I show that Bolsonaro used the two countries in different ways and with conflicting purposes: While depicting Venezuela as a “threat” to Brazilian society and connecting his opponent, Fernando Haddad, with Nicolás Maduro’s regime in Venezuela (intoning, “Brazil cannot become a new Venezuela”), Bolsonaro treated the United States as a positive example of what his own administration would look like, linking his campaign to Trump’s administration and embracing “Make Brazil Great Again” as a motto. My hypothesis is that whether articulating foreign policy toward Venezuela or the United States, Bolsonaro’s electoral campaign weaponized social media in ways that created both foreign enemies and allies and forged new or tighter connections to Haddad’s and his own campaign. To explore these dynamics, I engage and put into dialogue literature on social media, fear-mongering, and fake news, bodies of scholarship that have often remained isolated from one another. This research will be supported by a qualitative analysis of primary sources deriving from Bolsonaro’s and his supporters’ online activity on Twitter and Facebook from 2017 through October 2018.

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That is exactly what I did. Getting a masters' degree overseas seemed impossible to me, a Brazilian, public-school student, and from a peripheral town in the capital of Brazil. However, thanks to my family's tireless support and guidance, as well as admonition when necessary, today I turned one more "impossible" into "possible": I successfully got a master's degree in Brazilian Studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

For José Nilton da Silva, Benedita Batista da Silva, and Fernanda Batista da Silva

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INTRODUCTION

Presidential elections often raise questions about foreign affairs. In Argentina in 1946, for example, Juan Perón incorporated the threat of U.S imperialism into his victorious campaign against his domestic opponent. In 2004 in the United States, George W. Bush evoked the War on Terror towards similar ends. Last year, Donald Trump's use of China to boost his campaign illustrates the sustained importance of foreign affairs as domestic electoral tools. The present research offers new perspectives by examining a new set of variables, such as fear, fake news, and polarization, that are crucial to consider in order to understand how foreign affairs function in elections. My work thus put into dialogue bodies of scholarship that have often remained isolated from one another.

Political scientists have written extensively on the effects of negativity, misinformation, and social media in the United States. However, little has been said about Latin America, despite the powerful evidence that can be drawn from recent elections in the region. Brazil, for instance, offers an interesting approach to this discussion, given its 2018 presidential elections in which the conservative far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro became the 38th president of Brazil. There is a long history of political scientists debating foreign policy in electoral politics, and there is a shorter, but equally robust, scholarly focus on social media and electoral politics. I connect these avenues of inquiry by showing how Bolsonaro used social media to entangle the domestic battleground of voters with alleged foreign enemies and allies. Political scientists have produced significant works about foreign policy, fearmongering, and

misinformation, but generally have treated these topics separately. By using the Brazilian 2018 elections, and specifically Bolsonaro's campaign, as a case of study, my work bridges separate bodies of scholarship in Political Science.

During his campaign in 2018, Bolsonaro mentioned many international events, including the Venezuela Crisis, the United States under Trump, and the alleged threat of socialism for Latin America.¹ The first topic was mostly appropriated by Bolsonaro and some authors considered this a "meme" of his campaign. Chagas et al (2019), for example, claimed that the "*Brazil vai virar uma Venezuela*" (Brazil will become a New Venezuela) was used by Bolsonaro's campaign in order to transmit a negative idea of the socialist regime in Venezuela and to associate this image with his opponent, Fernando Haddad, from the Workers' Party.² According to their study, this meme circulated through many forms of social media, especially WhatsApp, which was the main tool used by Bolsonaro during the campaign (Pacheco, 2019; Pasqualini, 2018). It is important to highlight the amount of fake news transmitted through WhatsApp during the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections. According to some research, most "fake news" was produced and reproduced by right-wing groups, which favored the election of Bolsonaro (Avelar, 2019). Another meme the campaign utilized associated his future government with Trump's administration by setting "Make Brazil Great Again" as a motto.

¹ Bolsonaro mentioned the São Paulo Forum as an eminent socialist threat to the Latin America Region several times during his campaign. This international group was formed by the Brazilian Worker's Party in 1990 aiming at uniting other Latin American leftist parties in order to promote anti-neoliberal measures in the region.

² Workers' Party ruled Brazil between 2002-2015.

In this scenario, two questions merit further attention: (i) how and for what purpose(s) did Bolsonaro address Venezuela and the United States during his campaign?; and (ii) what role did social media play in supporting his claims about each country? My hypothesis is that Bolsonaro's campaign employed fear-mongering by using foreign affairs through social media. Specifically, he addressed themes related to Venezuela and the United States as a way to influence voters' behavior. While negatively connecting Venezuela with his domestic opponent, Fernando Haddad, Bolsonaro created fear by stating that Brazil could become a new Venezuela under Haddad's rule. At the same time, Bolsonaro used the United States under Trump's administration to boost his own campaign and future government by adopting "Make Brazil Great Again" as one of his mottos. My thesis thus puts Bolsonaro's case into conversation with the literature on foreign policy, fear-mongering, and fake news.

This research will be supported by a qualitative analysis which will include a tracking of primary sources deriving from Bolsonaro's social media as well as from his supporters' online engagement. More specifically, I pay critical attention to his posts, whether about Venezuela or the United States, on his Twitter (@jairbolsonaro) and Facebook (@jairmessias.bolsonaro) accounts. I will also track the activity within *Bolsoesfera* – Bolsonaro's supporters' online networks – by tracking two main pages in support of Bolsonaro on Facebook: "*Grupo da Página Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*", a group with more than 200.000 people managed by a civilian; and the page "*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*" which summed up almost a million of likes as of the writing of this thesis. I use the advanced search provided by both Social Networking Sites (SNS)

that enables me to access any comment or interaction of Bolsonaro and his supporters about each of these topics by inserting keywords and time frames. By doing so, I was able to evaluate (i) whether and under which circumstances Bolsonaro addressed the two countries; and (ii) whether his opinions resonated with those of his supporters.

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 1 puts into dialogue literature on fake news, fear-mongering, and foreign policy (here called three “Fs”). Specifically, I discuss how these mutually-constitutive elements can act together during electoral campaigns. Chapter 2 discusses the 2018 Brazilian elections context and Bolsonaro’s campaign strategies. I pay close attention to Bolsonaro’s case to exemplify an exceptional case where three “Fs” are in action. Finally, in chapter 3, I present the data tracked from Bolsonaro’s social media as well as from his supporters’ online engagement. I show what elements were attached to either Venezuela or the United States when addressed by Bolsonaro and the *Bolsoesfera*.

CHAPTER ONE: FAKE-NEWS, FEAR-MONGERING, AND FOREIGN POLICY: THE THREE “Fs” OF ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

Political scientists have long debated the importance of foreign affairs during elections, that is, whether foreign affairs work as an issue that voters truly care about. Scholars have also discussed how citizens acquire information – a fundamental part of what scholars call “the democratic citizen’s task” (Berelson et al. 1954). However, little work has been produced about the relationship of these topics. In other words, what should we expect from an electoral context where foreign policy topics are used as issue-voting matter through fear-mongering tactics weaponized by social media? To answer this question, this chapter addresses each respective topic. First, I will highlight what scholars have said about the use of social media during elections, as well as about the spreading of misinformation or “fake news” as a result of citizens engagement in digital communication. Second, I address how candidates employ fear-mongering strategies to win elections. Finally, I discuss the use of foreign affairs during national elections.

Online Elections: the effects of “Fake News” on Voter’s Behavior during Elections

The use of social media during electoral campaigns reshaped the way information is communicated by candidates and the way that citizens engage with that information, yet little has been written about these subjects (Brito et al. 2019). Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter have raised awareness about the (new) way people are engaging politically. The 2008 and 2012 U.S. elections, the Arab

Uprisings, and even the 2013 social protests in Brazil are some of the examples of the powerful role that social media started to play worldwide (Carlisle and Patton 2013). As for national elections in the “social media era,” candidates can communicate whatever they want to whoever they want at any time or location, thus not being limited to addressing their opinions in debates or rallies without directly communicating them to voters (Brito et al. 2019; Carlisle and Patton 2013). When it comes to voters, instead of limited and costly access to information, they now have gained open access to boundless, fast-paced electoral information, and they can also reach candidates directly. Some researchers have indicated that the internet can mobilize even the politically disengaged, as it offers a space for them to easily access information, connect with others, and discuss political issues at a very low cost. By reducing the costs of participation at all levels, these new networks have been extensively used to gather votes during national elections, mainly during electoral campaigns (Carlisle and Patton 2013).

Whereas some scholars have suggested that SNS have little, if any, impact on political engagement, recent studies have demonstrated otherwise. Schuler and Day (2004) and Rheingold (2000) for instance, have argued that SNS can provide important venues where citizens enhance civic and political engagement. Citizens can also increase their social capital, defined by Putnam (2000) as the connection among individuals through social networks that produce trust. Social capital transfers easily into SNS. Facebook-specific research has demonstrated that members use the platform to solidify relationships and bolster trustworthiness (Ellison et al. 2006) by building

networks where an individual can both influence and be influenced (Bond and Fariss et al. 2012). When studying such social interaction, scholars have observed that the size of the network increases the citizen's likelihood to participate (Kwak et al. 2005). Facebook thus would seem to increase participation, as it allows people to expand and maintain a relatively large online network that could be impractical offline. Scholars have drawn similar conclusions about Twitter, highlighting its simple and easy features and accessibility around the world (Swigger, 2013). By the inclusion of hashtags and the "retweet" function, twitter information is considered "richer," since users can have access to many features of the information and can reach a wider audience through the publication of tweets (Parmelee and Bichard 2012). Twitter has also been perceived as a news outlet given the variety of topic users can find, pointing to why the network is particularly popular among politicians and citizens during elections.

The 2008 and 2016 U.S. elections provide examples of presidential campaigns' extensive use of Facebook and Twitter to generate information. Barack Obama was called the "first social-media president" because of the way he and his Chicago-based campaign used social media in 2008 to attract volunteers and raise money. A Pew Research Center report by Smith (2009) on the internet's role in the 2008 campaign showed that 74% of U.S. Americans went online to take part in or find information about the electoral campaign. As for communicating with others, 38% U.S. Americans used Facebook and Twitter to talk about politics, while 59% used the networks to share and receive campaign information (Smith 2009). Along the same lines, during the 2016 elections, a Pew Research Center report revealed that 62% U.S. Americans acquired

political information through social media (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). In addition to SNS, chat-messaging platforms such as WhatsApp have also become popular during elections. The 2018 elections in Brazil and the 2019 elections in India have been cited as examples of the extensive use of WhatsApp during the electoral campaign (Reis et al. 2020).

It seems common sense that citizens should be informed in order to behave effectively in democratic systems. Berelson et al. (1954) once stated that democratic citizens, "are expected to be well informed about political affairs. They are supposed to know what the issues are, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, [and] what the likely consequences are" (308). Additionally, when evaluating public policy, citizens need to have broad access to factual information about that policy so they can make their choices (Berelson et al. 1954). Given these expectations about the democratic citizen, it seems reasonable to observe the positive impact of social media to democracy, yet many works have pointed out that such an ideal citizen does not exist. Some scholars suggest misinformation (see Kuklinski et al. 2000), elite-position-taking (see Kuklinski and Norman 1994, Broockman and Butler 2017), or partisan bias (see Bartels 2002, Huddy et al. 2015) as reasons for low or poor levels of political information. More recently, with the advent of digital communication and people engaging in politics through SNS (eg., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) as well as messaging platforms (eg., WhatsApp, GroupMe, Telegram, etc.), scholars have also highlighted the problematic spread of misinformation, which could also hinder citizens' ability to make informed choices in elections.

Although social media has positively influenced voters' behavior by decreasing participation costs and enhancing their social capital, these networks can also work as sources of inaccurate information. After the U.S. 2016 election, the spread of false information became a popular topic, since it was crucial to Trump's election. In fact, scholars have found that the majority of information shared on social media during the election was false and the total amount of this inaccurate information was comparable to the total news published by mainstream sources (Baum et al. 2017). One might ask why people would accept such inaccurate information given an individuals' rationality. However, citizens' reception of "fake news" is much more related to heuristics and social processes than to "rational evaluations." To begin with, source credibility profoundly matters for one's acceptance of information (Swire et al. 2017; Turner, 2007). In that sense, citizens will be more likely to believe in information stemming from their social capital, that is, well-known sources, usually aligned with their viewpoints. Secondly, citizens are biased information-seekers and are guided by motivated "skepticism": they tend to uncritically accept information congruent with their existing views (confirmation bias) while ignoring or extending critical scrutiny to information that are at odds with their prior beliefs (disconfirmation bias) (Taber and Lodge 2006). Finally, even when misinformation is refuted and corrected, people do not necessarily change their minds. Any repetition of fake information can increase its acceptance (Thorson 2015). If we take into consideration SNS and WhatsApp, the confirmation bias would be straightforward to understand, as users tend to only add people they know on SNS and chat-messaging platforms.

Another feature within the “fake news” phenomenon is related to the study of “computational propaganda,” what some may consider to be an emergent form of political manipulation. It is defined as “the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks” (Woolley and Howard 2018, 04). In that context, social communication would be delivered by computer programs, or “bots”, which are designed to exert specific tasks online. In fact, bots account for up to 50% of all mainstream online SSN accounts. On Twitter alone, there are more than 30 million bot-driven accounts (Motti 2014). The pervasive use of such technology can undermine the organizational and communicative features of social media previously discussed. Either through algorithms or bots, the computational propaganda can threaten people’s acquisition of information. Specifically, the use, and manipulation of, computational algorithms can play an important role during elections, as one candidate can spread certain kinds of information based on the characteristics of the audience. In that sense, instead of being presented chronologically, information is presented depending on their relevance for the user, increasing the chances of the spreading of inaccurate information (Woolley and Howard, 2018). If we take Facebook as an example, perhaps we will observe that depending on the users’ likes to certain party’s pages, they are more likely to receive biased information towards that party. A voter who is part of several of Trump’s supporting groups, likes Trumps’ profile page, and the Republican party’s page, will probably receive more conservative information, and ultimately, pro-Trump information.

Most significantly for this thesis, social media plays an important role in creating domestic enemies and allies. In other words, online networks can be used by candidates to create images of enemies to provoke outrage, fear, or hatred among citizens towards certain groups, or allies to reinforce a sense of belonging within their own community or party (Dafaure, 2020). This is also connected to fear-mongering campaigns, which will be analyzed later. In the U.S., this scholarship has focused on Alt-Right groups – white, far-right nationalist groups that advocates for reactionary, xenophobic, and often racist measures – because of the role they played in Donald Trumps’ election. The groups under study used visual and rhetorical provocations, overwhelmingly composed by “memes”, to attack what they consider as “enemies” – what in the 2016 U.S. elections context were Latinos and Muslims, and anyone perceived as such. The “Meme” can be understood as “iterated idea or behavior, passed on through a continuous process of propagation and appropriation” (Chagas et al. 2019). Fake news can also help weaponize domestic enemies and allies. Candidates or groups such as the Alt-Right, create foes and friends through fear-mongering strategies that intentionally use fake news about these groups, to justify their purported danger.

In sum, social media seems to play a dual, potentially contradictory, role as a source of information: while it can increase voters’ competence by decreasing the costs of participation and enhancing their social capital, it can also undermine citizens’ ability to make well-informed decisions by the spread of fake news, biased-information, used of computational propaganda, and by creating fear and hatred towards certain groups.

As an illustration of this last point, candidates can employ fear-mongering campaigns as part of their electoral strategies, addressed in the next subsection.

Creating common enemies in Voters' Imaginary: the use of Fear-Mongering Campaign by Presidential Candidates

The use of social media to weaponize internal allies and enemies during electoral campaigns is part of a larger strategy used by candidates in order to influence voters' behavior: fear-mongering. An archetype is the fear-mongering campaign that George W. Bush used in 2004. In that context, Bush played on fears stemming from the September 11, 2001 attacks by claiming that U.S. Americans would be endangered if his opponent, John Kerry, was elected (Cohen et al. 2005). Another feature of this strategy is embedded in peoples' allegiance to the charismatic image of the leader, what would make them feel part of a more valuable and particular group. Trump's campaign in 2016 and Bolsonaro's in 2018 are other examples of how presidential candidates can influence people by creating fear.

Political scientists have engaged more deeply in the discussion about fear and terror in politics after 9/11, mainly through a review of what was called "terror management theory" (Greenber et al. 1986; Solomon et al. 1991; Pyszczynski et al. 2003). Ultimately, this theory investigates how humans deal with their unique awareness about the inevitability of death, which basically has to do with the creation of shared cultural worldviews based on a sense of meaning and significance (Cohen et al. 2005). Given that, when there are any "reminders" of death (mortality salience) people tend to

react defensively by (i) favoring people who share their same political and cultural standards; (ii) taking punitive actions against “moral” transgressors while remaining tolerant of “heroic individuals”; (iii) acting aggressively towards groups with incongruent political orientations; and (iv) seeking to comply with “standards of value” (Cohen et al. 2005, 178-179). During elections, it seems that voters would use those “reminders” to strongly hold their “standards of values,” whether voting for Republicans or Democrats, by targeting the opposite candidate and vote to defend their own values. As part of a fear-mongering strategy, candidates use death “reminders” to influence voters to cast their ballots, drawing attention away from a candidate’s stance on issues or ideological and towards fear of an “enemy.”

Candidates can also use other types of reminders to convince people to vote against their opponents. Brader (2006) found that emotional appeals in political advertisements can change the way citizens engage in politics. Fear, for instance, particularly affect citizens’ opinions, as it makes them reevaluate their opinion towards the advertisement content. Moreover, fear-oriented campaign was observed mostly among “challengers” candidates, whereas “frontrunners” tend to use enthusiastic appeals (Brader 2006). Although it may be true that negative emotions can increase voter participation by motivating them to obtain new information and pay extra attention to the environment (Damasio, 2000; Marcus et al. 2000), fear can also further polarize the population, produce mistrust, and increase misinformation (Rhodes and Vayo 2019).

The “politicization of everything”³ during the 2016 elections, for instance, illustrates that U.S. candidates seem to use a fearful and angry rhetoric more towards their opponents’ character than to their stand on issues (Purdum 2016; Rhodes and Vayo 2019). Such a setting can lead to an unhealthy context in which (i) citizens would not vote “correctly”, that is, aligning their preferences on issues with the candidates’ and taking into consideration all the variables embedded in that decision (Lau et al. 1997); and (ii) candidates would mostly use negative campaigning strategies which focus more on attacks the opponent than promoting their own ideas (Nai and Walter 2015).

Mass media is crucial when it comes to fear-mongering strategies and can affect voter behavior through negativity. The advent of the internet, social media platforms, and mobile technologies, has significantly increased social media marketing during presidential campaigns (Samoilenko and Miroshnichenko, 2019). Increased negativity and person-centered media coverage are some of the ways that media can act as a “negativity seller”, which, in fact, is profitable for the media, as “clickbait” content focused on negativity is in high demand. By focusing on candidates’ fear-mongering speeches, for instance, media contributes to the normalization of those comments while also weaponizing internal “enemies” and “allies” (Dafaure 2020). As a result, fear-mongering campaigns find relevance within the media as it seems profitable in terms of audience-gathering, and within candidates, as it does mobilize and increase turnout, yet making citizens vote “incorrectly”, and therefore eroding democracy.

³ See more here: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-politicization-of-everything-1506291118>

Bringing International Relations into the National Electoral Campaign arena: Foreign Policy as an Issue-Voting Matter

Through social media, candidates can also bring foreign affairs into elections by creating fear. In fact, the discussion about whether foreign affairs are important when citizens decide to cast their ballots is extensive, yet little has been said about foreign affairs as issue-voting matters through a fear-mongering campaign weaponized by social media. Despite some scholars' claims about the predominance of domestic issues over international issues during national elections, the current campaign approach adopted by some presidential candidates – and the companion behavior of voters – suggest otherwise. Voters seem to produce sophisticated opinions when it comes to foreign affairs issues, such as immigration, regional agreements, or border disputes. This point speaks to Trump's use of China to influence voters in 2020 as well as Bolsonaro's approach of both Venezuela and the United States in 2018.

More than a half-century ago, political scientists quipped that “voting ends at water's edge”, mainly based on the so-called Lippmann-Almond consensus that maintained that the public had little interest in foreign affairs (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955). My research addresses the need to reformulate understandings of voter behavior on foreign affair issues, which has significantly changed due to the globalization and the advent of internet and social media. The current development in the field and evidence from Brazil shows that foreign-affairs issues now function as important constraints during elections (Aldrich et al. 2006; Aldrich et al. 1989; Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Gelpi et al. 2006; Milner and Tingley 2015). According to Aldrich et al (2006) three

conditions need to be met for foreign policy issues to affect voters' final decisions: (i) information about foreign policy should be available and voters need to hold coherent beliefs towards such information; (ii) the issue should impact any domestic sphere that is considered important for voters; and, finally, (iii) candidates should address foreign affair issues and promote different responses to them (Aldrich et al. 2006; Aldrich et al. 1989). Recent studies about the U.S. have also suggested that foreign policy polarization exceeded the ideological polarization by the 2000s, which means that people have begun taking foreign policy issues seriously when casting their ballots (Kriner 2010; Lee 2009).

Foreign affairs seem to be used by presidential candidates during campaigns and influence voters' behavior when casting their ballots. In such a context, when addressing foreign affairs, candidates can adopt a fear-mongering strategy by tying external issues to domestic candidates (e.g., tie a country's regime to the opponent), and therefore, spread fear among voters. Social media can help weaponize that by offering a free space for candidates to make these connections as well as for voters to engage with the information (e.g., commenting, sharing, sending to a friend, etc.). Yet it can also help spreading inaccurate information about foreign policy events, and thus, expose citizens to "fake news" about that, which can lead to an "incorrect" vote (Lau et al. 1997).

As an illustration, Trump's 2020 campaign tirelessly evoked China – mainly to blame the country for the COVID-19 pandemic – on social media platforms and on presidential debates, by connecting this foreign country with his running-opponent, Joe Biden. Trump tweeted things like, "*China is dreaming that sleepy Joe Bide[n], or any of the*

others, gets elected in 2020. They love ripping off America,” (@realDonaldTrump, 2020) and, *“China is desperate for Biden to win because if Biden Wins, China wins – and China will own America. This corruption is exactly why I decided to run for President in the first place”* (@realDonaldTrump, 2020). Both tweets illustrate how Trump’s fear-mongering strategies revolved around the idea that China would rule the U.S. if Biden became president. Both tweets also contain misinformation – there is no proof that Biden is an ally of Beijing.

In sum, social media can domestically contain foreign affairs in national elections and intensify fear-mongering campaign. Political scientists are best positioned to explore these concepts together. My work thus aims at connecting the three “Fs” in national elections – foreign policy, fake news and fear-mongering – by looking into the 2018 Brazilian elections. The protagonist was Jair Bolsonaro and his “Make Brazil Great Again” vs. “Brazil will become a new Venezuela” campaign, to which I now turn.

CHAPTER TWO: JAIR BOLSONARO'S CAMPAIGN IN THE 2018 ELECTIONS IN BRAZIL

In this chapter, I turn to Jair Bolsonaro's campaign during the 2018 elections. Bolsonaro ended up being elected as the 38th president of Brazil after a polarizing campaign against Fernando Haddad. Bolsonaro's electoral campaign provides an important opportunity to analyze the three "Fs." I argue that Bolsonaro used a fear-mongering campaign strategy that weaponized foreign states internally through social media to influence voters' behavior. First, I will discuss the use of social media platforms by both candidates and voters during the 2018 Brazilian electoral campaign and the dissemination of false information ("fake news") through these platforms; second, I focus on the fear-mongering strategies used in Bolsonaro's campaign by discussing his approach toward both Venezuela and the U.S. as electoral tools, thus also discussing the role played by ostensible foreign affairs in that context.

An online-coordinated disinformation Campaign: The dark power of Social Media Platforms during the 2018 Electoral Campaign

Brazilians are among the most "enthusiastic" users of social media platforms and chat-messaging apps worldwide. According to a 2018 Reuters Digital Report, Brazil accounts for more than 127 million accounts on Facebook and 120 million active users on WhatsApp – 10% of all company's subscribers worldwide (Newman et al. 2018). However, social media did not play an active role in politics until the 2018 elections, which marked a new shift in the country's history, as this election was mostly

conducted through social media (Araujo and Prior 2020; Pacheco 2019). The Political Reform Law, also known as the Facebook Bill (*Lei do Facebook* in Portuguese), approved in 2017, was the main element driving this shift: (i) for the first time it allowed candidates and coalitions to use online platforms to produce and share political advertisements; (ii) it allowed candidates with limited campaign funds to boost their campaign online, instead of paying for the traditional electoral propaganda on TV and radio; and (iii) it banned company's donations to electoral campaigns (Tactical Technology Collective, 2018). Most importantly, the "Facebook Bill" provided an alternative to the "*horário eleitoral gratuito*," a state-regulated television advertising for political campaigns, which had been crucial in Brazil's redemocratization and dominated political media since the return of civilian rule in 1985 (Skidmore 2009). All these elements helped give social media a central role in the 2018 elections.

Before 2017, Bolsonaro was an obscure congressman on the far right, and in 2018 he seemed to have exploited the new rules to reach his voters online (Machado et al. 2018; Brito et al. 2019). Bolsonaro was running for the Social Liberal Party (PSL, in Portuguese), a small, far-right political party. As a result, Bolsonaro had only eight seconds of airtime on TV and radio for traditional propaganda⁴. However, even with this limitation, Bolsonaro avoided participating in political debates - which could have compensated his limited time on TV and radio. In September, he was stabbed during a rally⁵ and hospitalized, effectively ending most of his in-person campaigning. But even before that, he only participated in one of two debates held in August and preferred to

⁴ In Brazil, great parties get more airtime on TV and radio for traditional propaganda than small parties.

⁵ See more at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/07/stabbed-brazil-candidate-transferred-to-sao-paulo-for-treatment/>

use Facebook live streams and Twitter, where he could engage directly with his voters and avoid media scrutiny and criticism. After advancing to a runoff against Fernando Haddad, he continued to avoid debates, claiming to be under poor health conditions, despite his doctors' approval for his attendance.⁶

Bolsonaro thus inaugurated a new communication *modus operandi* during electoral campaigns in Brazil, similar to what happened in the U.S. in 2012 with Barack Obama's online campaign. Bolsonaro's first speech as a president-elect, for instance, illustrates the new era. Instead of addressing the nation through television networks, he used Facebook Live, speaking while flanked only by his wife and a sign language interpreter (Pacheco 2019). He had turned himself into the self-proclaimed anti-establishment candidate.

Through SNS (mainly Facebook and Twitter), Bolsonaro built his campaign by sharing his stance on various issues. Although at the beginning of the campaign he had fewer followers both on Facebook and Twitter compared to other candidates, he was leading in terms of interaction (Pacheco 2019). By election day, Bolsonaro increased his followers by 49%, which indicates the power of his online campaign on SNS (Brito et al; 2019). In these particular platforms, communication networks are based less in social capital than in creating connections, as users can add whomever they want to their networks, regardless of their relationship with them (Pacheco 2019). Scholars have observed that pro-Bolsonaro clusters on Twitter and Facebook (hereafter referred as "Bolsoesfera") have fueled hyper-partisan content with a focus on *antipetismo* (anti-PT-

⁶ See more at: <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/10/18/jair-bolsonaro-afirma-que-nao-vai-a-debates-no-segundo-turno.ghtml>

ism).⁷ This sentiment was especially evident in Bolsonaro's tweets, whereas on the "Bolsoesfera", Bolsonaro's supporters were the main engines of *antipetismo* (Davis and Straubhaar 2019; Samuels and Zucco 2018).

WhatsApp also played a crucial role in Bolsonaro's online campaign, perhaps even more than the SNS platforms. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 64% of Brazilians have access to the internet⁸, mainly through their smartphones. More importantly, a 2018 Reuters Digital Report, revealed that Brazilians use their smartphones as their main source of political information, which helps explain Bolsonaro's success in using this platform.⁹ Unlike SNS platforms, WhatsApp depends on its users' willingness to add known contacts and join discussion groups to actually create a "network", which relies on user's social capital. Bolsonaro understood how this created a "Bolsoesfera" (*Bolsonaro's Bubble*) on WhatsApp, a network that (i) replaced Bolsonaro's traditional propaganda on TV; (ii) provided an open space for his campaign leaders to coordinate his campaign as well as to create and share materials; and (iii) worked as a powerful mechanism for the fast speed spread of news among general voters (Pacheco 2019). In other words, the "Bolsoesfera" made it possible for general voters to act as veritable campaign managers, helping offset Bolsonaro's limited time on traditional media outlets and creating more space for automated use and the spread of inaccurate information.

⁷ "Anti-PT-ism" refers to an intensely resentment of the Workers' Party in Brazil, which was fueled by Bolsonaro in his campaign.

⁸ See more at: <https://g1.globo.com/economia/tecnologia/noticia/brasil-tem-116-milhoes-de-pessoas-conectadas-a-internet-diz-ibge.ghtml>

⁹ See more at: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/brazil-2019/>

On both SNS platforms and WhatsApp, a similar pattern of “fake news” sharing was observed mainly on pro-Bolsonaro clusters. During the twenty days between the two rounds of the election, more than 228 “fake news” reports were reported by fact-checkers (Chaves and Braga 2019). A credibility crisis in Brazilian journalism helped shift news broadcasting from traditional media outlets to SNS platforms and is another important reason that “fake news” spread in 2018. Bolsonaro used an alleged media bias against him to attack any information at odds with his candidacy. Combined with the great levels of social capital found on SNS and WhatsApp and people’s confirmation bias, the credibility crisis increased the likelihood that voters would believe “fake news” (Davis and Straubhaar 2019; Chaves and Braga, 2019). Computational propaganda also played a role in Bolsonaro’s campaign, as there was extensive use of automatic instruments to boost his campaign, mainly on WhatsApp. Some studies have pointed out the high probability of the use of “bots” to disseminate false information on WhatsApp among different WhatsApp groups (Machado 2018; Abidin 2019).

The hyperpartisan content of *antipetismo* was mostly disseminated in the form of false information about the candidate Fernando Haddad (Chaves and Braga, 2019). Spreading false rumors about political opponents is not a new phenomenon, yet those rumors took shape during the 2018 Brazilian electoral campaign (Borba 2020): (i)

Haddad-Lula connection: Haddad was connected to former president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (popularly known as Lula¹⁰), either as an alleged criminal or as Lula’s political

¹⁰ Lula was in jail during the campaign due to allegation of corruption that prevented him from running in the 2018 elections.

pawn; (ii) **Leftists as enemies:** Haddad, alongside other leftists and even center candidates, were targeted by false allegations from pro-Bolsonaro clusters and even from Bolsonaro himself, who said that “evil leftists” would shut down churches, teaching children how to be gay (the infamous *gay kit*), end Christian holidays, and open Brazil to Venezuelan army; (iii) **Allegation of fraud during the election:** Bolsonaro and his supporters also were skeptical about the ballot boxes, raising suspicion about their effectiveness in producing a fair outcome. They even said that ballot boxes were coming from Venezuela as part of a communist alliance between Haddad and Maduro; (iv) **Communism as a threat:** Haddad was conceived as a communist candidate that would make Brazil like Venezuela, if elected. All these forms of “fake news” were part of Bolsonaro’s key campaign issues that appealed to his coalition of *boi* (beef), *Bíblia* (bible), and *bala* (bullet), or agro-business, evangelicals, and conservative public security lobbies (Hertzman 2018).

This thesis focuses on the fourth aspect discussed above. Ultimately, Bolsonaro’s use of “communism as a threat” highlights how his fear-mongering campaign strategies instilled fear and falsely connected Haddad and the Workers’ party to the Venezuelan regime, thus also bringing foreign affairs into the election, which I turn to below.

“Make Brazil Great Again” vs. “Brazil will become a new Venezuela”: Bolsonaro’s Fear-Mongering Campaign and the role of Foreign Affairs

Brazil’s 2018 electoral campaign brought foreign affairs to the fore. Bolsonaro’s use of both Venezuela and the United States is an illustration of that, as Bolsonaro used

the two nations in oppositional ways to influence voters' behavior. Most importantly, he used a fear-mongering campaign strategy by negatively connecting Haddad to Venezuela and communism, and positively attaching Bolsonaro himself to Trump. Similar to Bush in 2004, Bolsonaro fueled voters' fear about an external threat to the country (in this case, communism), thus encouraging votes based less on ideology than on a perceived "common" enemy (Borba 2020; Chagas et al. 2019).

Some scholars have analyzed the "circuits of disgust" in the making of Bolsonaro, in reference to the success of his campaign (Borba 2020; Abranches 2019). In other words, Bolsonaro targeted some groups, and countries (Venezuela and U.S.) because, in his conception, they were transgressing the social order. Ultimately, Bolsonaro divided citizens into "good" and "bad" camps, and thus activating "ugly" feelings toward those who thought differently from him. Haddad, for instance, was the main target of such "circuits of disgust," connected to elements such as communism, atheism, and homosexuality which would threaten what Bolsonaro considered to be the proper social order - the traditional family and Christian values (Borba 2020; Abranches 2019). This ties us back to the terror management theory and how candidates can appeal to citizen's standard values in an attempt to influence their final decisions, which can lead to polarization. It also resonates with Trump's campaign in 2016 and the "alt-right groups" activity.

In Brazil, the "circuits of disgust" around Haddad were also created by using foreign affair issues related to communism. Venezuela, for instance, was the negative connection appropriated for Bolsonaro to activate "fear" feelings among voters towards

Haddad. According to Estevez and Herz (2019), Bolsonaro depicted Venezuela as an antagonist and threat. Moreover, a refugee crisis on the Brazilian-Venezuelan border helped amplify Bolsonaro's claims about Venezuela failures and chaotic government (Estevez and Herz, 2019). He associated Haddad with the Venezuelan regime, suggesting that any leftist in power would transform the country in Venezuela, despite the fact that thirteen years of PT rule did nothing of the sort. Nonetheless, Bolsonaro insisted that Brazil would become a new Venezuela if he did not get elected, because Haddad would follow the bolivarianism regime of Maduro (Chagas et al. 2019). Some studies revealed that more than 11 thousand of messages related to the meme "Brazil will become a new Venezuela" were exchanged in pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp clusters with fake news concerning Venezuela and Fernando Haddad (Chagas et al. 2019).

Bolsonaro used the U.S., on the other hand, to activate "beautiful" feelings among voters towards Bolsonaro (Borba, 2020). By using "Make Brazil Great Again" as a campaign motto, Bolsonaro strived to attach his candidacy and future government to Trump's and to ride the "Trumpist" wave to the presidency. Bolsonaro's populist, patriotic, and nationalist campaign speeches echoed Trump's in 2016 and even 2020. According to Tamaki and Fuks (2020), Bolsonaro registered a populist score in his speeches, similar to Trump. As candidates, both Bolsonaro and Trump used fear-mongering strategies, by creating affective polarization among voters with mostly "fake news" that weaponized internal "enemies" and "allies" through social media. So many similarities are perhaps due to the assistance given by Steven Brannon (former Trump's strategist) in terms of online campaigning, data, and analysis to Bolsonaro's campaign.

All these factors together have led some to dub Bolsonaro the “Brazilian Trump” or “Trump of the Tropics” (Hertzman 2018).

In sum, Bolsonaro twisted foreign affairs during his campaign as issue-voting, using Venezuela and the United States as negative and positive examples, respectively. He used fear-mongering strategies to create affective polarization among voters against his opponent, Fernando Haddad, thus activating “ugly” feelings and “fear” towards the Worker’s Party candidate.

CHAPTER THREE: NAVIGATING THE “CIRCUITS OF DISGUST” WITHIN THE “BOLSOESFERA”: VENEZUELA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE COMMUNIST THREAT

This chapter turns to Bolsonaro’s social media during the 2018 presidential campaign. I track Bolsonaro’s posts on Facebook and Twitter while also examining his supporters’ reactions. As previously noted, Bolsonaro’s campaign focused on several aspects to promote fear. Specifically, he fueled his campaign by framing foreign affairs as Manichean struggle between good and bad, and foreshadowing a descent into the bad (e.g., communism), if his opponent would be victorious. Consequently, I tracked his online engagement looking for any comment, post, or interaction mentioning both Venezuela and the United States. I used the advanced search for tweets provided by Twitter. This tool enables any person to look for public account’s posts through searching for keywords, phrases, dates, etc. On one hand, I expected to see a negative approach to Venezuela, perhaps connecting it to either his opponent, Fernando Haddad, or to Haddad’s party, The Workers’ Party. On the other hand, I anticipated that the United States would be used as a model of what Bolsonaro’s administration would look like, that is, as a positive example.

The second part of this chapter will be dedicated to the reaction of Bolsonaro’s supporters within the “Bolsoesfera” in regard to his posts. In other words, I will track and show to what extent Bolsonaro’s ideas, whether about Venezuela or the United States, resonated with those of his supporters on Facebook. For that, I tracked the posts of two main pages in support of Bolsonaro on Facebook: “*Grupo da Página Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018,*” a group with more than 200,000 people managed by an everyday

citizen; and the page “*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*” which totaled almost a million of likes as of the writing of this thesis. I used the advanced search for groups provided by Facebook that enables any member of a certain group to quickly access any post by looking for keywords or even dates. By doing that, I was able to evaluate whether Bolsonaro’s ideas were echoed by his supporters in the “*Bolsoesfera*”.

The 2018 electoral campaign season legally began on August 16th, 2018, although candidates aiming to run usually start their “unofficial” advertising earlier. According to the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court (TSE in Portuguese), “official electoral advertising” refers to rallies, caravans, or any graphical material distributed by the candidates or their staff. The TSE rules neither mention nor restrict the online engagement of presidential candidates, which allows them to create political advertising months before the “official” campaign period. Additionally, by the beginning of the 2018 electoral year, all candidates were already nominated by their parties, including Jair Bolsonaro. In fact, Bolsonaro was the first candidate to be officially nominated by his party (January 2018) and to announce his campaign platform (March 2018). In light of these facts, I decided to start tracking Bolsonaro’s engagement on social media from August 2017, when he probably begun addressing important electoral topics for building his political support – which later will turn into the “*Bolsoesfera*”.

I start the chapter by presenting the main ideas appropriated, framed, and shared by Bolsonaro about Venezuela and the United States on his social media. I then

present his supporters' echo of those ideas, highlighting their approach to the topics raised by Bolsonaro about both countries.

Navigating Bolsonaro's Electoral Campaign on Social Media

I focused only on Bolsonaro's accounts on both Twitter and Facebook, though his official campaign was also disseminated by his sons on social media. I tracked his @JairBolsonaro account on Twitter and his @JairMessias.Bolsonaro page on Facebook. I first turn to Bolsonaro's campaign motto "Brazil cannot become a Venezuela" by presenting his posts mentioning Venezuela, with an emphasis on its perceived failures, in 2017 and 2018. Bolsonaro primarily depicted this country as a "threat" in two ways: (i) by negatively using Venezuela as a foil to promote his own positions regarding violence, gun control, immigration, and socialism; and (ii) by attaching his opponent, Fernando Haddad, to the Venezuelan authoritarian regime. I then present Bolsonaro's portrayal of the United States and his embracement of the "Make Brazil Great Again" motto during the campaign. In contrast with his usage of Venezuela, Bolsonaro framed the United States as a "promise", that is, as an allurements of what his own administration would be, while also using this association to advance his conservative agenda.

"Brazil cannot become a Venezuela"

Bolsonaro's first mention of Venezuela in the timeframe analyzed here was through his Twitter account on August 1, 2017. The post was a photo of a person holding a Venezuela's flag. He commented saying: "Venezuela is being destroyed by

Maduro's socialism. We cannot be silent before what is happening. All my support to the Venezuelan people!" (my translation, see fig. 1). Through this post, Bolsonaro announced two of his electoral campaign's key battle cries: an alleged communist threat and Venezuela as a negative example for Brazil.



Figure 1 – Bolsonaro's tweet on August 1, 2017, retrieved from @jairbolsonaro account on Twitter.

In this same month, Bolsonaro posted on Facebook a 1-minute video where a Fox News reporter is commenting on the situation of Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro¹¹. Among other things, the reporter claimed that while Maduro disarmed the Venezuelan population, he increased his personal armed militia to repress popular movements. Building on this video, Bolsonaro posted about the importance of an armed society – an important platform of his conservative campaign – saying that “More than citizens’ own life, guns guarantee a nation’s freedom” (my translation, see fig. 1). In that sense, while negatively framing the Venezuela’s socialist, gun-free society, Bolsonaro was also

¹¹ Available at: < <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/890734054408915>>.

raising awareness around an important topic of his political agenda: “freer” or laxer standards of gun control in Brazil.

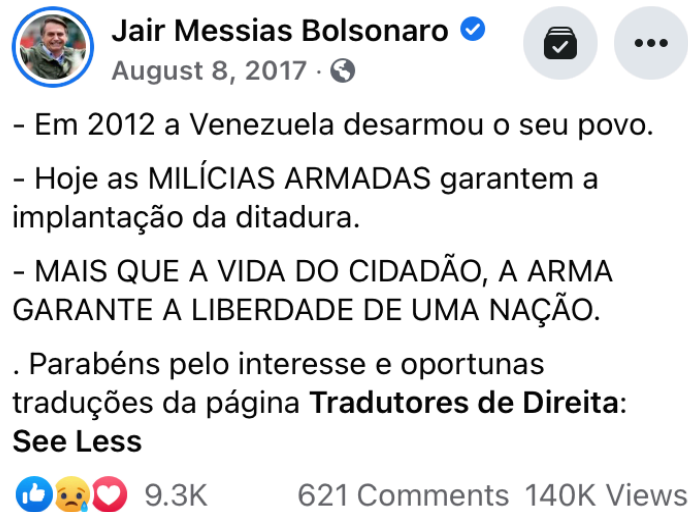


Figure 2 - Bolsonaro’s Facebook post on August 8, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro on Facebook.

Following this post on Facebook, Bolsonaro posted a video of his own claiming for printed vote in Brazil¹². Standing as the anti-establishment candidate, he argued that “the system” does not want printed vote in Brazil because it would allow new people to enter politics, even though he personally had been in politics for three decades. Additionally, he mentioned the “*distritão*” and the political reform discussions to criticize Brazilian politicians’ efforts to change the electoral rules in the country, mainly concerning the electoral coefficient. According to Bolsonaro, those changes would lead to the re-election of corrupted politicians. As an example of fraud concerning the electronic voting, Bolsonaro brought up Venezuela and its 2017 Venezuelan Constituent Assembly election, where he said that “a simple press on the button [of the electronic

¹² Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/890850637730590/>.

voting machine]” led to “a million more votes counted for the government [in reference to Maduro’s regime].” In the body of the post (see fig. 3), he said that “[we] are not far from Venezuela”, in reference to what could happen in Brazil in the upcoming 2018 elections. Indeed, another important issue of Bolsonaro’s electoral agenda was connected to Venezuela through his social media: the electoral rules in Brazil and chances of “fraud” due to the electronic voting system.

Figure 3 – Bolsonaro’s post on Facebook on August 8, 2017

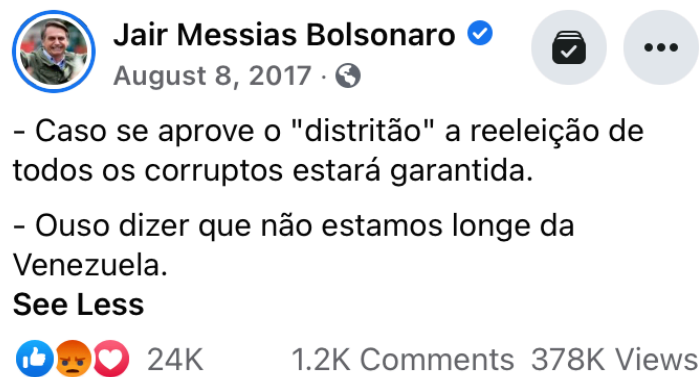


Figure 3 Bolsonaro’s post on Facebook on August 8, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

In a series of posts on Facebook, Bolsonaro launched a 3-episodes documentary entitled “*Venezuela: um alerta para o Brasil*” on his YouTube channel (see fig. 4)¹³. In those videos, the Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, Jair Bolsonaro’s son, interviewed Roderick Navarro, the national coordinator of the Movement Towards Freedom in Venezuela. The video starts with questions regarding the lack of information about Maduro’s repressive regime in the Brazilian media. The narrator, a Venezuelan woman, highlights

¹³ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/901745533307767>.

some of the social problems that Venezuelans were dealing at the time, including the food crisis and the police violence against popular resistance movements.

Following her introduction, Roderick Navarro starts describing Maduro's communist regime and how Brazil would be affected by it. He focused on communist indoctrination inside Venezuelan schools and the Venezuelan refugee crisis, which were important electoral issues for Bolsonaro's campaign. Interestingly, while Navarro was describing socialism in Venezuela, some photos of the former presidents Lula and Dilma with Brazilian kids alongside with textbook's pages in Portuguese comparing capitalism and socialism supposedly introduced by the Ministry of Education were presented. That was a clear attempt to convince the audience that Brazil would face the same problems under Worker's party government as those described by Navarro in Venezuela – and would continue facing them if they remain in power.



Figure 4 - Bolsonaro's post on Facebook on August 8, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

In September 2017, Bolsonaro posted on Facebook a video of one of his addresses as a deputy about what he called “the truth on Venezuela and Brazil” at the Commission on Foreign Affairs and National Defense of the Brazilian Chamber of deputies¹⁴. In this address, Bolsonaro focused on the relationship between Brazil and its South American neighbors during Workers’ Party administrations in Brazil. Although he focused on countries that would be part of “a bolivarianist alliance”, including Cuba, Bolivia, and Uruguay, Bolsonaro paid critical attention to Venezuela. He affirmed that former president Dilma Rousseff allegedly made all her governmental decisions after consultation with the Venezuelan intelligence. He also claimed: “only innocents would believe that Brazil could not become a Venezuela” because this process “does not happen out of nowhere; it is slow and takes time”. Through his post, Bolsonaro highlighted another aspect of his negative campaigning: Brazil’s relationship with Latin America, and specifically, with Venezuela in the previous governments.



Figure 5 - Bolsonaro’s post on Facebook on September 1, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

¹⁴ Available at: < <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/907057226109931> >.

Building on this supposedly “bolivarianist alliance” across South America, Bolsonaro started the year of 2018 making some posts on Twitter about the financial help provided by the Brazilian Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES in Portuguese) to Venezuela throughout the Workers’ Party rule in Brazil¹⁵ (see fig. 6 and 7). According to him, Venezuela defaulted on its payments of around R\$ 1 billion to BNDES and the Brazilian Treasury department had to pick up the tab. In the posts, Bolsonaro emphasized that citizens’ money was being used to assume Venezuela’s defaults by saying that “over the last years, the Worker’s Party has donated billions to its friend dictatorships through BNDES. Your money, that should be used in a responsible way for our own growth, helped the authoritarian and non-democratic governments, such as Cuba and Venezuela, without giving us any return. This will end!” (my translation, see fig. 7)¹⁶. Bolsonaro then connects Venezuela to one more important topic within his electoral agenda: the “bolivarianist alliance” in the region and the need to end contracts between BNDES and South American countries.

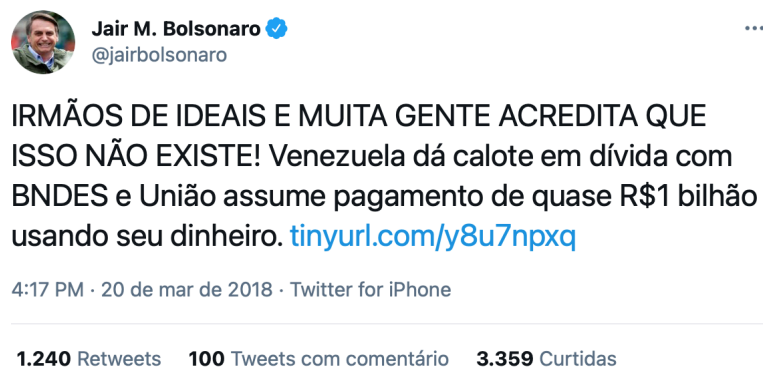


Figure 6 - Bolsonaro’s tweet on March 20, 2018, retrieved from @jairbolsonaro account on Twitter.

¹⁵ Available at: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/976206156673806336>

¹⁶ Available at: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1040930442243960832>.

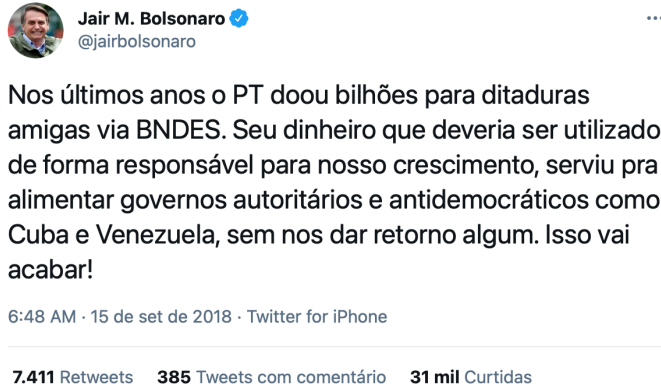


Figure 7 - Bolsonaro's tweet on September 15, 2018, retrieved from @jairbolsonaro account on Twitter.

As the second-round election day approached, Bolsonaro shifted his tone towards connecting the Workers' Party, and more specifically, his opponent, Fernando Haddad, to the Venezuelan regime. Until the first-round of election day, October 7, 2018, Bolsonaro had not directly mentioned Haddad in connection to Venezuela. However, after that, and given that Haddad was the only opponent left, Bolsonaro spoke up about what he described as the "last chance for Brazilians to prevent Brazil from becoming a new Venezuela." By framing himself as the anti-establishment candidate, Bolsonaro criticized Brazilian media and corruption that "brought us (Brazilians) to the chaos we are living and are more insistent than ever in a battle against us. Let's win and break down the gears that want us to become a new Venezuela" (my translation, see fig. 8). Some days later, he continued depicting Venezuela as a "threat" to Brazil by affirming that "thanks to the Brazilian people union (in reference to his victory in the first round), we have a real chance not to turn into Venezuela. Together, we will kick-start making Brazil one of the most respectable global powers, a position that Brazil should never be left out" (my translation, see fig. 9).

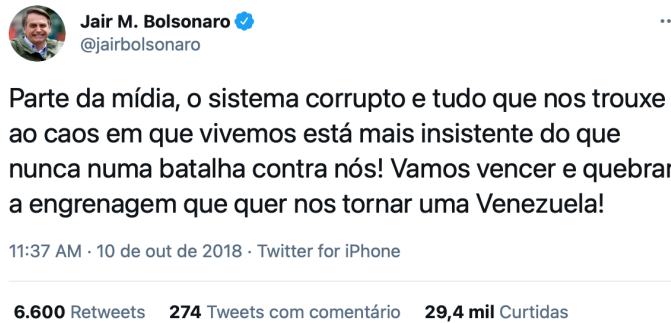


Figure 8 – Bolsonaro’s tweet on October 10, 2018, retrieved from @jairbolsonaro account on Twitter.

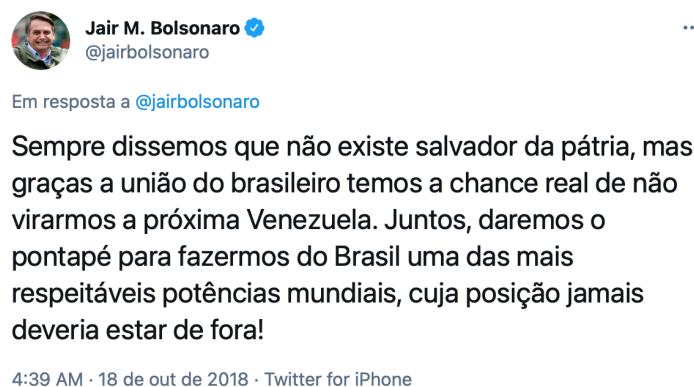


Figure 9 - Bolsonaro’s tweet on October 18, 2018, retrieved from @jairbolsonaro account on Twitter.

After criticizing the system, Bolsonaro focused on portraying Haddad’s candidature as a “threat” by attaching him to the Venezuelan regime. In October 2018, Bolsonaro posted a tweet about Franklin Martins, a Brazilian journalist who served as Press Secretary during Lula’s government in Brazil and was one of Haddad’s campaign advisors in 2018¹⁷. Without evidence, Bolsonaro affirmed that Martins kidnapped a U.S. ambassador during the Brazilian military regime, and that he “was part of the team that brought chaos to Venezuela,” without real evidence (see fig. 10). On Facebook, Bolsonaro continued the attacks on his opponent by claiming, “[Haddad] is oriented by

¹⁷ Available at: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1053342965274427392>.

a prisoner [in reference to Lula], hides the party's colors, pretends to be religious, throws the holy bible in the trash, hides his support for the Venezuelan dictatorship, and spreads lies about [Bolsonaro]" (my translation, see fig. 11)¹⁸. These posts illustrate the ways in which Bolsonaro attempted to associate Haddad's candidacy with the Venezuelan regime, and therefore, influence voters' behavior by spreading fear.

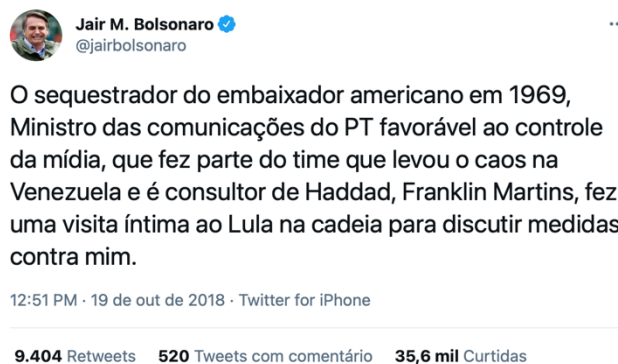


Figure 10 - Bolsonaro's tweet on October 19, 2018, retrieved from @jairbolsonaro account on Twitter.

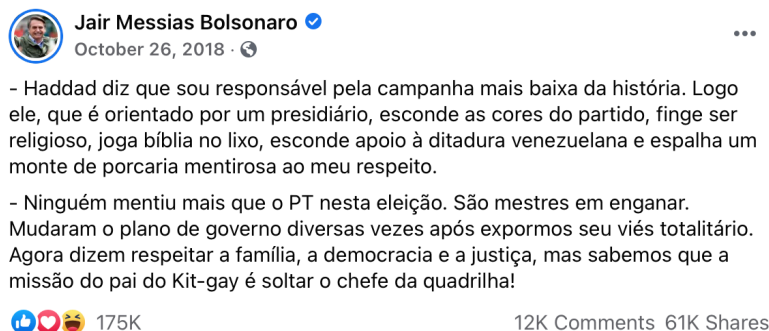


Figure 11 - Bolsonaro's tweet on October 26, 2018, retrieved from @jairbolsonaro account on Twitter.

¹⁸ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/posts/1273296762819307>

“Make Brazil Great Again”

I now turn to Bolsonaro’s perspective of the United States and its relationship to his political agenda through his social media accounts. In contrast to the negative framing of Venezuela, Bolsonaro positively promoted the United States during his campaign and aligned his candidacy and future policy with the Trump administration. Bolsonaro explicitly embraced “Make Brazil Great Again” as his campaign motto – in reference to Trump’s 2016 campaign – while also using the United States as an ideal polity and economy in order to advance his conservative agenda.

In 2017, following Trump’s inauguration, Bolsonaro posted a video of Luis Miranda on his Facebook, a YouTuber, businessman, and currently Brazilian deputy, in which Miranda explains the reasons for supporting Trump¹⁹. Miranda became famous with his YouTube videos on the disparities between the United States and Brazil, where he repeatedly portrayed Miami – where he used to live – as the land of capitalism. For proving his point, he consistently showed off his luxury life in the United States as businessman, yet most of his owned companies currently hold several charges of fraud. Among other things, in the video reposted by Bolsonaro, Miranda emphasizes that Trump “wanted to protect his country”, as a justification for his anti-immigrant policies. He also claims, “I wish I had a Trump as president in Brazil, who thinks about its people and ends with this bunch of leftists who only think about [social welfare programs]”. In quoting this video, Bolsonaro stated, “The great Brazilian press continues lying about Trump, as if Lula and Dilma were examples of heads of state. Will we have a Trump in Brazil?” (my translation, see fig. 12). Through this post,

¹⁹ Available at: < <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=768789026603419>>.

Bolsonaro signaled his desire to be considered the Brazilian Trump in the upcoming elections.

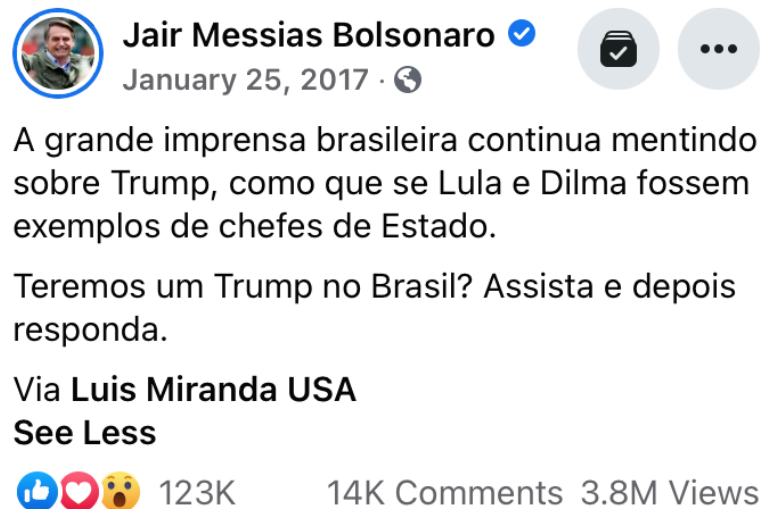


Figure 12 - Bolsonaro's post on Facebook on January 25, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

A major topic addressed by Bolsonaro when mentioning the United States was this country's gun laws. He made several posts showing the benefits of an armed society, including for combating violence against women in Brazil. In regard to this latter topic, he posted a video telling the story of an U.S. woman who killed the thugs who were trying to break into her house with her own guns²⁰. By echoing the video, Bolsonaro attested: "I defend that women in Brazil have the same rights of this American [woman]. With possession of guns and laws favorable to citizens, violence against women will decrease" (my translation, see fig. 13). Bolsonaro then used this isolated example from the United States to show the importance of laxer standards of

²⁰ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/839769962838658>.

gun control in Brazil, while also positioning more access to firearms as a potential solution for Brazil's issues with gender violence.

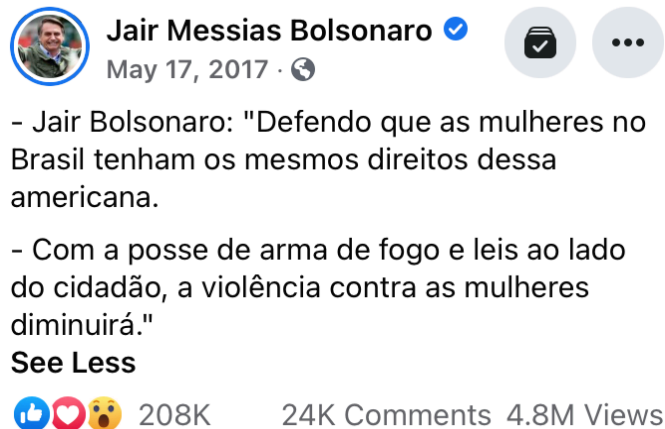


Figure 13 - Bolsonaro's post on Facebook on May 17, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

In another post, Bolsonaro manifested similar inclinations by specifically discussing the need for changes in the Brazilian criminal code. Standing next to Luis Miranda in a video (see fig. 14), Bolsonaro addressed the violence against police officers in Rio de Janeiro²¹. He announced, "In Brazil, if [the police officer] does shoot, he goes to jail. If he does not, he goes to cemetery", in reference to the laws about the police use of force in Brazil, according to which, police officers should not discharge firearms against people, unless in cases of self-defense or imminent threat. Luis Miranda, on the other hand, presented the reality of the United States by affirming, "If an American police officer feels intimidate by anything, he can shoot as much as he wants" (my translation). Both were criticizing the Brazilian criminal code, which, according to them,

²¹ Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/876569865825334>>.

defend hoodlums. Bolsonaro started then to frame what would be critical motto in his campaign: “A good hoodlum is a dead hoodlum”.



Figure 14 - Bolsonaro’s post on Facebook on July 18, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

Following his United States-centric agenda, in October 2017, Bolsonaro traveled to Miami with his sons, where we recorded a documentary addressing different topics about that country in comparison to Brazil. In the first video posted, Bolsonaro and his sons mainly discussed violence and education in the United States, and how Brazilians could take lessons from the U.S. experience. Bolsonaro also maintains, “leftists in Brazil like to criticize the United States because they are imperialists and capitalists. What they want is a country like Venezuela or Cuba, where people are poor under socialism” (my translation). This first video ended with the Brazil and the United States’ flags side by side with the following phrase: “Democracy is what unites us” (my translation, see fig. 15).



Figure 15 - Bolsonaro's post on Facebook on October 24, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

Interestingly, Bolsonaro's trip was a way for him to start his campaign in the United States, where many Brazilians live. He went to several cities, including New York, Boston, and Miami, and met with the Brazilian community to discuss his ideas for Brazil. In those meetings, Bolsonaro was answering questions from the community, including questions about education, death penalty, violence, printed voting, religion etc (see fig. 16)²². In answering questions, Bolsonaro compared Brazil to the United States, highlighting the fact that life in the latter nation is better due to the laxer standards of gun control, strict criminal code, and patriotism.

²² Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=946744845474502>.



Figure 16 - Bolsonaro's post on Facebook on November 7, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

In another post on Facebook, Bolsonaro included a video of his visit to The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a think tank and publisher based in New York (see fig. 17)²³. In that visit, Bolsonaro talked to the Council on Foreign Relations, Shannon K. O'Neil, who asked him several questions about Brazil's foreign affairs under his future government, mainly in regard to Latin America and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). Bolsonaro claimed, "the MERCOSUR would not prevent us from doing business. We would reduce MERCOSUR [importance] to the level it deserves" (my translation). When asked about the multilateral agreements between Brazil and Europe, for instance, Bolsonaro did not hesitate to reply: "I am very sympathetic to bilateralism", in reference to a closer relationship with the United States. Furthermore, he divulged, "During Lula and Dilma's governments, Brazil paid important attention to China, South America, and some left-wing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The

²³ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=948855261930127>.

estrangement towards the United States is a purposeful [action] by the Brazilian left” (my translation). Lastly, Bolsonaro mentioned the Venezuelan situation, highlighting Lula and Dilma’s support to Chavez and currently, Maduro, and the refugee crisis in Brazil-Venezuela borders.



Figure 17 - Bolsonaro’s post on Facebook on November 11, 2017, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

In 2018, as elections approached, Bolsonaro amplified his discourse about the differences in terms of quality of life between the United States and Brazil. Criticizing the Brazilian Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT in Portuguese) and the existence of labor unions, Bolsonaro posted a video of a Brazilian painter living in the United States showing off his possessions²⁴. In the video, the man highlights that he could bought a good car and house with his salary as a painter in the United States, while in Brazil that would only be possible if he was very rich. Quoting this video, Bolsonaro revealed,

²⁴ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/1002408019908184>.

“How a Brazilian painter lives in the United States. [In this latter] labor unions or CLT [in reference to the Brazilian Labor Laws] are almost nonexistent. In the country of rights [in reference to Brazil, nonetheless] there are an overabundance of political thieves, violence, and unemployment” (my translation, see fig. 18).



Figure 18 - Bolsonaro’s post on Facebook on January 28, 2018, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

Building on this topic, Bolsonaro posted another video of a child gardening Trump’s yard at the White House²⁵, proclaiming “In the United States, children can work, while in Brazil...” (my translation, see fig. 19). Bolsonaro was thus praising U.S. labor laws and condemning the Brazilian ones, which prohibits children under the age of 14 from working, yet those rules are similar in both countries. In fact, in the United States, children under the age of 14 are prohibited from working in most industries, although they can work up to three hours in the authorized ones with special permission (e.g., a legal guardians’ authorization).

²⁵ Available at: < <https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro/videos/1031905986958387> >.

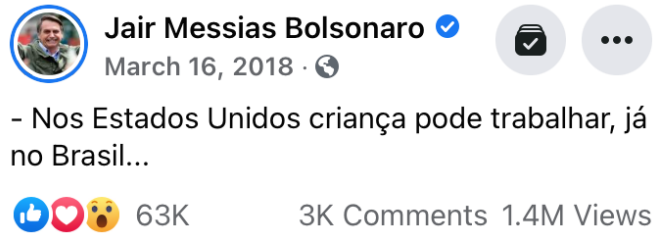


Figure 19 - Bolsonaro's post on Facebook on March 16, 2018, retrieved from @Jairmessias.Bolsonaro account on Facebook.

In sum, whether addressing gun control, violence, foreign affairs or labor laws, Bolsonaro embraced and promoted the United States as a positive example during his campaign – an idealized model for his own governmental reforms. Creating a good versus evil binary, Venezuela functioned as the nefarious foil character to U.S. capitalism dream that Bolsonaro bribed his potential voters with. Was it effective? I now turn to this question.

Navigating the “Bolsoesfera” on Facebook

I will now analyze the ways through which Bolsonaro's main ideas on Venezuela and the United States resonated with those of his supporters on the “Bolsoesfera”. The latter, as discussed by Pacheco (2019), refers to the online network launched by Bolsonaro's supporters to spread among general voters the ideas defended by the candidate. Through the “*Bolsoesfera*”, civilians acted as campaign managers, offsetting Bolsonaro's limited time on traditional propaganda (e.g., TV and radio). Civilians were also using social media to spread fast-paced, automated inaccurate information. As examples of these networks, I tracked the most liked page and group in support of Bolsonaro on Facebook: “*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*” and “*Grupo da Página Jair*”

Bolsonaro Presidente 2018", respectively. I start by presenting *Bolsoesfera*'s echo of Bolsonaro's ideas on Venezuela, followed by their reiteration about the United States.

Haddad and Workers' Party x Venezuela

In 2017, the "Bolsoesfera" members started their activity towards spreading Bolsonaro's fear-mongering campaign on Venezuela, but more specifically attacking the Worker's Party. In their first post about this, they stated, "Despicable "petistas" [Workers' Party supporters], [they] support Venezuela and want to do the same with Brazil, we will not let that happen" (my translation, see fig. 20)²⁶. This statement was referring to a note published by the Worker's party where they criticized Brazil's interference in the Venezuelan crisis during Temer's government²⁷. Specifically, they were defending Venezuelan's rights to find their own solution to their conflicts, with no external intrusion.



Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018

April 5, 2017 · 🌐



Canalhas esses petistas, apóiam a Venezuela e querem fazer o mesmo com o Brasil, não deixaremos!!!!

Figure 20 - "*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*" post on April 5, 2017, retrieved from "*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*" account on Facebook.

In August 2017, following with the attacks towards the Workers' Party and attempting to connect it to the Venezuelan regime, "*Bolsoesfera*" members posted a

²⁶ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/771917996302499>.

²⁷ Available at: https://pt.org.br/pt-divulga-nota-em-apoio-a-venezuela/?fbclid=IwAR2GWJsQ3H8cF5g6pLhw5c9gMm4_MEIvpdELj81TZlumjpsxuxt_ugtDAc.

video of Lula praising Nicolás Maduro (see fig. 21)²⁸. The video is from 2013, when Maduro was running for elections in Venezuela. Lula then was campaigning in favor of him, since Maduro served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Venezuela during Lula's administration in Brazil. In quoting this video, Bolsonaro's supporters affirmed in bold, "Lula praises Nicolaz Maduro" (sic). Although they were not explicitly depicting Lula's support for Maduro as a threat, they were implicitly inferring such since the post did not include information about the context nor the year of the video. For the voters then, it appeared as if Lula was praising Maduro even after his authoritarian managing of Venezuela, which started around 2015. The post's comments, for instance, illustrates this point: one commentor said "Brazil, [they have] tried to turn you [Brazil] into Cuba, Venezuela, but they never made it. Bolsonaro 2018" (my translation, see fig. 22).



Figure 21 - "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" post on August 9, 2017, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.

²⁸ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=844192839075014>

Brasil. Tentaram te transformar em Cuba, Venezuela mais jamais conseguiram. Bolsonaro 2018.

Figure 22 - Comment to the post on August 9, 2017, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.

In 2018, the election year, the "*Bolsoefera*" intensified the attacks towards Haddad and his party, although the posts' tone shifted a little: Bolsonaro's supporters started to share more appealing information, mainly portraying the situation of the Venezuelans in regard to food shortages as a possible outcome in case of Haddad's winning in Brazil. In September, for instance, the page and the group in support for Bolsonaro made several posts about this topic. In one of them, they posted a picture in which Venezuelan citizens are having their meal in garbage bins while Maduro is being served luxurious cuts of meat from the celebrity chef, Salt Bae (see fig. 23)²⁹. In the post body they claimed, "If you do not want our country to turn into Venezuela, vote for Bolsonaro" (my translation). In another post but including the videos of citizens in the garbage and Maduro at the restaurant, they emphasized, "If you do not want Brazil to turn into that, vote for Bolsonaro and campaign for him! If you do not do so, we will be worse than Venezuela" (my translation, see fig. 24)³⁰. In their final post about the food shortage in September, they posted the following statement: "It is better to fight over politics now than fighting for food, as in Venezuela. #Bolsonaro17" (my translation, see fig. 25)³¹.

²⁹ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1116558528505109>

³⁰ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=378919622644006>

³¹ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1117357011758594>



Figure 23 - "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" post on September 23, 2018, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.



Figure 24 - "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" post on September 23, 2018, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.

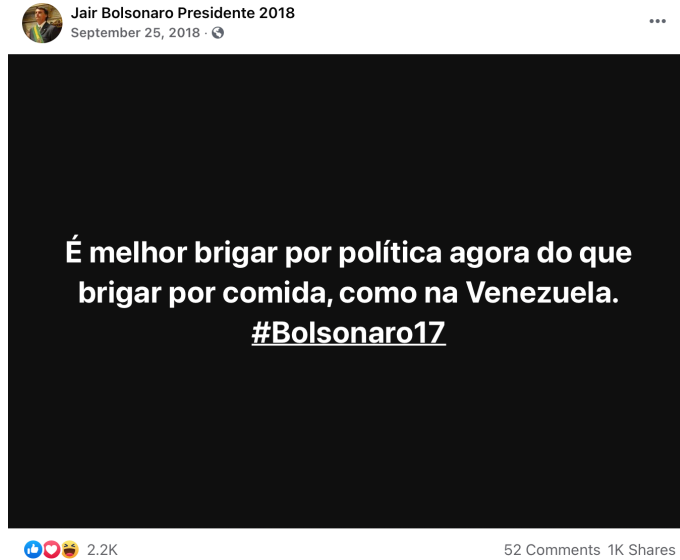


Figure 25 - “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” post on September 25, 2018, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” account on Facebook.

The Venezuelan food shortage continued to a major topic addressed by the “Bolsoesfera” in October, the election month. Few days before the first-round, October 7, 2018, Bolsonaro’s supporters asked, “Which one do you prefer: Venezuela or Brazil?” echoing a picture that compared how an aisle of a supermarket would look like in Haddad and Bolsonaro’s governments (see fig. 26)³². Building on this topic, some of the posts also underlined that Venezuelans were eating their pets due to the shortage. To illustrate that, they created several memes emphasizing that the same could happen in Brazil under Haddad’s government (see fig. 27). In one of them, they portrayed a group of dogs who voted for Bolsonaro because they did want to turn into a “Venezuelan hotdog”. In the other, a dog is claiming for people to vote for Bolsonaro, because “it does want to turn into a meal, as in Venezuela” (see fig. 27).

³² Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1122958914531737>



Figure 26 - “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” post on October 4, 2018, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” account on Facebook.



Figure 27 - Dog memes, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” account on Facebook.

After the first round, the posts inside “Bolsoefera” focused on explicitly align Haddad’s candidacy to the Venezuelan regime, yet the majority of information shared at that time was inaccurate. First, they continued stressing that Brazil would turn into

an even worse version of Venezuela in the case of Haddad's victory: on October 14, 2018, they posted, "If Haddad wins, we will move to Venezuela, since here [in Brazil] it will be worse than there" (my translation, see fig. 28), echoing a supposed Haddad's tweet where he stated, "The revolution taking place in Venezuela is, undoubtedly, an achievement that should be an example for all countries. Congratulations Maduro, we are together" (my translation, see fig. 28)³³. This tweet, nonetheless, was false, as showed in figure 29, where the Facebook's fact-checker indicated that the post contained false information. Another example of the *Bolsoesfera's* effort to connect Haddad with Maduro in every possible way, including with false information, was found on a photo posted in the Facebook group (see fig. 29). In this photo, where it says, "Haddad and Maduro. The photo PT [Workers' Party] does not want you to see" (my translation, see fig. 29), Haddad apparently shakes hands with Maduro. However, this photo is fake, since Haddad never met with Maduro in person; in fact, Bolsonaro's supporters made a photomontage by overlapping Haddad's image to the original photo (see fig. 30), where Maduro was shaking hands with the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in 2013. This shows how fake news played a major role as part of the *Bolsoesfera's* campaign.

³³ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1129506323876996>



Figure 28 - "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" post on October 14, 2018, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.



Figure 29 - "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" post on October 14, 2018 fact-checked, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.



Figure 30 - Haddad Shaking Maduro's Hands (fake photo), retrieved from "*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*" group on Facebook.



Figure 31 - Maduro Shaking Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Hands (original photo), retrieved from "*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*" group on Facebook.

In the few days that preceded the second-round, Bolsonaro's supporters designed the posts in a Manichean worldview, where the good represented a vote for Bolsonaro and evil a vote for Haddad. Bolsonaro's supporters thus divided Brazilian voters into "good" and "bad" camps. One of the photos shared in the Facebook exemplifies that: it portrays two possible ways, one towards Venezuela where there is a thunderstorm and the photos of Lula, Haddad, Manuela D'Ávila (Haddad's vice

president) and Ciro Gomes (another 2018 presidential candidate), and the other towards Brazil, where it is sunny and with Bolsonaro's photo (see fig. 32). In another post, but this time on the main Facebook page, they posted Haddad's and Bolsonaro's campaign proposals and stressed, "On October 28 [second-round election day] Brazil will decide whether to look more like Venezuela (13) [Haddad's number] or the United States (17) [Bolsonaro's number]" (my translation, see fig. 33)³⁴. Finally, two days before the second round, the page made a final point, "Thank God the myth [Bolsonaro]³⁵ will win this election, imagine Haddad turning our country into a Venezuela" (my translation, see fig. 34)³⁶.



Figure 32 – The two ways: Brazil x Venezuela, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" group on Facebook.

³⁴ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1126908524136776>

³⁵ Bolsonaro's supporters used to call him "myth" given his growing popularity even with limited airtime on TV and radio, and amidst media scrutiny.

³⁶ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1137360866424875>

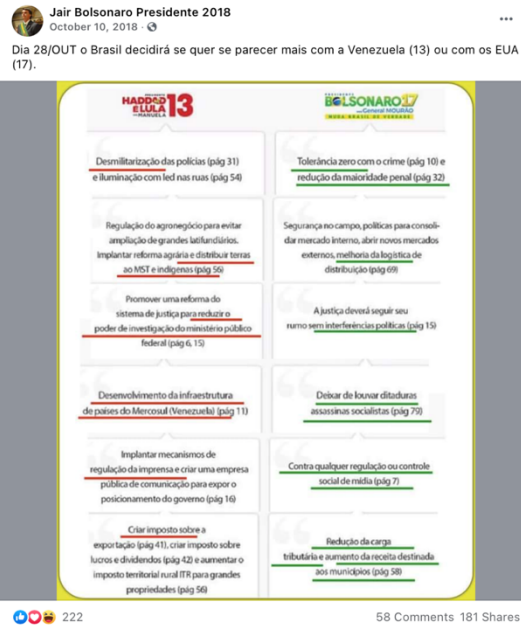


Figure 33 - “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” post on October 10, 2018, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” account on Facebook.

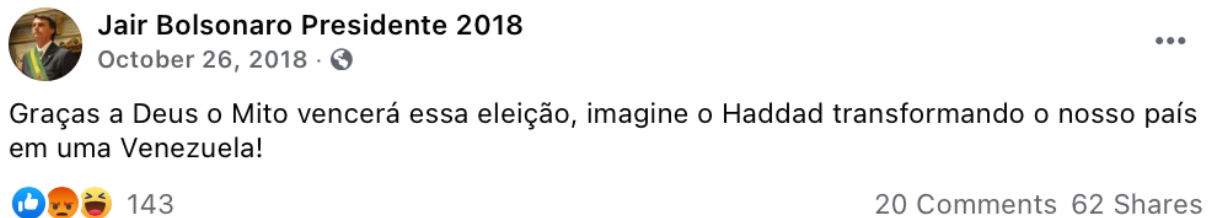


Figure 34 - “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” post on October 26, 2018, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” account on Facebook.

The United States, Trump, and Bolsonaro

In contrast with Venezuela, the United States was framed as a positive example in the *Bolsoesfera*. In fact, most of the topics addressed by Bolsonaro in regard to the United States, including gun control, violence, and international relations, echoed with *Bolsoesfera* posts. In April 2017, for instance, Bolsonaro’s supporters posted a gif where Trump was supposedly showing his support for Bolsonaro, and said, “Trump declares

support for the myth [Bolsonaro]" (my translation, see fig. 35)³⁷. However, once again, the gif was a montage, where they inserted Bolsonaro's campaign logo into a document Trump was signing. Similar to the way Bolsonaro framed this question, they wanted to attach his candidacy and future government to Trump in the United States. In the Facebook group, several photos were posted about that, including one where Trump and Bolsonaro are portrayed as representing "prosperity" while Lula and Chavez would represent misery (see fig. 36).

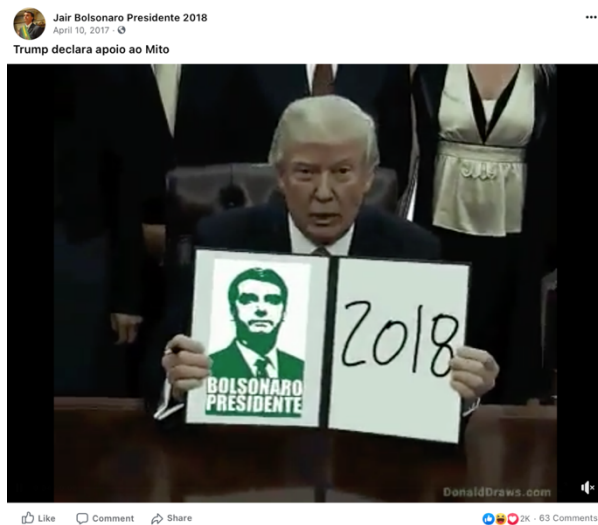


Figure 35 - "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" post on April 10, 2017, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.

³⁷ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=775114195982879>



Figure 36 – Prosperity x Misery, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” group on Facebook.

Building on violence and gun control topics, and depicting the United States as a model, Bolsonaro’s supporters posted a video from another page where a U.S. woman was challenging a police officer, including trying to hit him (see fig. 37)³⁸. In the video, the officer ends up destabilizing the woman and arresting her, yet no information on the context of the video was presented. The original post stated, “She challenged the police officer but forgot that she was in the United States, guess what happened. If it was here in Brazil, the leftists, like the *petistas* [Workers’ Party supporters], would say that [the woman’s arresting] is oppression, police violence. Despicable! A thousand times despicable!” (see fig. 37). They were indirectly condemning the strict Brazilian laws on police force use, as Bolsonaro also did using his social media. According to the Brazilian laws, police use force should follow the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, moderation, and appropriateness. Additionally, police officers are not

³⁸ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/889053664588931>

allowed to use firearms against disarmed people, unless they represent an immediate risk, yet Brazil accounts for the most alarming rates of police violence worldwide.



Figure 37 - “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” post on November 7, 2017, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” account on Facebook.

In 2018, the *Bolsoesfera* centered its attention in highlighting Bolsonaro and Trump’s similarities. More specifically, they were indicating that Bolsonaro’s election would lead to a closer relationship with the United States. In one of the posts concerning this topic, they included part of Bolsonaro’s address where he said, “I will look for the United States and Europe. I cannot be stuck here in the MERCOSUR” (see

fig. 38)³⁹. This post connects to Bolsonaro's desires to prioritize foreign relations with the United States at the expense of Mercosur (vide his conversation with CRF in New York). The "Bolsoesfera" then concurs with Bolsonaro in regard to the ineffectiveness and uselessness of MERCOSUR, and with prioritizing relations with the United States instead.



Figure 38 - "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" post on August 28, 2018, retrieved from "Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018" account on Facebook.

In the last days before both the first and second rounds, the *Bolsoesfera's* posts focused on exclusively embracing "Make Brazil Great Again" as their motto by linking Bolsonaro to Trump. In other words, they were emphasizing that Brazil under Bolsonaro's rule would be as great as America under Trump's. In one post in August 2018, Bolsonaro's supporters on Facebook posted a photo of him on Trump's side with the following statement: "Trump Bolsonaro, the right great again" (my translation, see

³⁹ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1100285823465713>

fig. 39)⁴⁰. In the post body, they divulged, “Trump and Bolsonaro together in 2019 for a better world” (my translation, see fig. 39).



Figure 39 - “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” post on August 25, 2018, retrieved from “Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018” account on Facebook.

In the group, several memes were posted in regard to the “Make Brazil Great Again” motto. In one of these memes, Bolsonaro and Trump are portrayed as two muscular fighters standing side by side with the United States and Brazil’s flags in the background (see fig. 40). In this photo, it is stated, “Bolsonaro. Make Brazil Great Again” in attempt to illustrate the close relationship among these countries in Bolsonaro’s future government. In another picture posted in the group, a person is raising a sign that says, “God bless Bolsonaro and Trump! Make us free from

⁴⁰ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/movimentobrasiladireita/posts/1098737296953899>

communism its slavery. Making America and Brazil great again” (see fig. 41). Indeed, Trump and the United States were used as an alternative to the misery and “slavery” represented by the communism in the country, yet Brazil was far from being under such regime.



Figure 40 – Make Brazil Great Again Meme, retrieved from “*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*” group on Facebook.



**Making America and Brazil
great again!**

Figure 41 – Make Us Free from Communism Meme, retrieved from “*Jair Bolsonaro Presidente 2018*” group on Facebook.

In conclusion, whether addressing Venezuela or the United States, the *Bolsoesfera* echoed ideas promoted by Bolsonaro in his social media. Bolsonaro's supporters incorporated the fear-mongering strategy into their posts concerning Venezuela by depicting it as a threat and connecting Haddad and the Workers' Party to Nicolás Maduro's regime, while positively treating the United States and a model for Bolsonaro's future administration by linking his campaign to Trump's government and embracing "Make Brazil Great Again" as their motto. In so doing, Bolsonaro's online campaigning strategy effectively spread his main ideas through the *Bolsoesfera*'s networks, which by their turn, acted as the most powerful weapon of his campaign.

CONCLUSION

My thesis discussed Jair Bolsonaro's campaign during the 2018 Brazilian elections as an example of the mutual constitution of foreign affairs, fear-mongering, and fake news, the "three Fs" that make us rethink electoral politics in the age of social media. More specifically, I asked how and for what purposes Bolsonaro addressed Venezuela and the United States during his campaign and the role played by social media, fear-mongering strategies, and fake news. Ultimately, I found that Bolsonaro used a fear-mongering campaign that used Venezuela and the United States to different ends through extensive "fake news" campaigning on SNS and chat-messaging platforms. This allowed me to bridge two separate bodies of scholarship in Political Science: on one hand, foreign affairs and electoral politics; and on the other, social media and electoral politics.

Although many studies have focused on fake news, fear-mongering strategies, and social media as independent topics, little was produced on the intersection among them. Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign in Brazil, for instance, brings new perspectives into this debate, proving that these topics are better understood if integrated. In fact, his 2018 campaign represents an exceptional context where foreign policy topics (e.g., Venezuela and the United States) were used as issue-voting matters through a set of fear-mongering tactics weaponized by social media (e.g., Bolsonaro's social media and the *Bolsoesfera*), which allowed me to evaluate all the three "Fs" in action.

Through social media tracking, I found that Bolsonaro's campaign created affective polarization around Venezuela and the United States. Specifically, he

addressed the two countries in two different, opposite ways: while Venezuela was used to promote fear by being depicted as a threat due to its socialist regime, food shortages, and governability crises, the United States were used as a positive example of what Bolsonaro's own administration would look like by being depicted as a model of society due to its perceived higher-quality of life, "freer" standards of gun control, and free market capitalism. Additionally, both countries were framed in a Manichean division of good vs. bad, where the United States would represent the virtuous, prosperous, right capitalistic model, and Venezuela would represent the evil, poor, communist threat. Consequently, whether articulating his campaign towards either country, Bolsonaro weaponized social media in ways that created both foreign enemies (Venezuela and communism) and allies (United States and market capitalism), which set the backdrop for Haddad's and his own campaign. As a result, the campaign also divided citizens into "good" and "bad" camps, thus activating a circuit of disgust within society.

My research aimed to serve as a first step in research about fake news, fear-mongering, and foreign policy. It is important to point out some possible caveats of my work. First, it is not a total explanation of the 2018 Brazilian election outcome. In fact, the Brazilian economic situation, previous corruption scandals, and citizen discontent with some domestic problems (e.g., violence, high prices, etc.) were perhaps more important in influencing voters' behavior. However, even with these domestic factors, Bolsonaro used a fear-mongering, online strategy through spreading fake news. Second, my methodology based on the advanced search tools provided by Twitter and Facebook might have been insufficient for solely examining Bolsonaro's online

campaign, thus limiting the results presented here; a big data analysis might be the most appropriate methodology for a more comprehensive look into social media networks. Lastly, my analysis of the *Bolsoefera* would have been more complete if I had included more pages and groups into my research design; possibly in these other networks I would have found other variables that Bolsonaro's supporters might have associated with both Venezuela and the United States.

Future work should focus on addressing the above-mentioned limitations and employ a more state-of-the-art, qualitative research design to measure Bolsonaro's online campaign. Statistical designs and observational data, for instance, might utilize methodological tools to further test the theory proposed in my thesis. Furthermore, the 2018 Brazilian elections and Bolsonaro's usage of fear-mongering tactics through an extensive online campaigning on SNS raised awareness about the way candidates are framing their campaigns and the impact for democracy. It would be interesting, for instance, to extend this analysis to other countries in Latin America to examine whether such tactics have been employed and whether this is connected to the rise of right across the hemisphere. Lastly, Trump and Bolsonaro's similarities extenuated in this work indicate interesting paths for future work, especially for a comparative analysis of their campaigns: How does Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign compare to Trump's during the 2020 elections in the United States? Are there more similarities or differences? What was the role played by social media? Who or what were weaponized as "allies" and "enemies" by both candidates? What role did foreign affairs play in such dynamics?

Although Bolsonaro was fixated on how Haddad's victory would make Brazil a new Venezuela, today, under his government, Venezuela is one of many countries that stigmatize Brazil. In fact, most of the world is now depicting Brazil as global biosafety hazard due to Bolsonaro's mismanaging of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Having used fear-mongering strategies through fake news sharing on SNS as a campaign strategy, a presidential candidate has made the country that elected him into a global pariah. The 2018 Brazilian elections showed us that fear-mongering strategies lined up with fake news campaigning make citizens cast their ballots more because of an alleged, unreal threat than because of their alignment with candidates' proposals, thus undermining real democratic process and belonging. Democracy demands electoral campaigns that focuses on the dialogue and tolerance as the primary means of communicating candidates' ideas and resolving potential conflicts.

The larger goal of this thesis was to raise the question of "new" media in electoral politics. Of course, a now "old" form of media, the radio, was key to Getúlio Vargas, during his authoritarian rise and during Brazil's "experiment with democracy" (Skidmore 2009). Likewise, the television was embraced by authoritarian rulers in Brazil during their 21-year reign and this now "old" media was key in the redemocratization process that ensured that political candidates could speak directly to voters in a state-mandated "*horário eleitoral gratuito*." Today, new media has again entered into the political fray, and it is yet to be seen if it will be more powerfully wielded by authoritarian, illiberal forces, or democratic liberal ones. Brazil, and the world awaits.

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