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THE INSURRECTIONIST PLAYBOOK: JAIR BOLSONARO AND THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF BRAZIL

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Extended abstract

This study unpacks the insurrectionist playbook leveraged by Jair Bolsonaro during the 2023 Brazilian Presidential election, a campaign marked by multiple claims of electoral fraud and support for a military coup d'état. We begin by applying content analysis to a database of 728 public statements made by then-president Jair Bolsonaro and fact-checked by Aos Fatos. This first step allowed us to identify the blueprint of the insurrectionist playbook and to establish whether Bolsonaro's statements become more extreme during the campaign. This database pinpoints the insurrectionist playbook along two central and persistent narratives: the first is dedicated to asserting false claims of electoral fraud. The second frame extends the former and entails calls for military intervention typical of a coup d'état.

We subsequently test the penetration of this playbook on members of the Brazilian National Congress during the election campaign until the transition of power to the opposition candidate, Lula da Silva, in January 2023, when pro-Bolsonaro protesters stormed the National Congress, the Supreme Federal Court, and the Palácio do Planalto in an attempt to overthrow the Federal Government. To this end, we archived the pronouncements of elected Brazilian representatives, 77% of whom use Twitter to release official statements, and identified messages supporting a military intervention or casting doubt on the electoral process. The collected data includes 208,217 observations (pronouncements) classified across nearly 50 quantitative and qualitative variables. The database also identifies accounts affiliated with the government (GO), the opposition (OP), and those of the broad coalition known as Centrão (CE) based on Radar do Congresso (Congresso em Foco, 2022).

Our hypothesis is that support for the self-coup d'état pushed by the Bolsonaro administration failed due to dwindling support from his coalition, a hypothesis that we tested based on official pronouncements made by representatives of his party, the

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coalition, and the opposition. In other words, we expected the Centrão—a group of political parties that do not adhere to any consistent ideological orientation but are focused instead on ensuring proximity to the executive branch to secure political advantages—to ultimately abandon the insurrectionist rhetoric. Figures 1-2 show a sample of messages supportive of military intervention or questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process.



Figure 1: Sample of public pronouncements of congresspeople

We begin by examining the database of Bolsonaro's public statements to identify instances of false claims of electoral fraud, broad and unqualified attacks to democratic institutions, and the out-group stereotyping of progressive groups that served as rationale for the proposed annulment of the election (Rennó, 2022). Public statements that included no such elements were coded as 0 (no problematic content), with statements coded 1 identifying messages attacking democratic institutions. Finally, statements coded 2 present a clear call for a military coup d'état in addition to casting doubt on the electoral process. We found 122 problematic statements (17%) from the universe of 728 public announcements fact-checked by Aos Fatos.



Figure 2: Sample of public pronouncements of congresspeople

Analysis of these statements reveals recurrent frames that are the blueprint for the insurrectionist playbook: 1. Righteousness (54 statements; 44.2%): how progressive governments threaten conservative values through the imposition of gender ideology; 2. The communist threat (22 statements; 18%): the perceived notion that the Latin American left is associated with authoritarian regimes; 3. Corruption (27 statements; 22.1%): attacks to democratic institutions, such as the Supreme Federal Court or the press, both of which are referred to as corrupt; 4. Election denialism (10 statements; 8.1%): attacks to the electoral process or the voting machines; 5. Historical revisionism (8 statements; 6.5%): support for the Brazilian military dictatorship installed in the 1964 military coup; and finally 6. Coup d'état (2 statements; 1.6%): open threats or calls for a military intervention and justifications for a coup d'état.

These problematic statements appeared in interviews, debates, Facebook Live Streaming, and Twitter. However, all statements coded as problematic (1 or 2) were posted or featured on YouTube. The public statements fact-checked by Aos Fatos show an uptake of 25 problematic statements in August, followed by 32 in September, and finally 65 in October when the election was held. With fear-mongering being central to this playbook, the statements include on-point messaging for the Bolsonaro base that promoted distrust in the electoral process and sowed anxiety with the looming prospect

of electoral defeat. Figure 6 unpacks these trends.

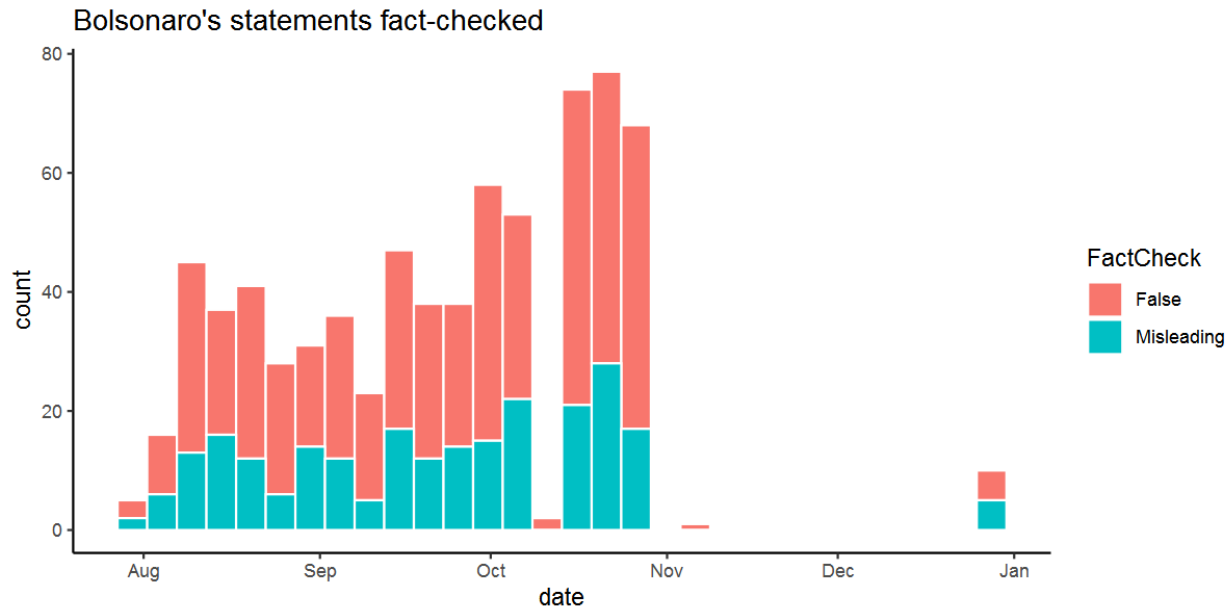


Figure 3: Public statements made by Bolsonaro fact-checked during the official electoral period

The core tenets of this playbook are centered on nationalism, religion, family, and the right to bear arms. It projects a global culture war against cultural liberalism (consistent with the agenda advocated by Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, and Benjamin Netanyahu) and reflect a commitment to issues of guns, Christianity, and what is repeatedly slammed as 'cultural Marxism,' 'gender ideology,' and 'environmental psychoses over deforestation' (Schipani, 2019). Another common thread are attacks on institutions overseeing the elections.

These statements accuse the Supreme Federal Court of partisanship. The manufactured notion of a constitutional military intervention and Bolsonaro's historical revisionism (Waymer & Heath, 2023) also feature prominently in the statements. Taken together, these statements are carefully aimed at creating 'righteous rage' (Rothbart & Stebbins, 2022). This combination of conservative social agenda, cultural war, and insurrectionist pragmatism was effective at stirring the base, but it is unclear if it managed to convert the government coalition.

Next we inspect whether the insurrectionist playbook was embraced by members of the Brazilian National Congress. We found that 12% of the representatives posted official statements openly supporting a military coup d'état or questioning the electoral process. The distribution of public statements peaks early and decreases over time, with the density curve shown in Figure 7(a) closely resembling a geometric distribution. The distribution of unsubstantiated fraud claims, however, follows the opposite pattern: as Bolsonaro struggles in the campaign trail, fraud claims escalate (Figure 7b), in sharp contrast to the pacing of the campaign (Figure 7a). Direct calls for a coup d'état, finally, peaked toward the end of October when Lula da Silva was announced president-elect (Figure 7c). Figure 7 shows these trends in line with the hypothesis driving this study.

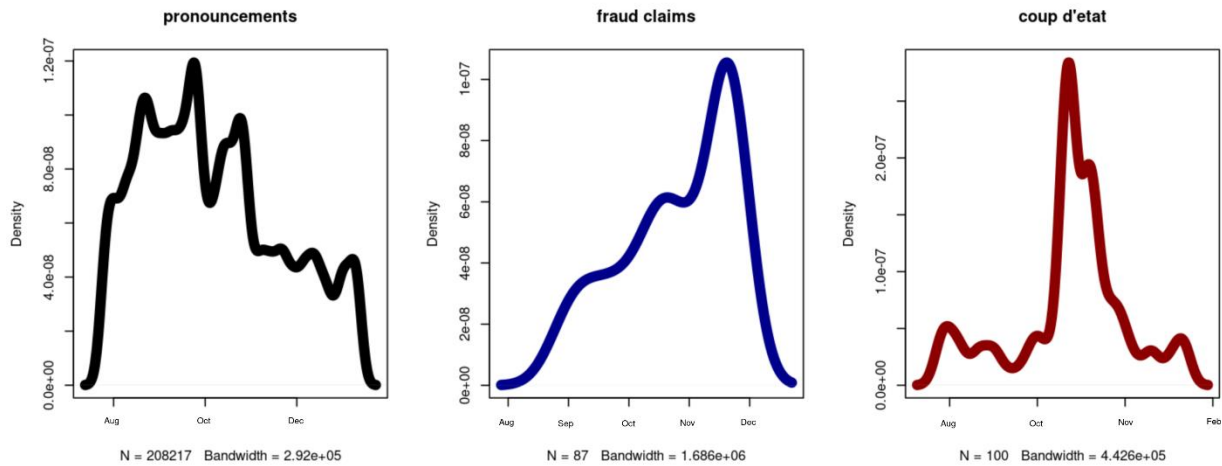


Figure 4: Distribution of public statements (left), fraud claims (center), and calls for military intervention (right)

Finally, we inspected the temporal series of false claims embedded in public statements of Government (GO) and coalition (CE) representatives. Figure 8 shows the frequency of public statements casting doubt on the electoral process or requesting a military intervention. While the Government continues to put out official statements with false claims of electoral fraud, the broader coalition (CE) abandons the insurrectionist playbook in early September. The government base becomes increasingly more isolated in its efforts to push the electoral fraud narrative, notwithstanding the relatively stable stream of messages with false claims about the election pushed by government core representatives in the period. As such, we conclude that the coup d'état in Brazil failed due to dwindling support for the Bolsonaro insurrectionist agenda.

Fraud claims & military intervention

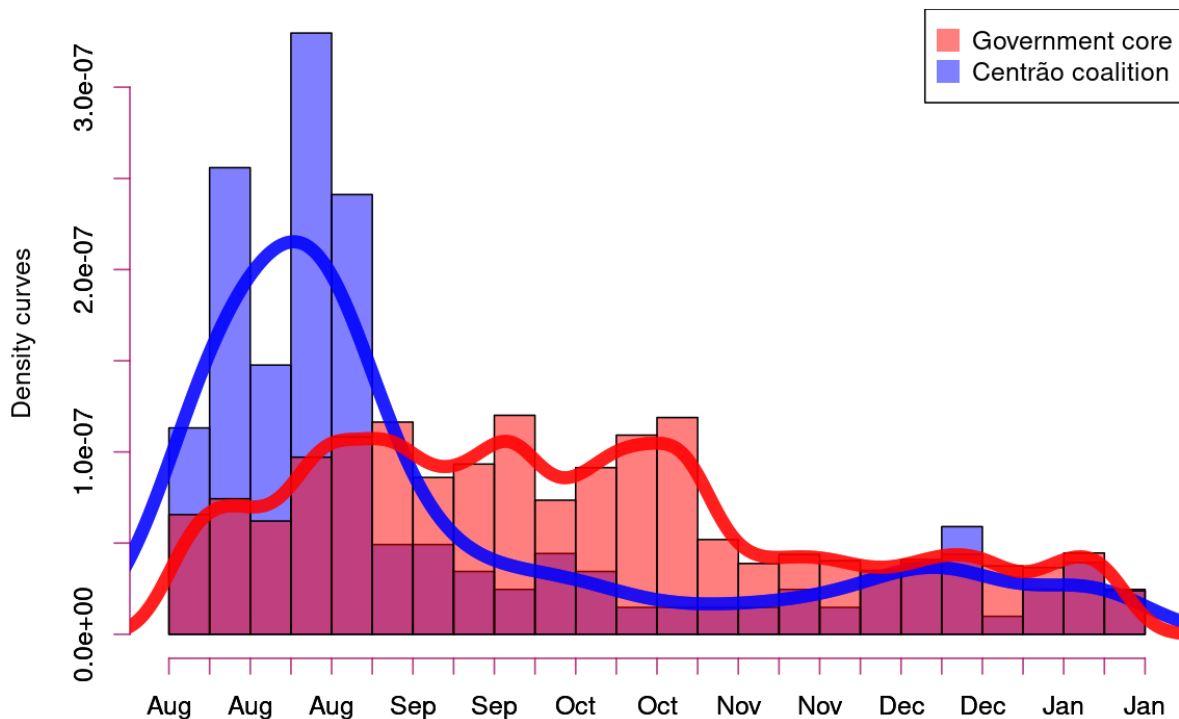


Figure 5: Frequency distribution of public statements casting doubt on the electoral process or requesting a military intervention by government (GO) and coalition (CE) representatives.

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