

‘Old and Unoriginal’: Bolsonaro’s Hold and Maintenance of Power in Brazilian Democracy

## Abstract

The present text explores the methods by which Jair Bolsonaro was able to hold and maintain power in Brazilian democracy. Over the years, many studies on populist leaders like Trump, Mussolini, and Peron have been produced by academia, leaving some like Bolsonaro behind. Being a leader of the 12<sup>th</sup> world economy, one that presents many characteristics of populist leaders, this study believes that Bolsonaro is a worthy candidate to be studied. This paper, then, first goes over the literature on the topic, separating it into three main ideas using the most critical scholars in the field. Next, introduces Jair Bolsonaro's strategies at making an enemy, being relatable, and his "old politics." With that, this paper presents Donald Trump and Geert Wilders as case studies to show that Bolsonaro's strategies work and are neither unique nor original to the Brazilian President. In addition, this study analyzes two main hypotheses related to Brazilian society, one about Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, and the other regarding Bolsonaro's knife injury. This paper concludes that Bolsonaro's strategies are indeed not exclusive to him and that they were able to place him in the presidential chair. Also, the impeachment, using Laclau's theory on broken societies, seems relevant since it created a situation where the Brazilian public wanted a savior, and they saw Bolsonaro as one since he was set on an opposite side of politics. Finally, the "knife effect" might have been significant, but Lula's imprisonment might have influenced Bolsonaro's apparent gain in popularity after being injured.

Key words; Populism, Mudde, Finchelstein, Laclau, Trump, Wilders, Bolsonaro, Rousseff, Relatability, Enemy, Impeachment

## Introduction

Right-wing populism dominates Bolsonaro's regime. Following his election on the 28th of October, Bolsonaro made sure to keep the same posture he had during his candidacy: of an honorable, patriotic man. As an attempt to understand Bolsonaro's strategies, the present text dives into some events before the election that explain why Brazilian folk saw him as the next president. One thing, however, must be clear: This paper is not an attempt to undermine and criticize Bolsonaro's government. It is, however, an analysis to try to understand the reasons in which Bolsonaro – as a right-wing populist leader – achieved and maintained hold of his power.

Before the discussion on Bolsonaro begins, a discussion on populism will take place. Even though this research revolves around populism, its definition will not be necessary since the goal of my research is not to assess if Bolsonaro falls or not under a populist umbrella. When it comes to populism as a theory, I will heavily rely on three leading scholars in the field: Laclau, Mudde, and Finchelstein, and then explain how they see three different areas in the discussion of populism. First, I will show their definition of populism. Second, I will illustrate how each defines the "people," as it is a crucial concept of populism. Finally, I will show the readers their discussion on populism as part of the Left or Right in the political spectrum. With this discussion in place, this paper will treat Bolsonaro as being a right-wing populist leader. Then, I will present this a short discussion on this paper's definition of relatability – based on three dictionaries – and a broken society as it is seen in Laclau. This paper believes that in order to understand the strategies behind Bolsonaro's relatability to the public, we first need to understand what is to be relatable, and in order to assess the "brokenness" of Brazilian society, we first need to address this fundamental concept in Laclau's philosophy.

Understanding populism is understanding Bolsonaro. In the early 2000s, the concept of populism was introduced to academia, which has generated thousands upon thousands of research articles on the topic. Finchelstein, one of the most well-known and important contemporary scholars in the field, even claims that populism nowadays is a trendy subject.<sup>1</sup> Though agreeing with Finchelstein, I believe that the fact that populism is now becoming a more discussed concept is for the best, and hence the reason in which I decided to embark in the analysis of a specific populist figure in a comparative study. Thus, in order to evaluate Bolsonaro's strategies that made it possible for him to hold and maintain power, this paper will divide his behavior into three different spheres: making an "enemy," being tired of the old system/party, and relatability to the "people." In each of these concepts, I will then use other political figures like Donald Trump and Geert Wilders to illustrate not only that Bolsonaro's line of reasoning works, but it is also not unique to the Brazilian president.

This paper will also investigate two different hypotheses. While reviewing the literature, it is evident that Dilma Rousseff's impeachment shook the Brazilian political atmosphere. What began as a mere protest in 2013 culminated in the president's removal from their post. Here, in my opinion, is where Bolsonaro shines. Using Laclau's philosophy of a broken society, this paper presents the hypothesis that Dilma's impeachment was key in Bolsonaro's election since he was launched to the presidency by a people who saw him as a savior, representing the complete opposite of the then party in power. Secondly, while still a candidate, Bolsonaro suffered a knife injury by Adelio Bispo de Oliveira, a man that was later discovered to have been

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<sup>1</sup> Federico Finchelstein. *From Fascism to Populism in History* (California: University of California Press, 2017), x.

part of a left-leaning party.<sup>2</sup> This, as you will see, was used as further evidence that the Left was indeed evil and corrupt which, in turn, helped Bolsonaro's popularity. However, Lula's imprisonment plays a role in this issue, and its complexities are addressed.

### **Literature Review**

Populism is a tricky subject. For many years, scholars like Mudde, Finchelstein, and Laclau have carefully studied the topic to understand its intricacies. The school of thought, founded by the Argentine scholar Ernesto Laclau, pushed academia to think differently of the term, driving a complex – and at times confusing – discussion of populism. Here, three main similarities between these scholars are examined. First, their definition of populism. Second, their conceptualization of the “people.” Third, their attempt at trying to place populism in the political spectrum.

### **Defining Populism**

For scholars like Mudde, the scholarly debate is rather negative and charged with emotion.<sup>3</sup> The author believes that, at least at the time of his writings, there were two dominant interpretations of the term. The first referred to *Stammitsch*, a word used to imply a simple and emotional speech that represents the feelings of the people.<sup>4</sup> For Mudde, however, such interpretation is problematic since it does not hold true when used for empirical research.<sup>5</sup> The second, instead of being related to the feeling of the people, alludes to certain devious policies

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<sup>2</sup> Joao Pedroso de Campos, “Homem que esfaqueou Bolsonaro foi filiado ao PSOL por 7 anos,” *VEJA*, September 6, 2018, <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/homem-que-esfaqueou-bolsonaro-foi-filiado-ao-psol-por-7-anos/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

used to please the people in question swiftly.<sup>6</sup> Such modus operandi would result in politicians not being rational with their choices, looking for the best way to “buy” the public’s support (e.g., lowering taxes before the election).<sup>7</sup> Mudde concludes that even though academia is far from achieving a consensus in the definition of populism, there are two points that remain clear: the elite and the people.<sup>8</sup> With that said, Mudde clearly defines populism “as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”<sup>9</sup> Out of these three scholars, Mudde is by far the most direct and transparent of them.

Laclau also acknowledges the ambiguities of the term. In the first chapter of his book *On Populist Reason*, the scholar discusses populism as “vague,” which directly impacts its study due to scholars’ reluctance to provide it with a clear meaning.<sup>10</sup> This being said, Laclau believes that a common strategy seen in academia is listing what he calls the “relevant features” of populism, which does not help in any way to grasp its true significance.<sup>11</sup> As an example, he lists Gino Germani’s work on authoritarianism, fascism, and national populism, and Margaret Canovan’s on populism to illustrate two scholars who are guilty of the strategy explained above. Laclau, however, does not blame them per se, but the limiting environment of political theory.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 543; For other articles about this notion, see Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, “How to Define Populism?,” in Gregor Fitzzi, Turner Juergen, and Bryan S., eds. *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy: Volume 1: Concepts and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2018), 62-78, and Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Practices in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 543.

<sup>10</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2018), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

philosopher asserts that the “ontological tools” available for scholars reflect the erroneous way in which theorists have approached the topic, which makes them focus on the wrong set of things.<sup>13</sup> Even though criticizing scholar’s lack of aim in the study of populism, Laclau embarks on a journey to contribute to scholarship by providing his own view on populism which, ironically, is far from direct. Some things, however, are certain. For Laclau, populism has not a fixed definition, but is a series of broad strategies used for different situations that can only rise once the previous system has been disrupted.<sup>14</sup> It also never emerges from the outside, but entrenches a nation by revolving around popular demand.<sup>15</sup> Most importantly, populism is structured around logics of equivalence and difference, which he defines as “two ways of constructing the social.”<sup>16</sup> The first, as its name suggests, is related to the frustration and feelings of endangerment that a population can have which, in turn, make them equivalent and unites them against an enemy.<sup>17</sup> When it comes to the second, Hansen illustrates that they are related to political movements that give room ‘differently’ to social demands.<sup>18</sup> Laclau, then, gives both terms an incredible weight in the discussion of populism.

Finchelstein, however, does not believe that populism is an ambiguous term, but that scholars are in denial in the significance that history plays in the study of populism. The historian

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 176; See Maria Stopfner, “Just Thank God for Donald Trump,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 186 (2021): 310, and Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (California: Stanford UP, 2016): 8, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/templeuniv-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4517325&pq-origsite=primo>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>17</sup> Ewen Speed, and Russell Mannion, “Populism and Health Policy: Three International Case Studies of Right-Wing Populist Policy Frames,” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 42, no. 8 (2020): 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Allan Dreyer Hansen, "Laclauian Discourse Theory and the Problems of Institutions," *Roskilde University* (2008): 7.

asserts that many scholars in academia are endorsing the notion that this new wave of populism is something wholly new and unique.<sup>19</sup> For him, however, populist movements (like Trump's and Bolsonaro's) have a long history, with only but a few particularities.<sup>20</sup> Finchelstein, then, presents the connections between fascism and populism but fails – unlike Mudde – to offer a clear definition of populism. However, some aspects of it can be understood by the historical examples Finchelstein provides. First, when analyzing Peron's regime in Argentina, Finchelstein points out that the Argentine dictator was the first case of modern populism that – unlike fascism – it did not idealize violence.<sup>21</sup> Second, populism is a totalitarian form of democracy that does not recognize a legal place for its opposition, putting the will of the people before every decision.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, populism is a universal concept that cannot be tied to a specific nation, being neither “Argentine, Latin American, North American, Asian, or European.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Concept of People**

One vital concept in populist theory is to understand the “people” and those who do not meet its membership criteria. In his paper, Mudde accepts the term's vagueness but does not explicitly state his opinion on it. Instead, he offers Paul Taggart's study on the topic. According to Taggart, the term “people” should be replaced by “heartland” since the latter emphasizes that the people are “neither real nor inclusive,” but fabled set of the whole.<sup>24</sup> What is clear for Mudde, however, is with who and what populists fight against. For instance, the author claims that it is not surprising that populist leaders tend to argue that political parties harm the union

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<sup>19</sup> Federico Finchelstein. *From Fascism to Populism in History* (California: University of California Press, 2017), x.

<sup>20</sup> Finchelstein, *Fascism*, xi.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Mudde, “Populist,” 546.

between leader and supporter, and so, they oppose not political parties per se, but those that are in power, calling for the establishment of a new one.<sup>25</sup> Also, Mudde claims that populism is not against technocratic measures, and cites the Social Credit movement in Canada that argued for a largely technocratic regime.<sup>26</sup>

In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau also treats “people” as a concept that seeks to make concrete the relationship between social agents.<sup>27</sup> For Laclau, “populism is the political logic of democracy, which he regards as ‘the only truly political society,’” and so “the *demos* or people” are key “to any conception of democratic politics.”<sup>28</sup> *On Populist Reason*, Laclau presents the “people” are nothing more than a notion that is able to construct and explain the unity of a group that – among other things – depends on the logics of equivalence and difference to exist.<sup>29</sup> In Giuseppe Ballacci’s words, the process of creating the people “requires not only the creation of a chain of equivalences and an agonistic frontier, but also the identification of a particular element of this chain as symbol of such unity... whose meaning will in turn determine” their political identities.<sup>30</sup> Here, as Laclau points out, is where the “equivalential chain” acts over them.<sup>31</sup> Most importantly, the “people” are already an existing group that was present in a nation way before a populist leader takes hold.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 547.

<sup>27</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Lincoln Dahlberg, and Sean Phelan, eds., *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2011), 202.

<sup>29</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 73.

<sup>30</sup> Giuseppe Ballacci, “The Creation of the ‘People’ in Laclau’s Theory of Populism: A Critical Assessment,” *Philosophy Journal* 57 (2017): 56.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 72.

Similarly, Finchelstein believes that “people” refers to a more abstract set of persons directly related to its political leader. The author echoes Andrew Arato’s study and presents the “people” as a “fictional united people” that refers to many diverse and united groups in a nation.<sup>33</sup> For Finchelstein, however, even though agreeing with Arato in the fictional aspect of the “people,” the goal of a populist leader is not only to act in the name of these people but impersonate them.<sup>34</sup> In Finchelstein’s words, “the leaders *is* the people.”<sup>35</sup> In many instances in history, from Argentina to France and Germany, we have seen leaders that embody – or try to – their people. The contradiction, is that even though only representing the fraction of the population that agrees with them, Finchelstein believes that populists believe that they are, in fact, representing the entire nation.<sup>36</sup> In Finchelstein’s philosophy, the leader is a key figure in the formation of the “people” since they – at some point – become one, with the voice of the people only being represented through the mouth of their leader.<sup>37</sup>

### **Left? Right? Both? Or Neither?**

In literature, populism can be presented as liberal, conservative, both, or neither. Mudde, Laclau, and Finchelstein all approach this dilemma in very similar ways, with slight differences. In his paper, Mudde asserts that in its majority, populism is associated with the Right. It can, however, also be found in the Left.<sup>38</sup> The scholar exemplifies his claim by using Jong Haiden with the FPO, Jean Marie Le Pen with the FN, and Pauline Hansen’s One Nation, all cases of a

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<sup>33</sup> Finchelstein, *Fascism*, xxxvi.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; See Benjamin Moffitt, and Simon Tormey, “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style,” *Political Studies* 62 (2014): 389, <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.1111%2F1467-9248.12032>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Mudde, “Populist,” 549.

democratic socialist ideology “with a strong populist discourse.”<sup>39</sup> Mudde also believes that it is completely logical to claim that populism is easily found in the Right since conservator movements tend to focus on the nation and nationalism, and so jumping from “the natio” to the “people” is almost effortless.<sup>40</sup> When it comes to the Left, Mudde alludes to Bernard Tapie, a former French businessman who was involved in the Socialist party and claimed that left-wing populism can combine democratic socialist values with strong populist ideas.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, they are no longer a “vanguard of the proletariat,” but the *vox populi*.<sup>42</sup>

Laclau also sees populism as being part of both sides of the political spectrum but is not as straightforward as Mudde is his arguments. What Laclau does, however, is discuss certain populism movements and attribute them at being from either the Left of Right. For instance, Laclau uses France as an example of right-wing populism, claiming that the Communist Party was the responsible for the rise of such ideology as people complained their voices were not being heard.<sup>43</sup> Even though Laclau asserts that such distinction between Right of Left became blurred after the Left “abandoned the camp of social division,” the Right took hold shortly after.<sup>44</sup> When it comes to both sides of the political spectrum, Laclau first disagrees with Meny’s and Surel’s works on populism, explaining that the only correct assumption made by them was that populism can be seen in both the extreme Left and Right.<sup>45</sup> Another example can be seen in his discussion of the language used by populist leaders, claiming that it is “imprecise and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid; See Stopfner, “Trump,” 310.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 550.

<sup>43</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 176.

fluctuating” from both the Left and Right.<sup>46</sup> As seen, Laclau does not explicitly talk about populism in the political spectrum, but the fact that he mentions populism in both leaves no doubt that the Argentine philosopher saw populism as part of both sides of politics.

Similarly, Finchelstein defines populism as an “ideological pendulum.”<sup>47</sup> The Argentine philosopher echoes Zeev Sternhell’s work *Neither Right nor Left*, and explains that populism, conceptually speaking, belongs to neither the Left nor Right. Historically, however, knowing that populism is a bigoted understanding of democracy, it has been both.<sup>48</sup> For Finchelstein, one defining characteristic of modern populism is its fluidity; the ability to quickly transition from one side to the other in the political spectrum.<sup>49</sup> However, notwithstanding its political tendency, many characteristics remain constant. Mainly, the idea that those not part of the “people” are enemies, the “people” as being correct, the leader as the embodiment of its followers, and radical nationalism.<sup>50</sup>

### **Gap in the Literature and Contributions to Scholarship**

Bolsonaro is not a target of academic research. As I read, I was able to easily find articles on Donald Trump, Mussolini, Hitler, Wilders, Peron, and many other populist leaders. Articles on Bolsonaro, however, took some more digging in to find. With this said, I believe that Bolsonaro is a worthy case study for two main reasons. First, Brazil is the 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world.<sup>51</sup> Then, understanding a populist leader that is the head of such a powerful country

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>47</sup> Finchelstein, *Fascism*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid; See also Michael Freedon, “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?,” *Political Studies* (1998): 750.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Caleb Silver, “The Top 25 Economies in the World,” *Investopedia*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/>.

is important to understand his politics and Brazil's response to world events. Second, Bolsonaro displays many behaviors that are classically identified as populist, and so a throughout understanding of Bolsonaro further pushes the boundaries of our understanding of populism, which is a worthy contribution to scholarship. In addition, Laclau points out that the institutional system has to be broken in order for populism to rise.<sup>52</sup> I believe that the first hypothesis analyzed in this paper can shed light on Laclauian philosophy and test if it still holds ground.

### **Research design**

This section is divided into four main points. The first goes over what made Bolsonaro, Trump, and Wilders adequate case studies for this research paper. Second, my criteria for selecting the data used in this research are stated. Third, the definition of relatability and broken society are presented. Finally, the two hypotheses are explained.

### **The Selection of Populist Leaders**

The year 2018 was challenging for Brazilian politics. As we can see in the documentary *The Edge of Democracy*, there were many events that led to a drastic change in power and popular view on politics. At the beginning of the piece, Petra Costa presents an unstable society after many years of dictatorship, and it is here that Lula rose as the hero the public needed.<sup>53</sup> This, however, would not last forever. As the documentary outlines, Brazil was under the Workers' Party's hold for around ten years when people got tired and did not feel represented by the current government.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 177.

<sup>53</sup> *The Edge of Democracy*, directed by Petra Costa (2019; SP: Busca Vida Filmes), Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80190535>.

<sup>54</sup> *The Edge of Democracy*.

With this, I was conditioned to hate the Workers' Party from an early age, a belief that was challenged as Bolsonaro became an influential figure. For most of my childhood and early adolescence, I remember hearing adults complaining about the Workers' Party, calling them names that would not be appropriate to be written in this essay. Therefore, I learned that the Worker's Party was unworthy of trust, and anything related to them was to be discarded. However, as the 2018 presidential election took place, my own political belief was challenged as I saw myself cheering for Fernando Haddad, a politician from the Workers' Party that ran against Bolsonaro, and all because of a simple truth: the more I researched Bolsonaro's life, the more I abhorred him. Seeing videos of him screaming at a woman that he would not rape her because she was not worthy, or that he prefers having a dead son than a homosexual one showed me how unstable and untrustworthy he was as a candidate for presidency.<sup>55</sup>

The fact that Bolsonaro was able to get so many emotional reactions out of me made him an excellent candidate for this study. Bolsonaro became one of the first politicians who really got my attention and made me interested in politics. Back then, politics seemed like a dull affair that was not worthy of my stress. All of this would, for better or for worse, change with Bolsonaro's emergence as a prominent politician.

Donald Trump came to mind due to his demeanor and relations with Bolsonaro. During his four years in office, Trump displayed many characteristics that became known as Trumpism: key characteristics to govern that were seen as an essential part of his government which, for

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<sup>55</sup> Joao Almeida Moreira, "Bolsonaro e as mulheres: 'Não estupro porque é feia', 'deviam ganhar menos', 'queria dar o furo'," *Diário de Notícias*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.dn.pt/mundo/bolsonaro-e-as-mulheres-nao-estupro-porque-e-feia-deviam-ganhar-menos-queria-dar-um-furo-11838495.html>; Muka Oliveira, "Relembre as Polêmicas de Jair Bolsonaro com a Comunidade LGBTQIA+," *Observatório G*, September 29, 2021, <https://observatoriog.bol.uol.com.br/noticias/comportamento/relembre-as-polemicas-de-jair-bolsonaro-com-a-comunidade-lgbtqia>.

scholars like David Tabachnick, is divided into four parts. His celebrity aspect. His nativism and policies revolved around it. His ability to portray himself as someone in opposition with the then party/politician in power. And his populist ideas that, as Tabachnick explains, “appeals to a large group of anti-intellectual, conspiracy minded and alienated malcontents.”<sup>56</sup> These characteristics, sadly, would also be seen in Bolsonaro, which made the relationship between these two politicians clear. For example, as argued by Ishaan Tharoor, Bolsonaro is well acquainted with Trump’s playbook for three reasons.<sup>57</sup> First, that like Trump, Bolsonaro rose to power “on a wave of anti-establishment anger.”<sup>58</sup> Second, that both are known as being politically incorrect individuals (due to their racist and homophobic opinions),. Third, that both displayed ignorant ideas on the COVID pandemic.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Trump was chosen due to an apparent connection he holds with Bolsonaro.

Wilders also possesses characteristics that link him with Bolsonaro and Trump. Both Bolsonaro and Trump are well-known figures for their outrageous claims over women’s rights and equality. Like them, Wilders became known for his hatred for those who did not “belong” in his society (in his case, the Netherlands), and those who were part of the opposition. Specifically for the Dutch politician, his disgust towards the Muslim population in the nation was driving force for many of his policies. Such connections between these three leaders made Wilders the ideal candidate, one that would better help to explain Bolsonaro’s actions.

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<sup>56</sup> David Edward Tabachnick, “The Four Characteristics of Trumpism,” *The Hill*, January 5, 2016, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/presidential-campaign/264746-the-four-characteristics-of-trumpism>.

<sup>57</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “Brazil’s Bolsonaro Follows the Trump Playbook,” *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/11/bolsonaro-trump-playbook/>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## Data Collection

Having chosen Bolsonaro, Trump, and Wilders, I now needed to get better acquainted with populist literature. Mainly, I wanted to find core works that are still relevant for today's scholarship and find contemporary academics that are still active in researching populism.

The first task was to find core works on populism. In order for my understanding of populism to be accurate, I focused on scholarly articles that talked about populism as a theory. In their majority, the Argentine philosopher Ernesto Laclau was always listed, which showed me the importance of his work. With this, I had my first major scholarly work to analyze. However, I did not want to rely on a book that – even though important – was written a long time ago. Therefore, using tools like Google Scholar and Temple University's library, I was able to find articles that used Laclau's work but were more contemporary. In this journey, two other major scholars in the field were presented to me: Cas Mudde and Federico Finchelstein. Now, I needed to find their main work on the subject. When it comes to Laclau, as I read articles on populism, his main work – the one that was majorly cited – was his book *On Populist Reason*. For Mudde, it was his article "The Populist Zeitgeist." And lastly, Finchelstein's book *From Fascism to Populism in History*. With this set, I now had three main works in the field.

These were not the only data I gathered. When talking about additional works in the field, I focused on three main areas: books, scholarly articles, and unbiased news sources. I also aimed at finding papers in other languages like Portuguese and Spanish. For instance, one of Bolsonaro's behaviors that will be discussed in this paper is how he makes himself relatable to his people. The sources that I will use for this part are either in Portuguese or written by Brazilian scholars in English that used Portuguese written works as their sources. In addition, I

also researched contemporary scholars that used Mudde and Finchelstein in their work so that my understanding of the academic conversation on populism was better-rounded.

### **Key Terms**

To understand a populist leader's relatability, we first need to understand what is to be relatable. According to the McMillan dictionary, relatability is when one feels a connection to someone due to shared characteristics.<sup>60</sup> For Cambridge Dictionary, being able to sympathize with someone is important.<sup>61</sup> When it comes to Merriam-Webster, being relatable is to be "able to be related to: possible to understand, like, or have sympathy for because of similarities to oneself or one's own experiences."<sup>62</sup> Using these three separate views on relatability, it does seem that they are all connected with one main factor: a connection that one feels with another. Therefore, what is in the core of this concept is the sense of belonging one feels due to a connection that bonds both parties. This will be, then, the way this paper will evaluate a politician's relatability to his public. Furthermore, in order to analyze if a populist leader is being indeed relatable, this paper will present ways in which they are able to achieve this state and, taking into consideration their leadership positions, their relatability to the public becomes clear for one main reason: they were only able to be where they are with public support. One way that we – voters – can quickly identify such phenomena taking place is by attentively observing a politician. Are they branding themselves as belonging to the people? Are they explicitly claiming to be part of the people? These are but a few examples of how such relatability can present itself.

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<sup>60</sup> *McMillan Dictionary*, s.v. "Relatable," accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/relatable>.

<sup>61</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "Relatable," accessed March 22, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/relatable>.

<sup>62</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "Relatable," accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relatable>.

When it comes to a broken society, this paper will borrow Laclau's definition. Even though not providing it with a clear meaning, Laclau does offer some tips. *On Populist Reason*, after claiming that populism only rises in a broken society, Laclau starts to cite some examples. In his words, "without the slump of the 1930s, Hitler would have remained a vociferous fringe ringleader. Without the crisis of the Fourth Republic around the Algerian war, De Gaulle's appeal would have remained as unheard as it had been in 1946. And without the progressive erosion of the oligarchical system in the Argentina of the 1930s, the rise of Peron would have been unthinkable."<sup>63</sup> With this said, this paper will consider that a broken society is one that – like the examples provided show – suffered a shock that drastically changed the course of its political system. In Brazil's case, for instance, what caused the society to break was Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, which drastically changed Brazilian politics by opening the door to a far-right candidate to – after 16 years of liberal rule – be elected as president.

### **Hypotheses**

As explained in the introduction, this paper will use two hypotheses that can help to explain Bolsonaro's hold and maintenance of power. The first, related to Laclau's philosophy, is connected to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff that might have created the perfect environment for a figure like Bolsonaro to emerge. In order to better understand the impeachment, this paper will present a brief discussion of the events before and after the impeachment that can help identify people's mentality in such a crisis. To be clear, this paper is not claiming that the removal of Dilma Rousseff from office by itself helped Bolsonaro but created a perfect environment for figures like Bolsonaro to emerge and gain popularity. Secondly, the knife attack that Bolsonaro suffered in September of 2018 might have also been

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<sup>63</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 177.

relevant. In order to analyze it, I will present data from credible Brazilian sources like Datafolha that show Bolsonaro's popularity before and after the attack. Then, using sources like his Facebook account, his reaction to his attack. Lastly, a short discussion on Lula's candidacy and its complexities attached to it takes place.

### **Case Presentation**

In order to fully assess Bolsonaro's ability to rise and hold power in Brazilian democracy, this paper divides his behavior into three main parts. The first is his ability to make an enemy (or his scapegoat of choice). The second is his portrayal of a politician that is tired and against the system/party in power. The third is about his relatability. Here, I present Bolsonaro's take on each of these topics, and then use Donald Trump and Geert Wilders to show that Bolsonaro's strategies are far from unique and might help to explain his success.

### **Enemies of the Nation**

As seen in the studies of Mudde, Laclau, and Finchelstein, the art of making an enemy is a popular one in populist rhetoric. Even in his definition, Mudde presents populism as a conflict between the "pure" and the "corrupt."<sup>64</sup> Laclau, using the logic of equivalence, describes a situation where a group of people become one (or equivalent) due to a frustration.<sup>65</sup> And finally, Finchelstein mentions that a populist leader consistently makes sure to put the will of the "people" in every decision.<sup>66</sup>

Bolsonaro represents Brazilian resentment towards politics and the Car Wash corruption scandal. After Dilma Rousseff employed anti-corruption tactics in order to save her popularity,

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<sup>64</sup> Mudde, "Populist," 543.

<sup>65</sup> Speed, and Mannion. "Populism," 1970.

<sup>66</sup> Finchelstein, *Fascism*, 5.

which directly resulted in the Car Wash operation being uncovered, hatred towards the Left (and with it, the Workers' Party) exponentially grew. This frustration, then, ignited a will to change the present government since they were now seen as corrupt (not only the Workers' Party but the Left as a whole). This polarization, as Franchini et al. explain, would culminate in Bolsonaro's election.<sup>67</sup> Back then, people believed that their world was "degenerating into corruption and violence because of the Partido Trabalhista (in English, the Workers' Party)," who are defined as "demons from the left."<sup>68</sup> The Right, however, see themselves as "united, good citizens," that will not allow the Left to take control of the nation.<sup>69</sup>

With that in mind, Bolsonaro branded the Workers' Party as the nation's main enemy, but not the only. With a rising hatred of the Left, Bolsonaro became known as this charismatic leader that told the "people" exactly what they wanted to hear, "that the right thing would be to blow up the Congress; kill those multitudes of people who only do harm to the country; defend workers and not the 'human rights of criminals', and so forth."<sup>70</sup> As he gained popularity by the day, people began seeing him as the savior that they prayed for, one that is the complete opposite of the corrupt and evil Workers' Party. For example, Bayarri published a study assessing the content published in far-right social media. There, the Left was being represented as animals in cages, excrement, and other degrading images.<sup>71</sup> They, however, are not the only group abhorred

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<sup>67</sup> Matias Franchini, Ana Carolina Evangelista Mauad, and Eduardo Viola, "De Lula a Bolsonaro: Una Decada de Degradacion de la Governanza Climatica en Brazil," *Analisis Politico* 33, no. 99 (May): 93, <https://www.proquest.com/publiccontent/docview/2485598321?pq-origsite=primo&accountid=14270>.

<sup>68</sup> Gabriel Feltran, "Centripetal Force: a Totalitarian Movement in Contemporary Brazil," *Lawrence & Wishart Ltd*, no. 75 (Summer): 105, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.3898/SOUN.75.06.2020>.

<sup>69</sup> Feltran, "Centripetal," 105.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Gabriel Bayarri Toscano, "Legitimation of Hate and Political Violence Through Memetic Images: the Bolsonaro Campaign," *Communication & Society* 34, no. 2 (2021): 455.

by Bolsonaro's followers. Racial minorities, women, gays, and other subgroups are also included. The black community, for instance, was attributed to dishonest characteristics (like theft) and the illegal ownership of firearms.<sup>72</sup> When it comes to women, many images hypersexualizing them were also found in the study.<sup>73</sup> In practice, Bolsonaro was accused – and then later confirmed – to have physically assaulted Conceicao Aparecida, an employee of a company that provided services for the army.<sup>74</sup> He also, in 2017, said that his only daughter is a result of his "weakness" at the time of conception.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, in an interview in 2020, said that Patricia Campos Mello – who criticized Bolsonaro's campaign – wanted to have sexual relations with him.<sup>76</sup> Those that do not have a formal job – like artists – are also a target, being represented as lazy, dependent, and "dangerous being who in the last resort can lead to the death of the 'good citizen.'"<sup>77</sup>

Additionally, news sources were also attacked by Bolsonaro and his followers. Ever since his candidacy, Bolsonaro has been known for his distrust in the media. By way of example, when talking about the Datafolha (one of Brazil's leading research organizations), Bolsonaro claims that "I've eight percent in the polls. If Datafolha gives me eight percent, I must have 24 percent."<sup>78</sup> By openly asserting that Datafolha's numbers are flawed, Bolsonaro makes it clear that he does not trust any media outlets that are not on his side.<sup>79</sup> In addition, Bolsonaro decided

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<sup>72</sup> Toscano, "Legitimation," 455.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Presidente Machista: Conheça as Agressões De Bolsonaro Contra Mulheres." Partido dos Trabalhadores, March 2, 2022. <https://pt.org.br/presidente-machista-conheca-as-agressoes-de-bolsonaro-contramulheres/>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> *The Edge of Democracy*.

<sup>79</sup> Aline Burni, and Eduardo Tamaki, "Populist Communication During the Covid-19 Pandemic: the Case of Brazil's President Bolsonaro," *PACO* 14, no. 1 (2021): 120,

to attack the biggest and most well-known channel in Brazilian tv: TV Globo.<sup>80</sup> Throughout right-wing social media, the hashtag #GloboLixo (in English, Globo trash) is incredibly popular. In his Twitter, for example, Bolsonaro uploaded a picture of Globo's icon being used as a sewer pipe.<sup>81</sup> Another instance is that Michelle Bolsonaro, Bolsonaro's wife, was accused of illegally receiving around R\$90 thousand in between 2011 and 2016 and, when questioned by a Globo reporter, Bolsonaro said that he wanted to "fill" the reporter's mouth "with punches."<sup>82</sup> In addition to Globo, Bolsonaro constantly attacks the *Folha de Sao Paulo*, the biggest newspaper in Sao Paulo. By way of example, as he addressed a crowd, he was asked by a reporter about a recent policy related to the Federal Police and, instead of answering, he told said reporter to "shut up" and called the *Folha's* reporters "a bunch of scoundrels, and liars."<sup>83</sup> He also told another *Folha's* reporter to leave his sight since they "have no morals" and only publish "trash."<sup>84</sup> In a recent article by Patricia Campos, the reporter shows that Bolsonaro attacked

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<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2569989185?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=14270>.

<sup>80</sup> Ricardo Fentrin, "Análise: Entenda por que Bolsonaro odeia tanto a Globo," *UOL*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.uol.com.br/splash/noticias/ooops/2020/07/20/analise-entenda-porque-bolsonaro-tem-tanto-odio-da-globo.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>.

<sup>81</sup> Jair Bolsonaro, Twitter Post, October 22, 2019, 9:32PM, <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1189354408141840387>.

<sup>82</sup> "Bolsonaro Ameaça Jornalista: 'Minha Vontade É Encher Tua Boca Na Porrada,'" *GI*, August 23, 2020, <https://g1.globo.com/fantastico/noticia/2020/08/23/bolsonaro-ameaca-jornalista-minha-vontade-e-encher-tua-boca-na-porrada.ghtml>.

<sup>83</sup> Ricardo Della Coletta, "Bolsonaro manda repórteres calarem a boca, ataca a *Folha* e nega interferência na PF," *Folha de São Paulo*, May 5, 2020, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/05/bolsonaro-manda-reporteres-calarem-a-boca-ataca-a-folha-e-nega-interferencia-na-pf.shtml>.

<sup>84</sup> Mauricio Ferro, "Bolsonaro ataca *Folha* de S.Paulo por reportagem sobre secretário," *Poder 360*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.poder360.com.br/governo/bolsonaro-ataca-folha-de-s-paulo-por-reportagem-sobre-secretario/>.

Brazilian media 87 times in the first semester of 2021, and out of the 331 registered attacks, 293 came from Bolsonaro and his family.<sup>85</sup>

Bolsonaro is also notorious for his language. As seen in the examples above, Bolsonaro does not shy away from using profanity when talking about his opposition. In Horvath et al., the authors present many examples of Bolsonaro's extremely offensive language. For instance, when talking about homosexuality, Bolsonaro claimed that "when a son begins to get sort of faggy, he gets beaten up and then he changes his behavior."<sup>86</sup> When it comes to minorities, Bolsonaro made sure to say that he wanted to "make a Brazil for majorities. The law has to exist to defend the majorities, minorities will adapt or simply disappear."<sup>87</sup> Also, Bolsonaro is well known for supporting the Brazilian dictatorship and, in an interview, he said: "I am in favour of torture, you know that, and the people are in favour of that too ... now, don't talk about military dictatorship here, only 282 [people] have disappeared, most of them outlaws, bank robbers, kidnappers."<sup>88</sup> Lastly, when criticized about his use of profanities, Bolsonaro exclaimed that he "curses, but does not steal," further elucidating his opinion on past governments.<sup>89</sup>

Trump was also proficient at establishing an enemy during his term in office, focusing on similar groups. It seems that for most populist leaders, whatever subgroup available in their

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<sup>85</sup> Patricia Campos Mello, "Bolsonaro atacou imprensa 87 vezes no primeiro semestre de 2021, aumento de 74%, diz entidade," *Folha de São Paulo*, July 28, 2021, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/07/bolsonaro-atacou-imprensa-87-vezes-no-primeiro-semester-de-2021-aumento-de-74-diz-entidade.shtml>.

<sup>86</sup> Agnes Horvath, Arpad Szabolczai, and Manussos Marangudakis, *Modern Leaders: Between Charisma and Trickery* (London: Routledge, 2020), 142, <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.4324/9780429319433>.

<sup>87</sup> Horvath, Szabolczai, and Marangudakis, *Modern*, 142.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> "Bolsonaro usa palavrões para criticar governos anteriores," *Poder360*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.poder360.com.br/governo/bolsonaro-usa-palavroes-para-criticar-governos-antigos/>.

society that can carry the blame for some action they – most likely – never committed, or will commit, is a target for repression. And for Donald Trump, immigrants, blacks, and women were chosen ones. As Hugh Gusterson claims, “it is clear that race and hostility to immigrants played a role in working-class and petty bourgeois support for Trump.”<sup>90</sup> Trump was, like Bolsonaro, skilled at utilizing white race resentment for his advantage. For instance, Bjork-James and Maskovsky explain that due to demographic changes, white Americans saw themselves as an oppressed minority.<sup>91</sup> With that, Trump was explicit in his white nationalistic-friendly position.<sup>92</sup> This phenomenon can be seen with Trump starting the lie that Barack Obama was not born in the U.S., and describing Baltimore’s majority black population as “disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess” that “no human being” would “want to live.”<sup>93</sup> In addition to blacks, the immigrant population was also a target. As Eric Silva writes, Trump launched his campaign in 2015 by announcing Mexican immigrants as rapists.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, Trump “capitalized on the stigmatization of Muslims in the United States,” branding not only them, but all immigrants as “baby anchors,” “sanctuary cities,” “chain migration,” and “diversity lottery.”<sup>95</sup> When it comes to sexism, Trump embodied masculinity to his followers. Scholars like Silva, for instance,

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<sup>90</sup> Hugh Gusterson, "From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the Rise of Nationalist Populism," *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 2 (2017): 212, doi: 10.1111/amet.12469.

<sup>91</sup> Sophie Bjork-James, and Jeff Maskovsky, "When White Nationalism Became Popular," *American Anthropological Association* 58, no. 3 (2017): 87. <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.1111/AN.455>.

<sup>92</sup> Bjork-James, and Maskovsky, “White,” 89.

<sup>93</sup> Bess Levin, “Trump Reportedly Called White Supremacists ‘My People,’ in Case it Wasn’t Clear He’s An Abject Racist,” *Vanity Fair*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/09/donald-trump-white-supremacists-my-people>.

<sup>94</sup> Eric O. Silva, "Donald Trump's Discursive Field: A Juncture of Stigma Contests Over Race, Gender, Religion, and Democracy," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 12 (2019): 4, <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.1111/soc4.12757>.

<sup>95</sup> Silva, “Donald,” 4.

believe that sexism might have been “even more notable racism” for the former president.<sup>96</sup> In this vein, Danielle Kurtzleben reports that during his 2016 candidacy, Trump notably talked about his testosterone count, penis size, and joked about committing sexual assault, defining it as “locker room talk.”<sup>97</sup> The former president was also recorded talking about grabbing women “by the pussy,” and claimed that Hillary Clinton would not be fit for the presidency since she cannot even “satisfy her husband.”<sup>98</sup> In addition, Trump, like Bolsonaro, was fond of defamatory nicknames to talk about his opposition. For instance, Trump likes to refer to the now President Joe Biden as “low-rated Morning Joe,” “Sleepy Joe,” “Basement Joe,” and so forth.<sup>99</sup> Another target, Hillary Clinton, has been called – among others – “Crazy Hillary,” and “Crooked Hillary.”<sup>100</sup> To conclude, Trump was – like many other populist leaders before him – quick on

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Danielle Kurtzleben, “Trump Has Weaponized Masculinity as President. Here’s Why it Matters,” *NPR*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/28/928336749/trump-has-weaponized-masculinity-as-president-heres-why-it-matters>; “61 Things Donald Trump Has Said about Women,” *The Week*, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://theweek.com/articles/655770/61-things-donald-trump-said-about-women>; “How Trump Talks about Women - and Does It Matter?,” *BBC News*, November 29, 2019, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50563106>.

<sup>98</sup> Kurtzleben, “Trump.”

<sup>99</sup> A'ndre Gonawela, Joyojeet Pal, Udit Thawani, Elmer van der Vlugt, Wim Out, and Priyank Chandra, “Speaking their Mind: Populist Style and Antagonistic Messaging in the Tweets of Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders,” *CSCW* 27, no. 3-6 (2018): 314, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2506711021?accountid=14270&parentSessionId=elC0OrrYGQqljBTstzzNv7dWzv2CvV0GwLmMu9YNvws%3D&pq-origsite=primo>; Jonathan Chait, “Trump’s Plan to Make Biden Look Senile Disappeared Without a Trace,” *Intelligencer*, October 23, 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/10/final-2020-debate-trump-calling-biden-senile-dementia-sleepy-joe.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Jeffery Martin, “Trump Calls ‘Crazy’ Hillary Clinton ‘so Easy,’ Asks His Supporters If They Should ‘Take Another Shot’ at Her,” *Newsweek*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-calls-crazy-hillary-clinton-so-easy-asks-his-supporters-if-they-should-take-another-1485004>; Kaitlyn Schallhorn, “Trump’s Nicknames for Rivals, from ‘Rocket Man’ to ‘Crooked Hillary,’” *Fox News*, November 15, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171115134402/http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/10/20/trumps-nicknames-for-rivals-from-rocket-man-to-crooked-hillary.html>.

establishing his enemy, using the same derogatory strategies that involved sexism, racism, and misogyny.

Wilders, like Trump and Bolsonaro, follows the same playbook. If the Left was Bolsonaro's main enemy, and foreigners as a whole were Trump's, Muslims are Wilders'. Even though representing only 5% of the Netherlands' population, Wilders defines them as the "biggest problem" in the nation.<sup>101</sup> In his early political career, Wilders' was one of the first Dutch politicians that got in contact with Islamic extremism in the 80s and 90s due to his fascination with Israel and the Middle East.<sup>102</sup> Koen Vossen explains that in the beginning, Wilders seemed to have (somewhat) understood the difference between Islam as a religion and Islamic extremism.<sup>103</sup> In an interview to the *De Volkskrant*, for instance, Wilders still possessed a moderate tone, saying, "I don't agree with Fortuyn that Islam is backwards, but the political culture in Arab and Muslim countries *is* backward, mediaeval [*sic*] even, when it come sot human rights, women and homosexuals"<sup>104</sup>. However, in the years that followed, Wilders' point of view regarding this topic began to change. In a study of Wilders' islamophobia, Michiel Bot gives his readers many examples of Wilders' aversion to Muslims. The author claims that "Wilders thrives on qualifying Islam as 'sick,' 'fascist,' and 'totalitarian ideology,'" even

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<sup>101</sup> Koen Vossen, "Classifying Wilders: The Ideological Development of Geert Wilders and His Party for Freedom," *Politics* 31, no. 3 (2011): 185, <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2011.01417.x>; Koen Damhuis, "The Biggest Problem in the Netherlands': Understanding the Party for Freedom's Politicization of Islam," *Brookings*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-biggest-problem-in-the-netherlands-understanding-the-party-for-freedoms-politicization-of-islam/>; "Topic: Islam in the Netherlands," Statista, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/topics/4905/islam-in-the-netherlands/>.

<sup>102</sup> Koen Vossen, *The Power of Populism: Geert Wilders and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 29.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

wanting to ban the Qur'an, or as he calls it, "the Islamic Mein Kampf."<sup>105</sup> In addition, Wilders calls the Muslim population in the Netherlands "traitors," "cowards," and "completely insane."<sup>106</sup> In this vein, the Dutch politician co-authored an article advocating for the "suspension of the constitutional rights of the Dutch Muslims in order to counter the monopoly of the extremist imams on the minds of the young," and also wrote a manifesto proposing that radical Muslims be excluded from the Netherlands "without mercy."<sup>107</sup> Wilders is not only filled with hate towards the Muslim population, but he even doubts the sincerity of those that assimilate in the Netherlands, which only shows the extent in which he abhors Muslims.<sup>108</sup> When it comes the use of nicknames, Wilders is as fond of it as Bolsonaro and Trump. In a speech, for example, Wilders claimed that political elitists are "being sort of 'weepy weepy' in the hallway."<sup>109</sup> When addressing Femke Halsema – the leader of the GroenLinks party – he mentions her "whining," calls her a "little girl with her wet eyes, her cuddle cloth pent-up in her mouth, throwing dolls."<sup>110</sup> In a tweet, Wilders refers to Netherlands' Prime Minister Mark Rutte as a "Europhile" and enemy of the "real Dutch."<sup>111</sup> Therefore, Wilders displays many of the same strategies as Bolsonaro and Trump to morally diminish his enemies.

As seen, the distinction between which minority will be the national enemy is essential for populists. By using Trump and Wilders', Bolsonaro's success as a candidate and then

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<sup>105</sup> Michiel Bot, "Elements of Anti-Islam Populism: Critiquing Geert Wilders' Politics of Offense with Marcuse and Adorno," *Krisis*, no. 2 (2017): 13, <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/elements-anti-islam-populism-critiquing-geert/docview/2291068832/se-2>.

<sup>106</sup> Bot, "Elements," 13.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>108</sup> Vossen, "Classifying," 184.

<sup>109</sup> Lieuwe Kalkhoven, "'A Piece of Trash of the Worst Cabinet Ever'. The Rhetorical Use of Exaggeration by the Dutch Populist 'Party for Freedom' (PVV)," *Politics, Culture, and Socialization* 6, no. 1-2 (2015): 65, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.3224/pcs.v6i1-2.05>.

<sup>110</sup> Kalkhoven, "Piece," 65.

<sup>111</sup> Gonawela et al., "Speaking," 312.

president becomes clear. Like the two other case studies presented, the Brazilian President uses the same defamatory strategies to minimize and morally damage his enemies. Like Wilders, Bolsonaro is aggressive with his words and does not shy away from using profanity. Furthermore, even though all of them have similar enemies, it is important to see that each leader had a different primary opponent due to their specific circumstances. Bolsonaro, since the majority of Brazilians were against the Left, decided to embody that sentiment. By using Trump and Wilders, it is clear that the strategies Bolsonaro used are neither original nor unique to him, and they – fortunately or not – pushed him in his trajectory as the 38<sup>th</sup> Brazilian President.

### **An Old System**

One other way for populist leaders to gain popularity is by claiming that the system they live in, or the party in power, is not sufficient and is not giving the “people” the life they deserve. In fact, we can see in Laclau’s philosophy that populism presents a “reconstruction of a new order,” and therefore, it is safe to say that such strategy is certainly present in the playbook.<sup>112</sup>

Bolsonaro rose to power in an unstable society. The 2013 protests, the Car Wash scandal, and consequently Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment shook Brazilian politics, and it was in this state of animosity that Bolsonaro rose as an important political figure. As explained by Matias et al., in a free translation, “the political and economic fluctuations of the period would generate a profound polarization of Brazilian society, which would have as a corollary the election of Jair Bolsonaro at the end of 2018.”<sup>113</sup> One common expression that became a symbol of Bolsonaro’s campaign was that he wanted to break down what he calls the “old politics,” all the flawed

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<sup>112</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 177.

<sup>113</sup> Franchini, Mauad, and Viola, “Lula,” 93.

aspects of Brazilian society due to more than a decade of leftist rule.<sup>114</sup> While with his supporters, for instance, Bolsonaro went as far as claiming that such period was over because of him.<sup>115</sup> In addition, the protests of 2013 were the first time since the dictatorship that Brazilians asked for the return of the Army to power.<sup>116</sup> This indignation with the present day politics got converted into hate, and Bolsonaro knew well how to use such sentiment to his advantage.<sup>117</sup> Bolsonaro, then, was seen as someone that would break the pattern of corruption that haunted Brazilian politics. In 2016, for example, an article was published by many organizations including the AMAI (Association for the Defense of the Rights of Active Inactive Military Police), claiming that Bolsonaro was elected the world's most honest politician with 52,3% of the votes, followed by figures like Barrack Obama and Francois Hollande. Not surprisingly, such an article was deemed a hoax a while later.<sup>118</sup> For many, Bolsonaro represented the light at the end of the tunnel. For over 20 years (since 1994), Brazilian folk always had to choose between the two biggest parties in the nation, with the Workers' Party being one of them for most (if not all) the elections. However, the election of 2018 was seen as a turning point. As Machado et al. claim, "for the first time in more than 20 years, a candidate who was presented as an outsider

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<sup>114</sup> Feltran, "Centripetal," 95.

<sup>115</sup> "Bolsonaro, agora adepto ao tomá lá dá cá, já foi um feroz crítico da 'velha política'; relembre," *Folha de S.Paulo*, May 7, 2020, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/05/bolsonaro-agora-adepto-ao-toma-la-da-ca-ja-foi-um-feroz-critico-da-velha-politica-relembre.shtml>.

<sup>116</sup> Bauer, Caroline Silveira. "La dictadura cívico-militar brasileña en los discursos de Jair Bolsonaro: usos del pasado y negacionismo." *Relaciones Internacionales* 28, no. 57 (2019): 42, <https://doi.org/10.24215/23142766e070>.

<sup>117</sup> Bauer, "Dictadura," 42.

<sup>118</sup> "Capitão Bolsonaro é eleito o político mais honesto do mundo – Amái," *AMAI*, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://amai.org.br/capitco-bolsonaro-e-eleito-o-politico-mais-honesto-do-mundo/>, "É #FAKE que Jair Bolsonaro foi apontado por fundação como o político mais honesto do mundo," *GI*, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://g1.globo.com/fato-ou-fake/noticia/2018/10/18/e-fake-que-jair-bolsonaro-foi-apontado-por-fundacao-como-o-politico-mais-honesto-do-mundo.ghtml>.

shifted the dispute and brought one of the smallest Brazilian parties in the spotlight, the PSL.”<sup>119</sup> So, Bolsonaro rose in an unstable society as a savior for the people.

The idea of nostalgia, that life was better in the past, was present during Trump’s presidency. In a study done in 2016, Inglehart et al. present some reasons that can explain such feeling. The authors explain that Trump’s election was due to a “cultural backlash,” which they define as being a “reaction ‘by once-predominant sectors of the population to progressive value change.’”<sup>120</sup> In Trump’s case, the part of the population that felt excluded from privilege were not African Americans, Asian Americans, or any other minority, but “white male, religious, and less educated parts of the population” that resentment minorities.<sup>121</sup> In this vein, a research done by the Project Home Fire found that around 61% believe that an increase in immigrants has a negative impact on their paycheck.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, 59% find that immigrants “would prevent them from getting a higher-paying job”<sup>123</sup>. Moreover, as the Pew Research Center shows, 66% of registered voters that align with Trump view immigration as a “very big problem.”<sup>124</sup> The former U.S.’s president’s slogan also alludes to this idea of the “good old times.” MAGA, or “Make

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<sup>119</sup> Vitor Matheus Beira Machado, Pedro Chapaval Pimentel, and Bruno Eduardo Slongo Garcia, "An Antihero's Journey: The Political Campaign of Jair Bolsonaro and the use of Archetypes on Facebook," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 20, no. 58 (2022): 40, <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/scholarly-journals/antiheros-journey-political-campaign-jair/docview/2501297531/se-2>.

<sup>120</sup> Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, "Media Coverage of Shifting Emotional Regimes: Donald Trump's Angry Populism," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 767, <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.1177/0163443718772190>.

<sup>121</sup> Wahl-Jorgensen, “Media,” 767.

<sup>122</sup> Bryan Metzger, “Most Trump Voters Are ‘animated by a Strong Anti-Immigration Sentiment’ and Worry That an Increase in Immigrants Will Threaten Their Jobs and Pay: Poll,” *Business Insider*, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/majority-of-trump-voters-believe-more-immigrants-threaten-job-security-poll-2021-10>.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Carroll Doherty, “5 Facts about Trump Supporters’ Views of Immigration,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/25/5-facts-about-trump-supporters-views-of-immigration/>.

America Great Again,” is born out of the premise that America was great in the past, and therefore, Trump’s election would get America back there. This notion, as explained by Abnan et al., “immediately triggered nationalistic sentiments of American inhabitants and they yearned for a pro-American leadership.”<sup>125</sup> During his time as a candidate and then president, Trump was able to brand himself with this idea of a patriotic man that fought every day for his nation, and with this, penetrated people’s hearts with this idea of a glorified America.<sup>126</sup> Like Bolsonaro, Trump used the broken system he believed to be part of to his advantage, resulting in his election as the 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. President.

Not surprisingly, Wilders also falls in the same line. As seen, both Bolsonaro and Trump rely on nostalgia to draw people into their movement. In the Netherlands, Wilders is able to do that by exacerbating public discontent with politics. By way of example, the Dutch politician claimed that “thirty years policy of tolerance has been thirty years of misery. My fraction does not need any scientific research about this tolerance policy to draw this conclusion. This conclusion is evident; facts of common knowledge don’t require proof.”<sup>127</sup> In this regard, Professor Jacques Koenis asserts that Wilders taps into the anxiety of Dutch voters who “long for the return to an imaginary former Dutch culture in which migrants, minorities and women don’t challenge the status quo.”<sup>128</sup> An example of a place like this is the peaceful village of Volendam

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<sup>125</sup> Mubee Abnan, and Rabiya Hamid, "Interpreting the Cause and Effect of Populism Narrative in US Elections' 2016," *Journal of Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (2019): 301, <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/interpreting-cause-effect-populism-narrative-us/docview/2417781740/se-2?accountid=14270>.

<sup>126</sup> Abnan, and Hamid, “Interpreting,” 302.

<sup>127</sup> Kalkhoven, “Piece,” 66.

<sup>128</sup> Jacques Paulus Koenis, “A History of Dutch Populism, from the Murder of Pim Fortuyn to the Rise of Geert Wilders,” *The Conversation*, accessed April 16, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/a-history-of-dutch-populism-from-the-murder-of-pim-fortuyn-to-the-rise-of-geert-wilders-74483>.

in northern Holland, defined as a “stronghold” for Geert Wilders.<sup>129</sup> There, voters like Theo Stirk claim that “the Netherlands’ economy is founded on difference people... but if you allow them to come into your country, you must ask them to fit in our society and do the same things we are doing.”<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, Wem Krockman, a coach at the Volendam field, sees himself represented in Wilders’ as both believe immigration is an issue.<sup>131</sup> In addition, related to his hatred of the Muslim population, Wilders likes to talk about the Netherland’s failed policies during WWII.<sup>132</sup> In this vein, Wilders believe that the Dutch government failed to protect Jews from Nazi persecution which, to him, still impacts the Netherlands.<sup>133</sup> The politician explains that the politically-correct wave in mainstream parties is directly linked to such failure since these groups are “afraid to detract rights from groups who do not deserve them.”<sup>134</sup> Therefore, his party (PPV) should act with reason and not emotion and see the Muslims for what they are: “A threat to the well-being of Dutch government.”<sup>135</sup> To conclude, Wilders also employed tactics that brought a feeling of nostalgia into his supporters, but at least in his case, such strategy was rooted in islamophobia.

Therefore, nostalgia plays a vital role in populism, which further suggests that Bolsonaro’s success is related to the use of such a strategy. As seen by the examples provided, all three leaders are effective at making their supporters believe that the past was ruled with

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<sup>129</sup> Lauren Frayer, “A Prosperous Dutch Village Hopes For A Right-Wing ‘Bit Of Revolution,’” *90.5 WESA*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.wesa.fm/national-international-news/2017-01-23/a-prosperous-dutch-village-hopes-for-a-right-wing-bit-of-revolution>.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Natalia de Almeida Barros Martins, “Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric in Western Europe: The Role of Integration Policies in Extreme Right Populism” (MA thesis, University of Central Florida, 2010), 114.

<sup>133</sup> Martins, “Anti-Immigrant,” 114.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 115.

prosperity, and their election would take them back to the “good ol’ days.” For Bolsonaro, widespread hatred over corruption scandals and overall calamity made his figure – one of a patriotic and honorable man – appealing to voters as they saw his election as a breaking point in Brazilian politics. When it comes to Trump, his attractiveness to white nationalists and the feeling of nostalgia helped him achieve his so desired presidency. As for Wilders, his anti-immigration stance are his main method of alluding to the past. With that, Wilders, Trump, and Bolsonaro use similar strategies, which shows a positive correlation between their strategies and their leadership positions

### **A Man of the People**

The last concept discussed in this paper is a populist leader’s ability to portray themselves as belonging to the masses. This, understandably so, can be seen as a core aspect of populism since the name of the theory itself is related to its meaning. When one analyzes the radical of the word populism, one notices that it comes from the Greek term “populi,” or in English, people. Going back to literature, Mudde presents it as an ideology that sees society divided into two groups of people, the pure and the evil.<sup>136</sup> Finchelstein goes even further and describes the leader as the people.<sup>137</sup> And Laclau heavily relies on the concept of the “people” in his logics of equivalence and difference as means to construct the social.<sup>138</sup> Hence, a leader’s ability to be – or make it seems like he is – part of the “people” is in the core of populism.

Bolsonaro is seen as an authentic and humble individual, a clear contrast between him and Dilma Rousseff. During his candidacy and then the presidency, Bolsonaro never changed his stance on how wanted to be seen by his “people” as authentic, courageous, and a pure religious

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<sup>136</sup> Mudde, “Populist,” 543.

<sup>137</sup> Finchelstein, *Fascism*, xxxv.

<sup>138</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 77.

man.<sup>139</sup> Even Bolsonaro's slogan "Brazil above everything, God above all," alludes to his religious persona.<sup>140</sup> The president, with his simple and colloquial language, employs uncomplicated but effective strategies.<sup>141</sup> The first, is by physically looking like his people. In Brazil, as it is commonly assumed, soccer plays a major role in many people's lives, with many choosing to wear their team's jerseys religiously. This is, not surprisingly, a culture attributed to men. Bolsonaro, then, wears different soccer jerseys wherever he goes represent that region's team. In his article, Sergio Pantolfi explains that Bolsonaro has been seen wearing over 80 soccer jerseys, with this being clearly attributed to self-promotion.<sup>142</sup> He also likes to publicly eat food that is seen as belonging to the lower classes.<sup>143</sup> For instance, a video went viral showing Bolsonaro eating farofa – a popular Brazilian dish – at Brasilia's Botanic Garden. In the video, one can notice a considerable amount of farofa on the President's pants and floor.<sup>144</sup> For his supporters, a scene like this shows Bolsonaro's humility and bonds him to the middle and lower classes.<sup>145</sup> Another strategy is by serving as a clear contrast between Dilma Rousseff and the money spent as a president. As Freire et al. explain, Dilma spent – in only ten months –

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<sup>139</sup> Horvath, Szazolczai, and Marangudakis, *Modern*, 145.

<sup>140</sup> "Planalto inaugura painel 'Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos,'" *Poder360*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.poder360.com.br/brasil/planalto-inaugura-painel-brasil-acima-de-tudo-deus-acima-de-todos/>.

<sup>141</sup> Fabricio H Chagas-Bastos, "Political Realignment in Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro and the Right Turn," *Revista de Estudos Sociais* 69 (2019): 96, <https://doi.org/10.7440/res69.2019.08>.

<sup>142</sup> Sergio Pantolfi, "Jogo de Poder," *UOL*, December 26, 2020, <https://www.uol.com.br/esporte/reportagens-especiais/bolsonaro-ja-exibiu-81-camisas-de-clubes-de-futebol-especialistas-apontam-uso-politico/>.

<sup>143</sup> "Bolsonaro come pastel, toma caldo de cana e tira foto com apoiadores de SP; VIDEO," *A Tribuna*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.tribuna.com.br/cidades/litoralsul/bolsonaro-come-pastel-toma-caldo-de-cana-e-tira-foto-com-apoiadores-no-litoral-de-sp>.

<sup>144</sup> Ingrid Soares, "Bolsonaro sobre farofa: 'Não é buscar ser povão. Sempre fui assim,'" *Estado de Minas*, February 2, 2022, [https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2022/02/02/interna\\_politica,1342022/bolsonaro-sobre-farofa-nao-e-buscar-ser-povao-sempre-fui-assim.shtml](https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2022/02/02/interna_politica,1342022/bolsonaro-sobre-farofa-nao-e-buscar-ser-povao-sempre-fui-assim.shtml).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

R\$790,000 (in today's quotation, around \$163,000).<sup>146</sup> Bolsonaro, however, likes to display himself as a man that does not spend public money unnecessarily. By means of example, Bolsonaro claims that he spent “zero” Reais with his corporate card and threatened the Brazilian press to find any information that says otherwise.<sup>147</sup> In an interview, he even calls Globo “scoundrels” for insinuating such a thing.<sup>148</sup> As time went on, an article was published explaining that the president spent, on average, R\$30 million in 3 years in office, which is 18% greater than Dilma.<sup>149</sup> Data like this goes to show that even though portraying himself as an ordinary man, there are more to it than it meets the eye.

Trump is also seen as a man of the people. The former U.S. President is described as a “champion of the working-class, a sort of a blue-collar billionaire.”<sup>150</sup> Like Bolsonaro, Trump implemented effective strategies to make his mission of appearing a member of the working class successful. Unlike Bolsonaro, that chose to change his entire dressing, Trump focused more on his vocabulary. When talking about his rhetoric, Abnan et al. explained that Trump has a “distinctive style which appealed to the masses.”<sup>151</sup> Mainly, he was direct and used brief sentences that focused on his ability to solve issues pertaining to the USA, which sounded

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<sup>146</sup> Sabrina Freire, and Ludmylla Rocha, “Lula foi ex-presidente mais caro em 2020; Dilma custa mais à União em 4 anos,” *Poder 360*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.poder360.com.br/governo/lula-foi-ex-presidente-mais-carro-em-2020-dilma-custa-mais-a-uniao-em-4-anos/>.

<sup>147</sup> “Bolsonaro diz que gasto com cartão 'é zero' e desafia imprensa a desmenti-lo,” *Correio Braziliense*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.correio braziliense.com.br/politica/2020/09/4873384-bolsonaro-adia-retorno-a-brasilia-e-dorme-em-quartel-em-sao-paulo.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Soares, “Bolsonaro.”

<sup>149</sup> “Bolsonaro gasta R\$ 10 milhões ao ano no cartão, acima de Dilma e Temer,” *Economia.IG*, January 31, 2022, <https://economia.ig.com.br/2022-01-31/bolsonaro-gasto-cartao-corporativo.html>.

<sup>150</sup> Gusterson, “Brexit,” 210.

<sup>151</sup> Abnan, and Hamid, “Interpreting,” 304.

genuine and honest to his followers.<sup>152</sup> In order to do so, Trump uses hyperboles and intensifiers like “really,” and “extremely.”<sup>153</sup> In a speech, Trump claimed that he would be “the greatest jobs president God ever created” and said that the United States – under him – had the “greatest economy.”<sup>154</sup> Moreover, Trump is keen on repetition as a method to emphasize his ideas, especially when talking about his opposition.<sup>155</sup> In 2016, for instance, the then candidate’s main point of attack to his opponent Hillary Clinton was her email conspiracy. On multiple occasions, he mentioned it to his supporters, and went as far as asking Russia for help to “‘find’ the missing emails,” claiming they were “worse than Watergate.”<sup>156</sup> In addition, scholars like Voelz believe that not following a script – like most politicians do – was helpful for Trump’s popularity. The academic claims that by “letting go rhetorically, Trump makes available to the senses an experience of the openness and contingency, not just of the future, but of the present.”<sup>157</sup> In their research, the author even compares Trump with George Wallace, an influential American

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Tiffany Markman, “An Analysis of President Donald Trump’s Use of Language,” FirstRand, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.firststrand.co.za/perspectives/an-analysis-of-president-donald-trump-s-use-of-language/>; Ben Chu, “Did Trump Really Build the ‘strongest Economy in the History of the World’?,” *The Independent*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-us-economy-record-jobs-stimulus-covid-stocks-wages-b869480.html>.

<sup>154</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Analysis | President Trump’s Repeated Claim: ‘The Greatest Economy in the History of Our Country,’” *Washington Post*, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/07/president-trumps-repeated-claim-greatest-economy-history-our-country/>.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> “Donald Trump News Conference | C-SPAN.Org,” accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?413263-1/donald-trump-urges-russia-find-hillary-clinton-emails-criticizes-record-tpp&start=1858>; Tessa Berenson, “Donald Trump: Hillary Clinton Email Scandal ‘Worse Than Watergate,’” *Time*, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://time.com/4534375/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-emails-watergate/>.

<sup>157</sup> Johannes Voelz, “Towards an Aesthetic of Populist, Part I: The Populist Space of Appearance,” *Real* 34, no. 1 (2018): 212, <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/toward-aesthetics-populism-part-i-populist-space/docview/2499963913/se-2?accountid=14270>.

politician in the 1940s.<sup>158</sup> An example of this is his inauguration speech where he claimed “we will make America strong again... wealthy again... proud again... safe again... great again.”<sup>159</sup>

Therefore, Trump mainly used his rhetoric in order to gain popular support.

Wilders is also well-known for his oratory skills, but not only. When it comes to his choice of words, the Dutch politician is incredibly cautious. As noted by Koen Damhuis, an Assistant Professor at Utrecht University, Wilders frequent use of plural first-person pronouns like “we,” “our,” and “us” puts him on the same level as the people he is speaking to, making him more relatable to his voters.<sup>160</sup> In a 2017 Tweet, for example, Wilders comments on a post talking about an Egyptian man who was a suspect in the Louvre attack, and says that “they declared war on us. And our EU-open-border-leaders betray us. We need a political revolution. And defend our people.”<sup>161</sup> According to Damhuis, Wilders is able – through his way of speaking – to relate to two types of voters. The first is known as a “hard-done-by voter,” those “fostered by negative experiences with non-natives in everyday professional life.” The second are those from the lower middle class who “made their way outside the official education system through hard work,” seeing their success as “mere fruits of their own efforts.”<sup>162</sup> In addition, these voters also believe that the people “give too much” in taxes that are believed to be

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>159</sup> “Transcript: Donald Trump Inauguration Speech in Full,” *Al Jazeera*, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/20/transcript-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-in-full>.

<sup>160</sup> Koen Damhuis, *Roads to the Radical Right : Understanding Different Forms of Electoral Support for Radical Right-Wing Parties in France and the Netherlands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 190, [https://temple.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/uresolver/01TULI\\_INST/openurl?Force\\_direct=true&portfolio\\_pid=53540136400003811&rfr\\_id=info%3Asid%2Fprimo.exlibrisgroup.com&u.ignore\\_date\\_coverage=true](https://temple.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/uresolver/01TULI_INST/openurl?Force_direct=true&portfolio_pid=53540136400003811&rfr_id=info%3Asid%2Fprimo.exlibrisgroup.com&u.ignore_date_coverage=true).

<sup>161</sup> Geert Wilders, Twitter Post, February 3, 2017, 4:26PM, <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/827629477781966848>

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

redistributed to the non-native population.<sup>163</sup> Wilders, then, is able to relate to these voters by holding an anti-immigration stance. Moreover, as Damhuis points out, the fact that Wilders' party, the PPV (or Party for Freedom) has not been "up there," they cannot be blamed for the current state of the society.<sup>164</sup> As seen, Wilders' oratory is part of his relativity to the people, but his political stance and party's status are also part of the equation.

Taking this paper's definition of relatability, all three leaders can be described as relatable. As a reminder, this paper concluded that relatability is about the connection one feels with another, which then evolves into a sense of belonging. Seeing the data presented on Bolsonaro, Trump, and Wilders, it can be safe to say that they did achieve some relatability. Bolsonaro is seen as an authentic and humble man that physically resembles his voters. Trump was described as a man of the people that used his characteristic and straightforward language to his favor. Wilders, like Trump, used his oratory skills to relate to his voters, mainly due to his anti-immigration position. Furthermore, they all mirrored public opinion in their speeches and branded themselves as representing the "true people" of their specific nations: Bolsonaro representing those against the Left, Trump siding with white nationalists, and Wilders with those against Islam. Additionally, they are – and in Trump's case, were – in leadership positions: Bolsonaro and Trump achieved the presidential office, and Wilders is the leader of his party. Their position is, then, a mirror of their relatability to their people since they could only be where they are with public support.

In conclusion, being relatable is a key part of being a populist leader. Looking at the strategies displayed by Trump and Wilders, we can see that Bolsonaro's stance is nothing but

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

unoriginal. In his case, simple language, casual dressing, and putting himself in a position of cheapness further helps in his popularity. For Trump, his straightforward and easily understood language put him in the spotlight for many Americans. As for Wilders, his rhetoric, party's status, and ability to relate to Dutch voters make him relatable.

### **Hypothesis 1: Bolsonaro and Impeachment**

Laclau explains that populism rises in a broken society. The philosopher presents the idea that populism is “the starting point for a more or less radical *reconstruction* of a new order whenever the previous one has been shaken.”<sup>165</sup> Any event, therefore, that drastically shakes the political scenario is needed for populism to rise. Here, this paper analyzes the relevance of this theory in light of the protests of 2013, the Car Wash scandal, and Dilma Rousseff's impeachment.

The hatred towards the Workers' Party grew exponentially after the protests of 2013, which then resulted in Rousseff's impeachment. Defined as being the most important rally in Brazil's history, the protests of 2013 began peacefully in June with civilians complaining about the price increase of the bus ticket.<sup>166</sup> The public, however, would be harshly reprimanded by police, which only strengthened their cause.<sup>167</sup> The protests achieved great notoriety nationwide, achieving its peak on June 17<sup>th</sup> with the invasion of Congress.<sup>168</sup> For Rousseff, these events had a damaging effect on her popularity, which prompt her to launch anti-corruption strategies in order to gain public support. Among them, Car Wash: a money-laundering investigation that quickly

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<sup>165</sup> Laclau, *Populist*, 177.

<sup>166</sup> Wender Starlees, and Alexandre de Melo, "Manifestacoes de Junho de 2013: Relembre os Fatos Importantes," *Guia do Estudante*, Accessed March 16, 2022. <https://guiadoestudante.abril.com.br/estudo/manifestacoes-de-junho-de-2013-relembre-os-fatos-importantes/>.

<sup>167</sup> Starlees and Melo, “Manifestacoes.”

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

turned into the biggest corruption scandal even known in Brazilian democracy, where many influential people – many politicians – were involved.<sup>169</sup> Seeing this situation only aggravated the animosity towards the present government, which were now seen as corrupt and untrustworthy.<sup>170</sup> Unbeknownst to her, she would also fall under this investigation, being controversially impeached in August of 2016.<sup>171</sup>

At this moment, taking advantage of the decadent state of government, Bolsonaro emerged as an important political figure. Due to the chaos Brazil's political system was in, as Prengaman explains, Bolsonaro's "poetical" way of speaking about the dictatorship was appealing to the masses.<sup>172</sup> One way Bolsonaro was able to grasp public attention was to, as seen, hold controversial opinions on many subjects, but more notoriously, the Brazilian dictatorship. For instance, during the impeachment voting session, Bolsonaro claimed that his vote was in "memory of Col. Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra," a man convicted for practicing torture during the dictatorship period, "the dread of Dilma Rousseff."<sup>173</sup> In addition, the impeachment created a need of a savior, one that stood in complete contrast with the Left. By means of example, in an op-ed in *El Pais*, Luiz Ruffato writes - in a very conservative tone - that while the Left are looking for their savior to lead the nation (alluding to Lula and other leftist

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<sup>169</sup> *The Edge of Democracy*; Fabio de Sa e Silva, "From Car Wash to Bolsonaro: Law and Lawyers in Brazil's Illiberal Turn (2014-2018)," *Journal of Law and Society* 47, no. 1 (October 2020): 93.

<sup>170</sup> Franchini, Mauad, and Viola, "Lula," 93.

<sup>171</sup> Simon Romero, "Dilma Rousseff Is Ousted as Brazil's President in Impeachment Vote," *New York Times*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/americas/brazil-dilma-rousseff-impeached-removed-president.html>.

<sup>172</sup> Jonas Belluci, "'A queda de Dilma' analisa de perto uma virada à direita e impeachment no Brasil," *Zedd Brasil*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.zeddbrasil.com/a-queda-de-dilma-analisa-de-perto-uma-virada-a-direita-e-impeachment-no-brasil/>.

<sup>173</sup> Mauricio Savarese, and Peter Prengaman, "Excerpt: Jair Bolsonaro's Polemical Brazil Impeachment Vote," *AP*, November 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/dilma-rousseff-jair-bolsonaro-brazil-impeachments-religion-b02c8084cd955332e5f2f2ed4990c35d>.

candidates in the 2018 election), “another savior, Jair Bolsonaro, rides his candidacy in the desert of leaders, snatching not only the hearts of the resentful, the humiliated, the hopeless, but also of those who, rain, shine, the wind blowing port or starboard, want to take advantage of everything.”<sup>174</sup> Ruffato finishes by claiming that Bolsonaro is not just a candidate, but a “savior of the homeland.”<sup>175</sup> These feeling echoed by Ruffato were, as one might think, incredibly common as people began relating Bolsonaro with a messiah (since his middle name is Messias, which translates to messiah), and a “legend”.<sup>176</sup> Even Bolsonaro himself claimed that the impeachment was a “miracle,” and that Lula would have taken his place if Dilma had been able to continue her presidency.<sup>177</sup> As seen, Bolsonaro rose as a hero for the anguished Brazilian folk.

So, it is safe to say that the impeachment played a role in Bolsonaro’s rising popularity, and Laclau’s theory is still pertinent. The polarity created by the 2013 protests and the Car Wash investigation created the need for a politician on the opposite side of the scale compared to the Workers’ Party. Bolsonaro, with his controversial opinions and simple manners, achieved notoriety by saying what people wanted to hear. Bolsonaro represented people’s torment over a decadent political system, which then resulted in him being elected as the 38<sup>th</sup> Brazilian President. When it comes to Laclau’s theory on broken societies, the events described above portray a society that ruptured politically due to corruption scandals and an impeachment process. This, then, shows the applicability of Laclau’s philosophy in today’s society.

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<sup>174</sup> Luiz Ruffato, "Em Busca de um Salvador da Patria," *El Pais*, February 21, 2018, [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/02/20/opinion/1519159053\\_555960.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/02/20/opinion/1519159053_555960.html).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> “Bolsonaro se Lanca a Presidencia como Salvador da Patria," *Swissinfo*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/por/bolsonaro-se-lan%C3%A7a-%C3%A0-presid%C3%A2ncia-como-salvador-da-p%C3%A1tria/44273046>.

<sup>177</sup> Getulio Xavier, "‘Se Dilma tivesse concluído o mandato, Lula teria sido eleito em 2018’, diz Bolsonaro," *Carta Capital*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/se-dilma-tivesse-concluido-o-mandato-lula-teria-sido-eleito-em-2018-diz-bolsonaro/>.

## Hypothesis 2: 2018 Knife Attack

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, Bolsonaro suffered an almost deadly knife injury. The then-candidate was being carried around by a group of followers in Juiz de Fora, a small city in Minas Gerais, when a man approached and attacked him. The aggressor, Adelio Bispo de Oliveira, was bombarded by kicks and punches as Bolsonaro is taken to a nearby hospital, where he endured two hours of surgery and later almost two weeks in recovery.<sup>178</sup>

Bolsonaro's popularity grew after being stabbed. On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Datafolha published that Bolsonaro had 19% of public approval.<sup>179</sup> Three days after the attack, his popularity reached a staggering 30%.<sup>180</sup> After two months, it grew to an even larger number, 56%.<sup>181</sup> When taking a look at Bolsonaro's Facebook account, one can see that his fans were indeed preoccupied. On September 16<sup>th</sup>, in his first post after the attack, people call him "captain" (in relation to his former post in the Army) and ask God to bless him.<sup>182</sup> Keila Maria, for example, claims that she is "praying for God to see our future president back in shape again."

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<sup>178</sup> "Jair Bolsonaro leva facada durante ato de campanha em Juiz de Fora," *GI*, September 6, 2018, <https://g1.globo.com/mg/zona-da-mata/noticia/2018/09/06/ato-de-campanha-de-bolsonaro-em-juiz-de-fora-e-interrompido-apos-tumulto.ghtml>.

<sup>179</sup> "Pesquisa Datafolha: Lula, 39%; Bolsonaro, 19%; Marina, 8%; Alckmin, 6%; Ciro, 5%," *GI*, August 22, 2018, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/eleicao-em-numeros/noticia/2018/08/22/pesquisa-datafolha-lula-39-bolsonaro-19-marina-8-alckmin-6-ciro-5.ghtml>.

<sup>180</sup> "Após facada, Jair Bolsonaro vai a 30%; Haddad tem 8%, diz BTG Pactual," *Poder 360*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.poder360.com.br/eleicoes/apos-facada-jair-bolsonaro-vai-a-30-haddad-tem-8-diz-btg-pactual/>.

<sup>181</sup> "Datafolha para Presidente, Votos Validos: Bolsonaro, 56%; Haddad, 44%," *GI*, October 25, 2018, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/10/25/datafolha-para-presidente-votos-validos-bolsonaro-56-haddad-44.ghtml>.

<sup>182</sup> Jair Bolsonaro, "Ola amigos," Facebook, September 16, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/211857482296579/photos/pb.100044022914395.-2207520000../1192610687554582/?type=3>.

Another, like Andre Guapo, mentions that “Brazil needs him.”<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, Bolsonaro blamed the Left for targeting him, alluding to the fact that it was discovered that Adelio was affiliated with a leftist party.<sup>184</sup> On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019, after being hospitalized with an obstructed gut directly correlated with his 2018 attack, Bolsonaro posted a picture of him in the hospital and, in its description, claims that “We all know that since the assassination attempt on the former PSOL member, the evil continues and unfortunately they are purposely ignored by most of the media.”<sup>185</sup> In another, after being hospitalized due to severe stomach ache, Bolsonaro posted a picture of him shirtless on a hospital bed, and wrote, “Another challenge, a consequence of the assassination attempt promoted by a former member of the PSOL, the left arm of the Workers’ Party”<sup>186</sup> However, little to no evidence can back Bolsonaro up. As explained by

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Carolina Linhares, “Internação de Bolsonaro vira laboratório eleitoral de embate sobre facada,” *Folha de São Paulo*, January 8, 2022, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2022/01/internacao-de-bolsonaro-vira-laboratorio-eleitoral-de-embate-sobre-facada.shtml>.

<sup>185</sup> Gabriel Araujo and Lisandra Paraguassu, “Brazil’s Bolsonaro Hospitalized with Obstructed Gut, May Need Surgery,” *Reuters*, January 3, 2022, sec. Americas, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-bolsonaro-taken-hospital-with-abdominal-pain-doctor-says-2022-01-03/>; Jair Bolsonaro, “Uma pequena pausa,” Facebook, February 9, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/211857482296579/photos/pb.100044022914395.-2207520000..1192610687554582/?type=3>.

<sup>186</sup> Ernesto Londoño, “Brazil President Bolsonaro Is Hospitalized and Faces Possible Surgery,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-surgery-hospital.html>; Jair Bolsonaro, “Mais um desafio,” Facebook, July 14, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/211857482296579/photos/pb.100044022914395.-2207520000..2487130634769241/?type=3>

Rocha, Adelio was already present in Juiz de Fora, which shows no premeditation on his part.<sup>187</sup> Also, Adelio had no contact with people that might have influenced him.<sup>188</sup>

When looking at his popularity before and after the attack, it becomes clear that this event positively affected his popularity. However, Lula's imprisonment needs to be taken into consideration. The data presented show that Bolsonaro went from 19% to 56% of public approval, suggesting that the knife attack was beneficial for his candidacy. However, in April, Lula – a candidate – was arrested for corruption but could continue his candidacy for president. As Fabiano Costa explains, Lula was confirmed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2018 as the Workers' Party's candidate, four months after he was imprisoned.<sup>189</sup> This was possible because the Brazilian Supreme Court will only analyze his case on the 15<sup>th</sup> when all other parties have to also confirm their candidates.<sup>190</sup> However, according to the Lei Ficha Limpa (in English, Clean Slate Law), a candidate can only run if they have never been convicted in a collegiate body of justice, which then prohibited Lula from continuing his candidacy, with Fernando Haddad taking his place.<sup>191</sup> In August, when Bolsonaro had 19% of popularity, Lula had 39%. In October, however, with Lula now unable to run, Bolsonaro reached 56%. The fact that Lula was a candidate and

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<sup>187</sup> Marcelo Rocha, "PF escolhe delegado que já investigou PCC para apurar facada em Bolsonaro," *Folha de São Paulo*, January 5, 2022, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2022/01/pf-escolhe-delegado-que-ja-investigou-pcc-para-apurar-facada-em-bolsonaro.shtml>.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Fabiano Costa, "Lula pode concorrer à Presidência mesmo preso em Curitiba? Entenda," *GI*, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/08/04/lula-pode-concorrer-a-presidencia-mesmo-preso-em-curitiba-entenda.ghtml>.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Renan Ramalho and Mariana Oliveira, "TSE decide por 6 votos a 1 rejeitar a candidatura de Lula a presidente," *GI*, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/08/31/maioria-dos-ministros-do-tse-vota-pela-rejeicao-da-candidatura-de-lula.ghtml>.

then was forced to give up on his candidacy might have narrowed down voters' choices on which candidate to vote for, pushing some to vote for Bolsonaro.

However, moving from Lula to Bolsonaro is a considerable jump in the political spectrum. In the American political system, voters have only two choices to make. In Brazilian democracy, however, the voting population has many. In the first turn of the 2018 presidential elections, for example, there were 13 candidates available.<sup>192</sup> In addition, Fernando Haddad – a member of the Workers' Party and former mayor of Sao Paulo – substituted Lula after the latter was prevented from running. With this said, claiming that the percentage of the population that was voting for Lula migrated to Bolsonaro is a stretch since, as seen, there were many other candidates to choose from, even one from the same party. The connection between Lula and Haddad is, then, much closer than Lula and Bolsonaro since Haddad is from the Workers' Party and ran representing Lula. There were, of course, a percentage of voters that migrated from one side of the political spectrum to the other. Guilherme Venaglia, a reporter for *Veja*, published an article going over these kinds of voters. Venaglia presents people like Regiane Mello that has been voting for the Workers' Party since the 90s.<sup>193</sup> Mello claimed that she could not believe all the corruption scandals involving the Workers' Party, believing they were a victim of injustice.<sup>194</sup> After a while, however, after her two sons presented her books of Olavo de Carvalho, also known as Bolsonaro's guru, she “woke up from an illusion.”<sup>195</sup> Mariana Fernandes, another example listed by Venaglia, claimed that she idolized Lula and saw his as the

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<sup>192</sup> “Eleições 2018 | Apuração 1º Turno para Presidente,” *Estadão*, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://politica.estadao.com.br/eleicoes/2018/cobertura-votacao-apuracao/primeiro-turno>.

<sup>193</sup> Guilherme Venaglia, “Os eleitores que votaram em Lula e agora vão de Bolsonaro,” *Veja*, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/os-eleitores-que-votaram-em-lula-e-agora-va-de-bolsonaro/>.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

“father of the nation.”<sup>196</sup> This, however, did not take long, as she then says that “after a while, our masks fall to the ground.”<sup>197</sup> Both Mello and Fernandes, then, saw the corruption scandals as a driving factor to vote for Bolsonaro. Others, like Natalia Passarinho presents, did not vote for Haddad since they claim they do not vote for a party but for a specific political figure.<sup>198</sup> Passarinho presents Monteiro, a taxi driver from Brasilia who said that he “votes for Lula as a person, not in his party. If another assumes his place (in this case, Haddad), I will not vote for him, but will for Bolsonaro.”<sup>199</sup> Here, people like Mello, Fernandes, and Monteiro represent the 6.2% of the population that, as CNT shows, would vote for Bolsonaro in case Lula disappeared from the polls.<sup>200</sup> This small percentage, however, is not significant considering the election results. In the second turn of the presidential elections, Bolsonaro won with 55.13%, and Haddad followed with 44.87%.<sup>201</sup> If Bolsonaro indeed gained 6,2% of voters from Lula, he would still have won with around 49%. If, however, these people decided to vote for Haddad instead, this might have led to his victory with almost 51% of votes.

To conclude, the knife attack is significant, but more research needs to be done to analyze this issue in its entirety. Looking at public approval alone, Bolsonaro doubled his numbers, suggesting that being stabbed by Adelio did help him in the long run. However, when taking the political environment as a whole – and inserting Lula’s imprisonment and candidacy removal into the equation – this issue becomes more complicated. The fact that Lula has always been a

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Nathalia Passarinho, “Quem são os eleitores de Lula que pretendem votar em Bolsonaro se o ex-presidente não concorrer,” *BBC News Brasil*, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-45323102>.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> “Resultados da 137ª Pesquisa CNT/MDA,” *CNT*, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://cnt.org.br/agencia-cnt/cnt-divulga-resultados-137-pesquisa-cnt-md>.

<sup>201</sup> “Resultado da apuração de 2º turno para presidente das Eleições 2018.,” *G1*, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/apuracao/presidente.ghtml>.

popular figure in Brazilian politics that was then forced to abstain might have forced voters to vote for Bolsonaro. This, however, seems unlikely since this would be a massive jump in the political spectrum. In addition, Haddad's presence in politics further complicates the issue since, as seen, he also belonged to the Workers' Party. The fact, however, that some voters like Monteiro claim that he votes for Lula and not for the Workers' Party as a whole shed light on a reason that might help explain this complicated political scenario.

### **Conclusion**

As seen, Bolsonaro's strategies are neither new nor original. Using Trump and Wilders as comparative case studies, this paper presented strategies focused on the making of an enemy, their relatability, and their ability to recall a time where their specific country was seen as prosperous. When looking at Bolsonaro's stance in such behaviors, one can see that he displays many similar characteristics from both Trump and Wilders: they all have a scapegoat (in Bolsonaro, the Left), blame the current state of affairs in the present day government, promising that it would all disappear with their election, and have ways to be relatable to their people. For instance, Bolsonaro uses the same simple and straightforward language as Trump but is also well-known – like Wilders – for his use of profanities. In addition, Bolsonaro was successful – like Wilders and Trump – into displaying himself as part of the people. The only difference, however, is that Bolsonaro chose to physically look like his voters by using soccer jerseys and other behaviors associated with the lower classes.

The impeachment was significant for Bolsonaro's election. Considering Laclau's theory that populism can only rise in a broken system, the chaos in Brazilian politics can be used as an example that shows Laclauian theory is applicable in today's society. As demonstrated, the 2013 protests charged the Brazilian folk with resentment towards the Workers' Party, being

exacerbated by the Car Wash investigation, which then resulted in Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. Popular opinion, therefore, was a determining factor in Bolsonaro's election since he showed himself to be a candidate that was the complete opposite of those from the Workers' Party deemed corrupt and evil. He, with his controversial opinions, achieved an almost celebrity status in Brazilian society, that in the end culminated in his election as President.

The knife attack might have helped Bolsonaro, but more research needs to be done in order to fully assess the situation since – as seen – Lula's candidacy might have influenced the results. Data shows that Bolsonaro's popularity boomed from 19% to 56%, which makes the "knife effect" seem relevant. However, taking the fact that Lula was still considered to be a candidate when Bolsonaro had 19%, and was then prohibited from continuing his candidacy might show that the knife attack was not as significant. As shown, Lula's voters might have voted for Bolsonaro due to Lula exiting the political scenario. However, this paper believes that this strategy is unlikely since going from Lula to Bolsonaro would be equivalent of going from a leftist candidate to an extreme right one. Also, as seen, Haddad's presence further complicates the issue. Therefore, more research is needed to fully understand the implications of the "knife attack" in Bolsonaro's election.

This paper, then, outlines important information about populist leaders in general. The first, is that their playbook can effectively cross borders. Here, three figures were analyzed that belong to three different parts of the world. All of them, however, follow a similar set of tactics. As seen, they all have a scapegoat, use defamatory nicknames towards their opposition, want to shape the political system as they see fit, and brand themselves as belonging to the "people." The fact that all three leaders are similar in these aspects show populism's ability to effectively travel

from one side of the world to the next. The second, is that their strategies – for better or for worse – work. Through such playbook, Trump and Bolsonaro were able become their nation’s next president, and Wilders now leads the Party for Freedom. Then, rapidly identifying populist characteristics in a politician is important for policy makers since, as these three examples show, populism is an effective way to achieve a leadership position on politics. Lastly, educating the public not only about populism per se, but the ways in which it is used, and how it affects democracy might be relevant to combat it.

*Iuri M. Piovezan is a graduate student at Villanova University studying Political Science. He has also received a Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies from Temple University in 2022.*

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