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Populist governance and populism's host ideology in the fight against COVID-19: the cases of Brazil and Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to elucidate the impact of populism on policy decisions and how to distinguish it from that of its so-called host ideology. It studies the health policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by presidents Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico to address the following questions: 1) What was 'populist' in the (populist) governments' management of the pandemic? 2) How can the populist form be distinguished from its ideological substance? and 3) What explains policy differences in the management of the pandemic? The article contributes to the understanding of the relationship between populism and ideology by adopting a minimalist conceptualization of populism, centered on the antagonistic constitution of 'the people' as a political actor, to conceptualize populist governance and showing that the 'populist' logic of the governments' response to the crisis was embedded within the mechanisms of governance, while the host ideology played a constitutive role in discursively constructing 'the people' – a process of identification that subsequently informed policy options. However, it concludes that governance and policy are not wholly discrete spheres, nor can populist form be wholly separated from ideological substance, as both played a role in shaping decisions and outcomes.

Introduction

The reach of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reactions of populist governments to the crisis present an opportunity to address important theoretical and empirical questions about populist governance. However, as De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon¹ pointed out, the enquiry should not be limited to populism alone, as populism is never enough to entirely characterize a government's policy or political project. First, populist leaders do not necessarily always rule as 'populists'; they use different political strategies and discursive appeals according to circumstances. Second, populism's host ideology is integral to the policy decisions governments take.² Populist governments' definitions of 'the people' and 'the elite'; diagnosis of the social, political, and economic issues at stake; and solutions proposed are among the questions influenced by populism's so-called host ideology.³ Third, populist governments do not rule in an institutional vacuum. Rather,

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they operate within an institutional and socioeconomic context that facilitates or constrains their rule. If populism is not an encompassing political dimension of populist governments, then the questions of how to assess the impact of populism on policy decisions, how to distinguish it from that of its host ideology, and how different ideological leanings and contextual factors impact on policy decisions are far from linear.⁴

This article studies how populism interacted with contrasting ideologies in the management of the COVID-19 health crisis through a comparative analysis of Brazil and Mexico's populist governments' governance of the pandemic. In doing so, we address the following questions: 1) What was 'populist' in the (populist) governments' management of the pandemic? 2) How can we analytically distinguish the populist form from ideological substance while tracing their articulation in practice? and 3) What explains policy decisions across cases?

We contend that populism shaped the governments' response to the crisis through a governance process marked by antagonistic politicization and the decisionist exercise of presidential authority. Populism's host ideologies, in turn, provided substantive content to the discursive construction of 'the people' and, consequently, shaped both the selection and justification of policies. The institutional context then either facilitated or constrained populist governance and conditioned the implementation of policy preferences.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section presents the concept of populist governance. Section three discusses left- and right-wing ideological constructions of 'the people.' Section four presents the research methodology. Section five outlines the contrasting political profiles of presidents Bolsonaro and López Obrador. Section six describes Brazil's and Mexico's health policies during the pandemic. Section seven analyzes the roles of populist governance, host ideologies, and institutional contexts on the management of the pandemic and section eight presents the conclusions.

Literature review

A growing body of literature has examined the impact of political regimes on the management of COVID-19. Using a dataset of 188 countries, Wehner and Hallerberg found that democracies implemented lockdowns faster than autocracies.⁵ However, their study focused on differences between democracies and autocracies rather than on populism. A related literature has examined the performance of populist governments during the pandemic, arguing that populist rulers' erratic style of government, mistrust of experts, and tendency to politicize public health decisions contributed negatively to health outcomes.⁶ Yet, these studies either failed to properly conceptualize populist governance, consider varieties of populism, or distinguish between the impact of the populist style of governance from that of its host ideology. Hallin et al. considered varieties of populism by identifying significant differences in the communication strategies on the pandemic between statist and libertarian varieties of populism.⁷ However, the analysis focused on differences among right-wing populist governments rather than on the differences between left- and right-wing populism.

Two articles are particularly aligned with our approach. In a study of anti-populism and populism during the COVID-19 pandemic, Galanopoulos and Venizelos argued that populism does not suffice to explain governments' responses to COVID-19. Rather, they

argued that populist leaders' ideological positions played a crucial role in their pandemic policies. But the article's focus on the role of populism's host ideology left under-theorized what, if any, was the role of populism in the management of the pandemic.⁸ The article closer to our approach is Panizza et al.'s comparative study of populist governance and social policy during the pandemic. We borrowed from the article the conceptualization and operationalization of populist governance. But the article focuses on the relations between populist governance and social policy rather than health, and the comparison is not systematically applied to the role of populism's host ideology on health policies.⁹

Conceptualizing populism and populist governance

The lack of agreement on the conceptualization of populism is an often-repeated claim. However, the claim should be qualified by scholars increasingly adopting minimalist conceptualizations of the term centered on populism's appeal to 'the people' – a unified political actor that draws its commonality from its antagonistic relation with a certain *other*.¹⁰ This formulation pares down the concept to two core features: First, the centrality attributed to the constitution of 'the people' (as the so-called plebs or under-dogs) as an excluded or marginalized part of the community that claims to be the only legitimate demos; and second, the role that the antagonism between the people and its *other* (e.g. the elite, the establishment, the political class) plays in populist identification by simplifying the political space into two mutually antagonistic, co-constitutive actors.

Populism is a mode of political identification that can be activated both in government and opposition. Meanwhile, populist governance is the application of populist strategies of identification to the structure and processes of decision-making, behavior, and control in government.¹¹ The focus on the priority that populism attributes to the constitution of 'the people' in an antagonistic relation with a certain *other* provides a vector to determine the specifically populist aspects of populist governance.¹² Two characteristics directly derived from the definition are particularly relevant in the study of populist governance: politicization and decisionism.

Populist rulers' antagonistic relations with established actors and institutions result in a hyper-politicized, antagonistic style of policymaking that blurs the dividing lines between governing and campaigning, as well as between politics and administration.¹³ In this characterization, antagonism is a relational category. Populist rulers are likely to claim that opposition to their policy decisions is driven by elite interests that undermine the will of the people. In turn, the anti-populist opposition reaction to the government's polarizing rhetoric and policy initiatives may lead to further entrenching the dividing lines of populist politics. Reproduced in time, antagonistic politicization becomes entrenched in society, affecting social attitudes beyond the political arena.¹⁴

The second characteristic central to populist governance is decisionism. Carl Schmitt originally used the concept to refer to the rule of a person, rather than of impersonal norms, in which deviation from the law is justified by personal decision-making in concrete circumstances.¹⁵ In this study, we defined decisionism as the centralized and personalistic rule of a leader that produces transgressive procedural and policy decisions, in contrast to the technocratic, rule-bound, and legal-rational Weberian model of public administration. Decisionism's relation to populism lies in the claim that the populist

leader embodies the will of the people and that political or institutional constraints on the exercise of power can therefore be portrayed as undemocratic. Acting within or outside the confines of the institutional order, populist leaders disrupt established political, cultural, and policy orthodoxies, transgress institutional rules and procedures, and redefine what is 'sayable' and, therefore, doable in a political order.

Populism's host ideologies and the discursive construction of the people

The constitution of 'the people' in contemporary societies is always context-dependent, historically specific, and highly contingent. As such, the way in which 'the people' of populism is construed and the meaning that is imputed to the antagonistic gap between the opposing camps of the populist divide are key questions to be investigated in the study of populist governance. We hypothesized that populist governments' health policies during the COVID-19 pandemic were designed to constitute and reinforce populist identification in line with contrasting ideological constructions of 'the people.'

Populist leaders, parties, and governments – whether (radical) right or left, agrarian, nationalist, democratic or authoritarian, progressive or conservative – construct 'the people' according to their underlying ideological outlook, the so-called host ideology.¹⁶ Notably, two inter-related problems hound the classification of populism in terms of a left–right divide. The first one is a more general question about distinguishing between left and right in an era in which socialism has receded into the political horizon, class is no longer the more salient political cleavage, and the left's claim to working class representation is empirically questionable, to say the least. The second one is that populist appeals are not based on neat ideological manifestos but on broad appeals to the people that may (and often do) combine a variety of ideological elements. For example, the populist right in Europe has, in many countries, adopted economic and social policies historically identified with the left combined with traditional right-wing tropes on issues such as gender, race, and culture.¹⁷

Moreover, the meaning of ideological elements in terms of left and right is relational and dependent on context. For example, wearing a mask as a protection against the spreading of COVID-19 is not necessarily left or right wing. Opposition to wearing masks becomes an element of right-wing populist appeals by its articulation to ideological elements of the libertarian right. Context also determines the right–left salience of ideological elements. Nationalism is an important element in European right-wing populism, but in Latin America, it has been historically associated to progressive, national-popular varieties of populism.¹⁸ This does not mean that distinguishing between right- and left-wing populism is an impossible task. Rather, the discursive elements of left- and right-wing populism are floating signifiers¹⁹ whose meaning can only be fully grasped in terms of how they are articulated to other signifiers in practices of identification.

In this process, populist discourse serves a dual function: as an ideational frame and as an instrument for policy action.²⁰ Left-wing populists define 'the people' mainly on an inclusive socioeconomic basis, appealing to the poor and the marginalized against the rich and their political representatives ('punching upwards'): the people against the oligarchy, the 99% against the 1%. In contrast, right-wing populist parties define 'the people' mainly on an exclusionary socio-cultural basis construed in terms of ethnic, race,

gender, religious, and other socio-cultural markers ('punching downwards'), as well as upwards against political, technocratic, and cultural elites ('the swamp,' 'the globalists') that betray or ignore the will of the people as manifested by the leader.²¹ Yet, as noted above, these are broad generalizations, as the articulation of left and right elements of populist discourse is context dependent.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative paired-comparison strategy. As Tarrow argues, paired comparisons strike a useful balance between descriptive generalization and analytical depth, making them a valuable intermediate step in theory building.²² A qualitative methodology is particularly suited for tracing the governance process in detail.²³ It also allows the close examination of how different ideological elements were articulated in the populist leaders' contrasting constructions of *the people*, and how said ideologies interacted with populist governance within the institutional contexts of the two countries under study.

Brazil and Mexico are well suited for this comparison in line with Mill's method of differences.²⁴ They are the two largest countries in Latin America by population and territory, are classified by the World Bank as upper-middle-income economies and have been described by Mazzuca and Munck as 'middle-low quality democracies.'²⁵ Both are presidential federations, giving substantial authority to the head of state while also leaving room for subnational actors to shape policy implementation. In addition, Bolsonaro and López Obrador faced the pandemic after their first year in office, placing them at a similar stage in their mandates when the crisis began. Both governments were widely regarded as prominent cases of contemporary populism in Latin America, but with contrasting ideological orientations: Bolsonaro as a radical right-wing populist and López Obrador as a left-wing one.²⁶ This allows to compare how left- and right-wing populist governments responded to the same transnational crisis under broadly similar institutional and regional conditions.

The article covers the period from March 2020 to December 2021. The analysis tracks government actions and speeches by both presidents and their health and communication ministers. The focus on these actors allows us to identify both policy decisions and the governments' discursive framing of the pandemic. We use data from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker,²⁷ which provides comparable information on containment and closure measures and public information campaigns. We also analyze two online media sources from each country – *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Globo* in Brazil, and *El Universal* and *Milenio* in Mexico – to triangulate the evidence and minimize problems of underreporting, fact-checking errors, and biased event selection.²⁸

To make the comparative assessment systematic, we operationalize antagonistic politicization and decisionism through a small set of observable indicators. Politicization was assessed through evidence of antagonistic framing, the portrayal of scientists or institutional actors as partisan adversaries, and the blurring of governing and campaigning. Decisionism was assessed through evidence of personalized decision-making, the subordination or bypassing of health authorities and institutional procedures, and transgressive departures from scientific advice or established public health norms. These indicators provided a common qualitative basis for comparing Brazil and Mexico, without

Table 1. Operationalizing populist governance.

Concept	Observable indicators	Evidence considered
Politicisation	Antagonistic framing; portrayal of scientists or institutional actors as partisan adversaries; blurring of governing and campaigning	Presidential speeches, press conferences, public mobilisation, conflicts with governors, courts, media or experts
Decisionism	Personalised decision-making; bypassing or subordination of health authorities and procedures; transgression of scientific or institutional norms	Executive actions, ministerial dismissals or subordinations, departures from expert advice, disregard of public health protocols

Source: Authors' elaboration.

converting politicization and decisionism into quantitative scales. Accordingly, Table 1 summarizes the observable indicators and the evidence considered for each concept.

The political context: two (different) populist leaders

Bolsonaro and López Obrador both came to power in 2018 amid crises of representation that are widely regarded as a condition of emergence for populism.²⁹ In Brazil, Bolsonaro won the presidency with 55.13% of the vote in the second round, in the context of a major corruption scandal, the Car Wash investigation, and the deep economic recession of 2015–16.³⁰ His campaign combined anti-system and anti-corruption appeals with hard right-wing nationalism, anti-communism, conservative Christian values, and support for market reforms. His coalition brought together Evangelical Christians, mainly white middle-class voters hostile to the Workers' Party, business sectors, agribusiness, and the security forces³¹: the so-called 'Bible, boi (cattle) and bullets' constituency. In office, Bolsonaro governed in permanent campaign mode,³² advanced a right-wing cultural agenda, clashed with the judiciary, militarized parts of his administration, and cultivated a direct personal bond with his supporters.³³

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, in Mexico also won the presidency in 2018. He broke the PRI/PAN duopoly that had dominated Mexican politics since the 1990s, winning 53% of the vote and a congressional majority for his coalition.³⁴ His campaign presented him as an anti-establishment leader fighting corruption, inequality, and entrenched privilege through the 'Fourth Transformation,' a project of national regeneration framed against Mexico's neoliberal order. Its unifying thread was a moralized critique of neoliberalism, in which corruption referred not only to individual dishonesty but to a political-economic order that privileged the powerful and neglected the poor. Unlike Bolsonaro's right-wing appeal, López Obrador's populism constructed 'the people' in socio-political and moral terms: the poor, the humble, and the excluded, opposed to 'the power mafia,' 'neoliberalism,' 'conservatives,' and other privileged actors.³⁵ His notion of *el pueblo bueno* combined social inclusion with a moralized image of the virtuous or pure people.³⁶

Brazil and Mexico's health policies during the pandemic

Brazil

The first case of COVID-19 in Brazil was confirmed on 26 February 2020, with the first death reported on 17 March.³⁷ By the end of March, the virus had spread nationwide. In Brazil's federal system, decisions to act during the pandemic were

divided between different state bodies at federal, state, and municipal levels. At the outset of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health (MoH) acted promptly in preparation for the crisis, creating a Public Health Emergency Operations Center on 20 January and issuing Ministerial Decree 188/2020 on 4 February, qualifying the outbreak as a ‘Public Health Emergency of National Importance.’ In February, the MoH sponsored legislation (Law 13.979/2020) to prepare the country for the COVID-19 pandemic; it was quickly passed by Congress. A month later, on 12 March, Ministerial Decree 356/2020 provided guidelines for the regulation and implementation of the Public Health Emergency of National Importance Act measures. The main dispositions included guidelines for social distancing and quarantine measures, and the requisitioning of assets and services (with compensation) from individuals or companies during the public health emergency. On 20 March, in an attempt to align subnational units to his libertarian health policy preferences, the President issued a Provisional Measure (MP 926/2020) that concentrated in the Federal Executive the management of the pandemic, including the power to impose restrictions on mobility and economic activities.³⁸ The MP was challenged in court by the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (an opposition party). On 15 April 2020, the Supreme Federal Tribunal ruled the MP unconstitutional, reasserting the power of state and local office holders to implement emergency control measures within their jurisdictions.³⁹

The National Health Surveillance Secretariat of the MoH coordinated health surveillance and developed the National Contingency Plan for Human Infection for COVID-19. Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta supported the imposition of restrictions to mobility and other containment measures, although the MoH did not issue any national lockdown or social-distancing orders, leaving these decisions to subnational authorities.⁴⁰

The initiatives taken by the MoH and state governors to fight the pandemic were systematically undermined by President Bolsonaro’s downplaying of the severity of the crisis, his opposition to any restrictions on commercial activities and freedom of movements, and peddling of unproven medical treatments. Bolsonaro emphasized the economic costs of lockdowns over the health impact of the pandemic. He dismissed the seriousness of the illness, famously characterizing it as nothing but ‘a little flu.’⁴¹ In April 2020, when a reporter noted that the number of deaths had surpassed those in China, he replied: ‘And so what? I am sorry. You want me to do what?’⁴² In November 2020, at a time when more than 160,000 people had died from the virus and Brazil had over 5.6 million confirmed cases, he stated: ‘There’s no use fleeing reality. Brazil needs to stop being a country of fags (*pais de maricas*) and face the pandemic “head on” (*com o peito aberto*).’ He further remarked: ‘I regret the deaths. I really do. But we’re all going to die someday. We have to face up to it and fight. I hate this fagot stuff.’⁴³

Bolsonaro strongly defended the priority assigned to keeping the economy open. For instance, he stated, ‘Brazil must work. The best medicine for any disease is work. We have got to work.’⁴⁴ On 17 May 2021, he labeled as ‘idiots’ those who remained at home in compliance with restrictions to mobility imposed by states and municipalities.⁴⁵ He justified his opposition to restrictions on economic activities with its impact on informal workers. He remarked: ‘What will happen to the 40 million invisibles [i.e. informal workers]? They have now

lost everything. The one that collected aluminum cans in the streets, has no cans to collect; no biscuits to sell in the beach or mate [a soft drink] to sell in the football stadium. Now everything is about the pandemic. We must put an end to this business.⁴⁶

In the absence of a coordinated national policy on restrictions to social mobility, subnational leaders, particularly state governors, were left to decide by themselves whether to impose social-distancing measures to curb the spread of the virus. In many cases, historical allies of Bolsonaro challenged his *laissez faire* response by enacting stringent public health measures to control the virus (e.g. Governors Marcos Rocha of Rondônia and Ronaldo Caiado of Goiás). This left citizens in a complex information environment, with often conflicting cues from the federal executive and state governments. In this environment, citizen response to the virus exhibited high levels of variation. Despite the President's attacks, most state governments remained firm in their support of social distancing and business closures, and warned against drugs and therapies that had yet to be tested.⁴⁷

The pandemic began to ease in the second half of 2021, mainly as a result of a successful vaccination program. After a slow start in early 2021, partly as a result of Bolsonaro's obstruction, the vaccination drive gathered pace in the second half of the year, evidencing the underlying strength of Brazil's health system. Despite Bolsonaro's opposition and a controversial procurement process, the vaccination drive enjoyed strong support among the population at large, members of Congress, and most subnational political office holders. As of 4 November 2022, 488,138,122 vaccine doses had been administered in the country, with 88.16% of the population having received at least one dose, according to the WHO.⁴⁸ On 22 April 2022, the Health Minister, Marcelo Queiroga, signed a decree ending the state of Public Health Emergency of National Importance. According to the ministry, the move was based on the country's improved epidemiological landscape and progress of the vaccination campaign.⁴⁹

Mexico

The first case of COVID-19 in Mexico was reported on 28 February 2020, and the first recorded casualty was on 19 March. Responsibilities for dealing with the pandemic were shared between the federal government, states, and municipalities. In contrast with President Bolsonaro, President López Obrador argued that the management of the pandemic should be depoliticized and claimed that his administration was following scientific advice. National responsibility for managing the pandemic was centralized in the office of the Undersecretariat of Prevention and Health Promotion of the Secretary of Health. The head of the office, Hugo López-Gatell, a politically appointed epidemiologist and infectious diseases expert, fronted the government's response to the pandemic.⁵⁰ As early as January 2020, López-Gatell began to hold daily televised briefings, which ran until June 2021.

While López-Gatell did not dismiss outright the WHO recommendations, he initially downplayed the severity of the virus. In the early stages of the pandemic, López-Gatell was against controlling international traffic, imposing social distancing, closing non-essential businesses, massive testing, and even masking. He dismissed them as actions based on 'panic' and 'fear' or 'unscientific' solutions. He also claimed that asymptomatic transmission was considered very unlikely. As evidence became available that put these

assumptions in doubt (or disproved them completely), the government slightly shifted its discourse but only changed its policies in a limited way.⁵¹

The federal government sought to justify its lax approach to the pandemic by initially minimizing its risks and stressing that it had it under control. President López-Obrador's initial reaction was of denial: 'It is not, according to the information we have, something terrible, fatal, not even equivalent to influenza.'⁵² He claimed that Mexico had the medical personnel and hospital capacity to face the pandemic. On 14 June 2020, he claimed that the most challenging part of the epidemic had passed: 'We already know how to take care of ourselves [...] now we can go out to the streets and do our activities as usual.' Even at the peak of the second wave in 2021, which left over 30 000 deaths in 1 month, he said: 'The worst is already passing. The situation that took place in Mexico City and the State of Mexico did not surpass us.' Furthermore, the government systematically tried to focus public attention on input indicators with a positive outlook (e.g. availability of hospital beds) while minimizing the high numbers of cases and deaths.⁵³

Despite downplaying its gravity, the federal government took steps to fight the pandemic. On 19 March 2020, the General Health Council, a board chaired by the president that includes among its members federal and state administrative authorities, heads of health authorities in each Mexican state, and representatives from public and private organizations, declared the COVID-19 epidemic a serious illness (*enfermedad grave*) that required priority attention. On 20 March, the Secretary of Education announced schools would close from 23 March to 17 April to help prevent the spread of the virus; classes subsequently adopted an online format for the academic year 2020–2021. On 23 March, the government launched the National Healthy Distance Campaign, which promoted maintaining a distance of at least 1.5 meters between people through the character *Susana Distancia*. On 30 March, the General Health Council declared that Mexico had entered a health emergency by 'force majeure.' All non-essential activities in the public, private, and social sectors were suspended until 30 April (later extended to 30 May). All residents in the country were exhorted to stay at home and limit movement except for those participating in essential activities.⁵⁴

In early June 2020, the Federal Ministry of Health replaced the nationwide suspension of activities with a 'COVID-19 traffic light' scheme of colors that ranked the risk of reopening each state's economy as a guideline for states' decisions based on the monitoring of indicators related to hospitalizations and the intensity of the spread of the virus. The system specified the activities that were permitted under each tier. Red indicated the highest risk, orange the next highest, followed by yellow and then green. Zacatecas was the only state rated at a level of risk below red. By the end of June 2020, 'traffic lights' were changed from red to yellow in several states, allowing the reopening of social, educational, and economic activities.⁵⁵

During the early stages of the pandemic, state governors belonging to the PRI, and particularly to the center-right PAN, consistently implemented more stringent policies compared with states governed by López Obrador's MORENA party. As time passed, more state governors began to speak out against the federal government's perceived inaction and ineffective policy choices. A number of states refused to implement the national policy of a traffic light system to resume non-essential economic activities. Opposition governors argued that they had not been consulted and that the policy had not been properly explained to them. The governors further objected to the spotlight

system's indiscriminate initial ranking of 31 of the country's 32 states as 'red' (the maximum level of risk). They further argued that the spotlight system unfairly put on them the onus and responsibility for the adverse public health developments that could take place after the relaxation of restrictions on economic activities.⁵⁶

The slow and patchy federal government response to the pandemic provoked protests from health care workers, who demanded stricter government policies and access to personal and protective equipment. As the pandemic continued, demonstrations increasingly shifted to involve business owners demanding to be allowed to re-open their business and receive more government support. Notably, demonstrations were limited to the state level and did not reach nationwide significance. One of the few significant protests that had national repercussions took place in September 2020, in the capital, Mexico City. Demonstrators belonging to the so-called National Anti-López Obrador Front (*Frente Nacional Anti-AMLO*) waved Mexican flags and held banners reading 'AMLO Out' (*Fuera AMLO*) in protest against the President's management of the pandemic. The same group had previously staged car demonstrations demanding the resignation of the President, questioning his economic policies and other policy decisions. Reacting to the demonstrations, President López Obrador called the protesters 'conservatives' and claimed that the demonstrations served as evidence that something was changing in the country, as the protestors belonged to the elites and not the popular sectors.⁵⁷ The media's coverage of the pandemic and the government's response was also a source of polarization. In a morning press conference in April 2020, López Obrador dedicated a full 20 minutes to separating the media into 'good' and 'bad' sources. He called his critics 'conservative' again and the mainstream media 'scoundrels' (*canallas*) and 'vultures' (*zopilotes*) that misinformed in bad faith.⁵⁸

On 25 April 2021, Mexico ceased classifying the states according to the traffic light colors, and from 1 May, ceased recommending health measures. Commenting on the end of the traffic light system, López-Gatell noted that the traffic light system and other health recommendations were meant as a guidance for Mexican states to establish their own health measures, and that these were never binding. In announcing the end of health guidance, López-Gatell was quoted saying COVID-19 'is not going to go away' and that it was time to 'move on from the pandemic state'.⁵⁹

Analysis

Populist governance

Regarding the governance process, politicization and decisionism were evident in both cases, although, in line with the ordinal nature of populism,⁶⁰ these were significantly more notable in the administration of President Bolsonaro. Government's policy responses to the pandemic are political and rightly so, as they involve complex trade-offs. In the case of Brazil, politicization was deliberately ratcheted up by President Bolsonaro to deepen political antagonisms and reinforce populist identification between himself and his followers. President Bolsonaro deepened politico-cultural dividing lines and mobilized his base against his adversaries. The polarization strategy included disinformation campaigns and the spread of fake news, orchestrated by the so-called 'hate cabinet,' an office composed of three special advisors to the president working closely with one of Bolsonaro's sons, Carlos, who oversaw the president's social media strategy.⁶¹

President Bolsonaro's supporters took to the streets on a regular basis and organized gatherings, motorcades, and public prayers. He often mixed with his supporters and participated in several demonstrations calling for the shutdown of Congress and the Supreme Federal Tribunal, while praising the country's former military dictatorship.^{62, 63} In line with the relational nature of polarization, Bolsonaro's denialist policies and antagonistic rhetoric prompted counter-manifestations against his handling of the pandemic. Protests against him intensified in May to July 2021, when thousands of demonstrators took to the streets across the country in protest against the slow rollout of the vaccine and allegations of corruption involving vaccine procurement by the health ministry.⁶⁴

Personalism and transgression, the elements of decisionism that characterize populist governance, were also evident in the Brazilian case. President Bolsonaro's governance was highly personalistic. He sidelined the MoH in an attempt to promote his own policies. As former health minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta put it, 'He (Bolsonaro) did not want that the MoH set up the basic rules.'⁶⁵ On 16 April 2020, President Bolsonaro dismissed Mandetta because the minister supported isolation measures. Mandetta's successor, Nelson Teich, resigned in May, after less than a month in office, owing to disagreements with Bolsonaro over the reopening of gyms and Bolsonaro's campaign in favor of the use of the anti-malaria drug chloroquine to treat the disease.⁶⁶ Following the dismissals, Bolsonaro appointed Eduardo Pazuello as health minister, a military officer of his personal trust, who agreed to promote the use of chloroquine.

Transgression was evident in Bolsonaro's violation of social distancing rules, systematic rejection of scientific advice (including from his own officials), promotion of the use of the anti-malaria drug chloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19, and unfounded allegations about the safety of the vaccines. He refused to follow WHO guidelines or evidence-based health policy and instead drew on discredited or incomplete science. Bolsonaro suggested that the virus was created in a laboratory by China to launch a 'chemical and bacteriological war.'⁶⁷ He opposed the use of masks, particularly in children, alleging that they caused irritability, headaches, concentration difficulties, and a reduction in feelings of happiness (he often appeared in public without a mask). He bragged about not being vaccinated and cast doubt on the safety of the vaccines, claiming that they may raise the chance of contracting AIDS and jokingly suggesting that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine could turn people into crocodiles or bearded ladies.^{68, 69} In a radio interview in January 2022, he criticized the medicine regulatory agency, ANVISA, for authorizing the vaccination of children aged 5–11 years, claiming that he had not heard of children dying of COVID-19. 'What is behind this? What are the interests of vaccine maniacs?', Bolsonaro asked in the interview.⁷⁰

The elements of populist governance that characterized the Bolsonaro administration were less evident in the management of the pandemic by President López Obrador. He, like Bolsonaro, sought to minimize the threat posed by the pandemic, particularly in the first few months. However, in contrast to the Brazilian president, López Obrador argued that the management of the pandemic should be depoliticized and claimed that his administration was following scientific advice. Yet, his governance of the pandemic was far from technocratic and included elements of politicization and decisionism. López Obrador did not dismiss scientific orthodoxy outright or weaponize transgressive statements and practices about the pandemic to deepen polarization. Nonetheless, he

undermined scientific orthodoxy with highly idiosyncratic, ambiguous, and contradictory statements and practices, such as not wearing masks, holding rallies, kissing supporters, and urging Mexicans to go out shopping and patronize restaurants to support the country's economy.⁷¹

López Obrador's appointment of López-Gatell, an infectious diseases specialist, to head the fight against COVID-19 underlined the message that his government was 'following the science.' However, we observed a significant alignment between the Undersecretary's scientific advice and the President's political message. López-Gatell, like López Obrador, initially downplayed the severity of the virus and was criticized for adjusting his messages to the preferences and actions of López Obrador. For example, early in the pandemic, when asked whether López-Obrador posed a risk to the communities he was visiting, should he become infected, López-Gatell replied, 'The force of the President is moral [...] it is not a force of contagion.'⁷² Communications on the pandemic were fronted by López Gatell, but President López Obrador fronted daily morning press conferences (the so-called *mañaneras*) that became the trademark of his communication strategy since he assumed office. In these conferences, he jostled with the press and frequently attacked his adversaries, including civil society critics of his handling of the pandemic. Within this context, López Obrador's call to de-politicize the pandemic could be interpreted as a strategy to mask the political nature of his management of the pandemic and reject criticisms of it being politically motivated.⁷³

President López Obrador's governance of the pandemic combined centralized decision-making and the centralization of communications with the de-centralized implementation of health policies through the 'traffic lights' system. However, the Mexican president took a different political approach to that of the Brazilian president by refraining from mobilizing his supporters against the state authorities that enforced stringency measures. Additionally, López-Gatell emphasized that the system was advisory rather than prescriptive. Nonetheless, Mexican politics and society were already highly polarized before the pandemic. Such polarization made it difficult for opposition governors and lawmakers to take at face value López Obrador's call to de-politicize the pandemic and coordinate policies at the national and subnational levels. During the pandemic, polarization was accentuated by disagreements over the severity of the virus, response to the crisis, and reliability of official data.⁷⁴

Host ideology

With respect to the role of ideology, President Bolsonaro's transgressive health policy proposals were in line with the central role assigned by right-wing populists to cultural signifiers in the constitution of populist identities. Social distancing, masking, alternative treatments, and vaccines became symbolic elements of the political frontier between the president and his right-wing supporters, on the one hand, and his opponents on the other. President Bolsonaro articulated COVID-19 denialism in homophobic remarks, reflecting a certain construction of masculinity and a fatalistic attitude toward death. His discourse on anti-economic restrictions was in line with libertarian, right-wing ideology, as exemplified by President Trump in the USA and right-wing populist parties.

This begs the question of who were 'the people' in Bolsonaro's COVID-19 Brazil in terms of their socioeconomic and sociocultural makeup. For some members of the lower middle classes, particularly small businesses and self-employed citizens, maintaining

economic activity was a high priority. The politico-cultural elements of Bolsonaro's anti-lockdown appeals were equally important for this social sector, as they tied their libertarian self-image of individualistic self-reliance and hard work with their mistrust of the state that they perceived as corrupt and unresponsive to their needs. By blaming state governors and other national and subnational authorities for their hardship, Bolsonaro reinforced this perception. Bolsonaro's pandemic fatalism ('What do you want me to do?') and homophobic remarks were in line with Evangelical Christians' reliance on God for their protection and acceptance of God's will for the death of their loved ones, as well as their conservative family values. As the 2022 election results suggested, these were Bolsonaro's people⁷⁵ and constituted 'the people' of Bolsonaro's populist appeal during the pandemic.

Political identification in Mexico calls for the need to qualify the assumption that left-wing populism constructs 'the people' in terms of class, whereas right-wing populism do so on cultural or ethnic grounds. This principle broadly fits López Obrador's populist appeal, as evidenced by his electoral campaign slogan, 'For the good of all the poor first.' However, we noted a distinctive ideological twist in his political appeal.

López Obrador's statements on the pandemic shared the same moral overtones of his populist discourse about the 'good people.' He argued that ordinary people's inherent strength, common sense, and tenacity to face adversity would suffice to help them overcome health risks without the need for compulsory lockdowns. Asked at a press conference in June 2020 in the state of Chiapas during a tour of seven cities in the country's southeast, López Obrador said he stayed safe during the pandemic by practicing social distancing, washing his hands, and eschewing junk food. He then counseled the country 'to be at peace with our consciences. Don't lie, don't steal, don't cheat. That helps a lot, so you don't spread the coronavirus.'⁷⁶ In short, 'the people' of López Obrador's anti-COVID-19 policies were poor, morally virtuous, and had the agency to take the decisions necessary to safeguard both their health and their livelihoods.

The differences in the socioeconomic makeup of the two presidents' 'populist people' are difficult to establish with empirical precision. We identified socioeconomic similarities, as well as significant differences, between the two. In seeking to maintain economic activity as much as possible, the two presidents focused on small businesses, self-employed citizens, and workers in the informal economy. However, 'the people' of President López Obrador's populist appeal included wider popular sectors, particularly the poor and the marginalized, that were not the natural constituency of President Bolsonaro's appeal, as evidenced by their support for Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in the 2022 election.⁷⁷

We also observed another major difference in the political construction of the people by the two presidents: Bolsonaro's 'people' were not the poor and morally virtuous but rather the highly mobilized (mainly white) nationalists expressing their anger against the politicians and judicial authorities that imposed stringency measures and defied Bolsonaro's call to maintain the economy open. Anger was not part of the emotional repertoire of López Obrador's appeal to *el pueblo bueno*. While the Spanish expression has several connotations that cannot be fully captured by the English translation, 'the good people' connotes signifiers such as 'humble,' 'honest,' and 'pure in heart.' Notably, the full meaning of the term cannot be captured without references to its *other*, which, in the discursive repertoire of

López Obrador, consisted of a wide variety of actors characterized by their power and privileges, from the corrupt political elite that promoted and implemented the neoliberal model to the press. It even included civil society organizations that – he argued – catered to the interests of the middle classes that he disqualified as ‘*fifis*’ (posh).⁷⁸

Institutional and economic constraints

As argued in the introduction, populist rulers operate within politico-institutional and socio-economic contexts that facilitate or constrain their governance style and policy choices. Regarding populist governance, the federal nature of the two countries placed limits on the Executives’ attempts at centralizing policy implementation, as important decisions about health policy, including lockdowns, were constitutionally delegated to state and local authorities in the two countries.⁷⁹ Moreover, in the case of Brazil, Congress, the judiciary, and state governors served as a check to the decisionist drive of President Bolsonaro, who had more success in setting the political agenda and disrupting policy decisions than in passing and enacting policy in accordance to his own preferences. In the case of Mexico, there were fewer politico-institutional checks on the President’s determination to centralize policy decisions in the Executive at the expense of the General Health Council and the state governors. However, the traffic light system remained formally advisory, leaving room for state-level implementation and contestation. Opposition governors criticized the federal response and, in some cases, resisted the national reopening scheme, but the federal government did not simply override state authority by executive fiat.

The two governments’ welfare responses during the pandemic illustrate the relationship between economic restrictions, institutional contexts and ideological preferences. Counter-intuitively, President Bolsonaro’s right-wing administration oversaw significantly higher levels of welfare spending than Mexico’s left-leaning government. Brazil’s historically higher social spending only partly accounts for this. Crucially, a fragmented Congress – where no party held an absolute majority – substantially increased the Executive’s initial proposal to raise the main cash transfer, *Bolsa Família*, from 200 to 600 reais. For Bolsonaro, vetoing Congress’s initiative would have been politically costly.

In Mexico, by contrast, federal welfare spending remained firmly under Executive control, supported by a solid congressional majority. The government neither introduced new cash-transfer programs nor expanded subsidies to protect formal employment. Instead, López Obrador relied on existing noncontributory schemes, with only modest budget increases.⁸⁰ These choices reflected the ideological priorities of the Fourth Transformation project, which sought to break with the neoliberal consensus of the previous three decades. Within this framing, limited social-spending expansion aligned with the President’s notion of ‘republican austerity,’ aimed at restraining public debt, which he argued benefited financial capital and undermined economic sovereignty. Throughout the pandemic, the federal government instead prioritized public works and keeping the economy open as strategies for job creation. Central to this approach were commitments to generate employment in infrastructure projects in marginalized regions and in flagship initiatives such as the Maya Train and the

Dos Bocas refinery, both pillars of López Obrador's anti-neoliberal economic strategy.

Conclusions

This article made three contributions to the study of the relation between populism and ideology. First, it contributed to theory building by analytically distinguishing the populist logic of the governments' response to the crisis, embedded in the mechanisms of governance, from the role of the host ideologies in the discursive construction of 'the people' - a process of identification that subsequently informed policy choices. Second, it showed how left- and right-wing populist leaders informed and legitimized policy choices through distinct ideological repertoires. Third, it analyzed how institutional and socioeconomic contexts conditioned both the scope and limits of populist governance and the extent to which presidential policy preferences were enacted in practice. In doing so, the article expounded how populist governance, host ideology, and institutional constraints were articulated in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evidence showed that politicization and decisionism, the two defining features of populist governance, were present in both cases, but more prominently in Brazil. It determined that populist governance affected pandemic management primarily by undermining coordination, blurring the boundaries between governing and campaigning, and dividing compliance with public health recommendations along political lines. In both countries politicization made it harder to construct a national consensus in response to the crisis. Decisionism further complicated the response by weakening the authority of technical bodies, subordinating expert advice to presidential preferences, and presenting institutional or scientific constraints as obstacles to the will of the leader. These dynamics help explain failures in the management of the crisis, even if they do not by themselves fully explain policy outcomes.

The analysis evidenced how populism's host ideology gave substantive content to the construction of 'the people,' shaping and legitimizing policy choices. This was still the case even when there were no radical differences in the policies being implemented, as was the case of opposition to economic lockdown. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's opposition to lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccination was articulated through a right-wing libertarian and culturally conservative repertoire. Economic restrictions were framed as attacks on freedom, work, individual responsibility, and ordinary people's livelihoods. Public health measures became symbolic markers in a broader political frontier between Bolsonaro's people and their enemies.

In Mexico, López Obrador also favored keeping some economic and social life open, but he justified this option through a different ideological repertoire. His appeal to *el pueblo bueno* constructed 'the people' as poor, humble, morally virtuous, and capable of making responsible decisions without coercive state coercion. The government's relatively lax approach to the restriction of economic activities was therefore not simply a technical choice. It was embedded in a left-populist moral language that emphasized trust in ordinary people, suspicion of privileged critics, and continuity with the Fourth Transformation's broader critique of neoliberalism and elite rule.

However, both presidents' opposition to lockdown suggests that policy choices cannot be explained by ideology alone. Socioeconomic constraints also mattered. Large informal

labor markets limited fiscal capacity, and the economic costs of shutdowns made strict and prolonged lockdowns politically and materially difficult.⁸¹ Yet, the different ideological legitimization of broadly similar policy choices mattered both politically and in terms of the governance of the pandemic, as studies show that voluntary policy compliance during COVID-19 increased with higher trust in government and aligned persuasive messaging and decreased when policy frames were politicized, contested, or inconsistent.⁸²

The analysis of institutional constraints sheds light on the relationship between populist governance and authoritarianism. Both Bolsonaro and López Obrador displayed politicized and decisionist features in the governance of the pandemic. Yet the evidence did not support a simple, unmediated, equation between populist governance and autocratic rule. Bolsonaro attacked institutions, mobilized supporters against courts and Congress, and disregarded scientific advice, but he complied when judicial authorities limited his power and failed to block the vaccination campaign. López Obrador delegitimised critics and centralized the government's narrative, but he did not suppress opposition protests or abolish subnational discretion. These findings corroborate an important theoretical argument about populism and democracy: Robust democratic institutions matter for checking the autocratic drive of populism. Our research showed that they do so through different mechanisms and with uneven effects.

Finally, the study elucidated a theoretical question about the relationship between populist identification and public opinion. Is it the case, as critics of populism claim, that populist rulers 'give the people what they want?' Most rulers consider public opinion when making decisions, and populist leaders are not different in this regard. The paradoxical point is that some of the decisions taken by the populist leaders on the pandemic appear to be against majority preferences. For example, Rennó et al.⁸³ found evidence that a majority of Brazilians disagreed with Bolsonaro's policies. This paradox can be explained by the argument that populist leaders make decisions not so much to court public opinion but to strengthen political identification with their social base, who may or may not be the majority of the population. Indeed, 'the populist people' is a relational political construct and not a statistical or socioeconomic category.

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