

# The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Issue and Ideological Congruence of Trump and Bolsonaro Administrations

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## Abstract<sup>3</sup>

Recent political developments and government control actions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic draw attention to the contrast between the duties of government and the demands of democratic representation. Elected by mobilizing far-right issues, Trump and Bolsonaro moved away from the WHO guidelines but had to accommodate demands on the health and the social protection system on the one hand and demands from the economic sector on the other. This study used the MARPOR Project method to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the issue and ideological congruence between the electoral and governmental arena in both the Trump and Bolsonaro Administrations. Findings reveal issue congruence between arenas in "National Way of Life: Positive", "Law and Order," and "Technology and Infrastructure" for Donald Trump, and "Welfare State Expansion" for Bolsonaro. Ideological estimation results show that Trump and Bolsonaro positioned themselves to the right in their presidential elections and initially moved to the center-right. However, welfare policy actions at high frequency during the COVID-19 pandemic moved the ideological estimations of both governments to the center-left, despite their denial rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Congruence, COVID-19, Donald Trump, Ideology, Jair Bolsonaro.

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## Introduction

Recent political developments and government control actions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic draw attention to the contrast between the duties of government and the demands of democratic representation. This study aims to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the issue and ideological congruence between the electoral and governmental arena in both the Trump and Bolsonaro administrations.

According to the responsible party model, political parties have distinct platforms, which their members should carry out when elected (Thomassen 1994, 2012). Congruence between voter interests and party positions is achieved as voters choose the policy package that best suits their preferences (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999; Carrerão 2015; 2019). Fear of retaliation from voters would motivate government parties to be responsive (Hofferbert and Budge 1992).

This argument mobilizes the understanding of two distinct concepts: command and authorization. Command understanding rests on the premise that voters grant the elected party the responsibility to carry out certain tasks or actions. In turn, authorization is based on the perception that by winning elections, after submitting a platform to the voters evaluation, the government gains the moral right and responsibility to implement it (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999; Klingemann et al 2006).

Voters would assess, thereby, both, party's issue priorities in the election and the party's performance in implementing their platform (Freitas and Araújo 2016), selecting good policies or politicians that support it. The winning party platform gets the mandate governments seek to carry out (Carrerão 2019), a prelude to the future government agenda (Naurin, Royed, and Thomson 2019; Diniz and Oliveira 2020).

Influenced by Rational Choice Theory, studies on party behavior provided models that understand parties as a small, goal-oriented group (Downs 1957). Political parties would centralize relevant issues in their platforms by incorporating recent issues demanded by their voters (Aldrich 2011) or issues in which they would have advantages in the competition<sup>4</sup> (Petrocik 1996; Bardi, Bartolini, and Trechsel 2014). However, the duties

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<sup>4</sup> Originating from the saliency theory, issue ownership theory suggests that parties should focus on the issues that are owned by or associated with them.

of the government and the demands of democratic representation can often be in sharp contrast (Karremans and Lefkofridi 2020).

This tension becomes particularly clear in times of economic, social, and political crisis when governments are pressured to follow non-electoral logic to the detriment of social and control policies. In this context of instability (Spoon and Klüver 2015), the defense of certain issues would lead to a dilemma in national politics that, on the one hand, suffers from the growing complexity of governing in a world composed of various institutional pressures and, on the other, with the need to respond to the various electoral demands.

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) - a result of its seriousness and, above all, its rapid geographic spread. Faced with this emergency, acting governments were subjected to national and international imperatives regarding the implementation of an agenda of containment, control, recovery, diplomatic agreements between partners, and order. Configured by the absence of effective treatment protocols, the COVID-19 pandemic led governments to implement divergent strategies to reconcile the growing demands of actors who began to act as fervent pressure groups.

Elected by mobilizing far-right issues, Trump and Bolsonaro denied the seriousness of COVID-19, contributed to the population's misinformation, and led the United States and Brazil to the top of the ranking of deaths by COVID in the world. Taking up the strong nationalist appeal that marked their election campaigns, Trump and Bolsonaro moved away from the WHO guidelines. Demands on the health and the social protection system, contrasting with growing pressure from the economic sector for actions to protect companies and services, required their governments to redefine their issue priorities.

The continuous responsiveness of governments to citizens' preferences is an essential feature of representative democracy (Dahl 1997). In line with the literature on congruence (Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 2006; Powell 2009; Egan 2013; Carrerão 2019) the analysis of the governmental actions developed in this article allows us to identify the priority issues as established by the presidents and to verify to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the formatting of governmental agendas.

## Methods

The analysis was conducted from two datasets. Campaign manifestos and Executive actions. We use the terms campaign manifesto, platforms, or electoral programs, indistinctly, to indicate the documents in which the parties publish their proposals and political positions of the candidacy (Tarouco, Vieira, and Madeira 2015).

For the American case, we assessed the 2016 Republican Party platform and the 220 Executive Orders issued by Donald Trump as president (2017-2021). For the Brazilian case, we assessed the campaign manifesto of the Social Liberal Party of 2018 and 208 actions of the Executive, among which provisional measures (MPV), bills of law (PL), and complementary bills (PLP), issued by Bolsonaro in the first two years of his term (2019-2020).

Data from both campaign manifestos were collected in the Manifesto Research for Political Representation (MARPOR). This data informs parties' salience to the 56 MARPOR issue categories and shows the ideological position of the party manifesto on the left-right scale (RILE):

$$\text{RILE} = (\sum \% \text{ Right} - \sum \% \text{ Left}) \quad (1)$$

Where:

$\sum \text{ Right} = (104 + 201 + 203 + 305 + 401 + 402 + 407 + 414 + 505 + 601 + 603 + 605 + 606)$ ;

$\sum \text{ Left} = (103 + 105 + 106 + 107 + 403 + 404 + 406 + 412 + 413 + 504 + 506 + 701 + 202)$ .

The RILE index is calculated by subtracting the sum of the percentages of the right categories from the sum of the percentages of the left categories. The index ranges from -100 to 100, and these values are considered the extreme points on the left (negative values) and the right (positive values).

In turn, the Executive actions data of the United States were collected in the Federal Register and the Executive actions data of Brazil were consulted in the Federal Chamber of Deputies.

From the MARPOR coding scheme, we assign an issue category to each of the Executive's actions. Like MARPOR, we used the code (000) to classify Executive actions that did not fit into one of the 56 issue categories .

To assess congruence between electoral and governmental issues, we used the Nihans index (Np). The Nihans index is used to separate a homogeneous set of quantified items, establishing the limits in three classes (Contador 2008). Class A gathers categories with greater prominence in each manifest, class B is intermediate, and class C groups the other categories. Therefore, it allows a better demonstration of the distribution according to the relative importance between the issue categories, which is calculated by the following formula:

$$Np = \frac{\sum X^2}{\sum X} \quad (2)$$

Where:

Np = class limit.

$x^2$  = the square of the value of occurrences.

x = the value of occurrences.

To estimate the ideological position of the Trump and Bolsonaro governments we calculated the RILE index (1) for the time analyzed. In addition, we have developed a formula to estimate the ideological position of governments monthly. We adapt the RILE index to present monthly cumulative estimates:

$$RILE_n = \left\{ \left( \sum_{k=1}^n \% Right \right) - \left( \sum_{k=1}^n \% Left \right) \right\} + RILE_{(n-1)} \quad (3)$$

Where:

n = reference month.

% Right = monthly emphasis on the right issues about the total Executive actions.

% Left = monthly emphasis on the left issues about the total Executive actions.

## Results

### *Issue Salience and Party Congruence: comparing Electoral and Presidential agendas*

Using Nihans index (Np) we divided electoral and governmental issues agendas into three groups of importance. The limit values for each class are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
CLASSES LIMITS IN NIHANS INDEX

Government	Data	Class A	Class B	Class C (below of)
Trump	Manifesto	4.73%	2.54%	2.54%
	Executive actions	7.06%	2.79%	2.79%
Bolsonaro	Manifesto	6.96%	3.14%	3.14%
	Executive actions	9.46%	3.59%	3.59%

Table 2 presents salient issues (Class A and B) in both party manifestos and Executive actions of Trump and Bolsonaro.

TABLE 2  
CLASSES OF ISSUE CATEGORIES FROM *NIHANS INDEX*

Government	Manifesto		Executive actions	
	Class A	Class B	Class A	Class B
Trump		202 (4.24%)		
		411 (4.20%)		
		107 (3.79%)		
		605 (3.37%)		
		401 (9.72%)	102 (12.60%)	601 (5.40%)
		201 (8.62%)	411 (10.80%)	605 (4.95%)
		603 (8.48%)	403 (3.15%)	000 (10.80%)
		104 (6.75%)	109 (2.92%)	504 (9.90%)
		503 (5.70%)	301 (2.92%)	303 (9.00%)
			601 (2.83%)	
			703 (2.69%)	
Bolsonaro		203 (2.60%)		
		506 (5.48%)		
		401 (14.73%)	304 (5.31%)	
		605 (13.19%)	201 (5.14%)	504 (22.12%)
		414 (8.40%)	504 (4.11%)	000 (12.50%)
		411 (7.71%)	202 (3.94%)	303 (10.10%)
		407 (3.43%)		
			402 (9.13%)	
			408 (3.85%)	

The Nihans index classes show congruence between arenas in “National Way of Life: Positive (601)”, “Law and Order (605)” and “Technology and Infrastructure (411)” for Donald Trump and “Welfare State Expansion (504)” for Jair Bolsonaro. While the defense of the national way of life (601), and Law and Order (605) are consistent with right-wing ideology in Trump's case, the congruence in favor of welfare state expansion (504) in Bolsonaro, a left-wing topic, can cause astonishment to those who are unaware of the Brazilian political and social context. While the support of equality (503) in Brazil is more restricted to left-wing parties, expansion of welfare policies (504), a broader policy than the previous one, is supported by both left and right-wing parties, as shown by historical data in the MARPOR dataset (Contrera, Cassotta and Hebling 2021).

Comparing the presidencies among themselves, we highlight that the support of free enterprise (401) is salient in both manifestos, and highlights Trump's and Bolsonaro's commitment to the economic model of free market and entrepreneurship. Both agendas linked to the liberal discourse, associate the concept of individual freedom (201) with the defense of property rights. Regarding the Executive Orders, the governments of Trump and Bolsonaro have in common significant emphases on "Expansion of the Welfare State (504)", a salient issue on their agenda of priorities due to national and international pressures for responsible actions in the control of COVID-19.

*Executive actions issue salience during the pandemic*

To verify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on shaping the agenda of the Trump and Bolsonaro governments, we calculated the frequency of issues in the pre-pandemic agenda and during the pandemic, considering the WHO declaration of the pandemic on March 11, 2020, as a time frame. Data are shown in Table III.

Regarding the Trump administration, we highlight the negative variation in the issues "Law and Order (605)" and "Technology and Infrastructure (411)" and the positive variation in "Market Regulation (403)", "Incentives: Positive (402)" and "Military: Positive (104)", indicating government changing of priorities.

From a strategy that focused on investments in infrastructure and the tightening of the rule of law, the Executive's actions began to focus on mechanisms to promote economic recovery – whether through financial incentives or market regulation.

In Bolsonaro's government, a decrease in salience was observed to the issues "Technology and Infrastructure (411)", "Economic Orthodoxy (414)" and "Economic Goals (408)". In contrast, increased attention was dispensed to "Incentives: Positive (402)".

Once the COVID-19 pandemic scenario was set, the Brazilian government had to reduce its investments in infrastructure, putting its economic proposals to cut the public deficit and promote reforms (Tax, Labor, and Administrative) on hold, while prioritizing an agenda of economic recovery policies, mainly through financial and fiscal incentives.

Trump and Bolsonaro's plans to reduce state spending were harshly confronted. Under recurrent pressure for an immediate and effective response to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, their actions started focusing on welfare, as observed in the significant positive variations of "Welfare State Expansion (504)", which grew, respectively, +18.33 and +19.92 during the pandemic.



TABLE 3  
EXECUTIVE ACTIONS ISSUE SALIENCY BEFORE AND WHILE THE PANDEMIC

Issue Categorie	Bolsonaro			Trump		
	freqB (before)	freqA (pandemic)	freqA - freqB	freqB (before)	freqA (pandemic)	freqA - freqB
101	1.16	0.00	-1.16	0.45	0.00	-0.45
102	0.00	0.00	0.00	9.09	10.53	1.44
103	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
104	1.16	0.93	-0.23	0.91	3.95	3.04
105	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
106	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
107	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.32	1.32
108	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.91	2.63	1.72
109	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.32	1.32
110	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
201	4.65	0.00	-4.65	1.36	3.95	2.58
202	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.91	0.00	-0.91
203	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
204	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
301	1.16	0.00	-1.16	0.00	0.00	0.00
302	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
303	12.79	9.35	-3.44	6.36	7.89	1.53
304	2.33	0.00	-2.33	0.00	0.00	0.00
305	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
401	2.33	4.67	2.35	0.00	0.00	0.00
402	1.16	16.82	15.66	0.91	3.95	3.04
403	2.33	0.00	-2.33	0.45	6.58	6.12
404	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
405	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
406	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.73	3.95	1.22
407	0.00	0.93	0.93	0.00	0.00	0.00
408	4.65	0.00	-4.65	0.00	1.32	1.32
409	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
410	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.32	1.32
411	5.81	0.00	-5.81	8.64	6.58	-2.06
412	2.33	0.00	-2.33	0.00	0.00	0.00
413	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
414	5.81	0.00	-5.81	0.00	0.00	0.00
415	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
416	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.91	0.00	-0.91
501	2.33	0.00	-2.33	0.45	2.63	2.18
502	2.33	4.67	2.35	0.91	1.32	0.41
503	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
504	12.79	32.71	19.92	2.73	21.05	18.33
505	1.16	4.67	3.51	1.82	0.00	-1.82

Issue Categorie	Bolsonaro			Trump		
	freqB (before)	freqA (pandemic)	freqA - freqB	freqB (before)	freqA (pandemic)	freqA - freqB
506	2.33	2.80	0.48	0.45	1.32	0.86
507	1.16	2.80	1.64	0.91	0.00	-0.91
601	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.64	5.26	1.63
602	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
603	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.32	1.32
604	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
605	3.49	0.00	-3.49	4.55	1.32	-3.23
606	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.45	0.00	-0.45
607	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.91	0.00	-0.91
608	1.16	0.00	-1.16	0.00	0.00	0.00
701	1.16	1.87	0.71	0.00	0.00	0.00
702	4.65	0.93	-3.72	2.73	1.32	-1.41
703	2.33	0.93	-1.39	1.36	0.00	-1.36
704	0.00	0.93	0.93	0.00	0.00	0.00
705	2.33	2.80	0.48	0.45	1.32	0.86
706	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.82	1.32	-0.50
000	15.12	12.15	-2.97	43.18	6.58	-36.60

### *Party and Government ideologies*

Comparison between campaign manifestos and Executive actions ideological estimates show that coming out of a position to the right in the electoral arena, Trump and Bolsonaro moved to the center in their mandates. Specifically, the Republican Party manifesto ideology was estimated by MARPOR researchers at 32.969, while the actions of Trump's executive actions were estimated by us at 1.35. In turn, Social Liberal Party (PSL) manifesto ideology as estimated by MARPOR researchers was at 42.466, while Bolsonaro's executive actions were estimated by us at -4.32692.

Considering that the campaign manifesto is implemented gradually throughout the mandate, we calculated the cumulative monthly ideological estimate (3) of the executive's actions. In both cases, there are initially centrer-right positioning trends, which move gradually towards the center-left, especially since the decrees of national emergency because of the COVID-19 being declared pandemic in March 2020. Trump's trends can be seen in Fig. 1, while Bolsonaro's are shown in Fig. 2.

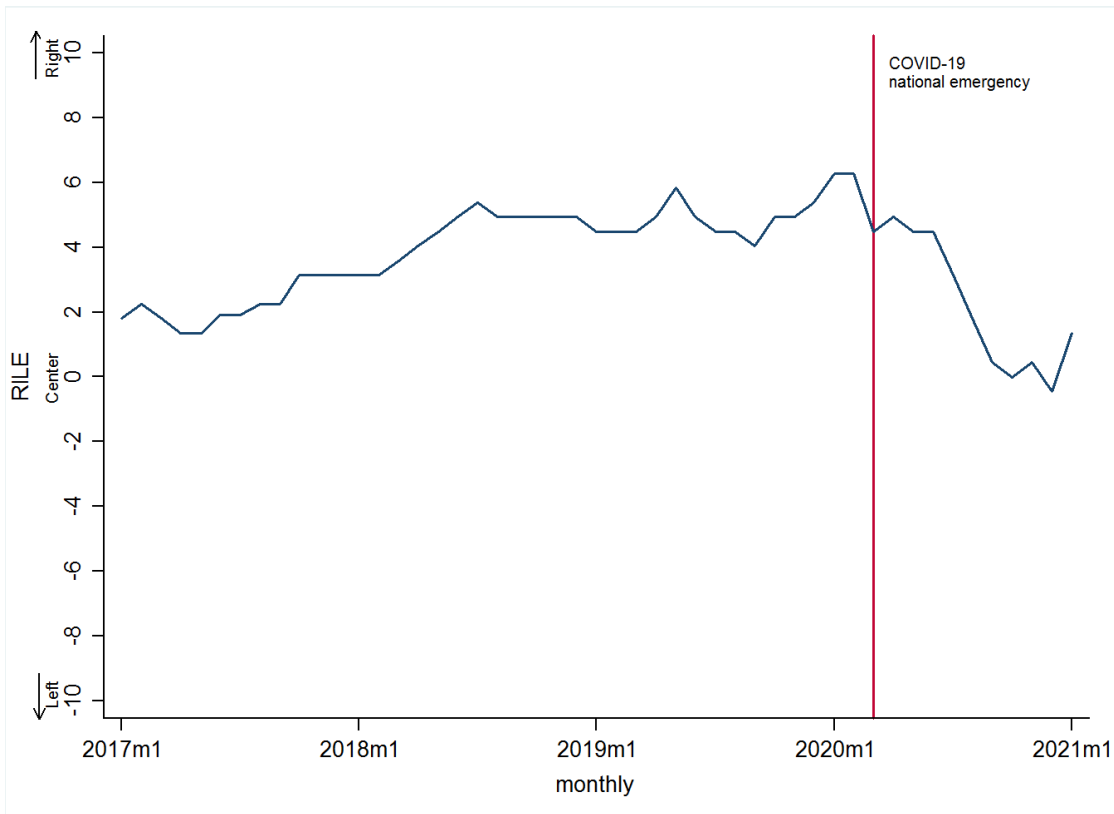


Fig. 1 Trump Executive actions RILE cumulative scores (monthly)

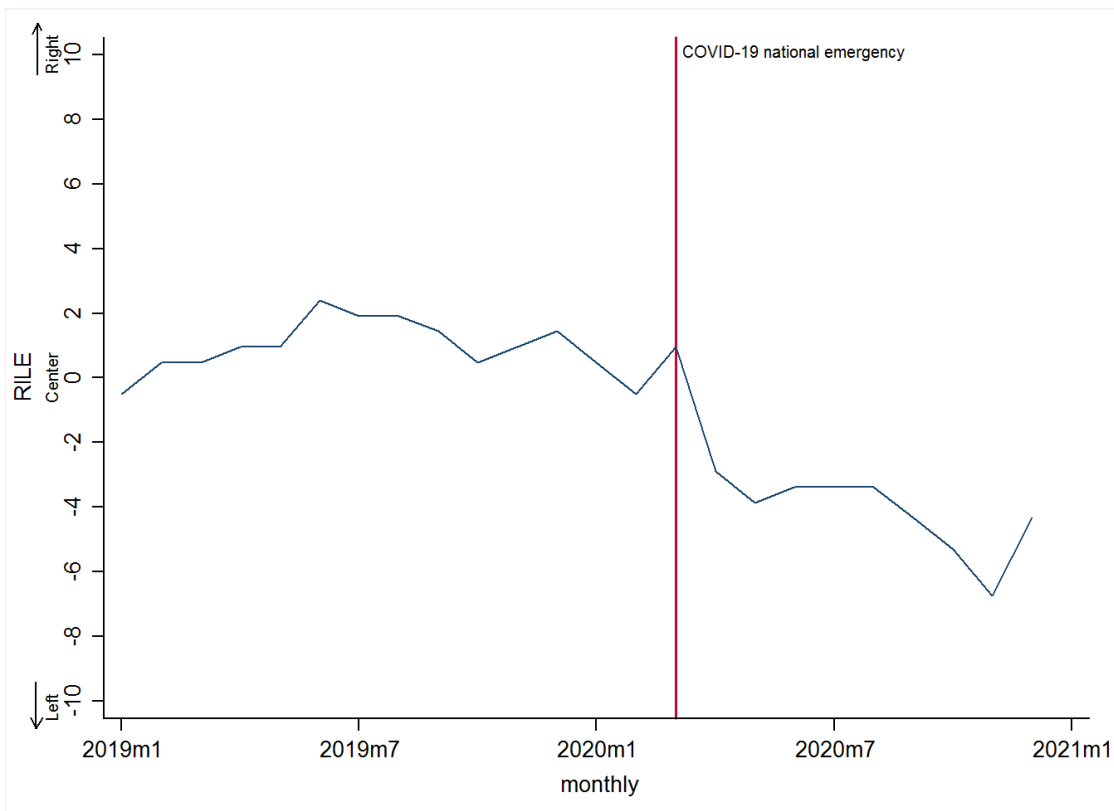


Fig. 2 Bolsonaro Executive actions RILE cumulative scores (monthly)



## Concluding remarks

The findings presented in this study are important contributions to the debate on the issue and ideological congruence from a comparative perspective. We found different patterns of issue congruence for the United States and Brazil. While issue congruence is consistent with right-wing ideology in Trump's case, Bolsonaro's issue congruence is inconsistent with his ideology.

Another important contribution of this work is assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's agendas. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic similarly shaped the Trump and Bolsonaro governments' agendas, which despite supporting denial discourses and practices, were compelled to respond, through the editing of a wide range of executive actions, to the health and social protection demands on one side, and to promote economic incentives for businesses on the other. As a result, the ideology of both governments, measured using quantitative criteria, gradually moved to the center-left.

However, the high incidence of response actions to the pandemic does not mean efficiency in its management. On the contrary, Trump and Bolsonaro denied the seriousness of COVID-19, contributed to the population's misinformation, and led the United States and Brazil to the top of the ranking of deaths by COVID in the world.

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