Explaining Bolsonaros Election: Making Use of Intersectionality

L. Rhodes Evans
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Faculty Mentor: Andrew Janusz, Department of Political Science

Abstract

News coverage of Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 presidential campaign routinely focused on his misogynistic, homophobic, and racist rhetoric. In his campaign, Bolsonaro derided women and Afro-Brazilians, even though both groups constitute majorities of the Brazilian population. Notwithstanding his offensive rhetoric, Bolsonaro was elected president with support from members of both groups. In this paper, we use public opinion data to investigate why women and Afro-Brazilians voted for him. Additionally, we briefly explore the impact of traditional values on electoral decision-making. The results of a quantitative analysis show significant differences in voting among women of different races and Afro-Brazilians of different genders. In particular, our results show that Afro-Brazilian women were least likely to support Bolsonaro. These results underscore the importance of using an intersectional perspective to understand political behavior in Brazil.

Keywords: Bolsonaro, Intersectionality, Gender, Race, Traditional Values

Explaining Bolsonaro's Election: Making Use of Intersectionality

The intersectionality of race and gender is important to consider when researching the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro. As more than 50% of the Brazilian population identifies as "non-white" and contemporary research shows that gender influences political participation and perspective, it appears that race and gender weave a multidimensional frame of reference from which individuals view the world (Crenshaw, 2017) (LAPOP, 2019). Research on the election of Jair Bolsonaro has considered many different explanations for voting behavior. Hypotheses ranging from economic shock and corruption to distrust in democracy have been postulated to account for Bolsonaro's victory. Though this research has given insight into the minds of Brazilian voters, it has largely ignored the important impact of gender and race.

Bolsonaro's rhetoric gained international media attention during the 2018 election when he made several comments which displayed offensive attitudes toward women and non-white people. For example, Bolsonaro said he would not rape congresswoman Maria do Rosario

because she was "not worthy" (Alter, 2014). During a public speech in 2017, he stated that he produced a daughter, rather than a son, in "a moment of weakness." Similarly, after visiting the northeast region of Brazil, which is primarily Afro-Brazilian, he said "a quilombo and the least heavy afro-descendant weighed seven arrobas (approximately 230 pounds). They do nothing! They are not even good for procreation!" (Meredith, 2018).

These comments, along with other offensive statements disregarding human rights and disrespecting Brazil's LGBTQ+ community, drew lots of attention from the media and various human rights groups. Headlines emphasized Bolsonaro's controversial speech and his regressive political values. Many Brazilians staged protests in opposition to Bolsonaro's campaign, the most famous of which being *Ele Não* (Not Him), which became a public rallying cry in 2018. The *Ele Não* movement, a widespread protest against Bolsonaro's campaign in particular and Brazilian sexism in general, is considered the biggest political manifestation organized by women in Brazilian history (Barros & Silva, 2019). At the same time, support for *Movimento Negro* saw a large increase, as members of Black and brown communities sought to draw attention to racial discrimination and hate speech in Brazil (Barros & Silva, 2019). It surprised many scholars and reporters, then, when Bolsonaro continued leading in the polls.

Despite Brazil's polarized political climate, which is largely sliced on the axes of race and gender, sufficient cohorts of Afro-Brazilians and women showed up to vote for Bolsonaro and helped deliver his victory in 2018. This racial breakdown can be seen more clearly in Table 1. Studying the intersectionality of race and gender is pivotal to understanding this result. Why did groups that were explicitly ostracized by Bolsonaro still show up to vote for him? And within those groups, who were Bolsonaro's most likely supporters? This paper seeks to combine previous theory with analysis of race and gender to fill in the gaps and better understand the variety of perspectives present in a modern and racially multidimensional Brazil.

Bolsonaro's Election: What is Already Known

The election of Jair Bolsonaro was a divisive event. Directly before the 2018 election, the largest corruption scandal in Brazilian history erupted, and President Lula da Silva, then the race's frontrunner, was barred from continuing his campaign. The precarious state of Brazilian politics captured the interest of such political scientists as Rennó (2020), Silvia, and Barros (2019). These scholars, among others, have landed on three main explanations for Bolsonaro's unexpected victory: a general distrust in the Brazilian government, issue voting, and a drive for

increased conservatism (Rennó, 2020). Although this research offers valuable insights, it has attended insufficiently to the influence of race and gender on Bolsonaro's election.

Most of Jair Bolsonaro's support base was white men. However, a considerable number of women and Afro-Brazilian voters supported him on election day as well. Distrust in the Brazilian government played an important role in these voters' choice of Bolsonaro. Months before the 2018 election, *Operation Car Wash* emerged as the biggest corruption scandal in Brazil's history. *Operation Car Wash* revealed a massive money-laundering scheme that was carried out by many of Brazil's most prominent politicians. As a result, many politicians, including then-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, were given lengthy prison sentences. Before the scandal, President de Silva's approval rating was high and local polls placed him significantly ahead of Bolsonaro (Watts, 2017). However, once *Operation Car Wash* became public, surveys showed a decline in popular trust of the Brazilian government (Watts, 2017). Because the Workers Party, to which Bolsonaro's Social Christian Party stands in opposition, had held the Brazilian presidency since 2002, Brazilian voters mapped their distrust onto the Workers Party more strongly than onto its rivals. Scholars believe that individuals who resented the Workers Party were more likely to vote for Bolsonaro as an alternative (Amaral, 2019).

Other scholars believe that Brazilians selected Bolsonaro because of his positions on a few salient topics—namely, his traditional social values and economic conservatism (Rennó, 2020). One theory that may assist in the analysis of this phenomenon is the Issue Ownership Theory. This theory states that political parties are often associated with specific issues and that they develop a reputation as to how they approach and deal with salient issues (Lachet, 2014). If this is the case, one would expect voters to be at least partially aware of how political parties represent their interests. Furthermore, it is well established that individuals vote for candidates based on a few issues that are particularly salient to them (Fournier et al., 2003). As a result, communities that did not identify with Bolsonaro's rhetoric might have voted for him if they agreed with him on specific issues. In 2020, Rennó used survey data to show that those who voted for Bolsonaro also tended to have strict views on law and order, support economic liberalism, and reject social policies.

In the 2018 election, Bolsonaro was the most conservative candidate. He supported a traditional family structure, aligned himself with the religious community, and held controversially negative views on LGBTQ+ progress and visibility. Some scholars believe that

Brazil's conservative religious population saw him as a way to further their agenda in politics (Rennó, 2020). In a sense, Bolsonaro mobilized both the working class and the religious elites who supported conservative values and eventually supported him on election day (Amaral, 2019).

Race and Gender in 2018.

During Bolsonaro's campaign, many scholars and political analysts assumed his controversial rhetoric had alienated large segments of the Brazilian population—specifically, women and Afro-Brazilians. Therefore, it is unsurprising to see that women supported Bolsonaro significantly less than their male counterparts and Afro-Brazilians supported him significantly less than their white counterparts. Yet, Bolsonaro still captured enough of the female vote, and enough of the Afro-Brazilian vote, to secure the election. To understand why, we must undertake a more intersectional analysis than other scholars have yet attempted.

Intersectionality is the space in which gender and racial identification overlap to create a sense of unique experiences. Current scholarship has understood the importance of studying intersectionality in countries with multidimensional racial dynamics, like Brazil. "Social categories are not isolated; they intersect. These intersecting identities result in different experiences" (Crenshaw, 2017). To best understand intersectionality in Brazil, it is a good idea to consider Crenshaw's (1991) structural approach to intersectionality. "Structural intersectionality is concerned with the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender and how their location makes their experiences qualitatively different from those of white women" (Crenshaw, 2017). Scholars believe that racial and gendered experiences are qualitatively different; therefore, researchers must account for differing desires and needs that influence voting. If Afro-Brazilian women and white women—and Afro-Brazilian women and Afro-Brazilian men—have distinct and separate life experiences, it would be reasonable to expect that these different experiences influence how they view and select candidates for office. Intersectional research within Brazil is significant but has yet to be applied to the 2018 election.

Political scientists Barros and Silvia postulate about differing gendered experiences influencing voting decisions. "Men feel more compelled to vote for a figure that exacerbates masculine stereotypes… Women, on the other hand, when confronted with economic shock and the prospect of Bolsonaro's election, responded in favor of a more pro-social platform" (Barros & Silva, 2019). Other scholars compare the election of Bolsonaro to that of Trump in the United

States, referring to Bolsonaro as the "Trump of the Tropics" (Meredith, 2018). Women who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 showed higher levels of ambivalent, benevolent, and hostile sexism (Setzler & Yanus., 2018). Scholars think that the election of populist leaders, such as Bolsonaro, often has to do with underlying sexism or traditional values as seen in the election of Trump (Setzler & Yanus, 2018) (Frasure-Yokley, 2018) (Cassese & Barnes, 2018).

Benevolent sexism is the positive and encouraging response given to women who uphold traditional gender roles (Valentino et al., 2018). However, it is also the negative and often degrading response given to women who choose to shy from traditional gender roles. Women who score higher on benevolent sexism measures are less likely to vote, but when they do vote, they are likely to support more conservative candidates (Valentino et al., 2018). Research suggests that white women identify with benevolent sexism at higher rates than black women (Cassese & Barnes, 2018). Additionally, it has been shown that women who possess higher levels of benevolent sexism, as measured through the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, may be more inclined to overlook sexist comments. As white women consistently score higher on measures of benevolent sexism, white women, as an aggregate, likely viewed Bolsonaro's comments differently than Afro-Brazilian women. Bolsonaro's most fervent women supporters, then, are likely white traditionalists who exhibit higher levels of benevolent sexism. Relatedly, because people with lower measures of benevolent sexism are less likely accept sexism in any form, Afro-Brazilian women may have viewed Bolsonaro's offensive comments as more of a "deal breaker." In other words, Afro-Brazilian women may have felt more deeply alienated by Bolsonaro's comments than white women, whose desperation to maintain traditional values outweighed any opposition to sexist comments.

There is also a substantial body of research that attempts to understand how racial identity impacts electoral choice in Brazil. However, this research often overlooks the important role of gender within a racial analysis. Rennó showed that those who supported strict views on law and order, economic liberalism, and the rejection of social policies were more likely to vote for Bolsonaro (2020). In Brazil, white people are more likely to hold these views than their non-white counterparts, likely as a result of racial disparities in education, income, and experiences with state-sponsored violence.

This work on the role of race in Brazilian electoral politics, however, fails to explain why Afro-Brazilian men voted for Bolsonaro at higher rates than Afro-Brazilian women, again signaling the need for an intersectional analysis. It is likely that, compared to Afro-Brazilian women, Afro-Brazilian men felt less personally affected by Bolsonaro's sexist comments. Yet, Afro-Brazilian men may have been less enthusiastic about Bolsonaro than their white male counterparts as a result of Social Identity Theory.

Social Identity Theory states that many voters display a significant preference for candidates of the same race (Goodyear-Grant & Tolley, 2015). White-identifying individuals, then, may have been more likely to vote for Bolsonaro because he looked like them (Aguilar et al., 2015). Afro-Brazilian men, however, would not have felt the same pull. At the same time, voters are more likely to select candidates who understand their needs. (Mitchell-Walthour, 2017). Though Bolsonaro has made several negative comments towards the Afro-Brazilian population, it is possible that his anti-elite mindset and support of more conservative religious was something that some Afro-Brazilians (disproportionately Afro-Brazilian men) supported. The salience of specific issues along gendered lines within the Afro-Brazilian community can explain how Bolsonaro secured Afro-Brazilian votes at all—and *which* Afro-Brazilian votes he secured—despite the fact that many Afro-Brazilian voters could not personally identify with Bolsonaro.

Including research on intersectionality helps us understand the voting behaviors of Afro-Brazilian women especially. Intersectionality is not simply looking at race or gender but rather the crossover between the two. This paper shows that Afro-Brazilian women vote statistically differently from both white women and Afro-Brazilian men. If the lenses of race and gender impact the way individuals view the world, it is not shocking that Afro-Brazilian women view political candidates differently than other groups. In Brazil, social movements like *Ele Não* and *Movimento Negro* that tackle issues of sexism and racism have become especially prevalent within the last few years (Barros & Silva, 2019). Afro-Brazilian women particularly face the overlap of centuries of racial and gender discrimination. By utilizing the approach of intersectionality, political scientists can better understand the needs and desires of Afro-Brazilian women—and how those needs and desire affect their decisions at the polls.

methods. This research utilized data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, which is made accessible through Vanderbilt University. LAPOP grants unlimited worldwide access to results from the Americas/Barometer survey, which is administered across Latin America. In the Brazil-specific dataset, the project used a probability sample design of voting-age adults, with a total N of 1,498 people who participated in face-to-face interviews conducted in Portuguese. The interviews took place in São Paulo and Mairiporã in 2019. (It is worth noting that though these cities have a variety of income levels and perspectives, it would be beneficial to include data from other parts of the country.) As part of the project's probability sample design, participant selection was randomized, meaning the survey data should reflect Brazilian society as a whole. Respondents answered a variety of questions and reported various demographic information, including race and gender. This research project utilized two binary variables: voting for Bolsonaro and gender. Respondents also self-selected the racial category they most identified with; this research includes individuals who self-identified as either "white," "brown," or "black" in order to measure race. This racial self-selection process is reflective of how Brazilians characterize race.

Results

Table 1. % of individuals who voted for Bolsonaro

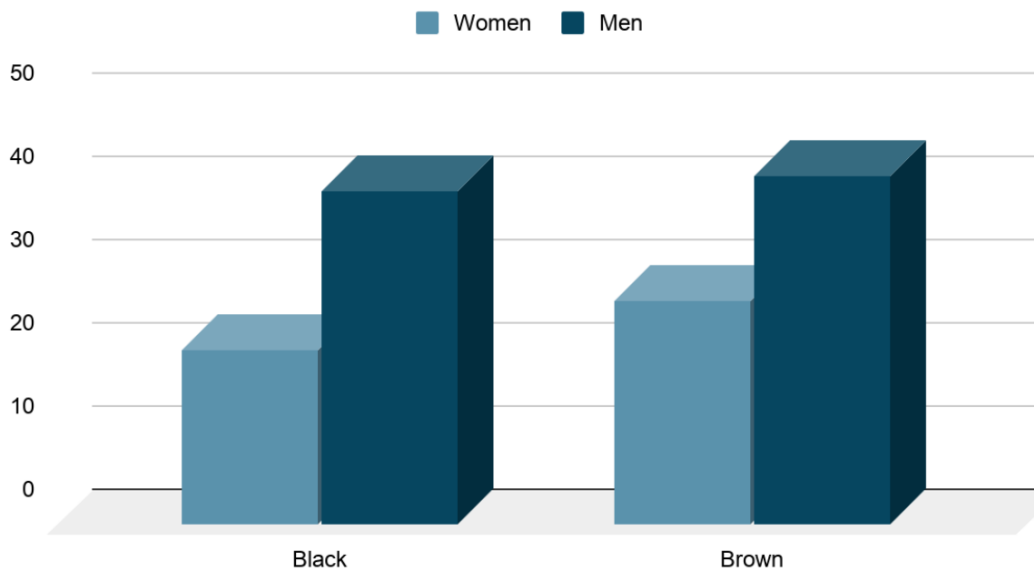|	White	Brown	Black	Gender Avg.
Men	48%	42%	40%	43%
Women	43%	27%	21%	30%
All	45%	34%	31%	

Figure 1. % votes for Bolsonaro by race

In Table 1, we see the distinction between men and women in votes for Bolsonaro. The share of women who voted for Bolsonaro was 13 percentage points lower than the share of men who voted for Bolsonaro. Interestingly, this gendered voting divide grows as individuals identify with darker complexions. Black identifying women are half as likely to vote for Bolsonaro when compared to Black men. Conversely, the voting gap between white men and white women was much smaller. Men in every racial category were more likely to vote for Bolsonaro than women of the same race. These findings emphasize why the lens of intersectionality is important, as viewing solely gender or race would overlook these important crossover effects. There is a large difference between the voting decision of white men, 48% of whom voted for Bolsonaro, and Black women, of whom only 21% voted for him. This paper demonstrated that intersectionality plays a role in Bolsonaro's election.

One possible explanation for the differences in race and gendered voting is "traditional values." "Traditional values," as measured by this paper, are the extent to which individuals resonate with more "traditional" societal beliefs such as conservative politics, religiosity, and conservative social beliefs. To best measure "traditional values," this project uses questions from LAPOP that ask about religious belonging and belief. To measure belonging, this research utilized questions that pertinent to religious identification, and for belief, it compiled two questions regarding public support of LGBTQ+ progress and visibility.
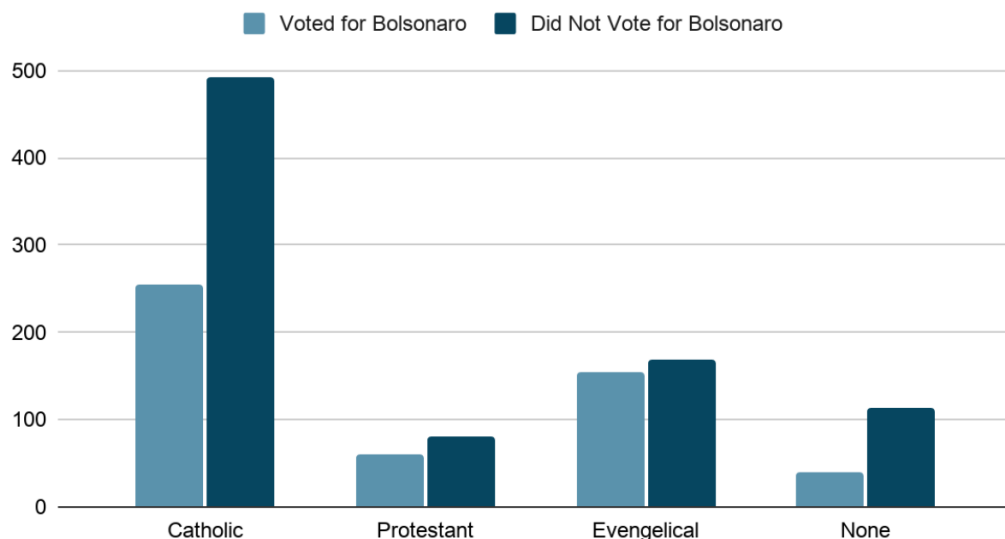
Figure 2. *votes for Bolsonaro by religion*

Table 2. first traditional values question over % votes for Bolsonaro

"how strongly do you approve or disapprove of same-sex couples having the right to marry?"

BolsoVoter	Disapprove	No Opinion	Approve	Total
0	278 55.49%	156 61.90%	402 69.07%	836 62.62%
1	223 44.51%	96 38.10%	180 30.93%	499 37.38%
Total	501 100.00%	252 100.00%	582 100.00%	1,335 100.00%

Table 3. second traditional values question over % votes for Bolsonaro

"And now, changing the topic and thinking of homosexuals, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office."

BolsoVoter	Disapprove	No Opinion	Approve	Total
0	145 57.54%	238 61.03%	454 65.51%	837 62.70%
1	107 42.46%	152 38.97%	239 34.49%	498 37.30%
Total	252 100.00%	390 100.00%	693 100.00%	1,335 100.00%

Within the three main religious groups in Brazil—Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelical Christians— most people did not vote for Bolsonaro. Less than half of all Catholics surveyed voted for Bolsonaro. However, Evangelical Christians displayed a more even mix, with roughly half voting for Bolsonaro. Religious identification did not seem to be a strong predictor of votes for Bolsonaro, nor did it explain the differences in voting along racial or gender lines.

However, support for same-sex marriage was a strong indicator of votes for Bolsonaro. 70% of those who approved of same-sex marriage did not vote for Bolsonaro. Similarly, 65% of those who supported LGBTQ+ individuals running for public office did not support Bolsonaro. Table 4 shows that support for same-sex marriage is highly significant. This means that individuals who support LGBTQ+ progress and visibility are less likely to vote for Bolsonaro and that Bolsonaro supporters are statistically likely to be white men who disapprove of same-sex marriage. Conversely, Bolsonaro's least fervent supporters are black women who support LGBTQ+ rights.

Table 4. Multivariate Regression for Bolsonaro Voter

	Bolsonaro Voter
Gay Marriage	-.0636574*** (.0174495)
Political Office	.0062104 (.0202102)
Race (etid)	-.02731*** (.0074719)
Gender	-.1108821*** (.0262235)
Constant	.7536042*** (.0618359)
R- Squared Observations	0.0386 1,327

Note. Race is categorized into three main groups, individuals identifying as white, brown, and black. Stars indicate
***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p <0.1

Unsurprisingly, the multivariate regression supports race and gender as highly significant predictors of votes for Bolsonaro. However, the results for traditional values produced incongruent results. Opinion about LGBTQ+ people holding political office was not a statistically significant predictor of voting for Bolsonaro, whereas opinion about same-sex marriage was highly significant. Perhaps Bolsonaro voters feel differently about these issues because same-sex marriage in particular is a highly contested social and moral issue in Brazil. This research shows explicitly and significantly that differences in votes for Bolsonaro are especially cut along racial and gendered terms. The many factors that could have led to these results need to be further examined in future research.

Discussion

This paper serves as a preliminary look at racial and gender divides in Brazilian electoral politics. Additionally, this paper elucidates the importance of intersectionality by emphasizing the differences between gender- and race-based analyses and showing how race-gender overlap (and the social attitudes to which it is correlated) provides helpful explanatory clues. The precise

reason for differences in voting patterns along racial-gendered lines remains unclear; support for traditional values, a likely cause, offered conflicting results.

In the future, research efforts should be made to gather public opinion samples from outside of cities, which may be biased toward social liberalism. There is also more work to be done in properly measuring traditional values and beliefs. In order to properly understand why electoral discrepancies, exist along both racial and gendered lines, scholars must ask more questions about how people of various racial and gender groups, with varying voting patterns, think about sexism, women's rights, and religiosity. It would also be helpful to complement this quantitative research with qualitative interviews. Studying Brazilian elections within an intersectional framework allows us to better understand the political behaviors of Brazil's diverse population— and the requirements of scholarship that seeks to explain those behaviors.

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