

Concept Paper

Populism in Times of Spectacularization of the Pandemic: How Populists in Germany and Brazil Tried to ‘Own the Virus’ but Failed

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Abstract: Populism has been at the center of recent debates in political science and international relations scholarship. Recognized as a contested concept and framed as a new global phenomenon, populism emerged in the context of liberal democracies, where political actors inflate social antagonisms by putting the people against the elite. Facing a global health crisis where a sense of threat, uncertainty, and emergency has pushed normal politics into the realm of politics of crisis, populists have actively engaged in creating a spectacularization of failure—of science, institutions, experts, governments—vis-à-vis the new Coronavirus, and in creating doubts about and devaluing scientists, experts and governments. Issues such as mask mandates, lockdown measures, compulsory vaccination, medicine effectiveness, and vaccine certificates became politicized. That is, they have been taken from normal politics and made contingent and controversial in order to deepen already existing political divisions and polarization. Exploring the case of Germany and Brazil, we will show how populists tried to use the pandemic to forge divisions between the people and the elite (represented by scientists, health experts, and the press). This conceptual-empirical paper wishes to make a contribution to the debate on how populists brought scientific public health issues into their black-and-white, antagonistic vision of society and hence instrumentalized COVID-19 for their own political gain.

Keywords: populism; COVID-19; global health; trauma; politization; social antagonism; Germany; Brazil



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1. Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Two and a half years later, the total reported cases have hit 650 million, and cumulative deaths worldwide have surpassed 6.6 million ¹. While the world realized that the pandemic was not a mere bump on the road, scholars took a pause to plunge deeper into the political, economic, social, and psychological effects of this unknown situation. Not surprisingly, the pandemic evolved to be recognized as the third major shock to the global system in the 21st century, following 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis [1–6] ².

This major systemic shock occurs in a strange political climate that resembles the dark times of the early 1930s—when many governments opted for nationalistic, illiberal, and beggar-thy-neighbor policies, making it difficult for nations to cooperate to stop the virus [7]. Indeed, over the past few decades, and particularly the last 10–15 years, the world has grown more authoritarian, nationalistic, xenophobic, unilateralist, anti-establishment, and anti-scientific (Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, Recep Erdogan, Jair Bolsonaro and others come to mind). Therefore, it seems almost fitting that the pandemic is associated with another buzzword of our strange time: populism. While some claimed

the pandemic would demonstrate the limits of populism as a method of government [8], others pointed out that populism would survive, given that populist leaders would not have a unitary response to the crisis [9].

Albeit the expansion of vaccination on a global scale, the pandemic still goes on. It seems that the prediction of populism surviving the pandemic due to its own diversity has been proved right, given the variation in responses by populists around the world. While Trump and Bolsonaro pursued policies bordering on negationism [10,11], such as preaching for pseudo-treatments based on chloroquine and attacking masks [12,13], leftist populists such as Andrés Manuel López Obrador [14] were hardly better in reacting to the pandemic, shying away from implementing strict lockdown and social distancing measures.

One curious trait stands out as a common denominator, though: populists across the political spectrum understood the possible benefits of performing the COVID-19 crisis as a tool to strengthen their political positions. They have actively engaged in creating a spectacularization of failure—of science, institutions, experts, and governments—vis-à-vis the new Coronavirus. By using the notion of spectacularization, we refer to how populists socially construct crisis by radically simplifying ‘the terms and terrain of political debate’ and advocating ‘strong leadership and quick political action to stave off or solve the impending crisis’ [15] (p. 190). Following Moffitt, we believe that crises are not natural phenomena; and that they must be mediated and performed by social actors. Therefore, crises do not generate populism, but rather, it is populism that generates crisis [15]. In the case of the pandemic crisis, issues such as mask mandates, lockdown measures, compulsory vaccination, medicine effectiveness, and vaccine certificates became politicized; that is, they have been taken from normal politics and made contingent and controversial in order to deepen already existing political divisions and polarization.

In this article, we want to contribute to the debate on how populists brought scientific public health issues into their black-and-white, antagonistic vision of society and hence instrumentalized COVID-19 for their own political gain. Exploring the case of Brazil and Germany, we will show how populists tried to ‘own the virus’ by articulating narratives that placed the people against the scientists and established political institutions. By ‘owning the virus,’ we mean that populist leaders tried to instrumentalize the pandemic for their own political gain, that is, to increase social polarization and present themselves as the true representatives of ‘the people’. We claim that they have tried to ‘own the virus’ in the same way that populists usually politicize issues such as migration, culture, abortion, women’s rights etc.

We will also argue that the ongoing spectacularization of the pandemic created a traumatic effect, for it intensified feelings of betrayal, helplessness, and abandonment, as well as suspicion over science and health experts. Populist leaders have opted to perform the pandemic into a crisis instead of defending the population from the virus. It is also in this sense that we claim they attempted to ‘take ownership’ of the virus for political purposes.

The paper is conceptual but, in part, also empirical. The paper is divided into four sections. First, we present the conceptual framework of our investigation, connecting the notions of populism, politicization and spectacularization, as well as our characterization of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global trauma. In order to illustrate how these concepts play out, we engage in an empirical discussion via two case studies. Following the conceptual part, the next two sections present the case studies that ground the empirical investigations, which will allow us to understand how populist leaders engaged in the ‘spectacularization’ of the pandemic in an attempt to perform crisis for their own political purposes to legitimate themselves as the authentic personalization of the will of ‘the people’. Finally, we offer concluding remarks on what both cases tell us about how populists tried—but failed—to ‘own the virus’ during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Populism and the Spectacularization of the Pandemic: When Populists Tried to ‘Own the Virus’

Considered the buzzword of the early 21st century [16], populism is frequently associated with charismatic leadership, where populist leaders claim to embody the popular will and thus speak in the name of the people. Recognized as a contested concept [17] and now framed as a global phenomenon [18], populism is mostly defined in ideational terms, where a political leader adopts a discourse based on a dualistic worldview of politics that puts ‘the people’ against a corrupt, evil ‘elite’. Populism emerged in the context of liberal democracies when political actors inflate social antagonisms by putting the people against the elite, and it seriously undermines the very features and institutions of democracy itself [19]. According to Takis Pappas, populism once in power differs ‘from ascendant liberalism in that it is invariably led by charismatic leaders’ intent on maximizing their executive power while, at the same time, turning a blind eye to liberal institutional order’ [20] (p. 210).

Frequently associated with the personalization of power and of decision-making, populism is often characterized by ‘direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers’ [17] (p. 14). This also has led several authors to focus on the features of charismatic leadership by populists in power [21]. The scholarship tells us that populist leaders will rather be more personalistic when compared to non-populist ones, as, according to their distinctive understanding of politics, ‘they, and they alone, represent the people’ [22] (p. 3).

It is in this sense that populism as a discourse ³ may also be understood as a powerful tool to construct national identities [23]. By claiming to represent ‘the people’, populists usually offer an exclusionary notion of what constitutes these people they personify. They address popular grievances and frustrations in an attempt to unify and mobilize support against supposedly unresponsive political elites that are blamed for social troubles. By positioning ‘the people’ against a dangerous Other—the elites, migrants, criminals, foreigners—and advocating in favor of strong leadership and quick political action to defend said people, populists shift blame to political adversaries who are turned into enemies of ‘the people’. As a result, in order to maintain the populist strategy of polarization, populists search for potential enemies to give cohesiveness to the social plurality that constitutes ‘the people’.

This logic of articulating identity/difference through othering has already been explored by authors such as William Connolly [24], who talks about identity being constructed ‘on the shadow of the Other’ (p. 66). Once confronted with difference, identity becomes unstable and unsecured, hence under powerful pressure to fix, regulate, or exclude the undesirable. ‘When this pressure prevails, the maintenance of one identity involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates’ (p. 64).

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, where a sense of threat, uncertainty, and emergency has pushed normal politics into the realm of politics of crisis [25], issues such as mask mandates, lockdown measures, compulsory vaccination, medicine effectiveness, and vaccine certificates became politicized, that is, they are taken from normal politics and made contingent and controversial. As populists attempt to ‘own the virus’ in order to explore and increase the social antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ for their own political gain, they engage in a blaming rhetoric typically used by populists [26] to create doubts about and devalue scientists, medical experts and institutions, intended to pit these against ‘the people’.

As a result, populists bring politicized issues into their black-and-white, antagonistic vision of society and present themselves as the only ones capable of dealing with the crisis. Moreover, they demonstrate the validity of the concept of medical populism. First introduced by Gideon Lasco and Nicole Curato to refer to ‘a political style that constructs antagonistic relations between ‘the people’ whose lives have been put at risk by ‘the establishment’ [27], medical populism enables us to think about the binary opposition between a technocratic response to the pandemic that tries to ‘sooth the public outcry by

letting experts and institutions of accountability take over', and a 'populist response which further spectacularises the crisis and pits 'the people' against failed and untrustworthy establishment' [27] (p. 1).

As they tried to 'own the virus', populists performed the health crisis to enhance their own claim of being the representatives of 'the people', for they, and they alone would have the swift, adequate response to solve the crisis. In this, we regard a failure of populists to do so as failing to gain a significant increase in political support or in votes at elections or in failing to get the population overall to believe their claims (by, for example, not getting vaccinated, or complying with protection measures).

The spectacularization of COVID-19, which will be explored in the empirical cases of Germany and Brazil in the next two sections, had an important consequence, though: the intensification of widespread feelings of anxiety, helplessness and betrayal by 'the elites'. Here we bring the characterization of the COVID-19 pandemic as a collective, global trauma. Beyond the shattering numbers that show the intensity of the pandemic as an event (number of infections, deaths, economic losses etc.), trauma is mostly defined by our own 'incapacity to respond adequately to it' and by the 'upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization' [28] (pp. 465–469) of individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated our own incapacity to react to its *eventness*. The pandemic broke what Robert Stolorow [29] calls 'the absolutism of everyday life': the illusion that we live in a secure, predictable world. As Jenny Edkins [30] points out, that is the quality of traumatic events: it shatters the 'metaphysical certainties' that we normally take for granted in order to continue living (p. 246). As the new Coronavirus rapidly imposed its harsh reality across the globe—forcing governments to impose lockdowns, quarantines, and closure of borders, as well as mask mandates and contact surveillance, we were exposed to an impossible, unbearable truth: that human life is fragile, that we are mortals, or what Giorgio Agamben [31] calls 'bare life'. People suddenly became cold numbers (of infections, of deaths) in daily reports about the development of the pandemic.

3. Germany: How the Right-Wing Populist/Extremist AfD and Other Populists Attempted to Politicize COVID-19

This section shows how key populist actors in Germany attempted to politicize and profit from the pandemic. It discusses the right-wing populist and partly extremist political party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany), the grouping of Corona-Leugner (pandemic deniers) and Impfgegner (vaccination opponents) found in the Querdenker movement (people joining and/or supporting the protest group, which in the German political context, can be seen as a term referring to thinking alternatively, differently from and/or opposed to the government, elites or mainstream). Founded in 2013, the AfD claims to be the alternative to the political establishment, the party that really cares for the people, and a normal party that other parties should cooperate with. However, scholars show AfD representatives repeatedly accusing the political establishment and mass media of denigrating the AfD and thereby a claimed large part of the people [32]. A study considers the AfD to be 'extremely right-wing populist', with a strong populist position but also a fairly strong right-wing extremist position [33]. The AfD's extremist positions have led to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classifying the AfD as a case of suspicion (Verdachtsfall). Other groups that attempted to politicize COVID-19 include the Querdenker movement with pandemic deniers and vaccination opponents that formed more or less organized, displayed partially overlapping ideas and aims, and relied heavily on social media to network and mobilize. A study found the Querdenker in Germany to be diverse, often unconnected groups that share ideas, are part of the middle class and often older in age, where many seemingly do not benefit from the government's aid to offset the restriction measures' economic costs [34] (p. 51); which may partly explain their opposition to measures.

3.1. *Downplaying the Disease and Its Danger*

Efforts to downplay the pandemic and its danger by the AfD were less relevant, likely due to the population mostly supporting the government's measures [35] and even the party's support base partially supporting them [36]. The AfD focused on claims of the government not responding enough to the pandemic while at the same time criticizing imposed limits on freedom of movement and contact and the negative impact on businesses—in effect, downplaying the pandemic's danger via the stated criticism.

The other groupings in opposition to protection measures, such as the Querdenker, voiced their relativization of the pandemic's danger in their protests on the street and on social media. They downplayed the virus and any need for protection against it, especially social distancing, mask-wearing, school and kindergarten closures, and vaccinations. Salheiser and Richter [35] show that different groups converged, including esoterics, conspiracy theory followers, and vaccination opponents, but also right-wing extremist groups who tried to steer the groups and also cooperated directly. Social media was central to mobilizing and spreading disinformation about the pandemic, appropriate protection, and the government's actions.

3.2. *Externalizing the Virus and Blaming China and the Chinese*

At the pandemic's onset, populists focused partly on the virus and the danger coming from China and the Chinese, thus from the outside to Germany. The AfD tried to utilize the pandemic for its anti-migration/refugee rhetoric. The AfD engaged in blaming both the German government and foreigners; refugees and migrants were said to increase the risk of infection [35]. However, this framing did not notably increase the party's support [36]. COVID-19 was used more to rally against the government. Pola Lehmann and Lisa Zehnter [31] also classified AfD discourse as nativist and as highlighting the virus' external origin.

3.3. *Politicizing Governmental Protection Measures and Creating Doubt*

Populists claim that the government reacted too late or not enough or not with the right measures. The AfD made COVID-19 and the government's protection measures one of its core themes for mobilizing against the government. The AfD and other groups linked other issues of non-content to their anti-establishment position, some protests becoming a platform for conspiracy theories and right-wing extremist efforts.

AfD discourse was anti-elitist (against both government and experts) [37]. At the beginning of the pandemic, the AfD was swerving between supporting strict measures and civil liberties. In the summer of 2020, the AfD called for lesser restrictions, condemned the government and elites, and supported anti-government protests; from the fall of 2020 on criticizing containment measures and the elites, but with an unclear position on vaccinations; and later on, claiming the government was only interested in increasing power [37]. The AfD claimed the government's measures were insufficient and ignored the economic impact. They especially criticized mask-wearing mandates, contact restrictions, gastronomy closures, and strict hygiene measures for production businesses [35].

Attempting to undermine the government's credibility and to garner support, the AfD framed then-Chancellor Merkel and her government as illegitimate, incompetent, and failing, and the government's course insane, chaotic and anti-democratic, which is why the people should not trust the government [38]. The large transfer payments and aid credits of the EU budget, meant to address the pandemic's consequences, were framed as selling out of German interests and plundering German taxpayers [35]. The German government was overall portrayed as betraying their own people and, furthermore, dividing society by imposing protection measures in spite of populist/extremist protests.

Anti-government protests came to be defined by the non-wearing of masks and the breaking of mask mandates. Protesters claimed that masks were no protection but a symbol of dictatorship and hindering communication—non-wearing served easy recognition and

identity formation [34]. Protesters differentiated themselves from ‘all others’ who followed the mandate and became unrecognizable among all mask-wearers.

Since November/December 2021, protests on the street have increased, with the growing political debate on mandatory vaccination (the government had planned to implement this measure for all over 18). Also, other protection measures, such as distancing rules, were met with increasing aggression against police and journalists. The planned vaccination mandate was used as a rallying point to mobilize against the state and delegitimize the state as taking away freedom (by the spring of 2022, the wide vaccination mandate was essentially taken off the table). Forgery of documents such as negative tests and vaccination certificates was also frequent.

Populists attempted to create doubts about protection measures by framing the government as illegitimate, incompetent, chaotic, anti-democratic, and undeserving of the people’s trust [38]. Populist discourse expressed a spectacularization of failure. Framings of the government only being interested in power [37] were aimed to enlarge the people-government/elites dichotomy. Protest groups, while at first distancing themselves from right-wing extremist actors, displayed a growing right-wing extremist participation. Social media communication included calls to storm the Bundestag and overthrow the government, advice for avoiding governmental measures, and calls for violence against particular politicians and health experts [35]. Health experts speaking on the virus’ danger were framed as part of the establishment; trust was placed in alternative medics and media who deserve trust simply because they differ from the establishment [34]. Populists defamed health experts and needed protection measures as against the people.

3.4. Polarizing: Did the German Populists ‘Own the Virus’?

Overall, populism in Germany decreased from 2018 to 2020 because democratic forces and the political center remobilized against populism and because, early in the pandemic, Germans were mostly satisfied with the government’s response [33]. The AfD lost nationwide 2.3% in federal elections in 2021, only keeping most of its support in the East [39], and during the pandemic, lost in several state elections, hovering around 11% on average in 2021/2022. The AfD could not substantially profit during the pandemic and did not truly own the virus, although it captured attention sporadically during the pandemic’s waves.

The AfD’s portrayal of itself as a defender of freedom has not brought political gain for the party [37]. The party could not position itself as a key player in protests due to infighting for leadership and other groups getting attention [40]. AfD social media communication was inconsistent, opportunistic and not very convincing [7]. The population mostly supported the government’s measures, and even much of the AfD’s support base did so. Many AfD voters switched in the following elections, particularly in western Germany, where higher infection rates coincided with lower AfD support—vice versa in the East [35]. Despite the sometimes strong, aggressive, and highly emotional framing of the government during the pandemic, the AfD and other populist groups could not truly own the virus.

4. Brazil: How Bolsonaro turned Brazil’s Response to COVID-19 into a Spectacle

COVID-19 reached Latin America later than other regions. The first case recorded in Brazil was on 26 February, 2020: a 61-year-old male returning home after vacationing in northern Italy. Then Brazilian Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, estimated that the country would have four to six weeks to prepare for the arrival of the first wave of the pandemic. This assessment failed to foresee the impact of right-wing populist president Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) in the management of the pandemic.

Since taking office in January 2019, Bolsonaro has shown an authoritarian leadership style and emphasized traditional family values, Judeo-Christian morals, and liberal economic positions [41], which has earned him the nickname ‘Trump of the Tropics’ [42]. When Brazil began to suffer more severely from the escalating number of infections and deaths

due to the new Coronavirus, Bolsonaro engaged in the process of spectacularization of the health crisis, actively sowing doubts about the extension of the disease, the validity of social distancing measures, and the efficacy of the vaccine, once it became available. His weekly live streams on his YouTube channel, combined with constant tweets and national TV addresses as the pandemic escalated, fit what has come to be understood as medical populism: a political style based on performances of public health crises that pit ‘the people’ against ‘the establishment’ using alternative knowledge claims to cast doubt on the credibility of doctors, scientists, and technocrats [27]. The result is a body count of 692,000 deaths since March 2020, according to the WHO *Coronavirus Dashboard*.

4.1. Downplaying the Disease and Its Danger

One key characteristic of Bolsonaro’s discourse on COVID-19 has been the downplaying of the extension and danger of the disease. In the early weeks of the first wave of the pandemic in Brazil, soon after the first recorded deaths due to COVID-19, Bolsonaro used the expression ‘a little flu’ to characterize COVID-19 ⁴ [43]. In a televised address to the nation, he proudly argued that given his history as an athlete, if infected, there would be nothing to worry about. ‘I would not feel anything. If at all, I would get a little flu, a little cold, as mentioned by that famous doctor, from that famous TV network’. In an attempt to discredit protection measures implemented at both the state and the municipal level, in direct contradiction to his guidelines at the federal level, Bolsonaro actively employed a vocabulary that downplayed the disease, shamed those who were worried and even afraid of the virus, and mocked those who eventually needed medical attention. On multiple occasions, he described the pandemic as ‘exaggerated’, ‘a fantasy’ and a ‘mass hysteria’, as other types of flu had been known to have killed more people than now.

Not only has the disease been downplayed, but the number of deaths and losses as well. Those who manifested any concern about the death of loved ones, or even those who had been fearful for the future, had been ridiculed and mocked. On 20 April 2020, when questioned on the country’s response to the climbing number of deaths due to COVID-19, he replied, ‘What do you want me to do? I am no gravedigger’. Ten days later, another rebuttal to a question on the latest record on deaths: ‘So what? I am sorry. What do you want me to do? I am Messiah [alluding to his middle name, Messias], but I am no miracle worker’. On 19 May 2020, when Brazil first registered over one thousand deaths in a single day, Bolsonaro reacted in a dismissive tone: ‘We are sorry about the dead, but that is the fate of all of us’. The tone continued for the following months. On 10 November 2020, when the number of deaths reached 162,000, Bolsonaro once again talked about the unavoidable fact of dying: ‘All people talk about is pandemics. This has to stop. Sorry about the deaths, but we are all going to die one day. No point in escaping from this, from reality. Gotta stop being a nation of pussies’.

Another element in the discourse that downplayed the disease is the promotion of ineffective drugs and treatments, such as chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin, which Bolsonaro believed to act as a ‘precocious treatment’ against COVID-19. According to Guilherme Casarões and David Magalhães [44], the combined use of these drugs as a prophylactic treatment against COVID-19 was an integral tool of medical populist performance in the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed populist (especially right-wing) leaders to increase—or at least to maintain—their popularity at home. As the treatment was proven ineffective, the drugs were abandoned in favor of the vaccines, which became available towards the end of 2020. Bolsonaro, however, remained enthusiastic about the treatment and purposely delayed the purchase of vaccines. When he tested positive for COVID-19 in July 2020, Bolsonaro appeared in live streams to show how he was taking chloroquine and getting well ⁵. ‘There is no efficacy proof of it, but [I am] another person that [has shown that] this works. I trust hydrochloroquine. And you?’ (7 July 2020).

4.2. Externalizing the Virus & Blaming China and the Chinese

Since his presidential campaign, Bolsonaro has been voicing a critique of China while singing praises to the United States. That behavior, however, was broadly seen as the result of his personal choice for alignment with Brazil's foreign policy. He has never been shy of expressing his preference for the United States, although China has been Brazil's biggest trading partner since 2009. Albeit this personal preference, Brazil's foreign relations with China have not changed much since Bolsonaro took office in 2019. What has changed is that people close to him have been openly critical of China. For example, in November 2019, Bolsonaro's son, Eduardo, tweeted that the Brazilian government supported a U.S.-sponsored 'global alliance for a safe 5G, with no espionage from China'. The Chinese Embassy in Brasilia released a statement that Brazil was going to suffer 'the negative consequences and carry the historical burden of upsetting the normalcy of a Brazil-China partnership' [45]. Bolsonaro's supporters then took on social media to blame China for the pandemic, and soon tweets about 'the Chinese virus' multiplied.

Even before the vaccines were available, Bolsonaro continued to blame China and the Chinese, but this time in regards to the CoronaVac's supposedly (bad) quality. 'There is much talk about COVID-19 vaccines. We joined that consortium from Oxford. It seems that it will work, and 100 million doses will reach us. It won't be from that other country, ok? It is going to be from Oxford.' [46]. Once CoronaVac became available through a local partnership with Brazilian Instituto Butantã in São Paulo, Bolsonaro ordered the purchase to be canceled, once again making hints that the Chinese vaccine was of inferior quality. 'We will not buy João Doria's Chinese vaccine', he stated, referencing the governor of São Paulo, who had championed the partnership between Butantã and Sinovac. A couple of days later, Bolsonaro justified his decision that Brazil would not buy vaccines from China: 'We will not buy from China, it is my decision. I do not believe that it is safe for the population. (. . .) China, regrettably, there is much discredit by the [Brazilian] population. And because, as people say, the virus was born there' [46].

4.3. Politicizing Governmental Protection Measures and Creating Doubt

Bolsonaro was an active opposer of lockdown measures due to economic reasons only. According to his rationale, lockdowns would affect the economy negatively, which could translate into rising unemployment, the closing of businesses, loss of income, inflation, etc. This would put his own political plans of getting reelected in 2022 in jeopardy. As he himself stated on 16 March 2020, if 'the economy goes down (. . .) [m]y government will go down. It is a power struggle'.

Although at the federal level, Bolsonaro prevented any safety measure that affected the normal functioning of the economy, at the state and municipal levels, governors and mayors started implementing lockdown rules. As cities and states slowly and unevenly closed down, in an attempt to flatten the contamination curve, Bolsonaro started attacking governors and mayors, especially those from opposition parties. The federal government claimed to have exclusive autonomy to decide on health policy, hence the exclusive authority to adopt measures in response to the pandemic. The Supreme Court was rapidly brought in to settle the dispute, and in a now historic decision, it ruled that governors and mayors do have the autonomy to promote health policies, for health is a fundamental civil right as well as an obligation of the state—at any level—towards its citizens. As a result, states and municipalities could adopt lockdown measures, such as shutting down businesses, schools etc. [47]

Seen from Bolsonaro's point of view, thousands of deaths from COVID-19 pale against the imperative to ensure his own political survival—and there is even the danger of a twisted logic arising in which the worse the situation, the greater the benefit to the embattled incumbent. For one, a continuing escalation of the pandemic will delay any impeachment proceedings as there is almost no way of justifying expending political energy on impeaching a president rather than combatting COVID-19; indeed, it would give Bolsonaro every opportunity to continue his criticisms of the 'establishment'. In addition, a

serious escalation of the crisis would make it far easier to enact the kind of authoritarian measures which would fit Bolsonaro's concept of political leadership.

Bolsonaro's politicization of safety and health policy turned the country into a hostile environment to technocrats, health experts, scientists, judges, governors, mayors, and journalists. All of them have been blamed for the collapse of the Brazilian economy as well as for the deaths from the disease. Following the populist playbook, Bolsonaro shifted blame away from him and placed it on those who could be framed as being against 'the people'. Bolsonaro openly stated he would not get vaccinated, and he discouraged the population from taking the vaccine. He suggested that the vaccine could have adverse effects [11]. On 21 October 2021, during one of his live streams on YouTube, he associated COVID-19 vaccines with HIV/AIDS⁶ [48]. The statements against vaccines, testing, and medical masks, however, were, in fact, part of a systematic attack against science and scientists that predated the pandemic. Since the beginning of his office in 2019, science has been attacked with budget cuts and negationism. Ricardo Galvão, director of the National Spatial Research Institute, was fired after presenting and commenting on data on deforestation; Bolsonaro repeatedly called the data 'fake' and 'false', probably produced 'at the request of international NGO's lusting after our Amazon'. With the pandemic, the attacks escalated and started to target health experts. Former ministers of health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta and Nelson Teich, publicly disagreed with Bolsonaro by defending scientific recommendations to fight COVID-19 and were fired. Pedro Hallal, a researcher leading the largest epidemiological study of COVID-19 in Brazil, suffered multiple attacks on social media, had his funding revoked and was even prosecuted under the 1983 National Security Law. In a letter to *The Lancet* in January 2021, he revealed the string of attacks, threats, and pushbacks since the release of the first results of his research. As he presented the data from his research, he claimed that 156,582 lives were lost in the country because of the government's underperformance in its response to the pandemic [49]. The public felt lost and deprived of guidance in such a harsh time. Contradictory messages about the disease itself, the miraculous treatments, the safety measures, as well as the vaccines left Brazilian confused, anxious and bewildered during the pandemic.

4.4. Polarizing: Did Populist Bolsonaro 'Own the Virus'?

In Brazil, public access to vaccines is one of the cornerstones of the Universal Health System since vaccination rights are a constitutional right of all citizens and residents and a legal duty of the government. Despite the fact that vaccines are generally successfully provided through the National Immunization Program, the COVID-19 vaccination campaign was marked by shortages and delays. This failure at the federal level meant that other levels of government had to step in: states, municipalities, independent federal agencies, and even Congress and the Supreme Court all tried to balance out the damage provoked by Bolsonaro. At the federal level, fear of retaliation forced government officials to follow the desires of the president instead of elaborating public policies that were scientifically based. Despite the failure of the federal government to adopt effective public health measures and speedily formulate a plan to vaccinate its population, 80% of Brazil's population is fully vaccinated today, a rate above the world average. This success can mainly be attributed to two factors: the actions of subnational governments and Brazil's vaccination culture.

In April 2021, the Brazilian Senate installed a Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry to investigate omissions and irregularities in the federal government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. During its running, the Committee investigated claims on the attempt of herd immunity by infection, suspicions of corruption around the overcharged acquisition of medical material, accusations of delaying on purpose in acquiring vaccines from both Pfizer and Jansen, accusations of a 'shadow Ministry cabinet' composed of Bolsonaro's friends and supporters in charge of policymaking, as well as ineffective treatments and the use of public money to buy drugs without scientific proof of effectiveness. At the end of the inquiry, upon the voting of the final report that recommended Bolsonaro be prosecuted

for multiple crimes against public health, his approval ratings dropped to only 22%, while 54% rated Bolsonaro's management of the pandemic 'bad' or 'terrible' [50].

5. Conclusions: How Populists Tried—But Failed—To 'Own the Virus'

A study found that populists and populist governments performed worse than non-populist governments in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis—both in terms of the pandemic and its consequences and of excess mortality (mortality above those rates without the pandemic) being more than double in populist-governed countries, including for example Brazil [51]. A Bertelsmann Foundation study on sustainable governance reports that populist governments consider government-independent experts less in their policy responses [52].

In the case of Germany, the AfD could not profit as much from the pandemic because key politicians, among them then-Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as state minister presidents and other politicians across the democratic political spectrum, openly and strongly rejected claims by the AfD that the virus was not dangerous, calling such claims and their speakers irresponsible and dangerous. The AfD, on the other hand, was itself divided on many issues, including how to deal with the pandemic and how to try to profit from it. Another key reason is that the federal government constantly included health experts in their policymaking, among them virologists, epidemiologists, and experts and chairs of medical associations on lung diseases, intensive care etc. The AfD—although not with a unified position—tried to discredit these experts publicly, even during the height of the pandemic.

Some health experts also communicated the evolving medical insights regarding the virus and the efficacy of protection measures in regular podcasts and other media, addressing the public directly. While there was not always a uniform view on appropriately protecting the public and offsetting the restrictions' consequences on public life and the economy, the message was that the virus is dangerous and that measures, at times strong ones, are needed to protect people. Many in the population also wanted to understand the pandemic and how to protect themselves in the public sphere and in meeting their daily demands.

Populist discourse by the AfD and other groups at times and in part resulted in a greater sense of hopelessness in the population regarding the pandemic while also increasing distrust in medicine and health experts. This sense of hopelessness was particularly strong and grew during the winter of 2020 and again after it became clear that the vaccinations do not prevent infection but only lower the risk of severe illness; it was also higher in those regions where the AfD had more support and where vaccination rates were lower. Greater hopelessness also seems to exist and/or have existed in Eastern Germany, where the pandemic came on top of already greater distrust in the government, a higher level of economic and social precarity, a lingering feeling of being second-class citizens, and in some way a feeling of continuing crisis. As Philip Manow shows, East Germans have supported the AfD and its populist positions more, not because of the commonly held view of East Germans modernizing late(r) and not yet having 'arrived' in democracy, but because of the impact of the memory of unemployment in the 1990s and the crisis then felt (AfD voters are mainly those with regular jobs in regions with industries still providing jobs). Politicizing the great intake of refugees and migrants after 2014, the AfD profited from East German voters' feelings of economic downgrading, a perceived cancellation of an implicit citizen-state contract, and the awareness of constant unemployment risk [33]. During the pandemic, the AfD was able to maintain its support in the East. Vaccination rates are lower in the East and correspond with higher AfD support; overall, though, vaccination rates for Germany are high (fully vaccinated with two doses are 76.3%, a first booster has been received by 62.4% and a second booster 13.4%, as of 22 November 2022).

Furthermore, the AfD had an impact on shaping anti-government protests. Some had considered the AfD as 'the radical driver' of protests in Germany, advising how to demonstrate without the needed prior authorization by covering protests up as so-called

walks ('Spaziergänge'); the AfD is seen to undermine democracy from the inside [53]. Thus, although the AfD was not able to translate the protests into more votes or significantly more political support overall, the danger of normalizing right-wing extremist/populist content in the middle of society in the long term exists [35]. The impact of polarization is then perhaps a deepening division among East and West Germans, with populism taking greater hold in the East. In the East, one can argue, with somewhat lower vaccination rates, that populists had some minimal success in their attempts to spectacularize the virus. It remains to be seen if the traumatizing effects will linger and if they will be greater in the East than in the West of Germany. Overall, with protection measures and restrictions for people mostly dropping by the Spring/Summer of 2022, despite increasing infection cases, the traumatizing effects seem to be less long-term. Most people seem to rely on being vaccinated and/or wearing the mask partially indoors (aside from those who still reject vaccinations and/or masks). Traumatizing effects were likely also less strong in Germany than in Brazil, because the German government early on had a quick and resolute response that prevented greater levels of infection.

In the case of Brazil, Bolsonaro's tactics of downplaying the effects of the pandemic, politicizing safety measures, and attacking China, science and scientists backfired. Once the jabs were finally available, people rolled up their sleeves and happily took the shot. Today, over 80% of Brazilians are fully vaccinated, which points to the failure of Bolsonaro's anti-science tactics. Since the beginning of his term, Bolsonaro has remained an agent of information disorder. His election mirrors the process of the rise of right-wing populist leaders who came to power in other countries during the past decade. Bolsonaro successfully mobilized part of society against an 'enemy' to be beaten (primarily the 'left' or 'communists,' among others), normalizing discriminatory discourses while leveraging the capillarity of social media. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the target changed: science, health experts, China, vaccines, state governors and city officials. Following the populist playbook, he tried to 'own the virus' for his own political benefit, driving the nation toward deeper polarization. In a runoff presidential election on 30 October, Bolsonaro was defeated by former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who took 50.9% of the votes cast in a very tight, polarized election.

After more than two years of the pandemic, Brazil is slowly bouncing back from the abyss after a record number of COVID-19-related deaths. According to the WHO *Corona-virus Dashboard*, as of December 2022, Brazil, with 36,001,760 confirmed cases and 692,280 deaths, has the third-highest number of confirmed cases and the second-highest death toll from COVID-19 in the world, behind only those of the United States and India. The economy shrunk by an unparalleled 9.7% in the second quarter of 2020 and plunged Brazil into a recession. By the end of 2020, Brazil's GDP had shrunk by 4.1%, the worst recorded since 1990 [54]. But it was the psychological side of the pandemic that hit Brazil more acutely due to Bolsonaro's spectacularization of the health crisis. Constantly bombarded with misinformation, hate speech, insults, and threats, the public felt locked in a slow-moving disaster that escalated in intensity over time, with no clear beginning or endpoint. The feelings of anxiety, burnout and stress were felt at each tweet downplaying the disease, at each live advocating chloroquine, or even any time the possibility of vaccination was ridiculed. By seeing the populist leader placing his own reelection before human lives, 'the people' felt betrayed, hence the trauma.

The two cases—Germany and Brazil—are somewhat different in nature: the AfD in Germany is a minority opposition party, and Bolsonaro is the president of Brazil. Yet, there are also similarities, such as some notable splits or divisions in the populist camp. In Germany, populists were moderated by democratic forces and by health experts, and in Brazil, Bolsonaro was moderated by the Judiciary, state and municipal authorities, as well as by health experts. As we can see from both cases explored in this article, despite variation on how to respond to the pandemic, populists in both Brazil and Germany engaged in what Lasco has termed 'medical populism', wherein the pandemic allowed for populists to engage in 'spectacularising the crisis' [55] (p. 1423). At first, dismissing or downplaying the

pandemic, then making false/misleading claims or even shifting blame, and later, invoking individual freedoms to attack safety measures against the spread of the virus. In common, all of them tried to use the pandemic to forge divisions between the people and the elite (represented by academics, health experts, and the press). The common goal, as frankly stated by both AfD leaders as well as Bolsonaro, was to mobilize supporters and enhance political representation, be it by winning more seats in Parliament, in the case of Germany, or getting reelected, in the case of Bolsonaro. Both failed. Populists tried to ‘own the virus’ for their own political gain, but the virus could not be owned that way.

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Notes

- ¹ WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. Available online: <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed on 22 December 2022).
- ² Drezner (2020) argues that COVID-19 will not have transformative effects on world politics [2]. The pandemic has been the object of several recent special issues in international relations journals [3–6].
- ³ For the purpose of this article, we have opted to follow Ernesto Laclau’s notion of populism as a specific kind of discourse [23].
- ⁴ All quotes from Bolsonaro were taken from a timeline developed by *Folha de São Paulo* [43].
- ⁵ In November 2021, Bolsonaro’s health records were sealed and classified for 100 years.
- ⁶ For that statement, he is currently under investigation by the Federal Police for disseminating panic in a public health crisis [48].

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