

Bolsonaro Loses Evangelical Support that Brought Him to Brazilian Presidency

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***Jair Bolsonaro** became Brazilian president by modelling himself as the “Tropical Trump” and securing support from the pro-US and formerly CIA funded Christian Evangelical churches. However, according to the latest Datafolha survey, only 29% of Evangelicals consider the Bolsonaro government to be excellent or good, the lowest recording since he took office.*

When Bolsonaro was elected in 2018, Evangelicals were partly responsible for his success. This is a relatively new phenomenon for Brazil since Evangelicals were previously more involved in legislative campaigns by electing senators, councillors and federal deputies. They were traditionally never really involved in presidential candidacies.

Previously, some Evangelicals voted for class reasons rather than religious ones. This changed in 2016 due to the impeachment of leftist president **Dilma Rousseff**, a time when Brazil’s poorest were especially suffering from the economic situation. In the 2016 election, forces against Dilma and the ruling Workers’ Party (PT) cooperated, eventually culminating into an Evangelical wave around some candidates. It is in this wave that Bolsonaro emerged, especially in the lead up to the last presidential election. In the 2018 election, Bolsonaro had 70% of Evangelical votes.

The economic situation made PT-supporting Evangelicals, who are mostly poor and black, abandon the party in favor of Bolsonaro as he portrayed himself as a devout Christian with an economic solution. Bolsonaro has a great deal of dialogue and relations with key Evangelical figures, especially as his wife and all his children are Evangelicals too. Despite the unchristian rhetoric of Bolsonaro, such as calling for the murder of leftists, when an ensemble of Evangelical figures became more associated with him, his candidacy became more palatable.

Bolsonaro latched onto the economic crisis, knowing that this was a major election talking point, and found much popularity despite having no economic policy of his own other than

allow Milton Friedman-taught Paolo Guedes run riot with neoliberal policies. The second point to his popularity in 2018 was his political manoeuvring, identifying that he needed the support of Evangelical Christians to secure the presidency, just as Donald Trump had done. He knew how to exploit a narrative that he is the protector of Christian values and Brazil's natural conservatism, and an opposer of all progressivism and gender ideology. For most Evangelicals, they believed that Bolsonaro was fighting these so-called malign forces, causing them to support him.

However, after several years in charge, the economic situation in Brazil has not improved at all. 65% of Evangelicals earn only one minimum wage (about \$200) and 57% of Evangelicals are black, i.e. living at the base of the Brazilian social pyramid and suffering the most from inflation and deteriorating working conditions.

The pandemic and the non-improved economic situation will emerge as major topics in the lead up to next year's election. One thing is for sure though, it is nearly impossible to predict what will happen in the 2022 election as Brazilian politics is famously volatile. The fact is that people are concerned about the economic issue, including most Evangelicals.

Even with an 11-point drop in the approval of the Bolsonaro government among Evangelicals, his likely presidential rival, former leftist President Lula, is failing to attract votes from this electorate. Lula and Bolsonaro are on an equal footing among the Evangelical electorate now. Although most Evangelicals are poor, the ultra-rich and mega-influential preachers carry out a very strong anti-PT campaign.

In addition, there is difficulty for the left to have an open dialogue with Evangelicals as they are usually middle class, more intellectualized and from the central neighborhoods. Because of this, they are usually detached from understanding the importance of the church to poor populations in the slums or rural areas. Effectively, the church is the community center for the periphery of Brazilian society.

88% of Brazil is religious, indicating that religion has a lot of weight in Brazil. Although Bolsonaro used this to his advantage to come to power and implement economic and geopolitical policies that serve US interests rather than Brazil's, neither Trump or current President Joe Biden have given the South American country any importance for its servitude.

Rather, under Bolsonaro, Brazil's formerly non-aligned policy that brought it closer to China and Russia has been diminished. Latin America's largest country is now mostly isolated with few real friends or partners. Although Bolsonaro ideologically aligned himself to Washington by utilising US-inspired Evangelical churches, it appears that they are now abandoning the president as the economy is still struggling and he catastrophically failed to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to the deaths of over 600,000 people.

Therefore, it appears that the Evangelical electorate will once again become a deciding bloc in the 2022 election. Although preachers of Evangelical churches will undoubtedly support Bolsonaro or another reactionary leader, the parishioners may once again favor a leftist candidate believing that their economic interests will be better protected after Bolsonaro not only failed to improve the economy, but actually made working conditioners more difficult.

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