

In historic elections that impacted the fate of democracy across the world, incumbent right wing incumbent, President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil was challenged by former President Lula Da Silva, of the center left Worker's Party in October 2022. It was incredible that Bolsonaro was able to stretch the contest to the second round, if one went entirely by the predictions of polling agencies, who were expecting a straight off Lula victory in the first round itself. The second round, where the two challengers faced off amidst an intensely heated political battle, saw a country as polarized as it has ever been.

Ultimately, Lula won the elections by a whisker, winning 51% of the vote. The statistic tells the tale of a country that finds its loyalties and beliefs divided. On one hand, Worker Party supporters celebrated enthusiastically, hugging each other, and cheering as fireworks erupted in central Sao Paulo city. On the other hand, disgruntled Bolsonaro supporters, including truckers, went on strikes and demonstrations throughout the country, blocking domestic trade routes. Just an hour from the public celebrations in Sao Paulo, pro-Bolsonaro demonstrations caused many airlines to cancel and reschedule international flights. Bolsonaro's silence seemed like a ticking time bomb – he had not immediately congratulated Lula for his victory. Would he challenge the election results, and would a January 6<sup>th</sup> like Brazil equivalent result? Eventually, after days of silence, Bolsonaro agreed to a transition of power and called for an end to his supporters road blockades, making supporters of democracy breathe a collective sigh of relief. However, it is clear, that the ring wing has certainly not been ousted from public imagination in one of the world's largest democracies, and that Lula is faced with a country with two entirely different ideas of Brazil.

I was able to present at this historic juncture in Brazil, thanks to a CLAS grant. My dissertation project asks the question – why do low-income voters re-elect populists from elite parties in high inequality contexts? Brazil is one of the key cases in my study. Being there, I could see a county ravaged by the Covid crisis, and with the poor struggling for basic necessities. Mugging has increased to an alarming level in Sao Paulo city. Three days before the second round of elections, a Federal Deputy aligned with Bolsonaro, pulled a gun and chased a stranger down the street in a very posh and supposedly safe part of Sao Paulo.

I was able to take in this context, and interview media and business elites, as well as access voter interviews to understand the information infrastructure surrounding the low-income voter. These conversations helped me understand the social coalition around right wing populism in Brazil. grant. Through these interviews, I was able to better understand the appeal and strategies of right-wing populism, and how institutions can be a foil or an enabler for such populism. I highly recommend researchers to visit the field at such crucial moments, such as in advance of an election, because it helped me not only absorb the country context, but get real-time understanding of political strategies, and how these were playing out. Brazil's electoral and judicial institutions have been trying to combat misinformation and make the contest fair – while Bolsonaro increased benefits for the poor in advance of the elections to serve as electoral carrots. It was also fascinating to note that in such a high inequality context, people's expectations of their leaders vary according to the differing world and world views they inhabit. Bolsonaro's coalition of evangelicals, low-income voters, small business, agribusiness and the rich certainly inhabit a different moral and information universe than Lula's supporters. My dissertation project, that this visit will benefit from, speaks to how these different world views are brought together in a single electoral coalition by right wing populists from elite parties.

