

COVID-19 AND POLARIZATION IN BRAZIL: THE DYNAMICS OF STATE-LEVEL POLICIES RELATED TO THE PANDEMIC

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The dispute over narratives about the COVID-19 and the negationism of president Jair Bolsonaro have hampered attempts to overcome the pandemic in the Brazilian polarized political scenario. The paper verifies if political preferences have affected state-level policies to face COVID-19 and finds that the variables related to partisanship (governor's alignment with the president and Bolsonaro's approval rate and share of votes in the 2018 election) have no significant effect on those policies. The actions of subnational units have been determined by local dynamics, specifically the death toll in the state and the possibility of governor's reelection, which shows that these concerns have guided state-level policies despite the polarization level.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Brazil, state-level policies, political polarization, Bolsonaro.*

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COVID-19 Y POLARIZACIÓN EN BRASIL: LA DINÁMICA DE LAS POLÍTICAS ESTATALES RELACIONADAS CON LA PANDEMIA

La disputa de narrativas sobre la COVID-19 y el negacionismo del presidente Jair Bolsonaro han perjudicado intentos de superar la pandemia en el escenario político polarizado de Brasil. El artículo verifica si las preferencias políticas han afectado las políticas regionales para enfrentar la COVID-19 y encuentra que las variables de partidismo (alineamiento del gobernador con el presidente y popularidad y porcentual de votos de Bolsonaro en la elección de 2018) no tienen efecto significativo sobre las medidas adoptadas. Las acciones de las unidades subnacionales han sido determinadas por dinámicas locales, específicamente el número de muertes en el estado y la posibilidad de reelección del gobernador, lo que muestra que esas preocupaciones han orientado las políticas regionales a pesar del nivel de polarización.

Palabras clave: *COVID-19, Brasil, políticas locales, polarización política, Bolsonaro.*

Introduction

The political scenario in Brazil has been increasingly polarized over the past three presidencies, from Dilma Rousseff (2015–2016) and Michel Temer (2016–2018) to Jair Bolsonaro (2019–). Since 2020, the country has also been dealing with a pandemic of COVID-19 that demands a governmental response. In this context, the disputes over narratives about the pandemic and Bolsonaro's negationism have hampered attempts to overcome the health crisis in Brazil (Cabral et al., 2021; Leone, 2021).

Due to the lack of a coordinated federal response to the pandemic, political parties and governors questioned the Brazilian supreme court about the competencies for adopting stay-at-home policies and received a favorable verdict. This has led to the decentralization of the fight against the COVID-19. Despite the attempts of governors and mayors to use such policies, Bolsonaro's attitudes have reduced their effectiveness (Cabral et al., 2021; Leone, 2021). The paper verifies if political preferences have affected the adoption of state-level policies to face the pandemic.

Recent studies pursue similar goals for countries such as Brazil (Cabral et al., 2021; Calvo and Ventura, 2021; Leone, 2021), Canada and the United States (Pickup et al., 2020). These authors show that partisanship affects how people react to COVID-19 and evaluate the government's response and ability to handle the health crisis. For the subnational level, other studies found similar effects (Grossman et al., 2020) and also that governors' partisanship and their possibility to run for a new term have influenced the response policies to COVID-19 (Baccini and Brodeur, 2021; Hale et al., 2020).

By looking at the Brazilian subnational level, the article verifies whether governors' position in relation to Bolsonaro, their possibility to run for reelection, the presidential approval rate, Bolsonaro's share of votes per state in the 2018 election, and the death toll in the subnational units impact state-level policies against the pandemic over time. The main finding is that the course of action followed by the subnational units has been determined by local dynamics, specifically the death toll in the state and the possibility of governor's reelection, which shows that these concerns have guided subnational policies despite the polarization level. The variables related to political preferences (alignment with the Brazilian president and his approval rate and share of votes) have no significant effect on the state-level policies to face COVID-19.

The paper consists of four more sections. The next one discusses the theoretical and contextual grounds of the article. Following it, there is a presentation of the data sources and methods applied. The results and findings are the next topics. The text ends with a final discussion presenting some conclusions.

Theoretical and contextual discussion

There have been several works about the effects of partisanship on popular and governmental attitudes related to COVID-19. Pickup et al. (2020) found that, despite the pandemic had been initially politicized in the US but not in Canada, partisanship has affected assessments of the federal government's response to COVID-19 in both countries. On the other hand, partisanship seemed to have less of an effect on people's behavior concerning the pandemic.

For Western Europe, Bol et al. (2021) applied a survey right before and right after the start of the March 2020 lockdowns in seven countries of the region (Austria, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom). According to the authors, these initial policies increased vote intentions for the party of the prime minister or president, trust in government, and satisfaction with democracy, by rallying individuals around current leaders and institutions.

There have also been publications about the effects of partisanship on responses to COVID-19 at the US subnational level. Regarding people's behavior, Grossman et al. (2020) found that the compliance to governors' recommendations for residents to stay at home was larger in Democratic- than in Republican-leaning counties.

Baccini and Brodeur (2021) reached similar conclusions for state-level policies. According to the authors, the probability of adopting a stay-at-home order was more likely for Democratic governors and for those who could run for a new term. Being a Democratic governor and having the possibility to run for reelection have also led to faster adoption of stay-at-home orders.

For the Brazilian case, Cabral et al. (2021) show that municipalities in which Bolsonaro received the majority of votes for president in the 2018 election have been more affected by COVID-19 cases and related deaths. Leone (2021) reaches the same conclusion regarding the effectiveness of social distancing. The author finds that the impact of social distancing rules on the circulation of people is lower in municipalities with a larger share of Bolsonaro voters.

There also are the effects of partisanship on the perceptions about the health crisis in Brazil. Since risks of unemployment and illness have become issues that elicit partisan responses, Calvo and Ventura (2021) used Bolsonaro's first speech on national TV addressing the pandemic and measured its effects on perceived risk by individuals. The authors found that pro-government partisans had lower levels of perceived risks of unemployment and illness along with greater support for the president's response to the COVID-19 crisis than opposition partisans.

Brazil reported the first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Bolsonaro has downplayed the risks. For example, as soon as March 20, 2020, he defined it as "little flu" (Uribe et al., 2020). The Brazilian

president has also publicized proven ineffective treatments, as the use of chloroquine, instead of social distancing and the use of masks. On May 19, 2020, when the daily balance recorded more than 1,000 deaths for the first time in Brazil, he said that “who is on the right-wing takes chloroquine. Who is on the left-wing drinks Tubaína”, in reference to a traditional Brazilian soft drink (Uribe and Carvalho, 2020).

Besides Bolsonaro’s negationism, this kind of statement reflects the political polarization in Brazil. At least since the beginning of Rousseff’s second term in 2015, the country has been increasingly polarized between political forces and positions associated with the left-wing and the right-wing. Rousseff’s term, the fourth consecutive for a president elected by the Workers’ Party (PT), started with her main opponent in the 2014 election formally questioning the electoral results. Her impeachment in 2016 was another source of political polarization (Avritzer, 2018). Since his candidacy by a small party in the 2018 election, Bolsonaro has taken advantage of this political climate and fueled the polarization with statements and actions.

Governors have also been protagonists of the health crisis in Brazil by trying to fulfill the lack of a coordinated federal response. From the government of São Paulo, the richest Brazilian state, João Doria has been opposing Bolsonaro in a race to enable massive vaccination and take political advantage of that. Actions such as those from Doria have been stimulating presidential reactions. As soon as March 25, 2020, in a meeting between the president and the four governors of the Southeast region of Brazil, Bolsonaro and Doria had an argument (Soares and Teófilo, 2020). Later, in a cabinet meeting on April 22, 2020, whose video was made public by a judicial investigation, the president cursed the governors of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Simon, 2020).

Such animosity and lack of coordination between government levels in a context of local inequalities have fueled the disease spread (Castro et al., 2021). Brazil has been behind only the US in the absolute number of deaths by COVID-19, according to the database from the University of Oxford. In deaths per 1 million inhabitants, it has also been among the first 20 countries in the world, as one of a few in this group with a population larger than 100 million.

Brazil adopts a federal system in which the 26 states and the federal district, besides the municipalities, share responsibilities with the federal government in policy areas such as education and health. The regulation of both systems of basic education and health is in charge of the federal government, while the states and the municipalities implement the policies (Souza, 2019). The three levels have budgetary resources which are constitutionally linked to these areas.

In response to demands from organized movements, the 1988 Constitution established a universal health care system, with the participation of the three levels of government in its operationalization. However, the implementation of the Universal System of Health (SUS) has failed to address regional and social differences in a highly unequal country like Brazil due to, among other factors, an emphasis on the role of municipalities over the states (Viana and Machado, 2009).

At the same time, there is an extremely fragmented multiparty system in Brazil, with 30 parties electing at least one representative for the lower chamber of Congress in 2018. The effective number of parties in relation to the seats obtained in the same election was 16.54. In such a scenario, the configuration of political forces and alliances between the president and the governors is much more complex than a division between Democrats and Republicans as in the US.

Despite their political differences, most of the Brazilian governors have been able to articulate themselves for negotiating jointly with the federal government during the pandemic and exerting public pressure in the form of statements and joint letters. The Northeast Consortium, which brings together the nine states of the Northeast region of Brazil, is the most formalized example.

Another source of complexity is the possibility of reelection for governor. The Brazilian legislation authorizes one consecutive reelection for this position. Considering the 27 governors in charge during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are both who can run for a new term and who cannot run.

The first hypothesis operationalized and tested in the following sections is that governors who oppose Bolsonaro are more likely to adopt policies such as stay-at-home orders and lockdowns (H1). Governors who can run for reelection are also more likely to adopt those policies (H2). However, when the presidential approval rate increases and social groups resume the pressure for an economy reopening, the subnational units tend to relax the social distancing policies (H3). Lastly, the states where Bolsonaro had a larger share of votes in the 2018 election tend to have a worse performance against the pandemic, since there would be less support for the necessary policies (H4).

Data and methods

To test the hypotheses described in the previous section, the paper uses data from the project Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OXCGR), the epidemiological panel by the Brazilian Ministry of Health, the percentage of votes per state obtained by Bolsonaro in the first round of the 2018 election, and the public opinion poll aggregator from the median outlet *Poder 360*, which displays presidential approval rates surveyed by several polling companies in Brazil. Each of the 26 Brazilian states and the federal district were also coded for the political position of their governor in relation to Bolsonaro and the possibility of governor's reelection. The timeframe used goes from March to December 2020, which corresponds to the whole cycle of the first wave of COVID-19 in Brazil.

The OXCGR collects and codes on a diary basis the response policies to the pandemic adopted around the world. For Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the US, the subnational policies are also included in the database. The data on the Brazilian states and the federal district was used for constructing the Stringency Index (SI), composed of the following variables: 1) schools closing; 2) workplaces closing; 3) public events cancellation; 5) public transport suspension; 6) social distancing policies; 7) movement restrictions; 8) international travel control; and 9) public awareness campaigns³.

The Bolsonaro's share of votes per state in the first round of the 2018 election was collected from the Brazilian electoral body (Electoral Superior Court - TSE). Studies on this election point out that a main factor influencing voters' decision was antipartisanship to PT, the party which elected the president in the 2002, 2006, 2010, and 2014 elections (Amaral, 2020; Rennó, 2020). By focusing on the first round of the 2018 election, it is possible to isolate part of the voters' suboptimal choices. The percentage of votes per state was used to create three categories, which are: < 40%, from 40% to 60%, and > 60%. This procedure was adopted to distinguish between the states with the highest and the lowest support for Bolsonaro, since there is no data available for presidential approval rate at the subnational level.

The presidential approval rate was collected from the survey aggregator powered by *Poder 360*, a Brazilian media outlet that also conducts surveys and aggregates results from other polling companies. The appendix shows the searches realized using the *Poder 360* database. This aggregator gathers surveys with different methodologies and samples. For minimizing the differences, the average of the surveys was used for each month, unless it is a month for which there is only one survey. Table 1 shows the data for each of the variables described above.

³ The calculation of the SI follows the methodology described by the OXCGR, available at <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics over time

Month	Deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (average)	Stringency Index	Presidential approval rate (excellent / good)
3	0.04	33.12	30.0%
4	2.10	70.11	29.2%
5	11.24	70.04	29.8%
6	16.12	66.42	30.0%
7	18.07	63.92	30.0%
8	14.52	61.12	37.0%
9	10.60	57.38	39.5%
10	7.42	52.99	40.1%
11	6.08	50.99	37.0%
12	10.28	51.06	37.0%

Sources: OXCGRT, SUS Coronavirus Panel, and Poder 360 survey aggregator

Besides the variables for the presidential approval rate and the response policies to COVID-19, data on political features of the subnational units were collected: the electoral support for Bolsonaro in the first round of the 2018 election, the reelection situation of the governors, and their political position vis a vis the Brazilian president. The governors coded as ally were those from Acre (AC), Amazonas (AM), Distrito Federal (DF), Goiás (GO), Minas Gerais (MG), Mato Grosso do Sul (MS), Paraná (PR), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Rondônia (RO), Roraima (RR), Santa Catarina (SC) and Tocantins (TO). This coding was based on the individual positions of the governors rather than on the positions of their parties, due to Bolsonaro's reluctance to formalizing a coalition and sharing power with allied parties in the first two years of his term. Table 2 shows the data for each of the variables described above.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics per subnational unit

Subnational unit	Deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (average)	Bolsonaro's share of votes in the 2018 election	Stringency Index (average)	Federal government's ally	Possibility of governor's reelection
AC	9.0	62.2	70.1	Yes	Yes
AL	7.5	34.4	57.5	No	No
AM	12.8	43.5	43.5	Yes	Yes
AP	10.9	40.7	66.8	No	No
BA	6.1	23.4	56.9	No	No
CE	10.9	21.7	66.9	No	No
DF	14.1	58.4	44.9	Yes	Yes
ES	12.6	54.8	61.7	No	Yes
GO	9.7	57.2	58.5	Yes	Yes
MA	6.4	24.3	44.8	No	No
MG	5.6	48.3	59.5	Yes	Yes
MS	8.4	55.1	35.7	Yes	No
MT	12.8	60.0	52.4	No	Yes
PA	8.4	36.2	52.5	No	Yes
PB	9.1	31.3	57.1	No	No
PE	10.1	30.6	62.5	No	Yes
PI	8.7	18.8	52.4	No	No
PR	7.0	56.9	63.8	Yes	Yes
RJ	14.8	59.8	59.0	Yes	Yes
RN	8.5	30.2	67.9	No	Yes
RO	10.2	32.2	76.0	Yes	Yes
RR	12.9	63.0	71.6	Yes	Yes
RS	7.8	52.6	58.9	No	Yes
SC	7.3	65.8	57.1	Yes	Yes
SE	10.8	27.2	57.9	No	No
SP	10.2	53.0	48.9	No	Yes
TO	7.8	44.6	53.5	Yes	No

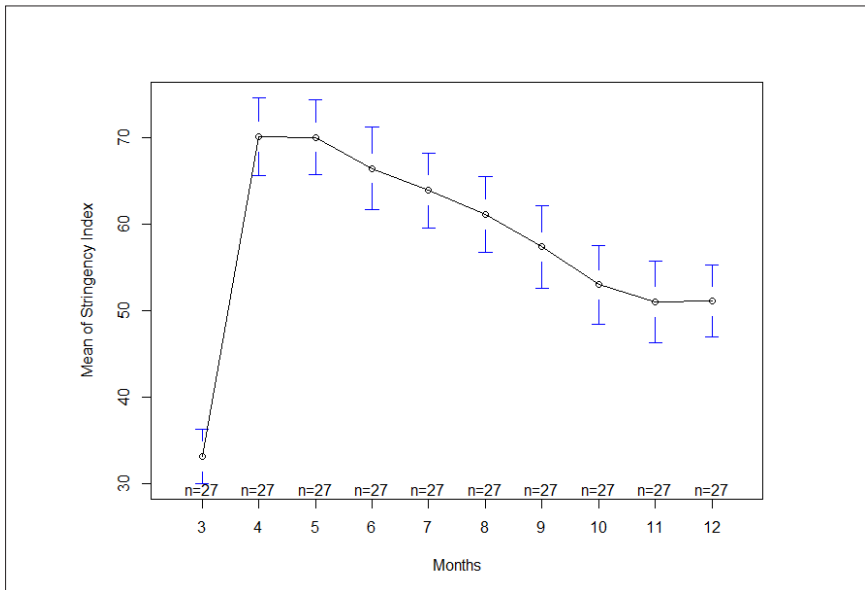
Sources: OXCGRT, SUS Coronavirus Panel, and TSE

The data were modeled using a two-way pooled panel regression. This technique takes account of the intercept variation both between cases and over time. That way, it is possible to consider simultaneously the difference between the subnational units and the effects of the presidential approval rate over time. The cases are the 27 federal units in Brazil, presented by their anachronisms in Table 2, and the considered period of time is the 10 months between March and December 2020.

Results and findings

Graphs 1 and 2 show the heterogeneity of the average of Stringency Index over time and between the cases, respectively. In the first month of pandemic, in March 2020, the response policies were still infrequent. On the other hand, the following two months, April and May 2020, were those when the subnational units more adopted policies to face COVID-19. This initial period of the health crisis in Brazil had the first disagreements between Bolsonaro and his then minister of the area, Luiz Henrique Mandetta. While the Brazilian president has been contrary to a lockdown since the beginning and defended at that time social distancing policies just to the elderly and people with comorbidities (Della Coletta, 2020), Mandetta was in favor of the adoption of policies defended by the World Health Organization (WHO).

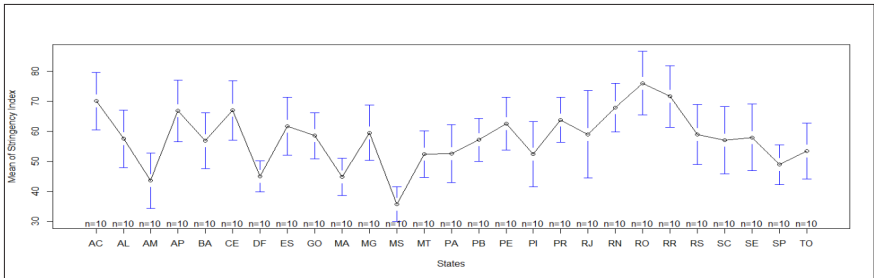
Graph 1
Heterogeneity over time



Source: OXCGRT

In reaction to Bolsonaro’s positions towards the pandemic, an opposition party questioned before the Federal Supreme Court (STF) the constitutionality of an executive decree that concentrated in the presidency the authority of adopting social distancing policies. The court ruled that this authority is not restricted to the federal government, since the Brazilian constitution defines that the responsibility on public health is shared with the states and municipalities. This rule has decentralized the adoption of policies to face COVID-19 in Brazil.

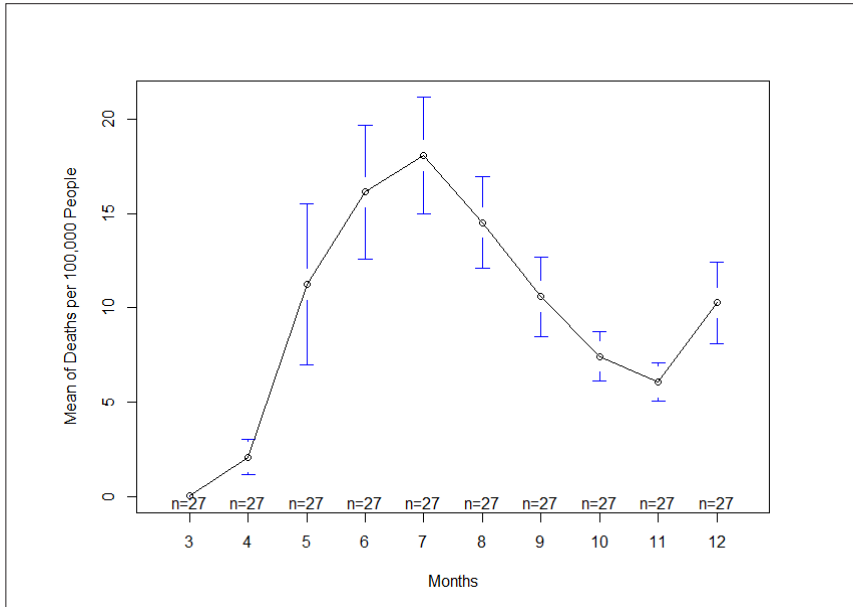
Graph 2
Heterogeneity within states



Source: OXCGRT

As graph 3 shows, the peak of the first wave of COVID-19 in Brazil was in July 2020. However, from May, the governors started relaxing the social distancing policies. The data demonstrate that there was no technical justification for relaxing the policies, since the numbers of infections and deaths were still growing. From July 2020, the Stringency Index variation followed the dynamics of the curve of deaths, even if the rate was still superior to five deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in the following months.

Graph 3
 Mean of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants over time



Source: SUS Coronavirus Panel

Table 3 shows the statistical results for the Stringency Index as the dependent variable. One finding is that Bolsonaro’s approval rate does not impact the adoption of policies to face COVID-19 by the subnational units. This can be due to the endogeneity between that variable and the number of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, since a poor federal government performance to handle the health crisis, expressed by an increasing death toll, can negatively affect the presidential approval rate.

In the first months of the pandemic in Brazil, Bolsonaro had his worst approval rate for the considered period. There was an increase in his popularity between August and October 2020. The average of daily deaths decreased during this period, but the presidential approval rate dropped again a month before a spike in the death toll. Although the time series is short, there is small evidence of a linear relationship between Bolsonaro’s popularity and the death toll.

Table 3
Statistical models

	OLS	Panel regression
Negative approval	0.429*** (0.141)	
Log of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants	0.560*** (0.105)	0.207* (0.106)
Federal government's ally: yes	1.554 (2.134)	1.344 -1.591
Possibility to run for reelection: Yes	5.294*** 2.029)	5.713*** (1.515)
Votes below 40%	8.450*** (2.287)	8.013*** (1.707)
Votes above 60%	6.571** (2.587)	6.612*** (1.928)
Constant	27.363*** (5.890)	
Observations	270	270
R ²	0.196	0.149
Adjusted R ²	0.178	0.102
Residual standard error	13.889 (df = 263)	
F statistic	10.689*** (df = 6; 263)	8.901*** (df = 5; 255)

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Sources: OXCGRT, SUS Coronavirus Panel, Poder 360, and TSE

The hypothesis about the effect of the political alignment with Bolsonaro was not confirmed too. Being or not an ally of the Brazilian president does not have a significant effect on the policies adopted by the subnational units to face COVID-19. The governors of Acre, Rondônia and Roraima, who are Bolsonaro's allies, recorded the best averages in the Stringency Index. At the same time, they are able to run for reelection in 2022. So it is possible to postulate based on the statistical results that the possibility to run for reelection stimulates the governors' action against the pandemic. Being able to run for a new term influences the instrumental calculation for adopting restrictive policies, since the worsening of the health crisis in their state can negatively affect the chances of reelection.

Lastly, there is no support for the hypothesis that the states where Bolsonaro had a larger share of votes in the 2018 election have a worse performance against the pandemic, since there would be less support for social distancing policies adopted by the governors. Table 3 shows a positive effect in both extremes (shares of votes below 40% and above 60%) when they are compared with the intermediary category.

Supported by the STF ruling, the governors and mayors have been responsible for the adoption of social distancing policies in Brazil. As there is no single guideline established by the federal government, each subnational unit has chosen its own path, with some degree of coordination among them. The course of action followed has been determined by local dynamics, specifically the death toll in the state and the possibility of governor's reelection.

Bolsonaro's inaction to face COVID-19 has led to the diversification of policies in the subnational units. As graph 2 shows, the difference between the states in the handling of the health crisis is evident. At the same time, actions that would rely on the cooperation between the subnational units, such as circulation control from one state to another and sanitary barrier and quarantine for international travelers, have been harmed by the disinterest of the federal government in leading these efforts.

Conclusions

This paper focused on state-level policies against the pandemic of COVID-19 in Brazil and verified if political preferences affect those policies. For doing so, an index of policies to handle the health crisis was constructed. And then, the effects of a group of explanatory variables on the Stringency Index were tested. In this group, the variables related to partisanship are the alignment between the governor of each state and the Brazilian president, the approval rate of Bolsonaro's government, and his share of votes per state in the first round of the 2018 election. Two other variables not related to political preferences, which are the death toll per subnational unit and the possibility of governor's reelection, were also tested.

The main finding is that the course of action followed by the subnational units has been determined by the death toll in the state and the possibility of governor's reelection, which shows that these concerns have guided subnational policies despite the polarization level. None of the variables related to partisanship has a significant effect on the state-level policies to face COVID-19.

The finding of no partisanship effect on the subnational policies to handle the pandemic is contrary to what Baccini and Brodeur (2021) observed for the same level in the US and other authors found for the individual level in Brazil, Canada and the US (Cabral et al., 2021; Calvo and Ventura, 2021; Grossman et al., 2020; Leone, 2021; Pickup et al., 2020). On the other hand, the effect of being able to run for reelection on the policies adopted by the Brazilian governors to face COVID-19 is in line with what Baccini and Brodeur (2021) observed in the US.

It is possible that the difference found between the effect of partisanship on the subnational policies to handle the health crisis in Brazil and the US is due to the volatility of the political alliances in the extremely fragmented multiparty system of the first country. Anyway, this difference shows that the comparative approach can improve our understanding of the phenomenon.

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Enviado: 27 de septiembre de 2021

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Appendix

Table 4
Presidential approval rate (March – December 2020)

Date	Polling company	N	Margin of error	Bad or very bad	Don't know or no answer	Excellent or good	Regular
03.15.2020	Datafolha	2023	2.0%	44.0%	2.0%	30.0%	24.0%
04.01.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	42.0%	3.0%	28.0%	27.0%
04.15.2020	DataPoder360	2500	2.0%	33.0%	3.0%	36.0%	28.0%
04.22.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.5%	42.0%	3.0%	31.0%	24.0%
04.24.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	49.0%	9.0%	18.0%	25.0%
04.27.2020	Datafolha	1503	3.0%	38.0%	3.0%	33.0%	26.0%
04.29.2020	DataPoder360	2500	2.0%	40.0%	5.0%	29.0%	26.0%
04.29.2020	Paraná Pesquisas	2006	2.0%	39.4%	1.6%	31.8%	27.3%
04.30.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	49.0%	1.0%	27.0%	24.0%
05.10.2020	MDA	2002	2.2%	43.4%	1.7%	32.0%	22.9%
05.13.2020	DataPoder360	2500	2.0%	39.0%	4.0%	30.0%	27.0%
05.26.2020	Datafolha	2069	2.0%	43.0%	2.0%	33.0%	22.0%
05.27.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	49.0%	0.0%	26.0%	23.0%
05.27.2020	DataPoder360	2500	2.0%	44.0%	5.0%	28.0%	23.0%
06.11.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	48.0%	2.0%	28.0%	22.0%
06.24.2020	Datafolha	2016	2.0%	44.0%	1.0%	32.0%	23.0%
07.15.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	45.0%	1.0%	30.0%	24.0%
08.12.2020	Datafolha	2065	2.0%	34.0%	1.0%	37.0%	27.0%
08.15.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	37.0%	3.0%	37.0%	23.0%
09.15.2020	Ibope	2000	2.0%	29.0%	2.0%	40.0%	29.0%
09.15.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	36.0%	2.0%	39.0%	24.0%
10.15.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	31.0%	2.0%	39.0%	28.0%
10.21.2020	MDA	2002	2.2%	27.2%	1.3%	41.2%	30.3%
11.15.2020	Ipespe	1000	3.2%	34.0%	2.0%	37.0%	28.0%
12.08.2020	Datafolha	2016	2.0%	32.0%	3.0%	37.0%	29.0%

Source: Poder 360