

Institutional Accountability and Support for Democracy: Evidence from a Natural Experiment^{*}

Nicolás de la Cerda[†]

Isabel Laterzo-Tingley[‡]

Ayelén Vanegas[§]

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Abstract

How do criminal proceedings against democratically elected executives influence citizens' support for democracy? We explore citizens' reactions to institutional accountability processes by analyzing the effect of coup charges brought against former president Bolsonaro by Brazil's Prosecutor General. Taking advantage of the fortuitous timing of these charges during our survey fieldwork, we demonstrate that the indictment significantly bolstered democratic support among non-Bolsonaro voters, while having no discernible negative effect on his supporters. Our findings offer a nuanced view of theories suggesting that partisan loyalties should lead supporters to reject democratic institutions that target their preferred leaders. This study contributes novel evidence on democratic resilience by capturing real-time reactions to consequential accountability processes outside experimental settings.

Keywords: Democratic Attitudes; Accountability; Natural Experiment; Public Opinion; Brazil

^{*} Authors listed in alphabetical order. We are thankful for comments from Diego Romero, Caitlin Andrews-Lee, Giancarlo Visconti, Eloy Oliveira, Lucy Martin and members of the CIPR Working Group at Tulane University. We are grateful for financial support from the Institute for Humane Studies. The survey for this paper was reviewed and deemed exempt by the IRB at [Anonymized University] (number XXX). All errors are our own.

[†] Postdoctoral Fellow, CIPR, Tulane

[‡] Postdoctoral Fellow, LBJ School, UT Austin

[§] Incoming Assistant Professor, Universidad Católica del Uruguay

In the past two decades, dozens of presidents in democratic countries have been indicted on criminal charges.¹ Examples span the globe, including former South Korean president Park Geun-hye's conviction on charges of bribery and abuse of power, and Peruvian president Pedro Castillo's arrest on charges of conspiracy and rebellion after attempting to dissolve Congress. While these events may be powerful shapers of public opinion, theoretical perspectives offer potentially competing expectations about the relationship between presidential indictments and democratic support. Some scholarship suggests that institutional accountability measures can undermine democratic support by creating perceptions of judicial bias and polarizing the public along partisan lines (e.g., [Gidron et al., 2025](#); [Novaes and Werneck Arguelles, 2024](#); [Mazepus and Toshkov, 2022](#); [Edwards, Gandhi and Grasse, 2025](#); [González-Ocantos et al., 2023](#)). Conversely, other studies indicate that institutional efforts to address recent and historical abuses of executive authority can shore up democratic legitimacy (e.g., [Claassen and Magalhães, 2022](#); [Padilla, 2025](#)).

How do criminal proceedings against democratically elected executives influence citizens' support for democracy? In this short article, we contribute to this debate by leveraging a natural experiment in Brazil. We analyze the fortuitous timing of the Brazilian Prosecutor General's (PGR, for its acronym in Portuguese) coup charges against former President Jair Bolsonaro during our online survey of Brazilians ($n = 2,003$, February-March 2025). This timing creates a quasi-experimental design ([Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020](#)), allowing us to compare the attitudes of respondents surveyed just before the announcement to those surveyed just afterwards. The unexpected nature of the announcement's timing and the gravity of the charges provides us with a unique opportunity to generate plausibly causal estimates about how institutional accountability measures affect democratic attitudes.²

The results from our experiment yield important implications to this theoretical debate by demonstrating that accountability processes can strengthen democratic attitudes without triggering backlash

¹<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/18/democracy-law-indictment-leaders-trump-bolsonaro-imran-khan/> Foreign Policy article on executive indictments

²While an investigation had been ongoing, there were no indications that charges would be announced specifically on February 18th, making the timing an unanticipated shock. The indictment also revealed previously unknown details from the two-year investigation that were unavailable to the public beforehand.

among partisan constituencies. Following Bolsonaro's indictment, support for democracy significantly increased among non-Bolsonaro voters, while we find no significant negative effects among his voters. Further analyses show that this effect is particularly strong for elements such as (a) support for the right to criticize those in power, (b) a preference for democracy over alternative regimes, and (c) the perceived importance of free and fair elections – elements widely considered by the public to be important to democracy (Chu, Williamson and Yeung, 2024). These results, which are robust across several estimation strategies, suggest that accountability measures neither alienate nor convert the political base of prosecuted leaders.

The observed patterns offer a more nuanced view of prevailing theories that suggest partisan loyalties should lead supporters to reject democratic institutions that target their preferred leaders (Gidron et al., 2025; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay, 2022). They also highlight the existence of a potential counterweight to Brazil's "illiberal backlash," highlighted by Bolsonaro's 2018 win (Hunter and Power, 2019). In turn, this study contributes to our understanding of democratic backsliding by providing novel evidence based on authentic, real-time reactions to a consequential democratic accountability process outside of an experimental setting. This is particularly valuable for understanding how democratic attitudes change in response to actual institutional actions, providing insight into the complex dynamics of democratic resilience during genuine moments of constitutional stress.

Case and Research Design

On February 18, 2025, Brazil's PGR formally charged former president Jair Bolsonaro with orchestrating a coup attempt to remain in power and prevent his successor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ("Lula"), from taking office. The indictment, which implicated Bolsonaro and 33 co-conspirators—primarily military officials—included allegations of a plot to poison Lula and assassinate Supreme Court Justice Alexandre Moraes³, in addition to fomenting the large-scale January 8th capital riot in Brasília.⁴ By the following morning, this announcement reached the front page of every major newspaper in Brazil (see Appendix

³WSJ article on charges.

⁴Folha de São Paulo on January 8, 2023 riot.

A8.2). In late March, the charges were accepted and the Supreme Court unanimously decided Bolsonaro would face a trial, potentially facing decades of prison time.⁵ Beyond the salience of the charges, Brazil presents a relevant site to study democratic attitudes, particularly with the concretization of far-right political allegiances in recent years (Layton et al., 2021), high-levels of support for Bolsonaro among skeptics of democracy during the 2018 election (Cohen et al., 2023), and recent instability in support for democracy among the electorate.⁶

The announcement of these charges occurred unexpectedly eight days into the administration of our original online survey of Brazilians ($n = 2,003$), which was launched on February 10, 2025.⁷ This unexpected timing created a natural experiment, allowing us to establish the causal effect of institutional accountability measures on democratic attitudes. This strategy is similar to those employed by other scholars in light of unanticipated events (e.g., Balcells, Tellez and Villamil, 2024).

Our identification strategy compares respondent attitudes before the announcement to those after, leveraging an “unexpected event during survey design” (UESD) (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020). The announcement of the charges is our “treatment,” relying on the assumption that respondents are randomly distributed across the pre- and post-treatment groups. In line with UESD best practices, we take numerous steps to validate the nature of our treatment and survey design, ensuring our study meets the necessary assumptions of ignorability, excludability, and compliance (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020). We address aspects of these assumptions here and provide further robust evidence for each in Appendix A8.

A crucial assumption for UESD is compliance with the treatment, or whether or not all respondents post-treatment were truly “exposed” to information about the coup charges. Assessments of internet search data via Google Trends (Figure 1) indicates both a shock and drastic rise in the salience of the charges against Bolsonaro and his alleged co-conspirators. Not only did searches for Bolsonaro himself increase dramatically on the day of and following the announcement, but as did searches for terms such

⁵Folha de São Paulo on trial.

⁶Datafolha estimates support for democracy among Brazilians fell two percentage points from 2023 to 2022.

⁷See Appendix A1 for survey details.

Figure 1: Salience of Announcement of Prosecutor General Charges against Bolsonaro

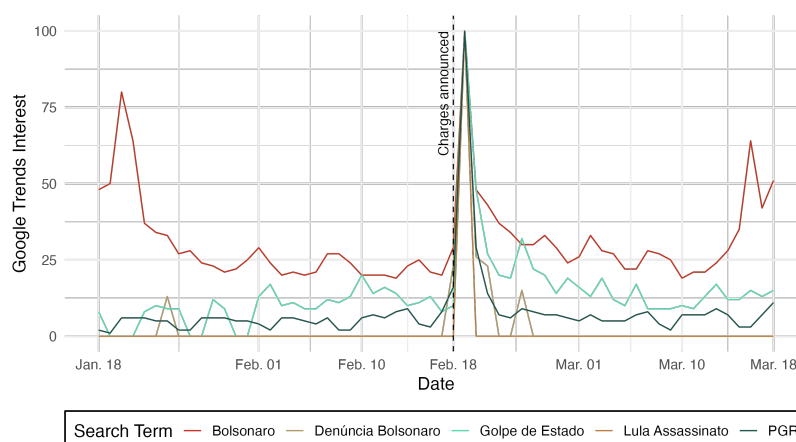


Figure note: Daily Google Trends data +/- one month to the announcement (January 18-March 18) The interest measure corresponds to the relative frequency of search terms, scaled from 0 to 100. “Denúncia Bolsonaro” translates to “Bolsonaro denunciation,” “golpe de estado” translates to “coup d’etat”, “Lula Assassinato” translates to “assassination of Lula”, and the PGR is the acronym for the country’s Prosecutor General.

as “coup d’etat” and “PGR.” Appendix A8.2 also presents evidence of compliance based on Brazilian news coverage. Overall, this also alleviates concerns of systematic pre-treatment exposure (excludability assumption) to significant information about the charges.

In our analysis, we examine varying bandwidths around the unexpected event, with our primary results focusing on responses collected four, five, and six days pre-and post-treatment. Following best practices for UESD designs (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno and Hernández, 2020), we avoid narrower windows than four days, as these pose risks for statistical power and inference, potentially hampering proper identification of variation.⁸ We drop respondents who were surveyed on February 18th from our analysis, as the announcement was made late that day and primarily hit the news the morning of the 19th, making it impossible to reliably determine the treatment status of these respondents.

Beyond ensuring appropriate temporal boundaries around our treatment, we also address potential compositional differences between pre- and post-treatment respondents. While our survey employs quota sampling to meet national sociodemographic benchmarks across urban and semi-rural areas, random variation in response timing could still produce imbalance in respondent characteristics across treatment groups. To address this concern, we implement nearest-neighbor matching on nine pre-treatment

⁸See Appendix, section A2, for information regarding sample sizes by window and corresponding power analyses.

characteristics (see Appendix A3). As Figure A3 demonstrates, this procedure successfully achieves balance on key covariates, strengthening our causal identification strategy. For our main coefficients of interest, we estimate robust standard errors (sandwich SEs), which are required for non-uniform weighting (e.g., matching with replacement).

Our main outcomes of interest are a battery of items regarding support for democracy on a 1 to 5 scale. We consider (1) support for democracy over alternatives, and the perceived importance of key components of democracy: (2) free and fair elections, (3) the ability to criticize those in power, and (4) a powerful opposition.⁹ Our primary outcome of interest is an index of democracy support estimated via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) utilizing all four variables. Details regarding CFA model fit are available in Appendix section A4. We use each individual item of the index as supplementary outcomes.¹⁰ To examine heterogeneous support for democracy and its components based on political allegiances, we examine heterogeneous treatment effects by respondent vote choice (first round) for Jair Bolsonaro in the 2022 presidential election. In Table A12, we demonstrate declared 2022 vote is not influenced by the treatment (announcement of the indictment); we also estimate our models using second-round vote choice (see Appendix A7). Importantly, non-Bolsonaro voters are an ideologically heterogeneous group. Table A4 demonstrates that over 30% voted for candidates other than Lula, and that over 35% identify as center or right-wing ideologically.

We estimate the impact of the coup charges announcement using ordinary least squares (OLS). With the matched sample, we regress our key outcome of interest (various measures of support for democracy) against a post-period indicator (equal to 1 for respondents interviewed after the announcement), using corresponding matching weights. In order to ensure our results are doubly robust, we also include the same pre-treatment covariates used in our matching procedure as control variables.

⁹Wording for each question in Appendix A1.

¹⁰In Appendix we also present results A7 for an index created with a basic average.

Results

Figure 2 presents the estimated effect of Bolsonaro’s indictment on our main outcome of interest: support for democracy. We plot effects for (1) the pooled sample, (2) respondents who did not vote for Bolsonaro, and (3) those who did vote for him, across different bandwidths.¹¹ Overall, we find an increase in support for democracy, which is strongest in magnitude and consistently statistically significant among respondents who did not vote for Bolsonaro. Among individual measures, we see most robust and differentiated effects when examining the ability to criticize those in power and a valuation of free and fair elections—both key components of democratic legitimacy.

Figure 2: Support for Democracy (CFA) by First Round Bolsonaro Vote

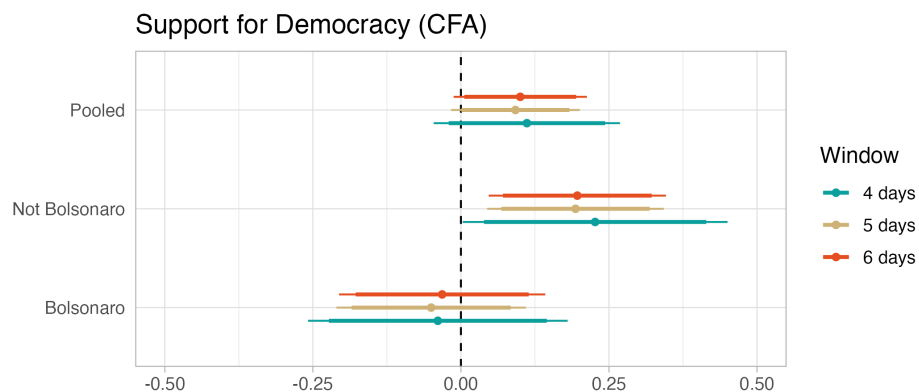


Figure Note: Bars represent 90% and 95% CIs. Estimates for “Not Bolsonaro” and “Bolsonaro” are estimates from our interactive models. Our matched sample sizes for the 4, 5, and 6 day windows are 962, 1088, and 1151 respondents, respectively.

Respondents who did not vote for Bolsonaro and were surveyed after the indictment exhibit significantly higher support for democratic institutions (as measured by a CFA-based index), with an increase of approximately 0.22-0.19 standard deviations within a ± 4 -6 days windows around the event. By contrast, we detect no significant change among Bolsonaro’s supporters. These results suggest that institutional accountability can enhance support for democracy among non-supporters of authoritarian leaders, without alienating their core base. The effects remain robust across a range of model specifications and bandwidths, although the size of the effect decreases slightly as the window expands (see Figure A5).

¹¹We present results for the datasets with time windows in which covariates are better balanced before and after February 18th. See Figure A5.

Turning to the components of the democratic index, we find that opposition to Bolsonaro is associated with greater endorsement of the right to criticize those in power. In particular, respondents who did not vote for Bolsonaro, when surveyed four days after his indictment, were nearly a quarter of a standard deviation more likely to believe that it is important to criticize those in power compared to those surveyed four days earlier. By contrast, Bolsonaro’s voters exhibit no significant changes on this dimension across all time windows. Among respondents who did not vote for Bolsonaro, the indictment announcement also increases the belief that democracy is preferable to other forms of government and the perceived importance of enjoying free and fair elections, although these effects appear more moderate. The magnitudes of these shifts are equivalent to 0.18 and 0.16 standard deviations when using five- and six-day windows before and after the indictment, respectively; however, the effects lose significance with alternative bandwidths.

Furthermore, institutional accountability has no significant effect on respondents’ views about the importance of having a strong political opposition. This is somewhat surprising, as one might expect respondents to interpret Bolsonaro’s indictment as evidence of a functioning opposition. However, the results suggest that respondents—regardless of partisan alignment—do not directly associate the legal charges against Bolsonaro with the broader strength or role of the opposition in Brazil.

Figure 3: CFA Components by First Round Bolsonaro Vote

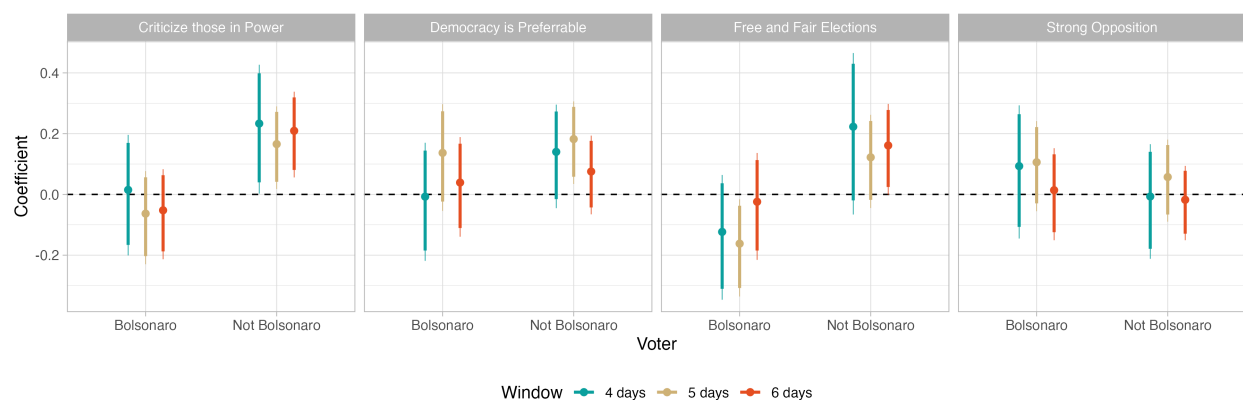


Figure Note: Bars represent 90% and 95% CIs. Estimates for “Not Bolsonaro” and “Bolsonaro” are estimates from our interactive models.

These findings suggest a more optimistic view of public responses to institutional accountability:

rather than triggering backlash, formal legal action against powerful political figures can reinforce democratic values, particularly among those already critical of authoritarianism. This interpretation is especially encouraging when considering that, prior to February 18th, respondents who did not vote for Bolsonaro expressed lower levels of support for democracy than his voters (see Figure A4). At the same time, the absence of consistent negative effects among Bolsonaro's voters suggests that accountability measures should not come at the cost of further democratic erosion through increased polarization or disillusionment among supporters of indicted leaders. Our results are robust to alternative specifications, including examining second-round (rather than first-round) Bolsonaro voters (Figure A6), an unmatched sample (Appendix A7.2), and controlling for linear time trends (Appendix A8.3).

Conclusion

This research notes contribute to our understanding of democratic resilience by examining how formal accountability processes against leaders who attempt democratic erosion affect public attitudes toward democracy. Following Bolsonaro's indictment for alleged coup plotting, we observe a measurable increase in democratic support among citizens who did not support him electorally. Further, we find an indication that institutional responses to anti-democratic actions can strengthen democratic legitimacy among the general population. At a minimum, we show these measures do not undermine support, even among those who voted for the leader being held accountable.

While these results are encouraging from a normative perspective, our results also suggest that the effects of the indictment on Brazilians' democratic support might have been short-lived. As our analytical window expands beyond the immediate period surrounding the indictment, effect magnitudes diminish, suggesting that institutional accountability may produce intense but potentially ephemeral positive shifts in democratic attitudes. However, baseline levels of support for democracy among Brazilians were relatively high from the get-go (Figure A4), suggesting resilience in already high levels of support.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of democratic accountability processes. Contrary to expectations derived from literature on affective polarization and backsliding (Gidron

et al., 2025; Graham and Svobik, 2020; Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay, 2022), we find no evidence that accountability measures targeting Bolsonaro undermined democratic support among his electoral base. This suggests that while institutional accountability measures may not produce lasting positive attitudinal shifts, they also appear unlikely to trigger democratic delegitimization among supporters of prosecuted leaders. These results hold significant implications for institutional actors who must balance enforcement of democratic norms against concerns that such actions might inadvertently accelerate erosion by triggering backlash among partisan constituencies.

Important questions remain about the cumulative effects of multiple accountability episodes and their interaction with other institutional and social factors. Future research should examine whether sequential accountability actions, such as Brazil's multi-pronged institutional response to Bolsonaro's anti-democratic behaviors, might produce more durable shifts in democratic attitudes than isolated events. Additionally, comparative analysis across cases of institutional accountability would help identify contextual factors that condition public responses to these processes.

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