



## Democratic Expeditions

# How to counter the far right: lessons from Brazil

Talita Tanscheit and Léonie de Jonge

Over the past few decades, the far right has been advancing across the globe, both electorally and through increased street-level mobilisation (Mudde 2019). While much attention has been paid to the causes and consequences of this rise, much less is known about how to counter it effectively. This policy brief outlines key strategic responses to the far right and draws lessons from Brazil, a country in which far right forces rapidly rose to power but subsequently were pushed back. The Brazilian case highlights how coordinated, multi-actor efforts can curb far right momentum and help safeguard democratic institutions.

### Responding to the far right: who, what, when, and where?

When looking at ways of countering the far right, it is useful to distinguish between four key dimensions: actors, strategies, timing, and context – in other words, who does what, when, and where?

### Actors

The academic literature has identified a range of actors involved in responding to the far right. These include state institutions, such as law enforcement and the judiciary (Ramalingam 2014); parliamentary actors, including mainstream political parties and elected officials (Heinze 2022); and extra-parliamentary actors, such as civil society organisations and media institutions (de Jonge 2019).

### Strategies

These actors have a variety of strategies at their disposal. From a theoretical perspective, three broad approaches can be identified: demarcation, confrontation, and accommodation (de Jonge 2021a).

→ Demarcation (or *Abgrenzung* in German) involves isolating the far right by treating it as a political pariah (Minkenbergh 2013). This may include enforcing a so-called cordon sanitaire, a refusal by mainstream parties or media outlets to cooperate or give a platform to far right actors. Crucially, demarcation means isolating rather than ignoring the far right.

- Confrontation is a more active form of opposition. Political and institutional actors may adopt delegitimising or stigmatising stances, openly denouncing far right narratives and distancing themselves from their policies. Similarly, journalists might work to expose contradictions, extremist affiliations, or the harmful consequences of far right agendas.
- Accommodation, by contrast, involves the partial or full adoption of far right positions. The logic of »if you can't beat them, join them« hopes to reclaim voters by co-opting far right rhetoric or policies (Bale et al. 2010). This may include mimicking policy positions, forming coalitions or amplifying similar narratives. Media outlets may also reproduce far right frames, thereby normalising their discourse and, in some cases, »removing the stigma of extremism« (Ellinas 2018).

## Timing

The effectiveness of such strategies often depends on when they are applied. For example, demarcation is particularly effective before the far right has gained substantial influence. The case of Belgium offers useful insights here (de Jonge 2021b). In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking north), far right parties have secured a strong foothold, whereas in Wallonia (the French-speaking south), they remain marginal. This difference may be explained partly by the consistent enforcement of a cordon sanitaire in Wallonia by both political and media actors, which has systematically excluded far right voices from mainstream platforms. When such measures are applied early and comprehensively, they can prevent the far right from gaining the visibility it needs to grow. When this is not achieved, however, even small breaches can have outsized effects (Art 2011; Heinze 2018).

## Context

Finally, context matters. There is no universal formula for countering the far right; what works for one actor in one setting may fail elsewhere. A strategy that is effective at the local level may backfire nationally, or vice versa. Similarly, while a combination of demarcation and accommodation may help centre-right parties to regain far right voters in the short term (Van Spanje and De Graaf 2018), it may at the same time harm centre-left parties or erode broader democratic norms in the long term. Moreover, recent research suggests that adopting far right positions rarely achieves its intended goal; instead, it often merely legitimises far right narratives and expands their influence (Krause et al. 2023).

With this analytical lens in place, we now turn to the case of Brazil, a particularly relevant context given its recent experience under a government aligned with far

right politics. As a large, diverse democracy with robust but contested institutions, Brazil provides a valuable case through which to test and refine insights drawn largely from European research on responses to the far right.

## The case of Brazil

Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer with a long but marginal career in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies, was initially viewed as a political outsider with limited chances of national success. He ran with an unconventional coalition of two minor right-wing parties, the Social Liberal Party (PSL) and the Brazilian Workers' Renewal Party (PRTB). Despite spending most of his career on the political fringes, Bolsonaro rose to prominence in the years leading up to the 2018 election as the most visible figure in Brazil's emerging far right (Rocha 2021).

His election marked a rupture in Brazil's post-democratisation political landscape. For over two decades, power had alternated between the centre-left Workers' Party (PT) and the centre-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB). Bolsonaro's victory not only disrupted this pattern, it replaced the traditional centre-right with a newly ascendant far right (Santos and Tanscheit 2019). Although his success surprised many, his campaign and presidency remained consistent with the views he had long espoused, based on moral conservatism, a hardline approach to crime and open praise for Brazil's past military dictatorship.

After breaking with the PSL during his presidency, Bolsonaro joined the Liberal Party (PL) in late 2021. The PL quickly became the largest party in Brazil's National Congress, reflecting both Bolsonaro's personal influence and the far right's growing institutional consolidation.

Because the far right now held executive power and enjoyed parliamentary support, passive containment or non-engagement were no longer viable. Responses from democratic actors had to be timely, coordinated, and assertive. At different moments, different groups were mobilised to defend institutions and push back against authoritarian drift.

Brazil's experience under Bolsonaro can be understood in terms of three key turning points that shaped both the rise and the pushback against far right governance: the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 elections, and the 8 January 2023 attacks on Brasília.

### (i) The COVID-19 pandemic: from crisis to coalition

The first major test came with the COVID-19 pandemic. Bolsonaro became one of the most prominent global leaders associated with pandemic denialism. He discour-

aged mask use, promoted mass gatherings, endorsed unproven treatments and spread misinformation. The human toll was catastrophic: Brazil recorded over 700,000 COVID-related deaths, second only to the United States. In response, the National Congress – particularly the Senate – established a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) to investigate the federal government’s handling of the crisis and played a prominent role in this response. The CPI brought together actors from across the political spectrum and played a pivotal role in documenting nearly two years of federal misconduct. This legislative initiative evolved into a broader multi-actor coalition, marked by strong alignment with extra-parliamentary forces, such as initiatives launched by civil society organisations and major media outlets, including the Consortium of Press Vehicles initiative, which independently monitored pandemic data and promoted an early pro-vaccination campaign. It also reshaped the political landscape in advance of the 2022 elections, providing a platform for public scrutiny and opposition mobilisation. The pandemic thus became a moment of collective learning, forcing institutions, society and the media to confront the realities of far right governance. It laid the groundwork for cross-sector alliances and more coherent counterstrategies that would become crucial in later crises.

### **(ii) The 2022 presidential election: contesting power and protecting institutions**

The second turning point came during the 2022 presidential elections. Bolsonaro took advantage of his incumbency to expand his electoral appeal, introducing targeted social programmes and discretionary budget mechanisms, such as the »secret budget«, to secure legislative and voter support (Tanscheit and Barbosa 2023). His campaign was anchored by the influential »Beef, Bible, and Bullets« coalition, which consistently commanded around 30 per cent of the electorate. Alongside this mobilisation, Bolsonaro escalated attacks on the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and other institutions, repeatedly alleging electoral fraud and judicial bias. These unfounded claims were intended to delegitimise his opponent, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and to suggest that electoral defeat would not be accepted. During this period, political leaders and parties played a central role in forming a broad pro-democracy coalition that transcended traditional ideological divides. Simultaneously, the judiciary – particularly the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) and the STF – acted decisively to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process, countering disinformation and ensuring institutional stability. The coordinated efforts by partisan and judicial actors, supported by civil society and the media, were essential in defending democratic norms and upholding electoral legitimacy against an incumbent president who was actively undermining them.

### **(iii) The 8 January 2023 attacks on Brasília: a breaking point**

The most acute crisis occurred on 8 January 2023, just days after Lula’s inauguration. Whipped up by months of disinformation and anti-democratic rhetoric, thousands of Bolsonaro supporters stormed and vandalised the Congress, the Supreme Court and the Presidential Palace, mirroring the 6 January 2021 insurrection in the United States. Bolsonaro’s refusal to concede defeat, his abrupt departure from Brazil days before the end of his term, and his absence from the formal handover of power (symbolised by his refusal to pass on the presidential sash) was intended to signal to his supporters that the election had been »stolen«. In the immediate aftermath, however, the executive branch acted with remarkable speed to restore order, reestablish control over the federal capital, and ensure institutional continuity. The judiciary, particularly the STF and the Federal Police, then assumed a more prominent role, leading investigations and prosecutions and securing the convictions of those involved in the attacks. Following Bolsonaro’s conviction, renewed attempts within Congress to grant amnesty to him and his allies sparked massive social mobilisation; civil society organisations exerted decisive pressure that ultimately forced legislators to backtrack and uphold due legal process. Together, these actions demonstrated a dual approach to democratic defence, both reactive and proactive.

### **So what works and what doesn’t? Lessons from Brazil**

Though initially fragmented, Brazil’s democratic forces coalesced around processes of demarcation and confrontation, especially when accommodation proved politically costly. Parliamentary actors (especially political parties and legislative coalitions) led the response during the pandemic and 2022 elections, playing a central role in building anti-authoritarian alliances. Over time, extra-parliamentary actors, including civil society, media and judicial institutions, increasingly complemented and reinforced these efforts. In the aftermath of the 2022 election and the 8 January attacks, these non-state actors assumed a more prominent role, reflecting a shift in the locus of democratic self-defence from formal politics to broader societal mobilisation.

Brazil’s experience demonstrates that effective responses to the far right require coordination across institutional boundaries, strategic timing, and a willingness to confront authoritarian tendencies head-on. It also suggests that proactive measures, rooted in democratic education, coalition-building and institutional reform, are essential to prevent democratic backsliding.

Taken together, these three moments – pandemic denialism, electoral delegitimation and the 8 January in-

surrection – triggered a gradual but meaningful process of political learning in Brazil. They catalysed cooperation among institutional and extra-institutional actors, including political parties, courts, civil society, and the media. Over time, these actors moved on from fragmented and reactive responses to a more coordinated and proactive defence of democratic institutions.

The Brazilian case shows that countering far right authoritarianism, especially once it has assumed power, requires more than principled opposition. It demands adaptive, cross-sectoral coalitions that can respond to evolving threats while maintaining democratic legitimacy.

Nevertheless, Brazil's far right remains a powerful and organised political force, capable of influencing public debate and policy agendas. This enduring presence underscores the need for continued vigilance and sustained democratic engagement.

Countering the far right is a societal responsibility that requires coordinated action across multiple democratic actors. It calls for a long-term, multifaceted commitment, one that combines principled political leadership, strong institutional safeguards, active civil society engagement and creative cultural strategies. Only through such comprehensive, top-down and bottom-up resistance can liberal democracies withstand the far right's persistent threat and preserve democratic norms in the years ahead.

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