

# “Minorities Conform or Disappear”: Bolsonarism’s construction of the People and its impact in limiting LGBTQIA+ Rights

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## Abstract

Frequently regarded as an inevitable outcome of the failure of existing democratic models to adequately represent certain segments of society, the populist phenomenon has resurfaced over the past two decades, exerting significant influence on elections across different nations and altering the political landscape. Far-right populist discourses have mobilized people’s sense of abandonment through a predominantly exclusionary language. Their appeal resonates especially among segments of the population who perceive the extension of rights to minorities as a direct threat to their own entitlements. In this article, we focus on the Brazilian case to examine how this sentiment is reflected in concrete legal actions regarding gender issues put forward by the Bolsonarist coalition in the Congress during Bolsonaro’s presidency (2019-2022). Drawing from Laclau’s post-structuralist theory of populism, we examine Bolsonarism’s use of traditional family values and its opposition to “gender ideology” in shaping identities. We also explore how these identities are reinforced by legal and cultural norms through the State apparatus. Our main objective is to highlight the State’s contribution to perpetuating values that ultimately restrict civil rights, particularly those impacting LGBTQIA+ communities. We argue that it leads to a constriction of citizenship, restricted to those who conform to Bolsonarism’s conception of “the people”, thereby directly affecting democratic institutions and minority rights.

Keywords: populism, bolsonarism, citizenship, gender, LGBTQIA+ rights.

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## ***“Ou as minorias se adequam ou desaparecem”: a construção bolsonarista do Povo e seu impacto na restrição de direitos LGBTQIA+***

### *Resumo*

Frequentemente considerado um resultado inevitável do fracasso dos modelos democráticos existentes em representar adequadamente certos segmentos da sociedade, o fenômeno populista ressurgiu nas últimas duas décadas, exercendo influência significativa em eleições em diferentes países e alterando o cenário político. Discursos populistas de extrema direita mobilizaram o sentimento de abandono das pessoas por meio de uma linguagem predominantemente excludente. Seu apelo ressoa especialmente entre segmentos da população que percebem a extensão de direitos às minorias como uma ameaça direta aos seus próprios direitos. Neste artigo, focamos no caso brasileiro para examinar como esse sentimento se reflete em ações judiciais concretas relacionadas a questões de gênero movidas pela coalizão bolsonarista no Congresso durante a presidência de Bolsonaro (2019-2022). Com base na teoria pós-estruturalista do populismo de Laclau, examinamos o uso que o bolsonarismo faz de valores familiares tradicionais e sua oposição à “ideologia de gênero” na formação de identidades. Também exploramos como essas identidades são reforçadas por normas legais e culturais por meio do aparato estatal. Nosso principal objetivo é destacar a contribuição do Estado para a perpetuação de valores que, em última análise, restringem os direitos civis, particularmente aqueles que impactam as comunidades LGBTQIA+. Argumentamos que isso leva a uma restrição da cidadania, restrita àqueles que se conformam à concepção bolsonarista de “povo”, afetando diretamente as instituições democráticas e os direitos das minorias.

Palavras-chave: populismo, bolsonarismo, cidadania, gênero, direitos LGBTQIA+.

## 1. Introduction

Jair Bolsonaro's electoral defeat in October 2022 led some analysts to question the survival of Bolsonarism. The investigations involving his administration and a trial for abuse of political power culminating in his ineligibility for 8 years have reinforced the impression that Bolsonarism was nothing more than an episodic phenomenon in Brazil's democratic maturity. In our view, however, such diagnoses are hastened.

Our understanding is that Bolsonarism is part of a larger populist phenomenon which has been shaping political disputes worldwide (Mudde, 2004, Mouffe, 2018). Bolsonarism shares several characteristics with experiences that preceded it, especially in Europe and the USA. It carries a particular repertoire of communicative practices that not only resemble those of its contemporary counterparts but also demonstrate a distinct resonance with the Brazilian socio-political context. In other words, although it shares some characteristics with a broader populist phenomenon, it also carries singularities in its materialization.

The electoral success that candidates associated with the Bolsonarist discourse have achieved since 2018 indicates its persistence. Despite Bolsonaro's electoral setback in 2022, Bolsonarism as a political force emerged victorious: the largest bloc in the legislature and the highest number of governors were "Bolsonarists." This result stems largely from his political strength. Bolsonaro's popularity introduced new actors to the political scene and consolidated center-right political dynamics. However, Bolsonarism extends beyond Bolsonaro himself. Its reach is more justified by emotions and affections involved in the meanings it articulated than by Bolsonaro as an individual.

Understanding Bolsonarism from this perspective requires looking beyond the mere interpretation of populism as a mass society phenomenon that challenges the political *status quo*. Instead, it is necessary to understand it from a relational perspective, which mobilizes affections and provides

identification mechanisms for individuals (Luz, 2022). Post-structuralist theory, especially in its elaborations on the populist phenomenon, offers a valuable analytical instrument to grasp these aspects. By presenting populism as a political construction of a people and highlighting the central role of antagonism in this process, post-structuralist theory of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau (2005) can elucidate the processes of construction of political identities that underlie the phenomenon in all its complexity.

One of the adjacent difficulties of this phenomenon is the multiplicity of antagonisms that constitute it. The present study concentrates on the antagonisms constructed towards the LGBTQ+ community. Some of the most prevalent signifiers present in the Bolsonarist rhetoric relate to traditional family values (Luz, 2022), which are closely intertwined with religious and moral signifiers. Since these values tend to be highly heteronormative, the LGBTQ+ community constitutes a natural target for these antagonisms.

Building on this theoretical framework, we investigate the extent to which traditional family values are employed for delegitimizing struggles and questioning non-traditional gender identity constructions through institutions. We analyze legislation proposed by the Bolsonarist coalition in Congress during Bolsonaro's presidency (2019-2022), particularly pieces of legislation – hereafter referred to as bills – on gender related issues. The reasoning behind these bills could inform of the extent to which sets of values are mobilized to influence institutional action. Furthermore, we argue that these measures help normalize a pattern of acceptance of exclusionary discourses in institutional environments.

This article is divided into four main segments. In the first section, we briefly present the theoretical foundations of our analysis, which draws on Laclau's theory of populism. We discuss the construction of identities by applying its concepts to Bolsonarism, emphasizing Bolsonarism's appeal to traditional Christian values and anti-communist sentiments. The following section explores how family values infiltrate state institutional mechanisms and influence legal and cultural norms. We do this to examine the state's

role in upholding values and the implications for civil rights, particularly for LGBTQIA+ communities. In the third section, we analyze the bills authored by Bolsonaro's coalition that pertain to gender-related issues. The legislative branch serves as an example of a case study of how state institutions are used for solidifying discourses. We argue that these laws use "gender ideology" as an empty signifier to brand all gender-related and LGBTQIA+ rights concerns as part of a subversive, dangerous doctrine. The article concludes by reflecting on the discursive strength of Bolsonaroism and its impact on democratic institutions and minority rights. We argue that Bolsonaroism's persistence in the political discourse and its ability to co-opt legal systems reveal the challenges liberal institutions face in countering this ideological agenda.

## 2. Antagonism and the People in Bolsonaroism

For decades, political theory has grappled with the populist phenomenon, striving to understand it in all its complexity. Despite variations among different conceptual frameworks, there is a relative consensus among the most influential contemporary researchers regarding the core of populism's concept and its general characteristics: the challenge to democratic institutions, the notion of a neglected "people", and the claim to give them voice. Broadly speaking, the canon of populist theory defines the phenomenon based on a minimal concept, commonly describing it as a construction (Laclau, 2005) or an appeal (Canovan, 1999) to the people against an enemy, usually termed the elite, whose designs do not correspond to the will of that people (Canovan, 1984). These formulations also highlight a moral distinction employed by populist actors in this construction/mobilization of the people (Mudde, 2016, 2021, Müller, 2017, Canovan, 1999, 2002), a collective subject always portrayed as pure, honest, and hardworking, in opposition to an elite presented as corrupt, self-interested, and greedy.

Intrinsically linked to representative democracy, the populist phenomenon is commonly presented as a sort of disconnection thermometer between the spheres of political power and popular demands. Some contemporary authors even assert that populism is an inescapable tendency of this model of democracy, given its inability to meet the demands of the represented (Arditi, 2009, Panizza, 2005, Mény; Surel, 2002, Taggart, 2000, Müller, 2017). In this sense, the populist phenomenon should be understood as a form of identity construction that expresses popular demands, although this construction does not always reflect democratic principles.

This view of popular frustration as a trigger for populism is an important interpretative key for understanding the role of antagonism, a central category in the theoretical construction of populism. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe assert that antagonism is the experience of the limit of all objectivity of a given discourse (2015). This is a core principle for understanding the authors' conception of the subject of populism: the people. In their formulation, subjects are part of a discursive structure and share their ambiguous, incomplete, and polysemic character. Consequently, it is impossible to talk about subjects whose identities are fully fixed, only about (discursive) subject positions, which are contingently overdetermined (Laclau; Mouffe, 2015). Given that the terrain of discourse is a system permeated by the flow of differences in which the constant dispute for hegemony allows for a partial fixation of meanings, antagonism plays an ambivalent role in identity formation, simultaneously delimiting and organizing the subject's positions. By marking differences in the presence of the "other" it prevents the full constitution of any identity – "A is only A because it is not B" – while partially and precariously constituting identities – "A is what B is not" – (Laclau; Mouffe, 2015). As this dual process of limitation and constitution unfolds within the symbolic realm, it should not be seen as an accurate reflection of the exclusions and oversights perpetuated by the power structure but resulting from hegemonic struggles among various discourses seeking to impose a partial closure of meanings

within the social structure. Hence, Laclau’s theory of populism enables the conceptualization of political subjects from their diverse spheres of identification. These subjects, constituted through different antagonistic relations, form incomplete and contingent representations of the articulated demands within a chain of signification that is equally incapable of providing objective totalization<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. The antagonistic frontier in Bolsonaroism

The notion of “the people” mobilized by Bolsonaroism does not correspond to a specific segment of the population based on class, ethnicity, or geography. The construction of the “us” versus “them” frontier is shaped by a moral framework that defines belonging through various dichotomies (e.g., workers vs. idlers, Christians vs. leftists, patriots vs. communists). Across these different dimensions of identity construction, a central antagonism directed broadly against the left and, more specifically, against the Workers’ Party is a common thread (Luz, 2022).

The absence of a rigid definition of belonging is central to Bolsonaroism’s political reach. By defining the enemy and the threats it embodies, it establishes core values that distinguish these two modes of belonging. The “people” (us) are primarily constructed through identification with individuals who embrace hard work, view private property as product of individual effort, uphold an orderly and hierarchical society, and prioritize Christian faith, family, and tradition (Luz, 2022). The values embedded in these formulations give the discourse flexibility to transcend social divisions and foster unity within a highly diverse population. It is this plurality of identification within the discourse’s “us” that enables the construction of a shared identity in Brazil’s deeply heterogeneous social and political landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that in their later works following *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) Laclau and Mouffe abandon the subject positions notion to operate with identification.

Bolsonarism's "people" was condensed in the signifier of the "good citizen", which bridges together three different ways of portraying the people: affirmative, reactive, and unifying perspectives<sup>2</sup> (Luz, 2022). The first relates to those characterized as "the honest, hardworking, conservative, and Christian majority"; the second pertains to "those who oppose corruption, leftist ideology, criminal impunity, the economic situation, and the overall state of affairs"; the third refers to "[...] those yearning for a better country in which they can once again take pride in being Brazilian [...]" (Luz, 2022, p. 170). Though this definition is comprehensive, it is also constraining, as it inherently embeds the distinctive values within the forms of belonging.

The term designating Bolsonarism's people holds significant meaning within Brazilian history. It embodies two distinctions that have historically validated notions of belonging within the country's democracy, a legal and a symbolic one, both culturally intertwined. The first pertains to citizenship itself, a fundamental principle of the Brazilian State which is institutionally granted. The second is the evaluative aspect attributed to being a citizen, which has been structurally conditional in Brazil. In other words, though citizenship<sup>3</sup> is a legal prerogative, certain structural privileges (class, gender, race, sexual orientation) give certain citizens more rights than others. Beneath the surface, these privileges validate the perception of privileged individuals as deserving of their rights while simultaneously justifying the exclusion of those lacking the same credentials.

Some credentials that define the citizen status in the Bolsonarist discourse are consistently referred to as family values, more specifically, what is known as the traditional Christian family structure. This structure

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<sup>2</sup> This categorization is an adaptation of the nomenclature suggested by Margaret Canovan (1999).

<sup>3</sup> We refer to citizenship as discussed by Wanderely Guilherme dos Santos (1979), who differentiates formal and real citizenship, and using Thomas H. Marshall's (1967) notion of "full citizenship". They argue that citizenship goes beyond legal rights and refers to actual participation in civil society, which in many cases is limited due to cultural and institutional constraints.

determines the heteronormative family as being the deserving portion of rights while at the same time excluding those who either do not conform or are not defined within the limits of the traditional family structure – e.g., same sex couples, single parent families, etc. – as well as those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. This narrative produces a simultaneous validation of rights for some and exclusion for others.

Bolsonarism constructs antagonisms and solidifies an identity of the people that advocates its definition of gender roles and families as being the only possible alternative, while at the same time vilifying inclusive discourses about non-heteronormative patterns. One of the primary ways this can be observed is in the construction of what became known as “gender ideology.” Rhetorically placed by Bolsonaroism into the political debate as a central concern of the people, “gender ideology” serves as an important signifier of its discourse, reinforcing the dichotomy between their perceived moral values and those they oppose.

#### 4. Family values as social “glue”

Though there are legal norms that rule family relations in all Western democracies, families are a social institution that is more ruled by morals and individual customs than by law. Brazil’s Congress is charged with legislating all matters within the Union’s competence<sup>4</sup>, meaning that, theoretically, enforcing customs is not among the legislative branch’s attributions. On the contrary, it is expected to create laws dispassionately and impartially according to rational rules. However, the discursive perspective informs us that this supposed impartiality is impossible, given that political contention is structured around antagonism and the constant pursuit of hegemony (Laclau; Mouffe, 2015).

The presence of these values in Congress can be perceived as an indication of how specific political conditions influence legislators’ and

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<sup>4</sup> Art. 48 and 49 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution, 1988 (Brasil, 1988).

political actors' behaviors and decision-making processes. These values being enacted within these dynamics could consolidate these discourses not as deviant, but as a norm reproduced through the institutional apparatus. Congress, thus, serves as an example of how a particular brand of the State's power can be used to assert specific values under the justification that they are a form of protecting social cohesion and the founding principles of society.

Under Bolsonarism, traditional Christian values were central in shaping the performance of institutional mechanisms and the legal rule. Although discursive elements are fundamental for these mechanisms to be developed, this could only occur if a significant portion of that population culturally shared these values. Patriarchal societies place great importance on the role of "family values" in forming and reproducing their culture (Miller, 1993, Fernandes, 1981, Vianna, 2005, Azevedo, 1948, Holanda; Cândido; Mello, 1936). Some familial values and gender norms are intrinsically connected and have significantly shaped the development of states and legal systems, including "institutionally developed" societies, such as England and Italy –, where these norms played a historical role in developing laws and institutions (Liddle, 1996, Seymour, 2005). Despite the argument of classical institutionalist theories (Weber, 2013), it is not uncommon for liberal democracies to oppose liberal values, invoking family values as the cornerstone of national morality and social cohesion (Seymour, 2005). Since norms about family values and strict gender roles are present and reproduced at the very origin of the State's formation, there are occurrences in which bureaucratic rational structures can use these values to exert social control and shape legal positivism (Liddle, 1996, Bunt-MacRury, 2022, Seymour, 2005). Women being victim-blamed by the justice system when accusing men of rape due to alleged lewd behavior (Bunt-MacRury, 2022), states opposing divorce laws (Seymour, 2005), and institutional actors actively affirming gendered logics, which inform reasoning and viability of masculinity as a defense (Hatton, 2022),

are some examples of how the state mechanisms are used for upholding these values.

These instances are examples of societal expectations for the State to uphold policies that facilitate maintaining family cohesion, protecting male honor, and enforcing female gender roles. In this sense, the state embodies the male traits expected of a patriarch to defend his family's reputation, that is, strength, honor, and even aggression (Liddle, 1996, Bunt-MacRury, 2022, Seymour, 2005). In other words, a State is expected to assume a position that not only respects and upholds the law but also acts as a defender of morality for that society, a sort of "social glue" (Caulfield, 2000)<sup>5</sup>.

Under certain conditions the State acts both directly and indirectly as a protector of male reputation and implicates a moral conditioner for women. Rather than institutional agents taking fact and norm as a sole parameter, they often uphold values parallel to legal bureaucratic norms. This is naturally applicable to LGBTQIA+ communities, which are essentially challenging traditional gender norms, family structure, and gender expectations. Therefore, if the State's role in guaranteeing the population's civil rights is morally conditioned, then this portion of the population's rights would naturally not be guaranteed, as they do not fall under this conditioner.

However, dominant values and norms do not naturally attain their status. They emerge from discursive struggles for social dominance, solidifying and organizing themselves through enacted practices. Consequently, social regulations become tangible expressions of the prevailing ideology, and this ideology is perpetuated through actions, as elucidated by Louis Althusser (1974, p. 90)<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> Caulfield argues in her study on the defense of honor in the judiciary of Rio de Janeiro in the 1930s that judges and courts served as actors of social morality through state mechanisms. Therefore, these judges did not act rationally according to the law, although they did so in a liberal bureaucratic context, but sought to defend male honor through legality in Brazil. Though we agree that institutional mechanisms are used as an upholder of morals, we challenge the notion defended in her work that this occurs due to an underdevelopment of democratic, rational, and liberal values.

<sup>6</sup> Laclau did not operate with this notion, treating ideology more as a sedimented discourse.

Ideas have disappeared as such (insofar as endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus. It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief.

The idea of family values as a social glue, that is, the belief that the State and society must defend and inform traditional familial structures, has consequences in LGBTQIA+’s civil rights – or rather, the lack of them. Same sex couples have been able to marry in Brazil since 2013, and there have been efforts to grant civil union rights since 1996. However, legal gaps limiting access to family rights for LGBTQIA+ individuals have persisted (Mello, 2006). Luiz Mello (2006) adapts a term from classical sociologist Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos (1998) coined “regulated citizenship” – in which Santos argues that post 1930’s Brazil conditioned citizenship to being inserted in the labor market – to suggest that the LGBTQIA+ community have their citizenships limited for not being inserted in traditional family structures (Mello, 2006). The issue here rests in the State being an ideological enforcing agent, in the Althusserian formulation.

Furthermore, the State would be a protector of values deemed foundational or compatible with the idea of who its people should be. Throughout Bolsonaro’s tenure, the alignment between State actors’ discourse and the legal reinforcement of values deemed ideal was evident. Continuous attempts to curtail minorities’ access to civil rights are part of Bolsonarism’s ideology, as they serve to delimit and constrain citizenship. This limitation does not singularly define the identity of the people, but

it played a central role in shaping Bolsonaro's image in the years leading up to his election and continued to be fundamental in how Bolsonarism is articulated. This was possible due to conditions of emergence established decades earlier in the Brazilian social and political imaginary.

Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta (2002, 2019) demonstrates that many of the meanings embedded in Bolsonarism's portrayal of the "people" and the "enemy" revive a mobilization strategy with significant presence in earlier periods of history. The most prominent aspect of this revival is the emphasis on the "communist threat," a symbol that largely shaped Brazilian political discourse and ideological landscape across various stages of its democratic development (Sá Motta, 2002, 2019).

Motta argues the deep-rooted infiltration of the anti-communist meanings within Brazilian society can be delineated within three distinct frameworks: Christianity, nationalism, and liberalism. The Christian framework accentuated the menace communism posed to the morality and values of Judeo-Christian society, particularly regarding the family, as it advocated for a new moral code devoid of religious influence. The nationalist perspective depicted the nation as a cohesive entity, transcending societal conflicts, with the defense of order, tradition, integration, and centralization being the antidote against revolutionary aspirations from foreign entities such as the USSR, China, and Cuba. Lastly, the liberal framework, divided between political and economic liberalism, viewed communism as a threat to both political and economic liberties, potentially leading to authoritarianism and the erosion of private property rights. Ultimately, the liberal-democratic anti-communist discourse predominantly focused on the perils of State interventionism, sidelining concerns about political participation and democratic norms (Sá Motta, 2002, 2019).

The point of intersection between the historically developed anti-communist sentiment in Brazil and the use of the State as a defender of morality lies in the interrelation between the religious bias and the liberal

bias of the three spheres of anti-communism proposed by Sá Motta (2002, 2019). Several authors have indicated how right-wing discourses have been concerned with an alleged domination of the left in the educational arena, associating it with moral degradation and a decline in academic standards (Apple, 2006, Lopes, 2019, Macedo; Ranniery, 2022, Martins de Oliveira; Sousa de Oliveira, 2018, Ranniery, 2021).

The relationship between the LGBTQIA+ movement and these sentiments was constructed through narrative disputes that placed these movements at the center of the right-wing discourse, even before Bolsonarism emerged. This association of the LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement with the Red Scare has been rebranded under the term “gender ideology”, one of the fundamental signifiers within those discourses (Corredor, 2019). Although multiple other “antagonistic others” are targeted within the Bolsonarist discourse, LGBTQIA+ individuals are among those defined under the logic outlined in Motta’s argument. Therefore, gender ideology as an empty signifier can inform of Bolsonarism’s definition of the people.

## 5. Gender Ideology and Legislative Narratives

Gender related issues have been increasingly present in the Brazilian political arena in the past decade. Greater visibility of gender-equality and LGBTQIA+ platforms has also been received with backlash, along with narrative disputes. The most prominent signifier of that dispute was “gender ideology”, which can be understood as a part of the identity construction of the “people” and antagonistic sentiments towards a minority that demands greater political representation. In that sense, “gender ideology” is a discursive construct that amalgamates negative sentiments towards the LGBTQIA+ community by framing it as an attempt to undermine familial values and substitute them with their own.

Olavo de Carvalho, a (self-proclaimed) conservative philosopher, was among the main actors to introduce "gender ideology" concerns in Brazil. He has been a reference often evoked by the Brazilian far-right and even considered for the position of Minister of Education under Bolsonaro. He claimed:

[...] if this person is nothing more than a man dressed as a woman, nothing in the world can force me to see him as a woman, except the state's arrogance that imprisons my perception in a straitjacket verbal speech calculated to subdue it first and destroy it later. The very idea of "gender", in the current sense, was invented to subjugate spontaneous perceptions to an artificial linguistic convention (Carvalho, 2018)<sup>7</sup>.

Conservatives<sup>8</sup> commonly employ the term "ideology" as the imposition of a manner of thinking. They frequently refer to Antonio Gramsci's definition of ideology and his concept of hegemony to suggest the existence of an occult leftist agenda within these movements and foster conspiracy theories in which its members are portrayed as indoctrinators. This line of thinking was influential in articulating meanings associated with the "gender ideology" signifier. Ambiguity and imprecision, as in any signifier, are what makes this such a powerful rhetorical tool. The lack of a proper definition and, consequently, the blurring of its limits permits

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<sup>7</sup> Though scientifically unimpactful and often dismissed by academics as frivolous, Olavo de Carvalho's work had great resonance among alt-right circles in Brazil, with several important political actors quoting him and even referring to him as "Master", as well as having some important mediatic impact. In that sense, his persona is important to understand the construction of the signifiers we refer to in this article.

<sup>8</sup> We use the term due to its widespread application when the far-right approaches themes concerning traditions, family, and religiosity. This means that the recognition of the conservative orientation of the discourse refers to conservative attitudes towards progressive societal proposals, and not to conservative political thought as a philosophical tradition.

the user of this rhetoric to fit anything related to gender issues within this spectrum potentially.

During Bolsonaro's first presidential campaign (2018), "gender ideology" was extensively employed as a rhetorical tool to instill fear in the population. Claiming that the left would use the state to indoctrinate children with this ideology, thereby dismantling traditional gender roles, they presented themselves as the only alternative under claims such as the protection of Christian values, children, and freedom of speech (to be openly against minority rights). The appeal successfully constructed discursive antagonisms and paved the way for the election of a prominent conservative congressional base. Once in power, Bolsonarism's appeal to gender ideology was used as a platform for implementing illiberal and exclusionary policies that restrict LGBTQIA+ rights.

To explore the extent to which this platform was reproduced in the State apparatus, we searched the Congress' online platform for bills related to gender ideology throughout Bolsonaro's tenure, spanning from 2019 to 2022. This period marked the ascendance of the far-right and Bolsonaro's allies within the legislative branch, when Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL) – a party with little representation and electoral strength – increased its seats in congress from one in 2014 to 52 in 2018 (Folha de São Paulo, 2018). A similar movement occurred in 2022, when Bolsonaro switched to the Liberal Party (PL), increasing seats from 76 to 99 (Brasil, 2022).

Our aim was elucidating the underlying discourses that perpetuate gender norms, uphold heteronormative values, and ostensibly claim to protect children under the guise of public morality and safety. We examined how these legislations not only reinforce traditional gender identities but construct narratives that depict non-heteronormative lifestyles as societal threats, thus creating antagonisms and circumscribing citizenship within Bolsonarism.

Our sample consisted of all the bills proposed by Bolsonaro's coalition in Congress (PSL, PL, PP, PSD, DEM, PSC, Novo, Republicanos, Podemos,

Avante, Patriotas, PROS and PTB)<sup>9</sup> that had some instances of the mention of gender ideology. Our search amounted to a total of 21 bills. Subsequently, we categorized the most prevalent signifiers based on the frequency of themes related to the constraints and grievances outlined in the bills. This process helped us define the primary signifiers (10), with the most frequently recurring ones presented in the graph below. It is important to highlight that the mobilized meanings combine different points in the discourse, often converging towards central themes in more than one signifier. Thus, most signifiers share meanings with others. These connections were considered in the classification. However, only the predominant signifier was considered for Figure 1.

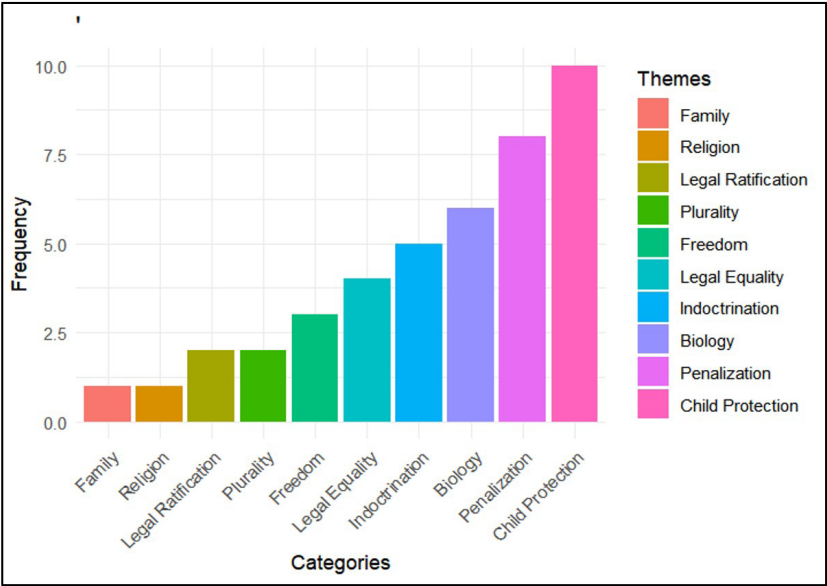


Figure 1. “Gender Ideology” main signifiers.

<sup>9</sup> The parties who effectively introduced bills were PSL, Patriotas, Avante, PL, Cidadania, PP and PSC, and will, therefore, be the ones we analyze here.

## 6. Results

We examined the content of the bills by focusing on the justification presented by the authors and its proposed change to legislation. The signifiers were determined by the analysis of the discursive strategies contained in the document for mitigating an issue or threat that was allegedly a form of imposing or caused by gender ideology. Despite a variety of signifiers and specific issues, all the analyzed bills were, to some extent, classifying and constructing gender ideology as a main antagonistic force. We sought to deconstruct the underlying motives and implications of these bills and their consequences to gender equality policies, particularly the LGBTQ community. Our examination of the bills' contents was done following the level of importance of each signifier.

Among the most prominent signifiers that appeared in our analysis "children protection and penalization" were the most common, followed by "indoctrination and biology", as exposed in Table 1<sup>10</sup> Of the 21 bills, 12 carried the idea of protection of children from "gender ideology", characterizing gender related themes in education, culture, and media as a way of indoctrinating children by non-heteronormative standards. Furthermore, 10 bills propose some punitive measures to individuals and groups that engage in gender-related discourses or activities that involve children. It is important to note that all bills that carried the penalization signifier shared meanings with another signifier, particularly those related to the protection of children. Additionally, six proposals had some manner of developing the idea of biological sex as the only gender marker. Although religion played a secondary role in justifying the bills, its influence was not as explicitly developed throughout the discourse. However, religious markers were evident in the arguments presented alongside other key signifiers.

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<sup>10</sup>These signifiers often overlap across bills, with one piece of legislation sometimes containing two or more signifiers in the same narrative.

**Table 1.** Dataset on ‘Gender Ideology’ and the Bolsonaroist Bloc in Brazil’s Congress (2019-2022)

| Status                   | Classification           | Summary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Year | PL        | Author                               | Party     |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| Attached to PL 867/2015  | IN; FREE; PLU; CP        | Establishes the “No Party School Program”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 2019 | 246/2019  | Bia Kicis -PSL/DF and others         | PSL       |
| Attached to PL 7180/2014 | IN; FREE; PLU; CP        | Provides for the right of students to learn without political-party ideology; regarding the conduct of teachers in transmitting content and adds item XIV and a single paragraph to art. 3 of Law No. 9,394 of December 20, 1996, which sets the guidelines and bases of national education to provide for respect for the convictions of the student’s parents or guardians giving precedence to family values over school education in matters related to moral, sexual, and religious education as well as banning the insertion of gender ideology issues in schools. | 2019 | 258/2019  | Pastor Eurico - PATRI/PE             | Patriotas |
| Attached to PL 5941/2013 | IN; FREE; PLU; BIO; R; F | Prohibits the application of public resources as well as the use of structures and institutions of Direct or Indirect Public Administration, Foundations, Autarchies, and Public and Private Companies providing services to the Federal, State, District, and Municipal Governments, among others, in actions promoting, encouraging, and valuing GENDER IDEOLOGY                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 2019 | 1239/2019 | Pastor Sargento Isidório - AVANTE/BA | Avante    |
| Attached to PL 8520/2017 | P; CP                    | Amends the penalty of art. 233 of Decree-Law No. 2,848 (Penal Code) of September 7, 1940, and adds a single paragraph that provides for the aggravation of the penalty.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 2019 | 1297/2019 | Carlos Jordy - PSL/RJ                | PSL       |
| Attached to PL 8907/2017 | P; CP                    | Adds art. 218-D to Decree-Law No. 2,848 of September 7, 1940 (Penal Code) to establish responsibilities for those who submit or allow children and adolescents to participate in events that contain nudity, present or simulate acts of lewdness or explicit sex, and provides other measures.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 2019 | 1298/2019 | Carlos Jordy - PSL/RJ                | PSL       |

Classified terms: Family (F), Religion (R), Legal Ratification (LR), Plurality (PLU), Freedom (FREE), Legal Equality (LE), Indoctrination (IN), Biology (BIO), Penalization (P), Child Protection (CP).

Table 1. Continued...

| Status                   | Classification | Summary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Year | PL        | Author                               | Party     |
|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| Attached to PL 1298/2019 | P; CP          | Adds art. 218-D to Decree-Law No. 2,848 of September 7, 1940 (Penal Code) to establish responsibilities for those who submit or allow children and adolescents to participate in events, including on the internet, that contain nudity, present or simulate acts of lewdness or explicit sex, and provides other measures.                                                                               | 2019 | 2040/2019 | Julian Lemos - PSL/PB                | PSL       |
| Awaiting Designation     | CP             | Amends Law No. 4,119 of 1962, which provides for the training courses in Psychology and regulates the profession of Psychologist, to allow care for cases of adjustment problems and psychological disorders, including those related to gender identity and sexual orientation.                                                                                                                          | 2019 | 2587/2019 | Pastor Sargento Isidório - AVANTE/BA | Avante    |
| Awaiting Designation.1   | P; CP          | Provides for the prohibition of sex reassignment surgery and treatment for minors and other measures.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 2019 | 3419/2019 | Heitor Freire - PSL/CE               | PSL       |
| VIRTUAL PLENARY          | P; CP          | Amends arts. 75, 121, and 129 of Decree-Law No. 2,848 of September 7, 1940 (Penal Code) to provide for the homicide and bodily injury of children and adolescents as qualifying circumstances for the crime of homicide and bodily injury and art. 1 of Law No. 8,072 of July 25, 1990, to include homicide against children and adolescents and to impose gender ideology in the list of heinous crimes. | 2019 | 3492/2019 | Carla Zambelli - PSL/SP, and others  | PSL       |
| Filed                    | IN             | Establishes the “Week of Law, Ethics, and Citizenship” in schools.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 2019 | 3664/2019 | Helio Lopes - PSL/RJ                 | PSL       |
| Awaiting Designation.2   | LE, IN         | Repeals item “i” of subsection IV of § 3 of art. 3 of Law No. 11,350 of October 5, 2006, which regulates § 5 of art. 198 of the Constitution, provides for the use of personnel covered by the sole paragraph of art. 2 of Constitutional Amendment No. 51 of February 14, 2006, and provides other measures.                                                                                             | 2019 | 5490/2019 | Pastor Eurico - PATRIOTA/PE          | Patriotas |

Classified terms: Family (F), Religion (R), Legal Ratification (LR), Plurality (PLU), Freedom (FREE), Legal Equality (LE), Indoctrination (IN), Biology (BIO), Penalization (P), Child Protection (CP).

Table 1. Continued...

| Status                     | Classification | Summary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Year | PL        | Author                                         | Party              |
|----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Awaiting Designation.3     | BIO; LR        | Determines that both biological sex and primary and chromosomal sexual characteristics define the gender of the individual in Brazil.                                                                                                                                                                        | 2020 | 2578/2020 | Filipe Barros - PSL/PR, Major Fabiana - PSL/RJ | PSL                |
| Attached to PL 2596/2019   | BIO; LR        | Establishes biological sex as the only criterion for defining the gender of athletes in competitions organized by sports administration entities in Brazil.                                                                                                                                                  | 2020 | 3396/2020 | Bia Kicis (PL-DF), and others                  | PL, PSL, CIDADANIA |
| Attached to PL 5367/2019   | P; CP          | Amends art. 217-A of Decree-Law No. 2,848 of September 7, 1940 (Penal Code) to increase penalties and provide other measures.                                                                                                                                                                                | 2020 | 4245/2020 | Carlos Jordy - PSL/RJ                          | PSL                |
| Attached to PL 3235/2015   | P; IN; CP      | Criminalizes the conduct of those who, within the premises of municipal, state, and federal educational institutions, adopt, promote, conduct, or organize teaching policies, curricula, mandatory, complementary or optional subjects, or cultural activities that have content related to gender ideology. | 2020 | 4893/2020 | Léo Motta - PSL/MG                             | PSL                |
| Attached to PL 2596/2019.1 | LE; BIO        | Creates the "Fair Competition in Sports Law" establishing biological sex as the exclusive criterion for defining gender in official amateur or professional sports competitions throughout the national territory and provides other measures.                                                               | 2021 | 1670/2021 | Guilherme Derrite - PP/SP                      | PP                 |
| Attached to PL 2434/2021   | CP; P          | Amends the Child and Adolescent Statute to prohibit the display of advertising on television and radio programming with the participation of child and adolescent actors or aimed at this audience that refers to topics related to gender, gender ideology, sexual orientation, or sexual diversity.        | 2021 | 2594/2021 | Pastor Gil - PL/MA                             | PL                 |

Classified terms: Family (F), Religion (R), Legal Ratification (LR), Plurality (PLU), Freedom (FREE), Legal Equality (LE), Indoctrination (IN), Biology (BIO), Penalization (P), Child Protection (CP).

Table 1. Continued...

| Status                                                   | Classification | Summary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Year | PL        | Author                               | Party  |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------|
| Ready for the Agenda in the Commission on Women's Rights | FREE; BIO      | Guarantees all female Military Police, Civil Police, Prison Guards, Federal Highway Police, and Municipal Guards in Brazil the right to refrain from performing searches on men dressed as women or who identify as Trans or Transvestites, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual. | 2021 | 2649/2021 | Pastor Sargento Isidório - AVANTE/BA | Avante |
| Attached to PL 3235/2015.1                               | P; CP          | Criminalizes the conduct of those who teach content within educational establishments related to gender ideology.                                                                                                                                                                        | 2021 | 4520/2021 | Dr. Jaziel - PL/CE                   | PL     |
| Attached to PL 3419/2019                                 | P; CP; BIO     | Amends the wording of Decree-Law No. 2,848 of December 7, 1940 - Penal Code to criminalize permanent sexual injury and other measures.                                                                                                                                                   | 2021 | 4553/2021 | Major Vitor Hugo - PSL/GO            | PSL    |
| Awaiting Designation.4                                   | LE             | Repeals Decree No. 8,727 of April 28, 2016, which "Provides for the use of the social name and the recognition of the gender identity of transvestites and transsexuals within the scope of the direct, autarchic, and foundational federal public administration."                      | 2022 | 158/2022  | Abílio Santana - PSC/BA              | PSC    |

Classified terms: Family (F), Religion (R), Legal Ratification (LR), Plurality (PLU), Freedom (FREE), Legal Equality (LE), Indoctrination (IN), Biology (BIO), Penalization (P), Child Protection (CP).

7. Discussion

The first sphere within the discursive construction of these narratives lies in legislation proposals that intertwine the protection of children and the punishment of those who allegedly compromise them. The discursive triad that includes gender ideology, child protection, and punitive restrictions overlapped consistently. Legislation such as PL 3492/2019 dramatically equates the “imposition of gender ideology” with severe acts of violence against children, drawing from isolated incidents to suggest baseless and

dangerous correlation. This bill uses the tragic case of a child harmed by their guardians, a transgender man and a lesbian woman, to argue that gender diversity itself can lead to violence:

**PL 3492/2019:** Amends articles 75, 121, and 129 of Decree-Law No. 2,848, of December 7, 1940 (Penal Code), to classify homicide and bodily injury of children and adolescents as qualifying circumstances of the crime of homicide and bodily injury and amends article 1 of Law No. 8,072, of July 25, 1990, to include homicide against children and adolescents and the imposition of gender ideology on the list of heinous crimes. [...] Death for the imposition of gender ideology:

VIII – to impose gender ideology. Penalty – imprisonment, from 30 (thirty) to 50 (fifty) years.

§ 2 – B. It is considered that there are reasons for imposing gender ideology when the crime involves:

I – disregard or discrimination against biological sex;

II – imposition of ideology regarding the existence of a neutral biological sex;

III – imposition of ideology to invert biological sex.

**Justification:** There is a growing escalation of violence against children in Brazil, with examples such as Rhuan Maycon da Silva Castro, aged 9, who was barbarously abused, tortured, emasculated to make him transgender; [...] It is therefore essential to curb this very serious type of violence with greater punitive rigor to intimidate its perpetrators and thereby restore the state’s ability to adequately execute sentences (Authored by Congress members Carla Zambelli, Bia Kicis and Eduardo Bolsonaro, PSL).

Stealthily, this legislation is attempting to pass a bill’s text “hidden” within another. It begins by developing a rhetoric that committing homicide against

a child should be considered a heinous crime, while at the same time creating an equivalence of “imposing gender ideology” to that crime. The strategy here is using a shocking, mediatic case to construct an association between a signifier (gender ideology) and a concrete action (murdering a child).

A similar tactic can be seen in the attempt to regulate psychological treatments for the LGBTQ+ community – popularly known as “the gay cure” – under the guise of providing care for those who might feel “unadjusted” with their identity. The signifier related to protecting the individual freedom for seeking these treatments would allow for practices that the Federal Council of Psychology has outlawed for over two decades<sup>11</sup>. This bill is carefully worded in a fashion that it does not directly attack people who identify as LGBTQIA+, but to protect the “freedom” of people who identify as LGBTQIA+ to seek treatment if they choose to do so. It is attached to a struggle commonly associated with the left to “incubate” a far-right proposal by equating gender-affirming care policies to unconstitutional “gay cure” treatments.

**PL 2587/2019:** Amends Law No. 4,119 of 1962, which provides for training courses in Psychology and regulates the profession of Psychologist, to allow for the treatment of adjustment problems and psychological disorders, including those related to gender identity and sexual orientation.

**Justification:** Homosexuality is not a disease and, therefore, is not subject to cure. However, it is undeniable – and the most recent scientific research confirms this – that disorders related to gender identity and sexual orientation cause enormous suffering to a large number of people, who cannot be left without assistance – whether they are heterosexual or homosexual. [...] On the contrary, it is about ensuring

<sup>11</sup> Article 3 of Resolution No. 01/1999 of the Federal Council of Psychology (CFP) (Brasil, 1999): “Psychologists shall not undertake any action that favors the pathologization of homoerotic behaviors or practices, nor shall they adopt coercive measures aimed at guiding homosexuals toward unsolicited treatments”.

that those who face difficulties in defining their sexual orientation, whatever it may be, can, if they so desire, obtain psychological support and assistance. Additionally, it is about ensuring psychology professionals that, when requested, they can provide comfort and specialized professional support in this area, which is of such importance to the psychic and emotional well-being of individuals (Authored by Congress Member Pr. Sgt. Isidorio, AVANTE).

Even though the bill does not directly mention the “gay cure” and its wording is carefully built to shield itself from accusations, the congress member in question is known for openly discoursing against the LGBTQIA+ community and has proposed other bills that are far more explicit in their contemptuous nature (e.g, PL 1239/2019). Furthermore, this bill implicitly relates to the groups that oppose this sort of treatment as being authoritative, not respecting individual rights, and preventing people (particularly children) from seeking treatment. Through cunning and elusive wording, this bill inverts the logic behind the proposed treatment by claiming that banning it is a fascist practice:

**PL 2587/2019:** Among these individuals, those who concern us the most are children, adolescents, and young people who are still in the process of psychological development and therefore are more vulnerable, thus may face serious difficulties, conflicts, and identity crises related to their sexuality. In some cases – unfortunately increasingly frequent – this has led many of these individuals to suicide. In this regard, denying access to psychological care for people experiencing such profound suffering by professionals who are so important to our society, reminds us of Nazi edicts and decrees (Authored by Congress Member Pr. Sgt. Isidorio, AVANTE).

A closer look at these regulatory markers reveals that many of them are redundant, illegal, and that many of the procedures the bills seek to outlaw

are already prohibited under Brazilian law<sup>12</sup>, and by the Federal Council of Medicine<sup>13</sup>. In that sense, the punitive actions proposed to protect children from being induced to undergo sex-change processes, for instance, have no practical impact on legislation. However, they produce an environment in which it is increasingly difficult for the LGBTQIA+ community to access legal rights that involve medical treatments, while at the same time creating an antagonism towards civil rights movements within those sectors. Moreover, it creates an imaginary imposition from the LGBTQIA+ movement to undermine individual beliefs and freedoms. It inverts the rhetoric of a knowingly fascist practice of “treating” LGBTQIA+ people by claiming that its prohibition is what is comparable to Nazism and harmful to children. The underlying objective in these cases is not to approve these bills, but to place these alleged issues under the public eye, thus contributing to the broadening of these antagonistic feelings.

Under similar justification, other bills aim to shield children from exposure to cultural events deemed obscene. These documents cite public performances involving nudity to suggest a direct threat from the LGBTQIA+ community to children by implying a correlation with pedophilia. The exposure of children to obscenity and indecency is a question that is often raised concerning cultural artifacts related to the LGBTQIA+ community.

**PL 1297/2019:** Art. 218 – D – Subjecting or allowing a child, adolescent, or vulnerable person to be exposed in a museum, cultural center, theatrical play, musical performance, artistic exhibition, or by any other means, to content that contains nudity or presents or simulates acts of lasciviousness or explicit sex.

<sup>12</sup>According to the Children and Teenager Protection Statute (ECA) from 1990 (Brasil, 1990), children are protected from such practices under articles 244-A and 241-D.

<sup>13</sup>Under resolution No. 2,265/2019 (Brasil, 2020), hormonal treatments are only permitted to those over 16 years of age, whereas sex change surgery is only permitted for those over 18 years.

**Justification:** [...] Thus, we have as an example of absurdities that violate the Child Statute and Adolescent, as well as the legal system as a whole, the infamous exhibition *QueerMuseu*, in 2017, in which a child around 4 years old is compelled to touch a naked man in public. These dark times of early attempts to sexualize children and legitimization of pedophilia through gender ideology require fighting for protection of children and adolescents, our future, which is why it is necessary to punish these agents (Authored by Congress member Jordy, PSL).

This refers to a performance that did not occur at the *QueerMuseu* in Porto Alegre, but at a different exhibit in São Paulo, which did not have an LGBTQIA+ theme. It alludes to a footage from an exhibition in the Modern Art Museum of São Paulo that right-wing activists made viral on social media. The video depicts a performer lying on his back naked while the audience is allowed to interact with him. One of the people who attended the performance was the performer and choreographer Elisabeth Finger, accompanied by her daughter. The frame the bill refers to shows when the artist Wagner Schwartz is lying down, and mother and daughter touch his feet. The presence of a child in that performance was seen as problematic, and the museum was reproached for not having a stricter age restriction.

Though one could argue that placing this incident in the *QueerMuseu* was an accidental blunder, it exemplifies the construction of a narrative that imaginarily intertwines the LGBTQIA+ community and pedophilia. The discourse constructs this association in the public's imagination through the exaggeration of an account coupled with an alleged accidental misplacement of events. The issue does not rest in the incident, but in the imaginary construct that the existence of an exhibition related to the LGBTQIA+ community is the cause of these incidents. Additionally, this bill does not address the need to protect children from other types of exposure, like hypersexualized images of women in television and publicity. The extent to

which the objectification of women causes these kinds of exposures is never raised.

The second most prominent strategy across these bills is creating an association between freedom of thought and protection from indoctrination. As most of the bills analyzed, it falls into what we referred to as a reactive perspective when constructing Bolsonaro's identity of the people. Protecting children from indoctrination and guaranteeing freedom from being exposed to gender related issues intertwine, in the sense that the state is expected to shield the "good citizens" from this ideology.

**PL 1239/2019:** Article 1 – The Federal, State, District, and Municipal Governments are prohibited from applying financial resources, of any nature, in actions of dissemination, implementation, and promotion of GENDER IDEOLOGY, either directly or indirectly.

**Justification:** Gender Ideology is a philosophical abstraction by the American Judith Butler that absurdly seeks to gain traction by preaching and attempting to deceive society with the lie that no one is born a man or a woman, but that each individual should construct their own identity throughout their life. "Man" and "woman," therefore, would be merely flexible social roles that each person could represent as and when they wish. However, the aforementioned ideology cannot even be called a thesis, as it is not based on any provable human experiment or any reliable field of study. [...] One of the tactics of the defenders of gender ideology is to "sugarcoat the pill." That is, to transform a serious problem into a trend or something modern. Thus, the implementation of gender ideology would be gradual, through non-educational means, with the indirect support of institutions when their leaders sympathize with the cause, of course! This would transform, by osmosis, public servants and the citizens they serve into tools to reach our children,

youth, and ultimately families, who would be the most harmed by the absurd project of Gender Ideology. Therefore, I request deference and support from men and women, regardless of religion, for the approval of this project that only defends the maintenance of the family created by God (Authored by Congress member Pr. Sgt. Isidorio, AVANTE).

By framing gender ideology as a threat to the "maintenance of the family created by God," the bill uses religious and moral signifiers to construct an ideological enemy. The emotionally charged language evokes a sense of urgency and danger regarding the matter, stating the need for legal protection to safeguard "our children, youth, and ultimately families." It becomes clear by the description of "gender ideology" as a product of an author whose goal is to "deceive society." This rhetoric serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it suggests an attempt by proponents of gender ideology to infiltrate the cultural and public spheres. It claims the need for the creation of legal protections against it. On the other hand, by claiming to protect the people from public institutions that would otherwise promote gender ideology, it also seeks to enforce traditional values. It effectively creates a justification for censoring subjects that espouse the promotion of gender diversity by claiming to safeguard individual freedom from the State's pervasive interference. A similar construction can be observed in the following bill:

**PL 258/2019:** Provides for the right of students to learn without political-partisan ideology; about the conduct of teachers in the transmission of content and adds item XIV and a sole paragraph to art. 3 of Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, on the guidelines and bases of national education, to provide for respect for the convictions of the student and their parents or guardians, giving precedence to family values over school education in aspects related to moral, sexual, and

religious education, as well as to prohibit the inclusion of gender ideology issues in the school environment.

Article 1 – This law regulates the balance that must be sought between the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn, within the scope of basic education, in all public and private educational institutions in the country.

Article 2 – The Government shall not interfere in the process of students' sexual maturation nor allow any form of dogmatism or proselytism in addressing gender issues (Authored by Congress member Pr. Eurico, Patriotas).

The use of terms like “dogmatism” and “proselytism” in addressing gender issues is vague and allows for a broad interpretation. This flexibility enables the construction of various antagonisms under the guise of protecting educational integrity and religious freedom. The slippery slope here lies in the fact that even equality-driven gender issues could be inserted under the gender ideology prohibition. Much like the previously examined bill, this works dually, by using state institutions to enforce a particular moral framework and exclude any opposing viewpoints on gender diversity, while justifying it by claiming this is protecting the freedom of the guardians and parents to have their children learn what they believe is adequate.

What stands out in these cases is that the use of these arguments articulates meanings that create an apparently plausible justification to criminalize and punish a movement under the guise that this is being done to protect innocent children from immoral and indecent groups. This, in turn, makes legitimate questioning about gender issues fall under a discourse of them being devious and attempting to corrupt children, thus creating a category in which all and any demands from these movements could be perceived as part of an indoctrination agenda.

The third most prominent signifier refers to gender identity. These bills use seemingly scientific arguments to consider sex assigned at birth as the only gender marker. In this sense, these signifiers are intertwined with the protection of women, by claiming that the advancement of civil rights for transgender women are dangerous for "real" women. For instance, one legislative project (PL 2649/2021) gives female police officers the right to refuse interactions with transgender individuals, framing this as a measure to protect them from discomfort in situations where they expect to only engage with other women.

**PL 2649/2021:** Article 1 - Female police authorities are guaranteed the right to refrain from carrying out intimate searches/approaching men whether they are straight, homosexual, trans, transvestite or dressed as woman.

**Justification:** Several Police Forces in the country have recommendations from State Public Defender's Offices that, in our view, beyond the absurd, expose our very worthy public security agents to completely unnecessary embarrassments. Such recommendations entail, shockingly, that Police strip searches must be carried out by a female police officer (public security agent) in trans women and transvestites. Recommendation which in our view is unreasonable due to the constraints caused to our brave policewomen! (Authored by Congress member Pr. Sgt. Isidorio, AVANTE).

Similarly, biological sex is posited as the sole criterion for women to participate in professional sports, ostensibly to maintain fair competition. This is justified by the argument that male bodies, regardless of hormonal treatment, inherently possess physical advantages, thereby excluding transgender athletes based on a debatable biological superiority.

**PL 3396/2020:** Art. 1 Biological sex will be the only criterion to define the gender of athletes in competitions organized by sports administration in Brazil, with athletes prohibited from acting in categories that do not correspond to your birth sex.

**Justification:** In short, because female transgenders were born men, their bodies were shaped with the help of testosterone, which is the main male sex hormone and, although produced in both sexes, men have around thirty times more testosterone than women. [...] It is found in any basic biology textbook – Wikipedia, for example – that “testosterone plays a fundamental role in the development of male reproductive tissues, such as the testicles and prostate, as well as the promotion of secondary sexual characteristics, such as increased muscle mass, increase and maturation of bones and the growth of body hair (Authored by Congress member Bia Kicis, PL).

Beyond defining transgender women as not being real women, this framing presents them as a threat to cisgender women, by leveraging the latter’s protection as a justification for enacting restrictive measures on gender identity. In doing so, it relies on biological determinism for the alleged protection of a population by making them feel threatened by the very existence of non-heteronormative gender identities.

Analyzing the content of these bills aggregately, we can observe how emotional elements mobilized in legislative proposals portray gender-related movements as subversive and dangerous not only to family values but to the fabric of society. The “gender ideology” signifier is constructed as an antagonistic force not only to the heteronormative identity, but to the “good citizens” altogether. However, this symbolic representation does not reflect real exclusions but is the product of discursive battles. By making use of the state apparatus, they attempt to create mechanisms that allow for and

legitimize the institutionalization of the attacks against LGBTQIA+ rights and restrict their citizenship by purportedly reflecting the will of "the people."

By framing espousers of LGBTQIA+ and gender equality movements as defenders of "gender ideology", these subjects are constructed as enemies of the people. They are associated with political indoctrination, pedophilia, violence against children, and a threat to familial and religious values. The consequences of this strategy are that those who do not align with the cultural norms implicated in the ideal of a traditional family – such as heteronormativity, traditional gender roles, and the gender division of labor, for example – are necessarily aligned with "gender ideology." These antagonistic relations reveal how the construction of the identity of the people in Bolsonaroism works discursively.

## 8. Conclusion

Bolsonarism's activity in the legislative arena represents the materialization of an exclusionary rhetoric that has played a significant role in its discursive construction. By examining the legislation proposed by the Bolsonaroist coalition, we elucidated how these bills systematically employ "gender ideology" as one of the main signifiers in order to associate gender related issues to a sense of harm and danger to "the people." Although the bills occasionally communicate acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals, the implications of the construction of "gender ideology" and its consequent positioning as an adversary to traditional values are clear. The narrative presented rests not so much on attacking individuals, but on equating non-heteronormativeness with a political, subversive agenda.

We also identified how the prominence of the religious and liberal biases in the Bolsonaroist discourse can be related to anti-communist sentiments through the association of LGBTQIA+ issues with a leftist, subversive agenda that allegedly intends to corrode Christian and traditional familial values by imposing its ideology through culture and education.

Given that these values are at the core of Bolsonarism's delimitation of the people, we argue that there is a concerted effort, via the state apparatus, to codify the specific set of moral and social values into law. Consequently, a series of restrictions that protect those values potentially occur. In that sense, the State acts as a protective agent for the values considered ideal and to delimit citizenship to those deemed compatible with the notion of the "good citizens."

Citizenship is primarily defined not by what it supports, but by what it opposes, thereby contesting established positions of power and modes of belonging. By extension, this notion perpetuates an exclusionary definition of citizenship, which in this case is heteronormative. Although "gender ideology" and LGBTQIA+ people are not the only (and arguably not the main) constructions of an antagonistic other in Bolsonarism, it informs us how these discursive constructions can be used to delimit citizenship via institutional action. It groups struggles for civil rights under the figure of an antagonistic other, ultimately framing them as threats to traditional family structures and, by extension, to the nation itself.

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