

Book Review: Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro by Richard Lapper

In Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro, Richard Lapper examines the underlying features of Brazilian society and recent socio-economic trends that shaped the 2018 presidential elections and lifted Jair Bolsonaro to power. Mark S. Langevin reviews the book, which provides a compelling, albeit incomplete, explanation of Bolsonaro's ascent by exploring who exactly he represents.

Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro. Richard Lapper. Manchester University Press. 2021.

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[Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro](#) is a thoughtful assessment of recent Brazilian political developments and many of the underlying political and socio-economic currents that swept Jair Bolsonaro to power in 2018. The book weaves together a tapestry of personalities, constituencies and socio-economic trends to understand the rise of a congressional backbencher who has openly supported torture, police brutality and misogyny while [defending the country's military dictatorship](#) that ruled from 1964-85. Lapper asks all the right questions but falls short of providing a methodologically consistent explanation of the political forces that delivered Bolsonaro's victory and tested the constitutional fortitude of Brazilian democracy.

The first half of the book, Chapters One through Six, describes in balanced detail the conditions underlying the rise of Bolsonaro, including [the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff in 2016](#). Lapper tells Brazil's story of skyrocketing expectations in Chapter Three, when the country faced a 'magic moment' of accelerating economic development that raised the income of nearly all Brazilians. However, the story ends in a nightmare, as Lapper chronicles, with the launch of the [Lava Jato corruption investigations in late 2014](#), the ensuing steep recession and, eventually, the 2018 electoral victory of the outsider, Bolsonaro, behind an emergent conservative coalition of military and police officers, militia members and evangelicals.

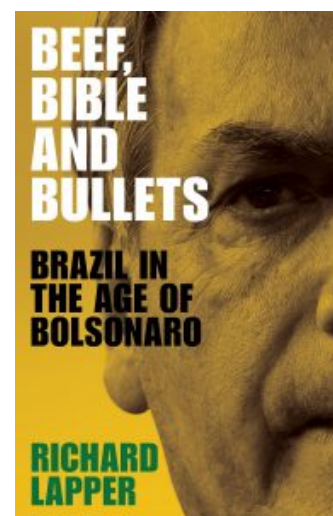


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In Chapter Seven, Lapper examines the impact of the 'bullet' constituency. He argues that rising violent crime and the expansion of criminal gangs, anchored to drug trafficking, triggered greater political support for Bolsonaro within the electorate and among the ranks of the military and police forces, as he pledged to get tough with criminals. Certainly, Brazilians worry about crime and Lapper cites research from the [Brazilian Forum of Public Security](#) to substantiate the claim that victims of crime often increase their support for authoritarian anti-crime measures. However, the book stretches the argument too far in claiming that the expanding number of homicides explains the emergence and electoral strength of the 'bullet' constituency and its electoral support of Bolsonaro.

Lapper points out that 37 former civil and military police officers were elected to Congress in 2018, many of whom pledged allegiance to Bolsonaro and his extra-constitutional approach to crime fighting (13). Many *Bolsonarista* candidates were police and retired military officers, including his running-mate, retired General Hamilton Mourão. However, in the 2018 elections, [971 federal and state-level legislative candidates](#) were associated with the military or state-level military police forces, but only 8 per cent were elected. In the northeast, there were fewer military and police-affiliated candidates distributed over a broader spectrum of political parties.

The book also misinterprets the variable impact of homicides on voting behaviour. While Bolsonaro won overwhelmingly in the heavily populated southeast region, where homicide rates have declined since the 1990s, he lost in the heavily populated and poorer northeast, finishing second to the Workers Party (PT)'s candidate Fernando Haddad by a large margin. Although organised crime plays an important role in Brazilian politics, as Lapper illustrates in Chapter Eight, the northeast region's electoral results cast doubt over the argument that violent crime moved voters toward Bolsonaro's camp in 2018.

Conversely, the disproportional attraction of military and police officers-turned-politicians to Bolsonaro's messaging reveals a more alarming undercurrent. Bolsonaro represents a segment of the electorate that supports extra-constitutional policing measures that deny due process to suspects and often result in police killings of unarmed civilians in dense, largely poor, urban communities. According to Lapper, police killings in Brazil have nearly tripled since 2013, climbing to one of the highest rates in the world (134). The author also explains that 'The big complicating factor is the emergence over the last twenty years of the police as an aggressive and noisy political lobby' (146). While Lapper understands these trends as triggering voters' support for Bolsonaro in 2018, it is equally or more likely that an overwhelming number of military and police officials, who support authoritarianism, threw their support behind Bolsonaro and expanded their congressional ranks to defend their brutality and guarantee their impunity.

Lapper treats the 'bible' constituency in similar fashion by exploring the political participation of Pentecostal churches. He traces their rise, highlighting the expanding influence of the Universal Church through media outlets, including its acquisition of the Record television network, and eventually among conservative political parties during successive electoral cycles. Overall, Brazilian Pentecostalism has developed an increased capacity to mobilise, directed by thousands of decentralised churches and their pastors. It is now one of the most potent social movements in the country.

The book shows how a growing number of evangelical churches and their pastors seized upon several weaknesses in Brazil's representative institutions to expand their political influence by providing funds and votes to candidates (162). [Since 2010](#), the congressional 'bible' caucus has steadily grown, from 73 to 84 federal deputies and from three to seven senators. Lapper shows how Bolsonaro's campaign understood the electoral potential of Brazilian evangelical churches and offered a transactional proposition, promising to advance their conservative social preferences, especially opposition to homosexuality, in exchange for votes.

Bolsonaro's 'beef' or large-scale agricultural producer constituency (also known as the rural caucus) has also heightened its political power and stretched its electoral reach in recent years. In Chapters Eleven and Twelve, Lapper sketches out an analysis of why this constituency expressed grievances toward the prior PT-led administrations but falls short of explaining how Bolsonaro effectively harnessed his bandwagon to the beef caucus. This is an extremely critical element to understanding both the rise of Bolsonaro and the political performance of this producer-led constituency.

While the rural caucus was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the Bolsonaro presidential campaign, in 2018 it [failed to re-elect](#) over half of its membership in the Chamber of Deputies. While agricultural exports provide a reliable financial [backstop](#) to the Brazilian economy, the sector's influence over Congress has dwindled due to urbanisation and the diversification of the national economy during the past decades. The gap between economic importance and political influence led the sector's leadership, especially the Brazilian Association of Soybean Producers (APROSOJA), to scout out an 'aggressive and noisy' presidential candidate (similar to the bullet constituency), who could defend their interests despite their waning legislative influence. As Lapper explains, Bolsonaro was the perfect fit, since he had pivoted toward the liberal economic policy direction of the University of Chicago-trained [Paulo Guedes](#), a trusted advocate for exporters and current economy minister.

Overall, *Beef, Bible and Bullets* paints a well-written collage of recent economic and political developments that helped propel Brazil's shift toward conservative populism and drive [Bolsonaro's bandwagon](#) in 2018. However, it does not fully explain the complex relations between these three major constituencies and Bolsonaro's essential alliance with the business elite and financial services industry, led by Guedes (a curious shortcoming of the book since Lapper is a former correspondent of the *Financial Times*). The book effectively examines the economic policy setbacks of the Rousseff administration in Chapter Four and the subsequent debacle of the *Lava Jato* scandal. However, it sidesteps critical questions about Bolsonaro and Brazil's business elite, represented in large measure by the São Paulo Industrial Federation (FIESP). How did Brazilian business leaders organise their support for Bolsonaro, at least in the second round of the presidential elections against Haddad? Why have they continued to support his administration amid a disastrous response to [the public health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) and [the president's repeated attacks on the Supreme Court](#)?

Beef, Bible and Bullets nonetheless offers a reader-friendly account of the factors that contributed to Bolsonaro's rise. Despite its shortcomings, it should be considered essential reading during the run-up to Brazil's 2022 presidential and congressional elections.

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