

Institutional Denialism: From the President's speeches to the formation of the Early Treatment Agenda (Off Label) in the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil

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Abstract

Since the efforts of Schattschneider (1960), Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and, then, Cobb and Elder (1971) proposing the “Policy Agenda-Setting”, studies on agenda have advanced to models as the Multiple Streams Model (Kingdon, 1984) emphasizing the interaction between problem, policy, and political streams as central elements. Recent studies also explore the content analysis of presidential speeches and legislative productions as complementary approaches (Capella *et al.*, 2015). In the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the convergence of these approaches sheds light on the process of public policy agenda formation and the role of political actors. In such a scenario this article proposes to reflect “What are the relations between the denialist discourses promoted by then President Bolsonaro and public policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil?”. As results, 1,115 statements by Bolsonaro related to early treatment and criticism of the WHO were categorized, along with 2,577 official contents mentioning off-label drugs in governmental channels. This article proposes the concept of 'institutional denialism', which refers to the dynamics in which disinformation, fake news and denialism enable the elevation of interpretations in the discursive dimension of authoritarian leaders to a dimension institutional, resulting in guidelines for public policies based on denialism. **Keywords:** Institutional Denialism. Agenda Setting. Bolsonaro. COVID-19.

Resumo

Desde os esforços de Schattschneider (1960), Bachrach e Baratz (1962) e, posteriormente, Cobb e Elder (1971) ao propor a “*Policy Agenda-Setting*”, os estudos sobre agenda avançaram para modelos como o *Multiple Streams Model* (Kingdon, 1984), enfatizando a interação entre os fluxos de problema, política e política como elementos centrais. Estudos recentes também exploram a análise de conteúdo de discursos presidenciais e produções legislativas como abordagens complementares (Capella *et al.*, 2015). Ao contexto da Pandemia de COVID-19, a convergência dessas abordagens lança luz sobre o processo de formação da agenda de políticas públicas e o papel dos atores políticos. Em tal cenário, este artigo propõe refletir “Quais são as relações entre os discursos negacionistas promovidos pelo então Presidente Bolsonaro e as políticas públicas durante a Pandemia de COVID-19 no Brasil?”. Como resultados, 1.115 declarações de Bolsonaro relacionadas ao tratamento precoce e críticas à OMS foram categorizadas, juntamente com 2.577 conteúdos oficiais mencionando medicamentos off-label em canais governamentais. Este artigo propõe o conceito de 'negacionismo institucional', que se refere à dinâmica em que a desinformação, *fake news* e o negacionismo possibilitam a elevação de interpretações na dimensão discursiva de líderes autoritários para uma dimensão institucional, resultando em diretrizes para políticas públicas baseadas em negacionismo. **Palavras-chave:** Negacionismo Institucional. Agenda Setting. Bolsonaro. COVID-19.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Studies of the public policy agenda were developed in Political Science with the aim of analyzing how issues-problems are transformed and gain space. These studies are based on Schattschneider's ideas of opinion mobilization (1960), which refers to the process of expanding the conflict around a theme; and in the two faces of power by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), which highlights the ability to block the identification and recognition of problems. As such studies advance, authors such as Cobb and Elder (1971) gain prominence, being the pioneers by using the term "policy agenda-setting", questioning how political issues are created and why some issues gain the attention of decision makers while others do not. From these studies, a new research tradition on the "agenda-setting" process was developed, focusing on the relationship between the formation of the public policy agenda and the participation of actors.

The "Multiple Streams Model", proposed by Kingdon (1984) highlights the interaction between the streams of problems, policies and politics as central elements in the agenda. Such a Model demonstrates how different problems come to the fore at certain times, how political solutions are developed and how political opportunities can be seized. More recently, when systematizing methodological paths, Capella, Brasil and Saudano (2015) point out that, in addition to studies that observe visible actors in agenda setting, in which Kingdon (2003) reinforces that "the chances of a subject to rise in the governmental agenda are greater if this subject is defended by the participants of the visible group and smaller if it is neglected by these participants", it is also possible to carry out analyzes of the content of presidential speeches, observe the legislative productions, among other approaches that can be complementary longitudinally or transversely.

Also, several studies have been dedicated to the phenomenon of populist leaders (Barr, 2009; Betz, 2002; Rueda, 2021; Ware, 2002; Weyland, 2001), in addition to a "third autocratic wave in a global trend", with leaders authoritarians who subvert democratic institutions to stay in power and undermine opponents (Lührmann; Lindberg, 2019; Lührmann; Tannenber; Lindberg, 2018; Olson, 1991). There is also studies that observe the relationship between authoritarian leaders and practices that propagate disinformation and fake news, both with populist characteristics (Bernardi & Costa, 2020), and with autocratic profiles (Alizada *et al.*, 2021; Santos, 2022), including a tendency for such leaders to attack scientific expertise and have an adversarial posture in relation to "technocrats" and supranational institutions (Bartha *et al.*, 2020).

Advancing on potential convergences between agenda-setting literature and authoritarian leaders, Bartha *et al.* (2020) points out that in the process of formulating public policies in populist contexts, such leaders tend to adopt anti-scientific postures, often criticizing mainstream thinking and, amid the discourse of "us" against "them", or "the people" against "the elite" (Rueda, 2021), negationist positions emerge as a basis for sustaining political alternatives to scientific conceptions that threaten the stability of such authoritarian leaders and their power dispute dynamics.

When we look at the Brazilian case, authors differ on the populist and autocratic characteristics of former President Jair Messias Bolsonaro (Akgemci, 2022; Crayne & Medeiros, 2021; Tamaki & Fuks, 2020), but bring particular elements to observe patterns in Brazil typical of countries where the organization of ideological discourse by populist aspects can take advantage of crisis contexts to advance authoritarian agendas, as is the case of the COVID-19 Pandemic. In this article, such potential is explored, in the light of authors such as Silva *et al.* (2022), who have pointed out that disinformation and fake news can influence public policies on several fronts, such as the prestige of the Institutions and the System, adherence to public policies, resources and public planning, among others. However, converging literatures of autocracies and populism in a vector of disinformation, fake news and denialism can bring contextual inputs to interpret such authoritarian phenomena.

In addition, the Brazilian case brings interesting empirical elements to an agenda formation with populist characteristics during the COVID-19 Pandemic, where former President Jair Bolsonaro mobilized an anti-World Health Organization (WHO) agenda (Akgemci, 2022), with criticism of vaccines, social isolation (lockdown) and the use of masks, proposing as an alternative the use of off-label drugs, the so-called "early treatment", with (hydroxy)chloroquine, ivermectin, azithromycin and others (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021). Therefore, the following question arises: "What are the relations between the denialist discourses promoted by then President Bolsonaro and public policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil?", observing what will be organized further on as discursive dimension and institutional dimension, a framework is proposed to observe what presents itself as a phenomenon of 'institutional denialism'.

2 THEORETICAL APPROACH

Initially, two literatures have pointed to sometimes dialogic phenomena in the field of Political Science, as is the case of studies that analyze populist leaders and those that observe autocratic leaders - amidst potential convergences, it is worth extracting some reflections for

the proposed context. In addition, the discussions mobilized by the agenda's literature are brought, especially with regard to the windows of opportunity and the selection of problems amid the interests and beliefs mobilized by the Federal Government's conduct during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil .

2.1 POPULISM AND AUTOCRACY: AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS

Rueda (2021) uses the 2017 Oxford Handbook of Populism to highlight three conceptual approaches considered the most used by researchers of populist leaders: a.) the ideational approach (in which populism is understood as an ideology); b.) the sociocultural approach (in which populism is understood as a particular form of political relationship between leaders and followers); and 3.) the political-strategic approach (which is based on the analysis of the strategies adopted by populist leaders to conquer and maintain power), which we deepen below and concerns the core of this article. Kurt Weyland, a scholar of Latin American populism, has developed a definition that emphasizes this strategic perspective. He defines populism as "a political strategy through which a personalist leader seeks or exercises governmental power based on the direct, unmediated, and non-institutionalized support of large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland, 2001).

However, Rueda (2021) systematizes that "despite its usefulness to analyze certain aspects of populism, the political-strategic approach has conceptual limitations". By systematizing, in the first place, it tends to reduce populism to a simple political strategy, "neglecting its ideological and sociocultural dimensions". There is a central element here, because, in addition to a strategy to conquer and maintain power, populism is articulated as a worldview, which uses the opposition between "the people" and "the elite" to mobilize and "promote popular sovereignty". That is, in addition to being a power dispute instrument, a mechanism based on an ideological and sociocultural vision of continuous mobilization.

In this way, three reasons are organized from the literature of populisms to support this article, namely: 1.) In addition to populist leaders carrying out attacks seen as political-strategic to conquer and remain in power, the ideational and sociocultural dimensions also need to be considered, where ideological, sociocultural and historical aspects build the characteristics of such a leader according to the context in which he is; 2.) the propagation of disinformation and fake news is highlighted as an authoritarian instrument, added to the denialist discourse "anti-expert and free of evidence"; and 3.) rulers emulate the dichotomy between "the people" and "the elites", presenting themselves as the legitimate leader of such people and "promoting popular sovereignty".

In addition to disputes that mobilize charisma to legitimize the exercise of power, there is a whole discussion about democratic quality and, in addition to authors who point to the discussion about democratic regimes (Dahl, 2005; Huntington, 1994), there are those that advance to characterize "autocratic waves" and, more specifically, an "autocratic third wave" (Alizada *et al.*, 2021; Lührmann; Lindberg, 2019; Lührmann; Tannenberg; Lindberg, 2018; Olson, 1991; Santos, 2022).

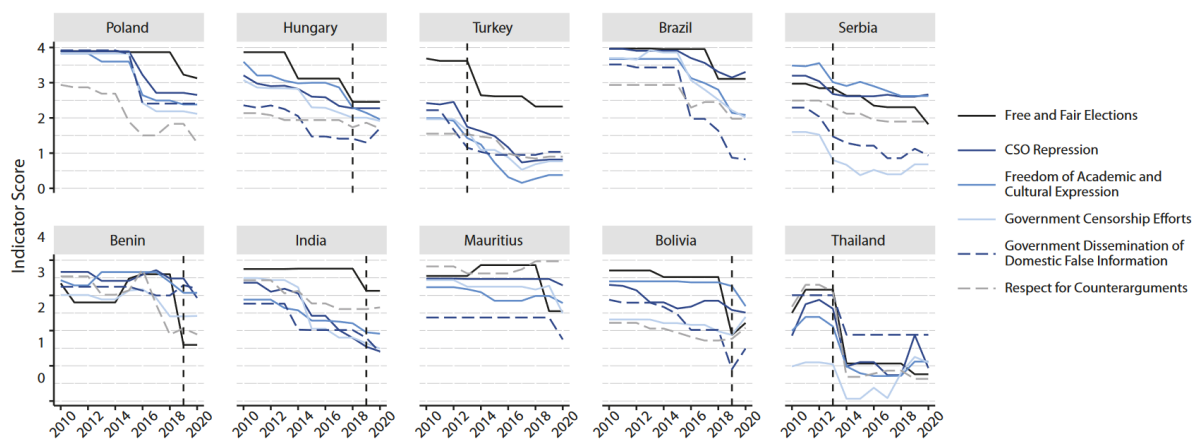
Lührmann and colleagues (2019; 2018) deepen the discussion to overcome a supposed conceptual dichotomy between "democracy" and "dictatorship", pointing to the so-called "autocratic" regimes. However, they point to the lack of more "longitudinal" and "comprehensive" measures that consider regimes with "autocratic" characteristics. In such reasoning, Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) bring evidence for a "third wave of autocratization" between 1994 and 2017, where the idea of 'democratic erosion' begins to be drawn.

It is this concept of 'democratic erosion' that characterizes, then, a first basic element for the perception of autocracy literature. This foundation points to gradual wear and tear in relation to the Institutions, mobilizing them towards an autocratizing direction. Along the same lines, Santos (2022, p. 8) brings the V-Dem report entitled "Autocracy becomes viral":

Autocratic rulers attack the media, academia and civil society; then, they polarize society, disqualifying their opponents and spreading fake news; finally, they carry out the 'final coup', distorting the elections and the Institutions. (Santos, 2022, p. 8, Translated).

Being a second element of attention, of discursive and informational disputes in the midst of autocratizing onslaughts, where such a pattern can be observed in a number of countries, including Brazil, pointed out in the V-Dem (Alizada *et al.*, 2021, p. 22) (Figure 1):

Figure 1. 'Autocratizing Pattern'



Vertical lines mark year of regime transition to electoral autocracy.

Source: Alizada *et al.* (2021, p. 22).

In short, three elements are extracted to support the discussion of autocracies in this article: 1.) the concept of 'democratic erosion', which points to gradual institutional erosion; 2.) 'discursive and informational disputes' gain ground in the midst of the third autocratizing wave; and 3.) the third autocratizing wave points to the 'role of rulers' in the erosion of institutions and democratic erosion.

2.2 AGENDA-SETTING AND THE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Agenda's studies are central in Political Science, aimed at understanding how issues-problems emerge, gain visibility and are incorporated into the political agenda. Based on Schattschneider's ideas of opinion mobilization (1960) and Bachrach and Baratz's concept of power as a capacity to block the identification of problems, studies on agendas have progressively developed, leading to approaches that consider the interaction between actors, themes and political context. This subtopic explores the evolution of these studies, with emphasis on Kingdon's Multiple Currents Model (1984), and discusses how populist leaders can influence the agenda in public policies.

The investigation of the agenda began with approaches that focused on competition between groups to define which issues deserved political attention. Schattschneider (1960) introduced the idea of opinion mobilization, highlighting how conflict between interest groups shapes the political agenda. In turn, Bachrach and Baratz (1962) argued that power also resides in the ability to prevent certain problems from being recognized and debated. Later, Cobb and Elder (1971) contributed to the conceptualization of the process by coining the term "agenda-setting", questioning how certain problems emerge and why some gain the attention of policy makers while others do not. This approach laid the groundwork for the development of a new research tradition on the agenda-setting process, focusing on the relationship between the public agenda and the participation of political actors.

One of the most influential approaches is the Multiple Stream Model proposed by Kingdon (1984). This model highlights the interaction between three currents: problems, policies and politicians. He argues that, at certain times, these currents can converge, creating "windows of opportunity" for issues to enter the political agenda and gain prominence. Problem streams involve perceived concerns and challenges in society, policy streams are proposed solutions to these problems, and policy streams represent the political and contextual conditions that influence the feasibility of an issue being addressed.

In a dialogue between the proposed literatures, Bartha *et al.* (2020) systematize that in the process of formulating populist policies, populist political leaders tend to be hostile to

technocratic expertise, have an adversarial stance towards technocrats and supranational institutions, tend to bypass the institutions of liberal democracy and emphasize direct communication with the electorate.

In dialogue with the idea of “window of opportunity” (Kingdon, 1984), the literature has shown that, during crises, authoritarian leaders find windows of opportunity to advance their agendas, including Moffitt (2015) highlights that such leaders position themselves as problem solvers, offering simple solutions to complex challenges and portraying other political actors as failures, exploiting crises rather than addressing and solving the problem. Prasad (2020), in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, highlights how populist leaders took advantage of the crisis to promote ideological attacks. Converging, Canovan (2002) points out that populist leaders use methods to establish authority and obtain support, especially in times of crisis.

If, on the one hand, as we have seen, populism mobilized discursive disputes and mobilizations of social sectors, on the other hand, the rise of populist leaders introduced additional complexities in agenda formation, since such practices can influence agenda, directing attention for specific issues (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Dussauge-Laguna, 2022; Brown & Mondon, 2020; Axford, 2020). There is also the dimension of social media, which play a crucial instrument for such populist leaders, enabling the dispute of public opinion, where authors such as Silva & Neves (2023) and Guerrero & Silva (2023) investigate how populist leaders can co-opt sectors of the society to garner support for their proposed agendas.

2.3 CHOOSING A CASE STUDY: BRAZIL

Tamaki and Fuks (2020) address the resurgence of studies on populism in Brazil during the 2018 general elections, with the rise of Jair Bolsonaro. When analyzing the discursive dimension, they present a mixture of populist, patriotic and nationalist characteristics in Bolsonaro's speeches and that, although his populism score is higher than that of other Brazilian presidents in the last 20 years, he would not have reached, at that moment, the level observed in populist leaders of other countries. As he advanced in his narrative, however, Tamaki and Fuks (2020) point out how Bolsonaro began to use populist strategies in his speeches, appealing to emotions such as resentment and frustration, positioning himself as a defender of the Brazilian people, criticizing the traditional political elite and emphasizing agendas public safety, corruption and conservative values.

On another front, Crayne and Medeiros (2021) reflected the profile of charismatic, ideological and pragmatic leaders in Canada, Brazil and Germany, respectively, in leading

countries during the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis, seeking to investigate the concept of leader as sense builder. The authors reach a conclusion very similar to populism and autocracy literature when conducting a discourse analysis of Bolsonaro: Jair Bolsonaro has adopted an approach guided by an intensively ideological character since his presidential campaign in 2018, transforming such electoral discourse into public policies by guiding the conduct of the country during the crisis based on such reasoning.

In summary, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Bolsonaro adopted a negative and past-focused tone, framing the virus as an “us versus them” issue, in the same tone observed in the literature of populism. Its response was then characterized, Crayne and Medeiros (2021) point out, by a focus on Brazil's idealized past, prioritizing economic actions to the detriment of public health measures and denying scientific evidence and expert advice, resulting in a delayed and largely ineffective response to the Pandemic. For Crayne and Medeiros (2021), the behavior of Bolsonaro and his supporters reflects the predictable results of the construction of ideological meaning, with "rigid adherence to values, demand for loyalty and rejection of information and people that go against the thematic narrative".

In such a scenario, Brazil proves to be an interesting case to be observed, where not only was omission identified during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021), but also institutional mobilization (Tamaki & Fuks, 2020; Guerrero & Silva, 2023). Thus, seeking to observe the crisis as a window of opportunity (Kingdon, 1984) for Bolsonaro to mobilize, amidst the multiple flows, his proposed agenda, to the detriment of recommendations from international organizations and the scientific community.

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

There is a maxim in political science that "there is no power vacuum." The defense of early (off-label) treatment as an alternative during the COVID-19 Pandemic is no exception, since in order to consolidate it as a governmental agenda, it is necessary to oppose recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) (WHO, 2023), for example, which seek to mobilize greater adherence to vaccines, social isolation (lockdown) and the use of masks, among other measures adopted during the three years of emergency, for example. In this sense, this article addresses not only the defense of early treatment by former President Jair Bolsonaro and potential relationships with the official content released by the Federal Government, but also includes the analysis of attacks on vaccines, social isolation (lockdown) and the use of masks undertaken by Bolsonaro in the same period, comparing them in a longitudinal perspective and seeking to answer "What are the relations

between the denialist discourses promoted by then President Bolsonaro and public policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil?".

There is also the reflection brought by Capella, Brasil and Saudano (2015), in which it is also possible to carry out analyzes of the content of presidential speeches, observe the legislative productions, among other approaches that can be complementary longitudinally or transversely. In this way, we seek to identify the attacks and defenses present in Bolsonaro's speech, comparing them with the content published in the official channels of the Federal Government that mention early treatment (off label) (Table 1):

Table 1. Surveys conducted

	Bolsonaro Speeches	Content available on channels Federal Government officials
Early Treatment (Off Label)	Mapping of discursive defenses	Official content mapping
Adherence to Vaccines	Mapping of discursive attacks	-
Social Isolation (Lockdown)	Mapping of discursive attacks	-
Use of Masks	Mapping of discursive attacks	-

Fonte: Autores (2023).

3.1 DATA EXTRACTION

Web scraping techniques were performed via Python using the following libraries: a.) time; b.) requests; c.) "from" bs4, BeautifulSoup; d.) "from" google.colab, auth; e.) gspread; f.) "from" google.auth, default; g) telethon and h.) tweepy (Silva, 2023a; Silva 2023b). Thus, four databases were extracted:

Being three bases of the discursive dimension: 1.) all false statements by Bolsonaro during the presidency, checked by fact-checking agencies; 2.) all of Bolsonaro's tweets, stored by the backup profile "@desbloqueandojb" (data provided by journalist Marlos Ápyus, including tweets deleted by Bolsonaro's profile); 3.) all of Bolsonaro's Telegram posts;

And a basis of the institutional dimension: 1.) all publications and regulations made available on any official portals of the Federal Government that mention off-label drugs, such as (hydroxy)chloroquine, ivermectin and others, including institutional promotional materials and contents of the 'Content Center ' of the Portal of the Ministry of Health in the respective period, in addition to other Ministries and federal agencies.

For the discursive dimension, the following keywords were used: a.) "vacina" (ção/ado/ada); b.) (hidroxi)"cloroquina"; c.) "ivermectina"; d.) "lockdown"; e.) "fique em casa";

f.) "isolamento social"; g.) "máscara" (s); h.) "off label"; i.) "ozônio"; j.) "azitromicina"; k.) "tratamento precoce"; e l.) "kit covid". As for the institutional dimension, only terms related to early treatment were sought, namely: a.) (hidroxi)"cloroquina"; b.) "ivermectina"; c.) "off label"; d.) "ozônio"; e.) "azitromicina"; f.) "tratamento precoce"; e g.) "kit covid".

3.2 DATA PROCESSING

1,115 speeches by Bolsonaro between 2019 and 2022 were mapped, which support the denialist agenda during the COVID-19 Pandemic, detailed in Table 2:

Table 2. Data processing steps

Telegram	<u>32</u>	Twitter	<u>87</u>	False Speeches	<u>996</u>
Initial Data: 100%	5.077	Initial Data: 100%	8.040	Initial Data: 100%	6.685
Key Words: 17,0%	0.862	Key Words: 6,3%	0.503	Key Words: 35,8%	2.395
After Review: 0,6%	0.032	After Review: 1,1%	0.087	After Review: 14,9%	0.996
Total (Discursive Dimension)				<u>1.115</u>	
Initial Data: 100%				19.802 contents	
Keywords: 19%				03.760 contents	
After Review: 6%				01.115 contents	

Source: Authors (2023).

On another front, with the extraction of official content that mentions early treatment and off-label practices in official channels of the Federal Government, 2,577 contents were mapped, such stages are shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Data processing steps

Total (Institutional Dimension)	<u>2.312</u>
Initial Data: 100%	02.773 contents
Http Error 404: 95,3%	02.643 contents
2019 to 2022: 92,9%	02.577 contents

Source: Authors (2023).

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

For the classification of data, a manual cleaning and selection of all 1,115 speeches and 2,577 contents was carried out, creating categories and grouping them so that they could be observed on a longitudinal scale on a monthly and semi-annual basis, in addition to observing their respective contexts to enable an interpretation of the data. With the longitudinal mapping with daily details, it was possible to segment data oscillations by monthly and half-yearly clipping, highlighting each variable and their coexistence.

4 RESULTS

From 2,643 contents that mention off-label drugs, such as "(hydroxy)chloroquine" and "ivermectin" in official Federal Government channels between 2013 (first registration) and 2022 (end of scraping), a total of 97.5% (2,577) were recorded during the Bolsonaro administration. That is, before 2019, only 66 mentions (2.5%) were made, which represents an increase of 3,905% in the disclosure of these early treatment drugs during the Bolsonaro administration. In Table 4, below, we have a longitudinal analysis of the categorized data, in which it is possible to observe a convergence of the growth of attacks on the vaccine, social isolation and the use of masks with the discursive defense of early treatment and the presence of contents that make mention of such early treatment in the official channels of the Federal Government.

It should be noted that the identified institutional contents do not necessarily mean an effective public policy. Evidently, a portion of these was implemented as contracts, cooperations, bulletins, norms, but it was not up to this work to make an individual analysis of the contents, but rather to identify how a posture of a leader in possession of the Institutions becomes an institutional position, defended by the State, even if based on denialism and disinformation. It should also be noted that the 17 occurrences of content in the period prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic concern reports and protocols that occasionally mention the use for other illnesses and situations. However, when we move on to the analysis of the Pandemic period, both the discursive dimension has grown significantly, and we can deepen each of the categories of Federal Government content (Table 4):

Table 4. Absolute Data Analysis

Category		2019 S1	2019 S2	2020 S1	2020 S2	2021 S1	2021 S2	2022 S1	2022 S2	Total
(Speech) Attack on the Vaccine + Social Isolation + Masks	Vaccine Adherence	0	0	73	46	67	46	15	14	262
	Social Isolation	0	0	26	21	82	39	33	14	216
	Use of Mask	0	0	1	13	14	1	1	0	30
	Others	0	0	8	1	0	1	0	0	11
	Total	0	0	108	81	163	87	49	28	[516]
(Speech) Defense of Early Treatment	Total	0	0	86	189	198	87	24	15	[599]
(Institutional) Federal Government Content	Federal Articulations	0	0	0	517	61	4	9	3	594
	Reports and Bulletins	0	0	4	150	36	21	124	69	404
	Documents and Regulations	0	1	39	110	114	22	27	31	344
	Protocols and Guidelines	6	6	5	87	24	9	70	80	287
	Bids and Contracts	0	0	5	6	135	48	45	44	283
	Scientific Evidence	2	1	3	14	123	5	62	34	244
	News	0	0	10	28	8	9	14	162	231
	Inputs and Trade	1	0	2	10	32	33	44	68	190
	Total	9	8	68	922	533	151	395	491	[2577]

Source: Authors (2023).

However, despite revealing peaks and variations within the variables, only the absolute data do not bring a proportional comparison between the variables, since they have different total volumes, distorting possible coexistence of graphic variations. In this way, a normalization process was carried out, where each value was divided by its respective total of the variable, returning the normalized relative value of each content (Table 5):

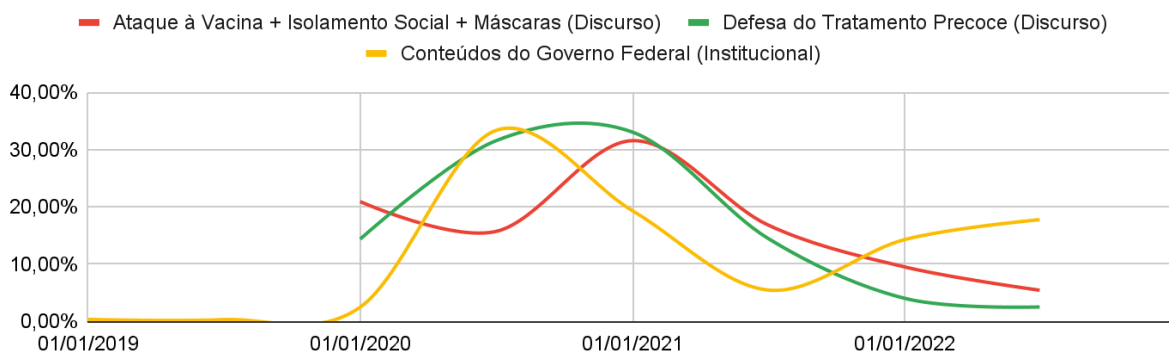
Table 5. Normalized Relative Data Analysis

Category		2019 S1	2019 S2	2020 S1	2020 S2	2021 S1	2021 S2	2022 S1	2022 S2	Total
(Speech) Attack on the Vaccine + Social Isolation + Masks	Vaccine Adherence	0,0%	0,0%	14,1%	8,9%	13,0%	8,9%	2,9%	2,7%	50,8%
	Social Isolation	0,0%	0,0%	5,0%	4,1%	15,9%	7,6%	6,4%	2,7%	41,9%
	Use of Mask	0,0%	0,0%	0,2%	2,5%	2,7%	0,2%	0,2%	0,0%	5,8%
	Others	0,0%	0,0%	1,6%	0,2%	0,0%	0,2%	0,0%	0,0%	2,1%
	Total	0,0%	0,0%	20,9%	15,7%	31,6%	16,9%	9,5%	5,4%	[516]
(Speech) Defense of Early Treatment	Total	0,0%	0,0%	14,4%	31,6%	33,1%	14,5%	4,0%	2,5%	[599]
(Institutional) Federal Government Content	Federal Articulations	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	20,1%	2,4%	0,2%	0,3%	0,1%	23,1%
	Reports and Bulletins	0,0%	0,0%	0,2%	5,8%	1,4%	0,8%	4,8%	2,7%	15,7%
	Documents and Regulations	0,0%	0,0%	1,5%	4,3%	4,4%	0,9%	1,0%	1,2%	13,3%
	Protocols and Guidelines	0,2%	0,2%	0,2%	3,4%	0,9%	0,3%	2,7%	3,1%	11,1%
	Bids and Contracts	0,0%	0,0%	0,2%	0,2%	5,2%	1,9%	1,7%	1,7%	11,0%
	Scientific Evidence	0,1%	0,0%	0,1%	0,5%	4,8%	0,2%	2,4%	1,3%	9,5%
	News	0,0%	0,0%	0,4%	1,1%	0,3%	0,3%	0,5%	6,3%	9,0%
	Inputs and Trade	0,0%	0,0%	0,1%	0,4%	1,2%	1,3%	1,7%	2,6%	7,4%
	Total	0,3%	0,3%	2,6%	35,8%	20,7%	5,9%	15,3%	19,1%	[2577]

Source: Authors (2023).

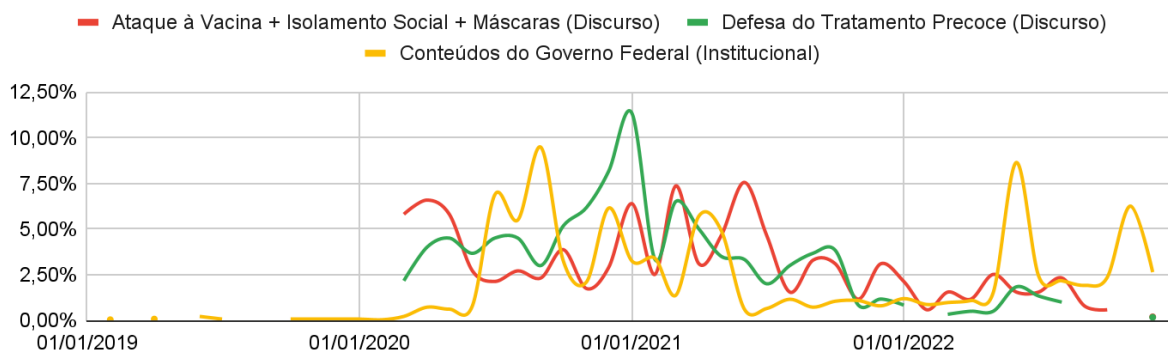
Therefore, the two Figures (2 and 3) below show the normalized variation of the three variables, demonstrating a convergence between Bolsonaro's attacks and defenses, in addition to the growing institutional content in the Federal Government's official channels.

Figure 2. Normalized Longitudinal Analysis (By-Annual)



Source: Authors (2023).

Figure 3. Normalized Longitudinal Analysis (Monthly)



Source: Authors (2023).

In addition to the concentration of the three variables between the first half of 2020 and the first half of 2021, there is also another ascending one between the first and second half of 2022, where the agenda reaffirms itself amid electoral disputes, with criticism of the adoption of social isolation, especially. In addition to the higher percentage of news on the subject, there are reports and bulletins describing results achieved in recent periods from the actions of the Federal Government, mentioning such early treatment practices. Next, three samples from each category are observed.

4.1 ANALYSIS OF ATTACK CONTENTS

Table 6. Examples of Attack Speeches

Attack (Discursive)	Example of Contents
Vaccine Adherence 262 occurrences	1. "Aproximadamente 70% da população vai ser infectada. Não tem como fugir disso" [Bolsonaro em 20/04/2020] / 2. "No meu caso particular; como já fui infectado; eu já tenho anticorpos; eu não vou tomar a vacina" [Bolsonaro em 31/12/2020] / 3. "Uma coisa que é uma verdade: quem contrai o vírus está mais imunizado; tem mais anticorpos do que quem tomou a vacina" [Bolsonaro em 08/12/2021].
Social isolation (Lockdown) 216 occurrences	1. "O que se passa no mundo tem mostrado que o grupo de risco é o das pessoas acima dos 60 anos. Então por que fechar escolas?" [Bolsonaro em 24/03/2020] / 2. "4- A política do fique em casa que a economia a gente vê depois acabou e o 'depois' chegou. A imprensa; que tanto apoiou o fique em casa, agora não apresenta opções de como atender a esses milhões de desassistidos" [Bolsonaro em 29/09/2020] / 3. "Foi um negócio que nem a OMS apoiava; esse negócio de lockdown; que eu sempre fui contra" [Bolsonaro em 19/12/2021].

Use of Mask 30 occurrences	<p>1. "Tem algum médico aí? Eficácia dessa máscara é quase nenhuma" [Bolsonaro em 19/08/2020] / 2. "E essa máscara aí ela é pouco eficaz. Já tem alguns médicos que tão falando que é um percentual baixo de eficácia" [Bolsonaro em 27/11/2020] / 3. "O CO2 não leva ao sono? Não ajuda o sono? O cara tá com uma máscara; o carro tá fechado. Ele com a máscara; respirando ali. Quer dizer; vai ter uma oxigenação menor no seu corpo. Isso não precisa ser médico para dizer isso aí. Isso pode levar a acidente" [Bolsonaro em 17/06/2021].</p>
Others 11 occurrences	<p>1. "O diretor-presidente da OMS é médico? Não é médico" [Bolsonaro em 23/04/2020] / 2. "Ele falou no protocolo que foi usado em Manaus; usando três a quatro vezes uma dose maior que 200 mg; que é um protocolo chinês. Todos; 100% morreram" [Bolsonaro em 07/05/2020] / 3. "A desinformação mata mais até que o próprio vírus. O tempo e a ciência nos mostrarão que o uso político da Covid por essa TV trouxe-nos mortes que poderiam ter sido evitadas" [Bolsonaro em 09/08/2020].</p>

Source: Authors (2023).

From the observed extracts, it is evident how Bolsonaro structured an attack strategy against the agenda proposed by the WHO, using characteristic elements of populism. In his speech, he adopted a polarizing posture, creating a division between "the people" and "the elite", portraying the WHO as an alleged elite with hidden interests. To achieve his goals, Bolsonaro claimed that the vast majority of the population would inevitably be infected by the virus, downplaying the severity of the Pandemic. Furthermore, he stated that since he had already been infected, he would not take the vaccine, suggesting that he had superior immunity to vaccine immunization.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF DEFENSE CONTENTS

Table 7. Examples of Defense Speeches

Defense (Discursive)	Example of Contents
<p>Early Treatment (Off Label) 599 occurrences</p>	<p>1. "Sabemos que não tem comprovação científica que ela é eficaz, mas também não tem comprovação científica que não tem comprovação eficaz [a hidroxiclороquina]. Nem que não tem nem que tem." [Bolsonaro em 16/07/2020] / 2. "Se ele [médico] receitar o tratamento precoce; faça; mesmo você tendo sido vacinado duas vezes" [Bolsonaro em 17/08/2021] / 3. "Esse comprimidinho pro lado de cá; que eu não posso falar pra não cair a live; com meia dúzia daquele comprimidinho da caixa azul [hidroxiclороquina] resolve o teu problema. O outro; meia dúzia também; que é pra</p>

*combater ali piolho [ivermectina]; também resolve o teu problema"
[Bolsonaro em 14/10/2021].*

Source: Authors(2023).

Bolsonaro presented himself as someone revealing a hidden truth that the WHO, as the supposed elite in antithesis, would not reveal. He defended the use of early treatment to the detriment of vaccines and other recommendations. To strengthen his narrative, Bolsonaro stated that the correct use of (hydroxy)chloroquine would not have side effects, emphasizing its effectiveness as a solution to the disease.

It also encouraged people to pursue early treatment even after they've been vaccinated, portraying it as a superior option. In his speeches, he evasively mentioned (hydroxy)chloroquine and ivermectin, suggesting that these "pills" could solve the problems of individuals, implying that they were the key to fighting the virus. By presenting himself as someone who shares a "truth" hidden by the supposed elite represented by the WHO, Bolsonaro then used rhetoric with populist characteristics to attract popular support and consolidate himself as the leader who defended the interests of the people, while defying the recommendations of the international health organization.

4.3 ANALYSIS OF DEFENSE CONTENTS

Table 8. Examples of Institutional Content

Content (Institutional)	Example of Contents
Federal Articulations 594 occurrences	1. "Boletim Segov Estadual e Municipal" / 2. "Monitoramento da Aquisição e Distribuição de Fármacos no Âmbito da COVID-19" / 3. "Plano de Contingência para Atendimento ao Paciente com Suspeita ou Infecção pelo novo Coronavírus (Sars-Cov-2), orientações aos Hospitais Universitários".
Reports and Bulletins 404 occurrences	1. "Vigilância em Foco" / 2. "Anuário dos Programas de Controle de Alimentos de Origem Animal" / 3. "Boletim Epidemiológico Covid-19".
Documents and Regulations 344 occurrences	1. "Observatório de Tecnologias Relacionadas à COVID-19" / 2. "Documentos do Hospital Universitário" / 3. "Portarias publicadas sobre COVID-19".
Protocols and Guidelines 287 occurrences	1. "Medidas Tributárias Adotadas no Combate à Covid-19" / 2. "Protocolo UCM manejo clínico paciente COVID19" / 3.

"Orientações sobre o tratamento Farmacológico do paciente adulto hospitalizado com Covid-19".

Bids and Contracts 283 occurrences	1. <i>"Ata de Registro de Preços"</i> / 2. <i>"Ata de Registro de Preços do Pregão Eletrônico"</i> / 3. <i>"Medicamento, Vacina e Hemoderivados - Parcerias Vigentes e Extintas"</i> .
Scientific Evidence 244 occurrences	1. <i>"Fosfato de Cloroquina tem mostrado aparente eficiência no tratamento do COVID-19 associado a pneumonia em estudos clínicos"</i> / 2. <i>"Revisão sistemática da eficácia e segurança da Cloroquina para o tratamento da COVID-19"</i> / 3. <i>"O que os atletas precisam saber sobre tratamentos do COVID"</i> .
News 231 occurrences	1. <i>"Cloroquina: Forças Armadas intensificam a produção no Brasil"</i> / 2. <i>"Camex zera Imposto de Importação de mais 61 produtos para combate ao coronavírus"</i> / 3. <i>"Medidas adotadas pelo Governo Federal no combate ao coronavírus"</i> .
Inputs and Trade 190 occurrences	1. <i>"Plano Anual de Contratações 2020 - Insumos Estratégicos para Saúde - IES"</i> / 2. <i>"Lista de Importação e Exportação"</i> / 3. <i>"Lista de Conformidade Técnica"</i> .

Fonte: Autores (2023).

As we move from the discursive dimension to the Institutional one, we observe how the Brazilian State was mobilized by Bolsonaro to promote the defense agenda of early treatment. This alignment was evidenced in the 2,577 contents mapped in the official channels of the Federal Government that mentioned such off label, highlighting the self-presented materials as "scientific evidence" and the 'heroic news' propagated about the army's action in the production of drugs. It is also worth noting the amount of government material produced to guide public policies in federative relations and other aspects.

5 DISCUSSIONS

From the observed literature, Prasad (2020), Canovan (2002) and Moffit (2015) show us that, in the imminence of crises, as is the case of the COVID-19 Pandemic, leaders with an authoritarian bias tend to use such a context to stir up disputes and create moral panic among citizens, and may even incite violence. Still, the authors are dealing with a dimension of 'politics', not necessarily analyzing a dimension of 'policy'. Amidst the convergence with the multiple flows in dispute in the formation of the agenda and the window of opportunity for issues to become problems (Kingdon, 1984), what we saw from the data collected is that the crisis not only widens the space for authoritarian action, but it can also transform peripheral topics into a central focus of governance, significantly shaping the formation of the public

'policy agenda'. So, such a crisis can be used as a 'window of opportunity' to move forward, in addition to 'politics agendas', also 'policy agendas' - being a 'policy window' -, a fact that is illustrated by the way former President Jair Bolsonaro promoted the treatment as an alternative to WHO recommendations during the COVID-19 Pandemic, institutionalizing denialism beyond a rhetorical dimension.

While populism literature highlights the dichotomy that such leaders create between "the elites" and "the people", placing themselves in the role of legitimate representatives of the people, when fighting a supposed "corrupt elite" that hides versions of reality (Barr, 2009; Betz, 2002; Rueda, 2021; Ware, 2002; Weyland, 2001); on the other hand, the autocracy literature details the process of co-option of the Institutions, mobilizing and demobilizing the State's action fronts, pointing to the 'role of the rulers' in the wear and tear of the Institutions and democratic erosion, where erosion becomes gradual and incremental (Lührmann; Lindberg, 2019; Lührmann; Tannenberg; Lindberg, 2018; Olson, 1991).

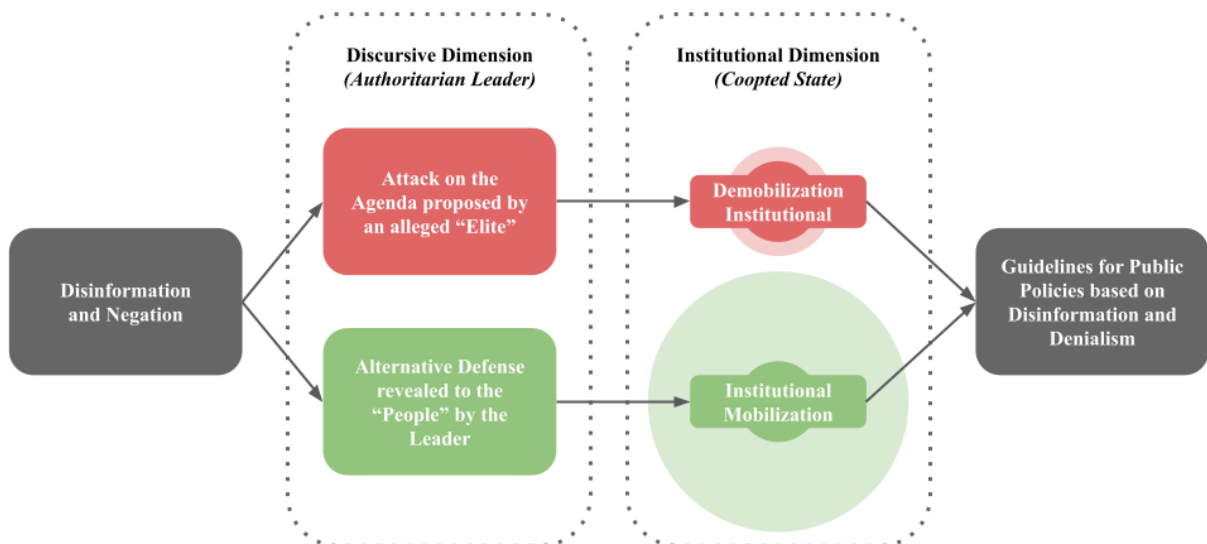
Among the characteristics raised by the literature, there is a certain convergence in understanding the spread of disinformation and fake news as instruments for advancing such authoritarian agendas (Alizada *et al.*, 2021; Bernardi & Costa, 2020; Santos, 2022). It is in this aspect that we can observe where an authoritarian leader can propagate disinformation and fake news to dispute not only the vision on such an agenda, but also to mobilize the State's action dispute, where the State apparatus can be co-opted to print such a vision on a given guidelines, in an institutional dimension of public positioning.

When we look at the case of the dispute over early treatment during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil, this movement becomes clearer, because while on the one hand Bolsonaro attacks adherence to vaccines, social isolation (lockdown) and the use of masks, treating them as an ineffective agenda of an alleged "elite with hidden interests", in this case the WHO, he also defends the so-called early treatment as an alternative, especially exalting (hydroxy)chloroquine, ivermectin and azithromycin as a supposed "revealed truth" to "the people". In the midst of such disputes in a discursive dimension, however, basing an attack on the propagation of disinformation and fake news makes it possible to institutionalize such a denialist posture, a fact that stands out due to the defense of such posture by 2,577 contents mapped in official channels of the Federal Government in the period. In other words, disinformation as an instrument of demobilization and institutional mobilization, polarizing against an enemy "of the elites", co-opting the State to print a particular vision.

Evidently, other actors composed such flows in dispute over the formation of the agenda and, in addition, the popular mobilization carried out by Bolsonaro during his government composed a strategy with populist and authoritarian characteristics, as pointed

out by Guerrero & Silva (2023) and Silva & Neves (2023) - This is a central element to consider in the agenda setting. However, this article seeks to isolate, just to analyze, the policymaker dimension in the process of discursive mobilization and institutionalization of such an agenda. To this, the framework (Figure 4) systematizes such a phenomenon that we call 'institutional denialism', that is, the dynamics in which disinformation, fake news and denialism elevate interpretations of reality from a merely 'discursive dimension' of an authoritarian leader to the 'level institutional', resulting in guidelines for public policies based on disinformation and denialism, while Institutions are co-opted.

Figure 4. Framework 'Institutional Denialism'



Source: Authors (2023).

In the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, 'institutional denialism' can manifest itself when authorities or institutions responsible for public health minimize the severity of the virus, promote conspiracy theories, discredit preventive measures, such as the use of masks and social distancing. or even promote scientifically unproven treatments. This denialist stance can have significant impacts on public health, on the response to the Pandemic and on the population's trust in the authorities and institutions responsible for their protection. It is important to emphasize that 'institutional denialism' differs from the existence of legitimate controversies within the scientific community, which is part of the process of advancing knowledge. However, when Institutions adopt a denialist stance, ignoring or distorting scientific evidence to meet particular interests, informed and effective decision-making in dealing with public problems, such as a Pandemic, is undermined.

6 CONSIDERATIONS

This article proposed to reflect "What are the relations between the denialist discourses promoted by then President Bolsonaro and public policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil?", based on extraction techniques web scraping data via Python, combinations of methods were used to analyze the case for early treatment during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil, discursive data were extracted from statements by former President Jair Bolsonaro, including his false statements, tweets and posts on Telegram. Institutional data were also collected from official Federal Government channels, including publications and regulations.

After 22,575 contents were extracted and processed, 1,115 speeches by former President Jair Bolsonaro related to the agenda of early treatment and criticism of WHO recommendations during the COVID-19 Pandemic were listed, in addition to 2,577 contents on the official channels of the Federal Government that made mention of drugs related to off-label practices. In addition, of the 2,643 contents mentioning such off-label-enabled drugs in the Federal Government's official channels since the beginning of the publications found (started in 2015 with public registration), until the end of 2022, a total of 97.5% (2,577) was recorded during the Bolsonaro administration, representing an increase of 3,905% compared to the sum of previous years. That is, early treatment rose to the agenda and attention of the State in the face of Bolsonaro's continuous effort in its defense, becoming official guidance for public policies based on such institutionalized defense in the State.

Alignment: 1.) The data show a convergence between attacks on the vaccine, social isolation and the use of masks, adding to the discursive defense of early treatment in government channels; **2.)** Bolsonaro adopted a strategy to attack the WHO agenda, polarizing the discourse and discrediting the organization. He advocated early treatment, minimizing side effects and emphasizing its effectiveness; **3.)** The Brazilian State was also mobilized to promote this agenda, with official content mentioning early treatment, protocols, guidelines and regulations, in addition to tenders, contracts and news released by the government, where such a consistent strategy of discrediting and polarization contributed to the opposition to the agenda proposed by the WHO.

Disinformation as Authoritarian Convergence: 1.) While populism creates a dichotomy between "the elites" and "the people", portraying itself as legitimate representatives of the people, fighting an alleged "corrupt elite" that hides versions of reality, the literature on autocracy addresses the gradual co-option of Institutions and democratic erosion, moreover, in times of crisis, authoritarian leaders can exploit the situation to intensify disputes and incite moral panic, including by propagating disinformation. However, although

not every populist leader is autocratic, and vice versa, there is convergence in the understanding that the dissemination of disinformation is an instrument to advance authoritarian agendas; **2.)** In this sense, it presents itself to a phenomenon of 'institutional denialism', which refers to the dynamics in which disinformation, fake news and denials enable the elevation of interpretations in the discursive dimension of authoritarian leaders to an institutional dimension, resulting in guidelines for public policies based on disinformation and denialism.

Crisis as a Window of Opportunity for the Policy Agenda: If, on the one hand, Moffitt (2015), Prasad (2020) and Canovan (2002) show that crises are windows of opportunity for authoritarian leaders to advance their 'politics' agendas, on the other hand, this article points out that crises can also be used as a 'Kingdonian' 'window of opportunity' (Kingdon, 1984) for authoritarian leaders to advance their 'policy' agendas, being a 'policy window'. In the context discussed in this article, this is illustrated by the way Bolsonaro promoted early treatment as an alternative to WHO recommendations during the COVID-19 Pandemic, institutionalizing denialism beyond a rhetorical dimension. This analysis highlights the intersection between populist and authoritarian strategies during crises, when leaders can both polarize discourse against "elites" and promote alternative agendas and institutionalize this narrative through public policy. Therefore, the crisis not only expands the space for authoritarian action, but can also transform peripheral topics into a central focus of governance, significantly shaping the formation of the public 'policy agenda'.

Research Limitations and Future Studies: **1.)** The analysis focused mainly on the speeches and institutional materials of former President Jair Bolsonaro and the federal government, failing to explore other relevant actors in the context. Future research could examine the influence of other political leaders, media and civil society organizations in spreading disinformation by forcing 'institutional denialism'; **2.)** Another limitation is that the research focused specifically on the case of early treatment during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil. Future studies may investigate the phenomenon of 'institutional denialism' in different contexts and crises, analyzing how authoritarian leaders and co-opted institutions use disinformation to advance their agendas; **3.)** In addition, this article proposed to conduct content analysis using Python techniques relating discourses with institutional materials. To this, a methodological path is made possible that merges automation practices with data sciences and humanities, in addition, the scripts and bases and materials raised were made available in an open format for transparency purposes, but also for future investigations.

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