

PANDEMIC COORDINATION, ECONOMY,
DENIALISM, AND EMOTIONS IN THE TRUMP
AND BOLSONARO GOVERNMENTS

*COORDENAÇÃO DA PANDEMIA, ECONOMIA,
NEGACIONISMO E EMOÇÕES NOS
GOVERNOS TRUMP E BOLSONARO*

*COORDINACIÓN DE LA PANDEMIA, ECONOMÍA,
NEGACIONISMO Y EMOCIONES EN LOS
GOBIERNOS DE TRUMP Y BOLSONARO*

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ABSTRACT: This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the editorials from the Washington Post and O Estado de São Paulo newspapers, examining the denialist coordination of the Covid-19 pandemic under the governments of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, as well as its intersections with the economy and emotions. Contrary to the perceived failure attributed to the pandemic coordination, our thesis is that it represented the realization of a conservative power project, based on the systematic denial of science and democratic principles. Denialism is understood as a historical and political category aimed at constructing ignorance and distorting the truth, serving as a foundation for far-right governments. Through this lens, the layers

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of this political strategy unfold, mapping its ramifications and impacts beyond the health crisis, in the fields of emotion and the economy, highlighting the multifaceted influence of denialism on the contemporary social context.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19. Denialism. Economics. Emotions.

RESUMO: *Este artigo empreende uma análise comparativa dos editoriais dos periódicos Washington Post e O Estado de São Paulo, examinando a coordenação negacionista da pandemia de Covid-19 sob os governos de Donald Trump e Jair Bolsonaro, bem como suas interseções com a economia e as emoções. Contrariando a percepção de fracasso atribuída à Coordenação da pandemia, nossa tese é que esta representou a concretização de um projeto de poder conservador, assentado na negação sistemática da ciência e dos princípios democráticos. No cerne deste estudo, o negacionismo é entendido como categoria histórica e política voltada à construção da ignorância e a distorção da verdade, servindo de alicerce para governos de extrema direita. Através dessa lente, desdobram-se as camadas dessa estratégia política, mapeando suas ramificações e impactos além da crise sanitária, nos campos da emoção e da economia, sublinhando a multifacetada influência do negacionismo no tecido social contemporâneo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Covid-19. Negacionismo. Economia. Emoções.

RESUMEN: *Este artículo realiza un análisis comparativo de los editoriales de los periódicos Washington Post y O Estado de São Paulo, examinando la coordinación negacionista de la pandemia de Covid-19 bajo los gobiernos de Donald Trump y Jair Bolsonaro, así como sus intersecciones con la economía y las emociones. Contrariamente a la percepción de fracaso de la coordinación de la pandemia, nuestra tesis es que esta representó la realización de un proyecto de poder conservador, basado en la negación sistemática de la ciencia y de los principios democráticos. En el núcleo de este estudio, el negacionismo se entiende como una categoría histórica y política dirigida a la construcción de la ignorancia y la distorsión de la verdad, sirviendo de base para gobiernos de extrema derecha. A través de esta lente, se despliegan las capas de esta estrategia política, mapeando sus ramificaciones e impactos más allá de la crisis sanitaria, en los campos de la emoción y la economía, subrayando la influencia del negacionismo en el tejido social contemporáneo.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Covid-19. Negacionismo. Economía. Emociones.

Introduction

The research underpinning this article investigates the actions taken by the governments of China, Brazil, and India regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and how it was addressed in editorials and opinion articles in the newspapers People's Daily (China), O Estado de São Paulo (Brazil), and Times of India (India) from the perspective of the Global South during 2020 and 2021. During data collection, two distinct positions became evident. While China adopted strategies to combat COVID-19 that were markedly based on modern scientific and technological recommendations, Brazil and India adopted strategies that denied the severity of the health crisis and discredited science and technologies designed to combat the virus. In this context, the discourse and actions of the Modi and Bolsonaro governments were aligned with those of the Trump administration, which may give rise to a working hypothesis that emphasizes understanding the pandemic under conservative governments.

Starting from this possibility, we introduced the United States into the data collection, as its handling of the health crisis was foundational to the political strategies that became a reference for the Bolsonaro administration. To understand how Trump's United States dealt with the health crisis, we examined editorials and opinion articles from the Washington Post, and for Bolsonaro's Brazil, we analyzed the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*.

The choice of opinion articles and editorials from these newspapers is based on the fact that both represent traditional media outlets in their respective countries. From the perspective of the editorial lines of these newspapers, we could assert that they are "tolerant" of conservative governments, although, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were critical of Trump and Bolsonaro, whose management contradicted the protective measures advocated by the World Health Organization. Furthermore, the newspapers offered sharp criticisms of the use of non-scientifically recommended therapies, such as hydroxychloroquine, ozone, and ivermectin.

Amplified by the social media platforms of their supporters, the statements of Trump and Bolsonaro assumed the status of truth (Adorno, 2020; Proctor, Schiebinger, 2005), producing misinformation and garnering support for proposals that downplayed the severity of the pandemic. According to Proctor and Schiebinger (2005), ignorance, which is often associated with a lack of knowledge about something in the political realm, takes on an intentional perspective. They argue that the political objective of this deliberate production of ignorance through specific sciences and arts is to control the masses not only through misinformation but also by manipulating particular segments of the truth.

Adorno, in *Studies on Authoritarian Personality* (2019), argues that a significant portion of the population is more susceptible to authoritative political discourse, submitting uncritically to what is said. In this regard, he identifies certain personality traits and attitudes within this population that predispose them to authoritarian or extremist ideologies. By observing behavioral patterns within this susceptible segment of the population, Adorno developed what he calls the F Scale. When we examine the discourse of contemporary far-right leaders and their effects on the population, we see a resemblance to the personality traits and predispositions described by the author.

Rooted in the us-versus-them antagonism, far-right discourse aims to weaken democracy. This political strategy, initially proposed by Carl Schmitt (1929), seeks to create a conflict scenario in which political opposition is viewed as an enemy that must be annihilated under the pretext of threatening social harmony. Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2015) revisit this discussion, updating it and demonstrating how contemporary far-right movements continue to employ this practice. According to the authors, political antagonism involves simulating a belligerent reality, resulting in this segment of the population aligning with conservative ideology. The belligerent metaphor of far-right discourse divides society into the good (us) and the bad (them), and thus, both discourse and action are characterized by political Manichaeism.

Countries as diverse as the United States, Turkey, Poland, India, Hungary, and Brazil have witnessed in recent years the rise of far-right national leadership characterized by ultra-conservatism, extreme nationalism, attacks on minority rights, and direct communication via social media, bypassing major news outlets, often with disinformation and fake news (Bassani, Fabris, Simoni Jr, 2021, p. 233-234, our translation).

Similarly, Morais, Costa, and Bernardi (2020) argue that Trump's statements about COVID-19 in the US demonstrate that populist far-right discourse operates through "selective information" that exacerbates political polarization between us and them:

Perception of polarization, then, alters citizens' attitudes, generating negative feelings towards the other, as they are perceived as not part of their group. The result is the generation of political intolerance and hate speech. Therefore, populist discourses can increase this perception and generate negative attitudes and behaviors regarding specific issues under debate (Morais; Costa; Bernardi, 2020, p. 131-132, our translation).

Denialism is neither a new¹ nor unique phenomenon, but one that can be observed across various times and fields of human knowledge and action: History, Philosophy, Sociology, Natural Sciences, politics, and even common sense. According to López (2023), denialism as a social phenomenon denies an empirically verifiable truth, insofar as it conflicts with a group's interests, beliefs, and ideas. Its strategy involves constructing arguments based on false experts and conspiracy theories, thereby producing false interpretations of facts. This argument aligns with Proctor and Schiebinger's (2005) views on the intentional and systematic production of ignorance and control over the truth, as well as Adorno's (2019) arguments. In this article, we consider that the management of the pandemic in the US and Brazil, founded on denialism, was the expression of an authoritarian and far-right power project that denies science, democracy, and civilized principles (Valim, Avelar, Bevernage, 2021; Caponi, 2020; López, 2023).

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by the data used in this article, such discourses and actions inevitably led to a significant increase in the number of deaths and illnesses. The examination of the data led us to consider the hypothesis that denialist politics highlighted the precariousness of life, especially for the most vulnerable, and the insistence of both presidents on denying the virus's effects and accusing the press of manipulating the data. From this perspective, it became evident not only the economic and social inequality among the victims but also these leaders' defense of a supposed ontological difference between individuals, which seeks to justify inequality while also explaining the virus's differentiated effects.

However, while this hypothesis helps understand the nuances of the pandemic in the United States and Brazil, we conjecture that the denialist coordination of the pandemic by Trump and Bolsonaro was related not only to misinformation and distortion of the truth but also contributed to the transmission and propagation of the virus. The thesis we support in this article is that denialism, by constituting itself as a tool for the systematic production of ignorance, is part of the far-right political project, shaping the discourse and actions of these leaders. By disseminating lies, denialism transformed them into perceived truths through their effects, reproducing denialist content and attitudes among individuals who were stripped of their ability to distinguish between false and true (Kant, 1985; Honneth, 2018).

Although considered failures in pandemic management, Trump and Bolsonaro proved effective in producing misinformation aimed at controlling the masses. Examples of this effectiveness include the public's adherence to denialist discourse regarding science, belief in communist threats, and concerns over the end of individual freedoms, religious freedoms, and family values. The mobilization power of

¹ See Rousso (2008) on this subject.

denialism led to anti-democratic demonstrations (the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, in the US and January 8, 2023, in Brazil) and the growth of organized far-right groups in both countries. With Trump's and, subsequently, Bolsonaro's defeats, the denialist project continued but was now embraced by right-wing and far-right politicians and movements.

Methodology and Analysis Guidelines

Data collection was conducted using the newspapers *O Estado de São Paulo* and *The Washington Post* from the first two years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021). We selected editorials and opinion articles that addressed the topic in the daily editions of these newspapers. The articles not only reflected the statements made by Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro, as well as their immediate aides, including ministers, secretaries, directors of government agencies and state-owned enterprises, advisors, and parliamentarians of the same political orientation as the presidents, but also revealed the positions taken by the newspapers and the type of debate they proposed regarding how these governments handled the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Editorials and Opinion Articles from *O Estado de São Paulo* and *The Washington Post* – 2020-2021

Newspaper	Year 2020	Year 2021	Total
<i>O Estado de São Paulo</i>	180	108	288
<i>Washington Post</i>	533	391	924
<i>Total</i>	713	499	1212

Source: Authors, 2024.

The first observation is that both newspapers were largely critical of Trump and Bolsonaro. These positions can be understood not only as a reaffirmation of the interests of the liberal and democratic groups to which these newspapers are affiliated but also as a reflection of their concerns about the severity and extent of the health crisis triggered by COVID-19.

The tool used for data collection was NVivo10. Its use allowed the themes addressed in the editorials and opinion articles to be classified into a set of nodes or categories that synthesize the topics covered in each of the analyzed articles. The categories used in the research were developed based on a preliminary reading of a subset of editorials and opinion pieces from both newspapers, corresponding to 10% of the total articles published about the pandemic for each year covered in the study. We then calculated the frequency of the themes discussed in the editorials

and opinion articles, which helped us define which categories would be addressed in this article. The recurrence of themes was central to our decision on how to classify the empirical material. Once the categories were established, we read all the published texts, as per Table 1, and performed subsequent classification. The results of the classification were subjected to a significance scale that allowed us to assess the relevance of the themes. The scale we developed consisted of three intervals ranging from 1 to 10, with 10 representing the maximum frequency of the theme and 1 representing the minimum. This distribution allowed us to create three levels of significance, with values assigned as follows: 1 to 3 indicating low significance, 4 to 6 indicating medium significance, and 7 to 10 indicating high significance. With the help of this scale, we selected the categories of high significance for this article, which are listed in the table below.

Table 2: Categories and Frequency in the Analyzed Newspapers – 2020 and 2021

Categories	<i>Estadão</i> 2020	<i>Estadão</i> 2021	Washington Post 2020	Washington Post 2021
Denialism	123	167	167	187
Emotions*	66	26	111	79
Pandemic Coordinator	173	87	168	118
Economy	89	36	89	103

Fonte: os autores, 2024

The **category of denialism** includes the denial of science and the protective measures recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) (mask usage, isolation, social distancing, and hygiene). This category also encompasses the denial of the severity of the infection, the extent of the pandemic, and the role of the media in reporting data on cases and deaths. The **category of emotions** covers themes related to the sensitivity and feelings² produced by the pandemic: manifestations of suffering, fear, death, loss, grief, helplessness, loneliness, abandonment, and solidarity. The category of **pandemic coordination** includes the political dimension of managing the health crisis, including measures taken to contain the virus, the role of the State in supporting victims of the coronavirus, the public health system,

² AMARANTE *et al* (2020), Coping with psychological suffering during the pandemic: dialogues on reception and mental health in vulnerable territories. RANGEL *et al*. (2021), COVID-19 in China, Italy and the United States of America: a short review. SANDÍN, *et al* (2021), Emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the period of confinement in Spain: Protective factors and risk/vulnerability factors. TIZÓN (2020), Emotional health in times of pandemic. Urgent reflections. SOUSA *et al*. (2020), Feelings and emotions of men in the context of the covid19 disease. ASÚN *et al*. (2020), The emotional impact of the pandemic on young people: Sociabilidad, conflicts, and politics. ORNELL *et al* (2020), "Pandemic fear" and COVID-19: mental health burden and strategies.

and programs supporting vaccine and medication development. The **category of economy** encompasses the relationships between economic production and the pandemic, measures such as lockdowns, income and job protection, maintenance of small and micro enterprises, and social assistance programs for the poorest social segments.

Our thesis treats the pandemic coordination of these leaders as a political strategy founded on the denial of science and the severity of the health crisis, concerning its impacts on the economy and emotional production (emotions). Such practices were accompanied by the systematic production of ignorance, falsehoods, and misinformation about the virus and the pandemic through mass media (Proctor, Schienbinger, 2005; Arendt, 1998) and primarily through social media; the promotion of treatments with no scientific validation, discourse on maintaining economic activity, and advocacy of individual freedom, given that any measures of isolation and social distancing were framed as authoritarian exercises of State control over citizens. In both the United States and Brazil, isolation measures were only implemented after pressure from governors, mayors, and social movements, and were not approved by central governments, leaving the responsibility for social isolation measures to local leaders.

Even though governors from different Brazilian states attempted to adopt isolation measures, the lack of federal government coordination, absence of common guidelines, and contradictory and cross-referenced information contributed to abandoning isolation and restricted control possibilities. On May 14, 2020, President Bolsonaro declared that we are at war. However, he did not refer to the questionable metaphor used by other presidents when talking about a war against the pandemic. On the contrary, President Bolsonaro chose to declare war on governors and mayors who, in different states of Brazil, supported the implementation of social isolation policies. He sought assistance from business leaders, urging them to obstruct quarantine measures. Indeed, this war declared on May 14 had already been underway since the initial implementation of epidemic control measures and intensified after the dismissal of Minister Henrique Mandetta (Caponi, 2020, p. 210, our translation).

The denialist coordination of the pandemic inevitably contributed to the significant increase in the number of sick and deceased, leading us to consider that it highlighted the precariousness of life (Butler, 2018; Honneth, 2009; Souza, 2019), particularly for the most vulnerable, exacerbated by social inequality³ and the

³ See on this subject: Oliveira et al (2020), Racial inequalities and death as a horizon: considerations on COVID-19 and structural racism. Lima (2021), The Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil contextualized under the

insistence of both presidents on neglecting measures to combat the virus and care for the sick. From this perspective, it became apparent not only the social inequality of the victims but also the defense by these leaders of a supposed ontological difference (Butler, 2018) between individuals. Understanding health inequality places us within the broader context of the origins of all forms of inequality, which encompasses not only economic, social, racial, and gender phenomena. While these dimensions are fundamental to its understanding, they are not sufficient. Inequality is much more than the visible differences or external marks that can be perceived by common sense through the manifest differences between groups of individuals and their practices. Thus, it is not enough to address only what is immediately visible, but also what lies beyond economic disparity, political participation, education, culture, gender, race, or skin color. When we talk about inequality, we refer to two dimensions of this phenomenon that are not explicit in the economic and social dimensions (income, education, culture, lifestyle), focusing on forms of social integration and ways of life⁴.

The hypothesis of ontological difference, underlying far-right thinking, naturalizes social inequality and, in the case of the pandemic, naturalizes the effects of the virus and illness. The lost lives were considered expendable, and despite being in the thousands, they were not enough to prompt either Trump or Bolsonaro to reconsider their approach to pandemic coordination; on the contrary, they remained steadfast in their denialist project. According to Butler (2018, p. 15, our translation), “the apprehension of the precariousness of life leads to a potentiation of violence, to a perception of the physical vulnerability of a certain group of people that incites the desire to destroy them.”

On the one hand, the data reflect how the pandemic was managed by these governments, and on the other hand, how they acted to deny not only the pandemic but also its impact on the feelings developed by the population in the face of a public health catastrophe that threatened everyone’s lives and simultaneously challenged science, perhaps in its most radical form, to produce effective means for disease prevention and suffering mitigation in record time.

Although the hypothesis of ontological difference helps to understand some nuances of the pandemic in the United States and Brazil, we also sustain the hypothesis that denialism constitutes a systematic tool for producing ignorance (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2005), and thus operates as a political project that encompasses all dimensions of life and social order affected by the health crisis.

Socio-Racial Prism. On the Pandemic and inequality in the USA, see: Canales and Fernandez (2020), Social and ethnic-racial inequality in the face of Covid-19 in the United States.

⁴ See on this subject: Rasia, Souza and Hoffmann-Horochovski (2022), Inequality and Health in Times of Pandemic.

Trump and Bolsonaro proved effective in managing the pandemic by disseminating false information with the aim of politically controlling the population, focusing on re-election and perpetuation of power. Examples of the effectiveness of this coordination include the public's adherence to denialist discourse, belief in the communist threat, the end of individual freedom, freedom of belief, and family values, and in the case of the pandemic, belief in ineffective treatments and attacks on both science and vaccines.

The denialism regarding the coronavirus crisis originates from far-right leaders, grounded in an “anti-globalist” ideology and characterized by a dual distrust: of international organizations and of China. They perceive a threat from any UN body, such as the WHO, at this moment. However, the American conservative strategist Steve Bannon, an interlocutor and ideological reference for the Bolsonaro family in Brazil, had been advocating for social isolation measures in the United States and was even surprised by the maintenance of Brazil's position. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, continued to double down on his stance. Repeatedly, Bolsonaro, who exhibits ignorance and disdain for scientific activity, disseminates distorted information and maintains a behavior of ignoring or mocking “social isolation” recommendations (Silva, 2020, p. 1, our translation).

The electoral defeat of Trump and later Bolsonaro, by a narrow margin of votes, did not extinguish the power project of the denialist far-right, which is now carried on by lawmakers, mayors, governors, and right-wing and far-right movements in both countries.

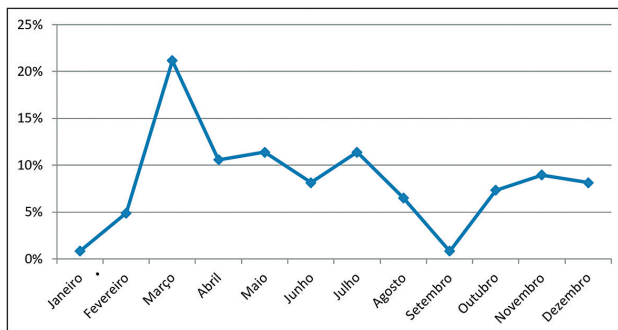
Discussion and Data Analysis

The results presented in this section refer to the quantitative treatment of the collected data. The data were classified according to the previously mentioned categories, allowing us to understand how Trump and Bolsonaro constructed narratives about the Covid-19 pandemic. These narratives were the subject of the newspaper articles considered here.

We begin with the data classification regarding the denialism category in the editorials of the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* during the year 2020. This category was discussed 123 times in the editorials and opinion articles analyzed, with monthly percentages presented in the graph below:

*Pandemic coordination, economy, denialism, and emotions
in the Trump and Bolsonaro governments*

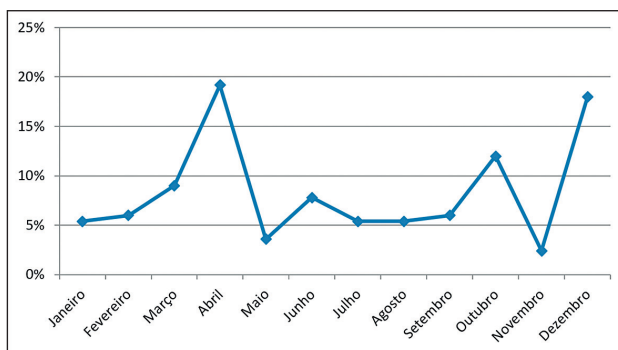
Graph 1: Denialism - O Estado de São Paulo: 2020



Source: Authors, 2024.

In the United States, this category was discussed 167 times, with the following distribution:

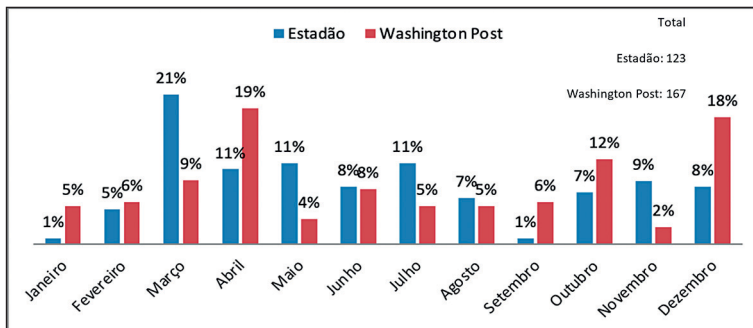
Graph 2: Denialism - Washington Post: 2020



Source: Authors, 2024.

Graph 3 shows the comparison between the two newspapers to facilitate the visualization of the phenomenon in both countries.

Graph 3: Denialism - O Estado de São Paulo and Washington Post: 2020



Source: Authors, 2024.

In Brazil, the month of March stands out, accounting for 21% of the total mentions of denialist acts and speeches. In contrast, the Washington Post shows two peaks: one in April with 19% of mentions and another in December with 18%. The higher percentages correspond to the months when the pandemic worsened in each country.

In Brazil, the data for March reveal that denialism was a topic of criticism in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo, particularly due to official statements by President Jair Bolsonaro, such as “the pandemic is just a little flu,” or when he downplayed the severity of the disease and scientific findings related to it by claiming that, due to his athletic background, he had nothing to worry about.

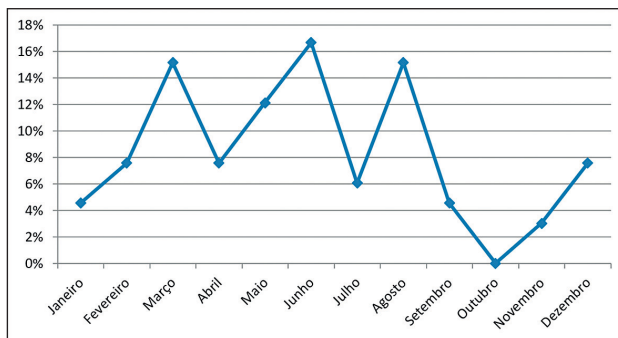
Meanwhile, in the United States, denialism led the country to sever its ties with the World Health Organization (WHO), while President Donald Trump made public statements similar to those of Jair Bolsonaro, endorsing coronavirus countermeasures without scientific validity. In an official White House briefing (April 23), Trump promoted sunlight and disinfectant injections as treatments for the disease. In both cases, the criticism of denialism in the two newspapers related, on one hand, to pandemic-related issues and, on the other, to the denialist statements of the presidents. The December peak in the United States, under the Biden administration, can still be considered a result of the Trump administration’s actions.

Data related to feelings or emotions in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo reveal that the months with the highest discussion of emotions in 2020 were March, August, and June. In March, the WHO declared a Public Health Emergency due to the severity of the virus, and in Brazil, states and municipalities implemented measures for isolation and social distancing. At that time, our understanding of the virus was limited, and we were unprepared to confront it. During this period, Bolsonaro attacked the arguments of scientists who highlighted the risks of the virus, its rapid spread, and modes of transmission. Bolsonaro and his supporters opposed

*Pandemic coordination, economy, denialism, and emotions
in the Trump and Bolsonaro governments*

the measures recommended by science, arguing that they would negatively impact economic growth.

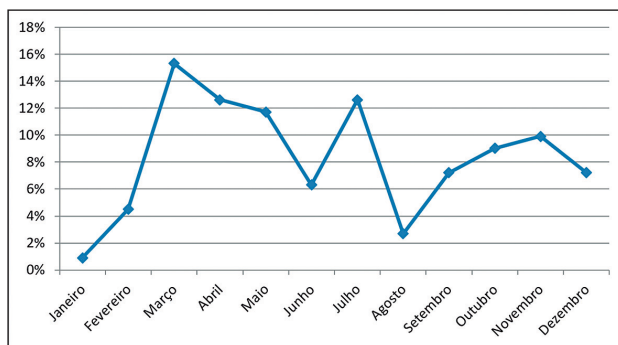
Graph 4: Emotions - *O Estado de São Paulo*: 2020



Source: Authors, 2024.

Data from **Graph 5** shows that in the United States, March, April, and July were the months with the highest presence of issues related to feelings of loneliness and fear of death in the texts published by the Washington Post. The reasons are similar to those observed in Brazil. Trump maintained a denialist stance, questioning pandemic prevention and mitigation measures, as well as the WHO's declaration of a Public Health Emergency. At this time, as in Brazil, the American far right launched campaigns against the WHO, not only cutting health funding but also threatening to withdraw from the organization. Social isolation and physical distancing measures were also viewed as detrimental to the economy and individuals who would lose income and jobs due to not working.

Graph 5: Emotions - Washington Post: 2020

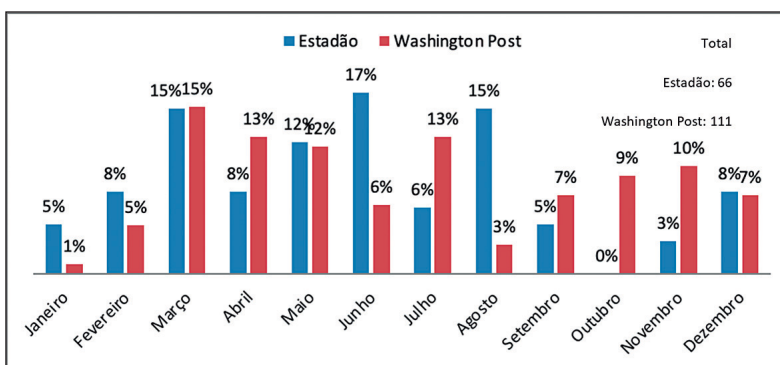


Source: Authors, 2024.

When comparing the information, we observe that in March, both newspapers coincide in their percentage of mentions regarding emotions and feelings. A common situational factor in both countries at this time is the WHO's position on the pandemic, the severity of the virus, and containment measures: social isolation and physical distancing. Regarding the use of protective masks, Bolsonaro was a staunch opponent.

On March 4, the first death on U.S. soil was reported in California. The discussion of emotions recorded in the Washington Post depicts the Trump administration as politically destabilizing for downplaying the effects of the pandemic. As a result, on the 27th of that same month, the U.S. became the first country to surpass 100,000 Covid-19 cases.

Graph 6: Emotions - O Estado de São Paulo and Washington Post: 2020



Source: Authors, 2024.

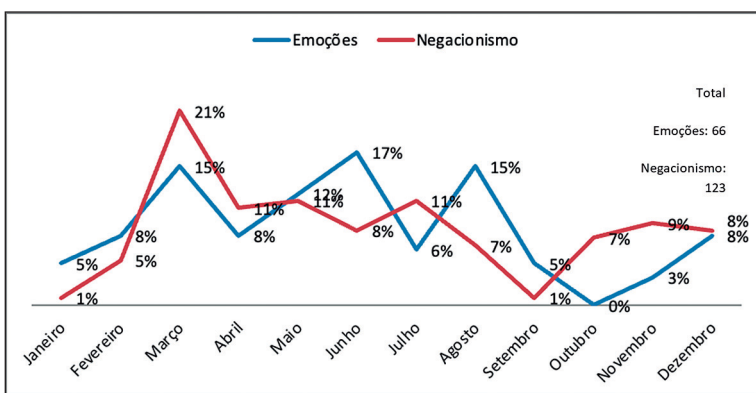
In the United States, mentions of emotions in July (13%) can be attributed to the exponential increase in the number of cases. At this point, the country has surpassed 4 million cases, according to official government reports.

In Brazil, June stands out, with 17% of discussions addressing the theme of emotions during the pandemic, coinciding with a change in the government's data reporting method. The new method focused solely on reporting cases recorded in the last 24 hours. The press treated this methodological change as a form of political manipulation of data, deliberate misinformation, and minimization of the pandemic. In response to this change, a consortium of media outlets was created to disclose the real data. In August, with 15% of mentions, the country reached over 100,000 deaths and 3 million infections, ranking second in the world for the number of cases and deaths, behind only the U.S., which had 4.9 million infected and 161,000 deaths. In the Washington Post, the percentages are 9% in October, 10% in November, and 7% in December. Trump's unchanged political strategy for managing the pandemic

partly explains the increase in fear and insecurity among the population, as reflected in the discussions presented in the newspaper's editorials.

It is evident that similar factors determined the greater or lesser presence of references in both newspapers, regarding both emotions and denialism. The denialist statements and attitudes of Trump and Bolsonaro and their disregard for the pandemic can be understood as part of the same power project. From the perspective of the population, this results in the development of feelings such as fear, insecurity, helplessness, hopelessness, and distrust, among others. In Brazil, this can be observed in the following graph:

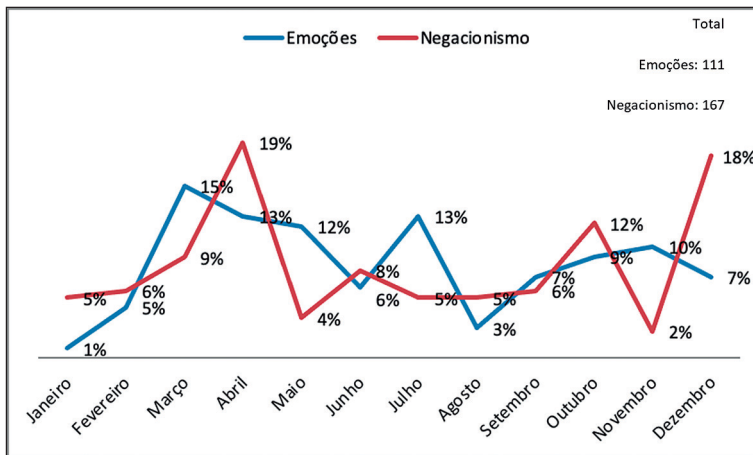
Graph 7: Denialism and Emotions – *O Estado de São Paulo*: 2020



Source: Authors, 2024.

In the United States, the relationship between emotions and denialism presents the following scenario:

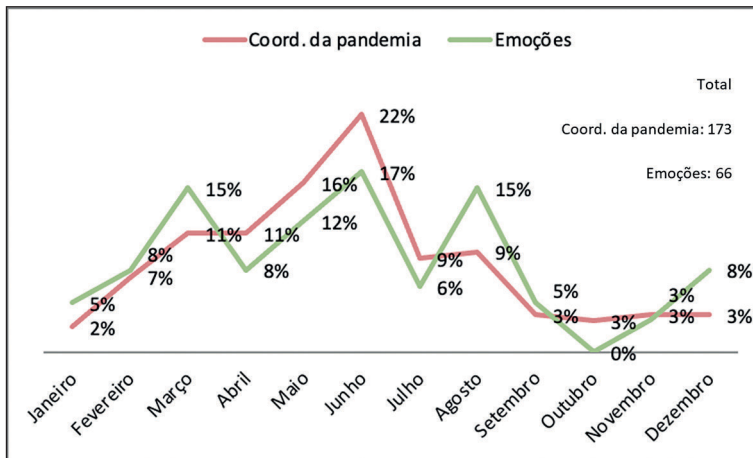
Graph 8: Relationship Between Denialism and Emotions in the Washington Post: 2020



Source: Authors, 2024.

From the comparison between the pandemic coordination category, which refers to the political treatment of confronting the pandemic and emotions, in Brazil, we have the following data:

Graph 9: Pandemic Coordination and Emotions - O Estado de São Paulo: 2020



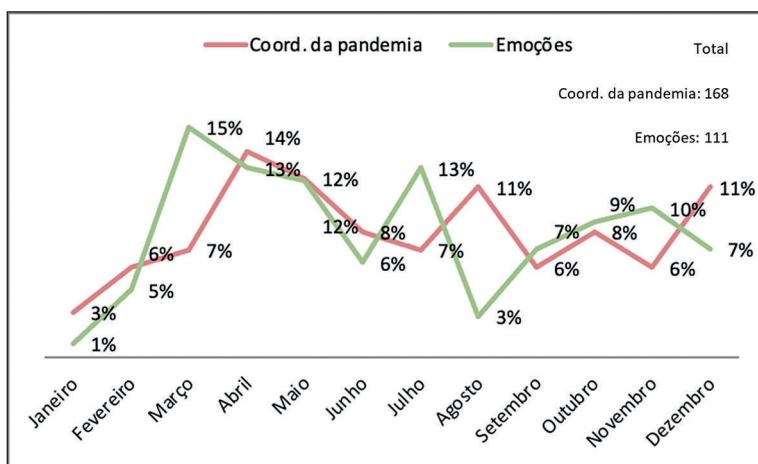
Source: Authors, 2024.

In March, a month that saw a rise in discussions about pandemic coordination, articles began focusing their criticism on the Bolsonaro administration's management, starting with its initial denialist statements, corroborated by the dismissal of

Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who advocated for horizontal isolation. Meanwhile, the government proposed a questionable vertical isolation policy, isolating only individuals in high-risk groups: the elderly, diabetics, those with severe chronic illnesses, and immunocompromised individuals. In May, with 16% of references, Brazil, aligning with the Trump administration, adopted a policy against the WHO, considering it a threat to national sovereignty. By July (22%), the peak for this indicator in the country, the president spoke out against acquiring vaccines produced in China. This statement was followed by strong support from Bolsonaro's allies, who disseminated various attacks on the vaccine's quality. In July, with 9% of references, there was a shift in responsibility for pandemic coordination to states and governors.

Despite this, the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* maintained its critical stance towards Bolsonaro and his government team, especially the Ministry of Health, for its refusal to assume pandemic coordination and the crisis generated by the dismissal of Minister Mandetta.

Graph 10: Pandemic Coordination and Emotions - Washington Post: 2020

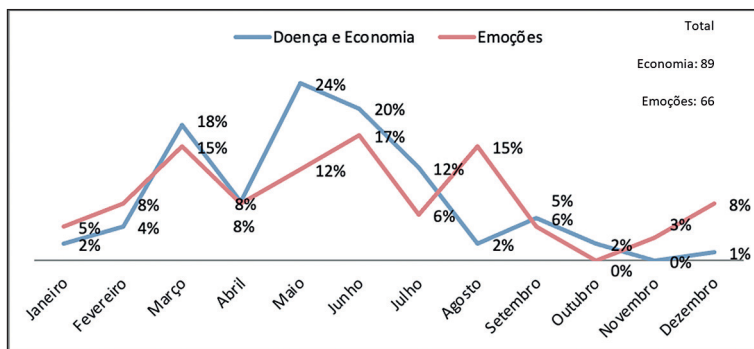


Source: Authors, 2024.

In April 2020, the United States, which had previously reported 200,000 cases and approximately 4,000 confirmed deaths, surpassed 900,000 cases with 58,365 deaths—a number greater than the American soldiers killed in the Vietnam War. From a political management perspective, Donald Trump announced the suspension of funding for the WHO. By August of the same year, according to records from the Washington Post, the United States exceeded 5 million confirmed cases, a result of the denialist approach to pandemic coordination. The same percentage (11% of

references) was repeated in December, with over 100,000 hospitalized. However, discussions about pandemic coordination in that month can be interpreted in light of the effects of the election of the new President, Joe Biden, and how he, unlike his predecessor, began to encourage vaccination and effectively combat the pandemic. Conversely, mentions related to emotions decreased, indicating increased public security in response to the new administration's public policies.

Graph 11: Economy and Emotions – O Estado de São Paulo: 2020

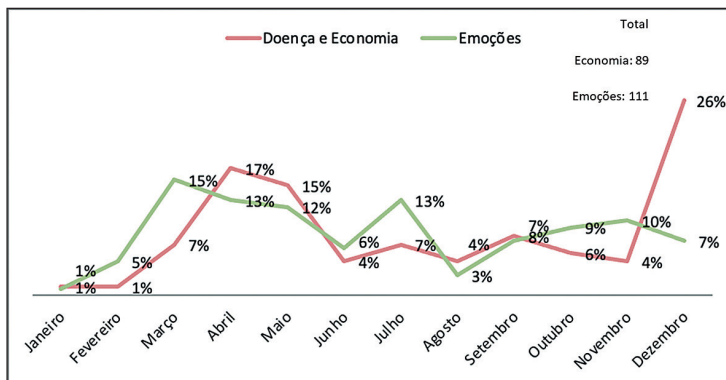


Source: Authors, 2024.

The period of greatest incidence in articles discussing the impacts of the pandemic on the economy centers on three months: March, May, and June, with 18%, 24%, and 20% of the references for the year 2020, respectively. The main focus of this discussion was the economic crisis, social isolation measures, and physical distancing. Regarding the economy, Bolsonaro attributed the deepening crisis, the collapse of small and medium enterprises, increased unemployment, decreased general income, inflation, and the food security crisis to protective measures (Bragon *et al.*, 2022).

In the United States, references to the impacts of COVID-19 on the economy can be observed in the following graph:

Graph 12: Economy and Emotions in the Washington Post: 2020

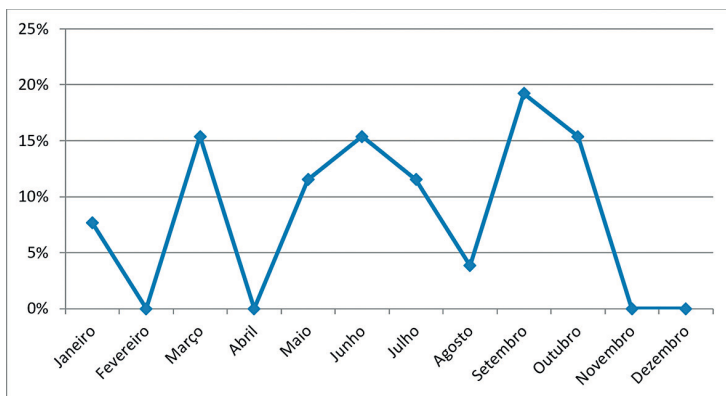


Source: Authors, 2024.

As expected, the discussion on this topic began in March with 7% of the references and grew significantly in April and May, with 17% and 15%, respectively, due to the uncertainties and insecurities caused by the pandemic and social isolation measures. It was also predictable that references to the economy would increase in December in response to Joe Biden's election and the expectation that the new president would implement policies for better economic management.

The data collected for the year 2021 allows us to conduct a series of analyses, among which we again highlight the relationship between emotions and denialism, using pandemic coordination and discussions about the future of the economy as reference points.

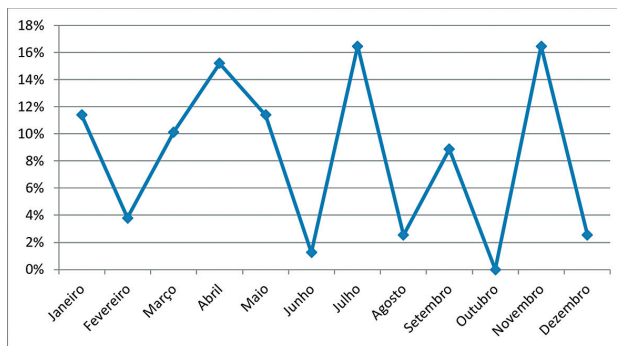
Graph 13: Emotions – O Estado de São Paulo: 2021



Source: Authors, 2024.

While there are no references to emotions in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* for the months of February, April, November, and December, the months of September (19%), October (15%), June (15%), and July (15%) saw the highest values of the year. In the United States, the Washington Post made no references to emotions in October, while there was a significant increase in April (15%), November (16%), and July (17%).

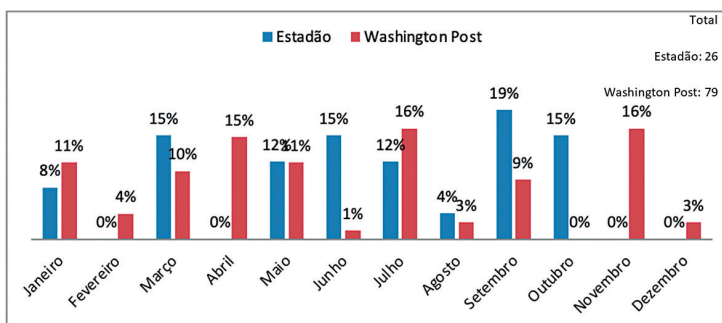
Graph 14: Emotions – Washington Post: 2021



Source: Authors, 2024.

The comparison between the newspapers (Graph 15) allows us to visualize some aspects related to emotions and events during the year 2021 in both countries, as we will analyze further.

Graph 15: Emotions – O Estado de São Paulo and Washington Post: 2021



Source: Authors, 2024.

In Brazil, the most significant number of references is found in the months of March (15%), June (15%), September (19%), and October (15%). In March, references to emotions are associated with the increase in daily deaths. At the beginning

of the month, there were 2,000 deaths, and by the end of the month, on the 23rd, there were 3,251. In São Paulo alone, there were 1,021 deaths in a single day. At this point, Brazil had already surpassed 300,000 deaths, with confirmed cases exceeding 12 million. In March, Brazil accounted for 11% of the world's COVID-19 deaths.

April 2021 was the deadliest month of the pandemic in Brazil, with 67,723 deaths. In this same month, 4,249 deaths were recorded in 24 hours. It is noteworthy that there are no references to emotions for this month. The texts primarily discuss the president's denialism, the economy, and the need for the establishment of a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) to investigate possible crimes of omission by the government.

June (15%) shows a peak in references to emotions that coincide with the increase in COVID-19 vaccinations among Brazilians. The availability of the vaccine through the Unified Health System (SUS) briefly rekindled hope for the end of the pandemic. However, this hope turned back into pessimism, and fear resurfaced strongly with the emergence of the Delta variant of the coronavirus.

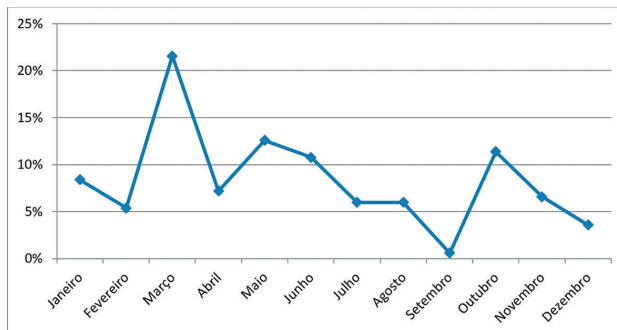
In September, with most infections being caused by this variant, there are 19% of mentions related to emotions. On one hand, Brazil reached 590,000 deaths and 150,000 new cases, totaling 21.2 million infected individuals (Queiroz, 2021). On the other hand, there was still a certain level of optimism due to the reduction in the number of deaths, which fell to approximately 500 per day, representing a 75% decrease compared to April.

In the United States, the peaks in references to emotions, as recorded in Washington Post articles for April (15%), July (16%), and November (16%), reflect a different context. In April, a significant factor contributing to the increase in discussions about emotions is that, according to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), 35% of the U.S. population had already been infected, contrary to the official underreported figures. In July (16%) of the same year, the number of infections exceeded 34 million, while in November (16%), the number of infected increased from 46 million at the beginning of the month to 48 million by November 25. Emotions varied between fear of new threats from variants detected by the WHO and optimism regarding the increase in the number of vaccinated individuals.

Meanwhile, references to denialism saw a fundamental shift. In 2021, the United States, under the presidency of Joe Biden from the Democratic Party, began implementing significant changes in pandemic management. This shift redirected discussions, with texts no longer addressing denialism related to pandemic management but instead criticizing the Trump administration. In Brazil, however, President Jair Bolsonaro maintained his denialist stance, expressed through political actions opposing public health measures against the coronavirus.

Overall, the data from both countries are as follows, starting with Brazil:

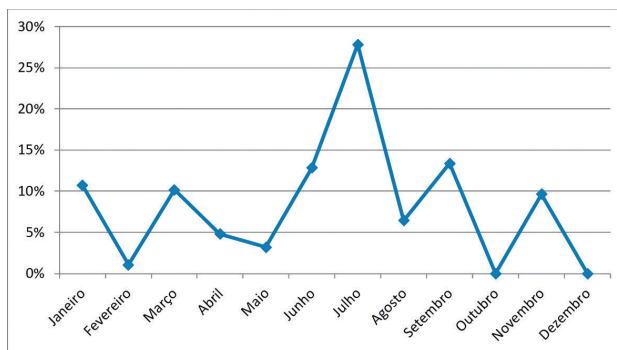
Graph 16: Denialism in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo: 2021.



Source: Authors, 2024.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the statistics are:

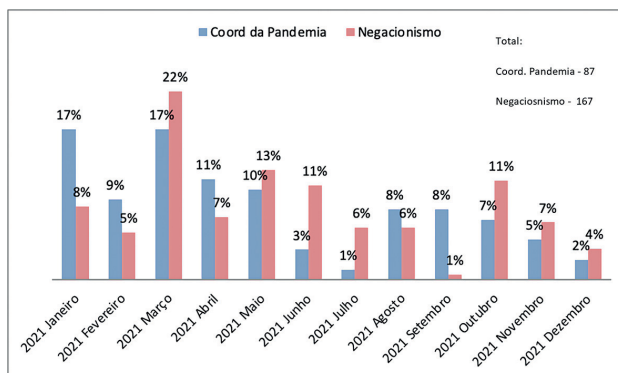
Graph 17: Denialism in the Washington Post: 2021.



Source: Authors, 2024.

The highest peak recorded in the O Estado de São Paulo newspaper occurred in March, with 22% of references related to denialism. During this month, headlines included: “Bolsonaro is not merely irresponsible or negligent. He has become harmful by deliberately obstructing the efforts of health professionals and public authorities committed to containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Santos, 2021); “Antivaccine in the COVID-19 pandemic: denialism kills” (Fran, 2021); “No country has had a denier as active in the presidency as Bolsonaro’s Brazil” (Silva, 2021). Denialism, not as mere omission or incompetence, but as a government project, marked the pandemic coordination.

Graph 18: Pandemic Coordination and Denialism – O Estado de São Paulo: 2021



Source: Authors, 2024.

Pandemic coordination, in the months of March and January, accounted for 17% of the references, showing that besides public attacks on vaccines and scientific recommendations, Bolsonaro prioritized the defense of the economy. The tone of the articles in January highlighted that the government intentionally neglected public health, exposing issues such as the lack of oxygen in Manaus-AM and the shortage of hospital beds, equipment, and professionals in public health services.

In the United States, supporting our hypothesis, in July, 28% of references and articles addressed denialism by discussing the management of former President Donald Trump, with a total of 121 mentions of his name or government. Still, in that same month, the number of new cases surged by 70% in one week, primarily due to the antivaccine campaigns by American far-right groups and antivaccine movements.

There has been considerable discussion in Brazil and the United States regarding how Bolsonaro and Trump did not show empathy toward their populations during the pandemic. They were perceived as detached and indifferent to the suffering and difficulties faced not only by individuals directly affected by the disease but also by the entire population of their countries, who, in various ways, felt threatened by the virus, unemployment, and the lack of any form of income. The decrease in economic activity, exacerbated by the closure of factories and businesses and suspension of services, physical distancing, and social isolation, was not promptly accompanied by protective measures for the most vulnerable.

In the United States, the groups most affected by the pandemic were Latinos and the Black population. “Mortality from COVID-19 is significantly uneven according to ethnic-racial origin. As of November 14, 2020, the mortality rate for Whites was 48.4 deaths per 100,000 people, among Latinos this rate reaches 141.7 deaths per 100,000, and among African Americans 142.7⁵ deaths per 100,000.

⁵ On this point, see: Canales and Fernández (2020).

The coronavirus crisis in the United States has highlighted significant racial disparities, particularly affecting the African American community. For example, in Michigan, African Americans, who make up 14% of the population, account for over 30% of recorded infections and 40% of deaths related to the disease. In Chicago, where they constitute 29% of the population, they represent 70% of the fatalities resulting from the disease (Milam, Tréré, 2020; Einhorn, 2020). Additionally, there is a lower frequency of COVID-19 testing among African Americans, a phenomenon that may indicate unconscious racial bias among frontline health professionals, suggesting that African American patients are less frequently referred for testing when they seek medical care with symptoms of infection⁶.

In Brazil, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted Black (Oliveira *et al.*, 2020), indigenous, and the most disadvantaged communities. During Bolsonaro's administration, official statistics on the outbreak initially did not include detailed information on race or ethnicity. This gap was partially addressed after pressure from organizations demanding that the government consider this data. Subsequent epidemiological reports began to report only data related to deaths and hospitalizations, omitting statistics on confirmed cases segregated by race or ethnicity (Silva, Morais, Santos, 2020). Recent research, such as that by Martins and colleagues (2022), reveals that the virus had a more lethal effect on Black, mixed-race, and Brown citizens in Brazil, where it is observed that one in every four hospitalized patients and one in every three COVID-19 deaths are from these ethnic-racial groups.

The Unified Health System (SUS) has always responded at the limit of its capacity to the demand for treatment for mild cases through Basic Health Units (UBS) and for severe cases requiring hospitalization by relying on Emergency Care Units (UPA), which transformed into makeshift hospitals with Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and ward beds; public hospitals maintained by SUS; available beds in hospitals contracted with SUS; and field hospitals.

The emotional cost for doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, and other health-care workers has not yet been thoroughly studied, but it is known that they were subjected to excessive workloads amid the risk of infection and the lack of ventilators, oxygen, medications, and patient beds. A survey conducted with healthcare workers in the Metropolitan Region of Curitiba-PR, between 2020 and 2021, by the Health Sociology Research Group (UFPR), found that nurses, physiotherapists, and intensivists were the most emotionally affected by the pandemic at that time. To account for the difference in risk, involvement, and proximity among frontline workers combating COVID-19, the survey divided them into two groups: bedside

⁶ In this regard: Goes, Ramos and Ferreira (2020), Racial inequalities in health and the Covid-19 pandemic.

workers and outpatient workers, concluding that the former experienced the highest levels of stress and emotional strain in the healthcare service during the pandemic (Rasia, 2021)⁷.

The lack of a public health system in the United States led to an unprecedented crisis, primarily represented by the lack of free access to healthcare services. As expected, the poor were the most affected by illness, including Black and Latino populations. Those who managed to receive some form of hospital treatment with limited resources found themselves in debt upon leaving the hospitals, making them poorer and more vulnerable. ObamaCare revealed its limitations not due to exhaustion but because it did not constitute a public system with universal access.

In very general terms, it is within this health crisis context that Bolsonaro and Trump persist in pandemic coordination that does not implement social protection measures for the poorer population and continue to affirm the discourse that denies the lethal effects of the virus, the role of science, and present themselves as advocates of medications proven ineffective against the new coronavirus. In the wake of these actions, both Bolsonaro and Trump showed little regard for the deaths, deprivations, and sufferings endured by Brazilians and Americans. It is in this context that the term “lack of empathy” proliferates as an expression attempting to address the discourse and actions of these presidents. The meaning of this expression relates to what could be considered disregard, neglect, absence of otherness, and recognition.

Having lost the election to Biden, Trump left office at the end of 2020. This fact is crucial for understanding the shift in discourse and denialist actions, which no longer have Trump as their primary agent. Instead, the focus has shifted to the Anti-Vaccine Movement, far-right legislators, representatives, and continuators of Trumpism within the Republican Party, as well as conservative and far-right Governors and Mayors. These agents are now responsible for advancing the discourse and the fight against isolation and social distancing measures, reopening the economy, and campaigning against vaccination.

In Brazil, the continuation of Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency has maintained him as the principal agent of denialist discourse, anti-science sentiments, opposition to social protection measures, and complete economic reopening. Jair Bolsonaro has been the main proponent of anti-vaccine ideas and a series of attacks on science.

If “lack of empathy” points to the absence of otherness towards those affected by the catastrophe, our analysis sought to understand this absence beyond mere lack of recognition and alienation. Firstly, because the dimensions implicated in the concept of recognition, as understood by Hegel (2014) and later by Honneth (2009), extend beyond the realm of Law and Morality. Secondly, the “lack of empathy” of

⁷ Rasia, José Miguel (Coord.) *Work and Health Workers in the Pandemic*. Curitiba, 2021. (Unpublished Research Report).

Trump and Bolsonaro constitutes a project, guiding political action oriented towards the interests of a plutocratic and financial elite, and expresses a desire for economic success at any cost.

By situating the roots of inequality, Butler (2018) engages in a critical dialogue with Honneth (2018). While Honneth (2018) situates recognition within the sphere of Law and Morality, Butler (2018) argues that the absence of recognition goes deeper, residing in a supposed ontological difference among humans. The struggle for recognition is not only a fight for rights and social visibility but also a struggle to overcome the alleged ontological inequality and its political consequences. Butler's radical understanding rests not only on the emergence of a society of equals but also on the establishment of new forms of social bonds where markers such as race, sexuality, gender, and economic property are not determinants of an individual's position on the social scale.

Thus, denying the pandemic is a form of political action that is acting against social interests and in favor of the particular interests of the social segments that control power and the market. Although these segments are also at the mercy of the virus and illness, we know that when the pandemic affects them, it does not do so under conditions of social and economic vulnerability.

Final considerations

The research presents a comparative analysis of the management of the pandemic by two notoriously controversial political leaders, Donald Trump, and Jair Bolsonaro, highlighting the adoption of denialist strategies and their implications for public health, the economy, and the social fabric of the United States and Brazil. The study demonstrates how denialism, understood not only as a rejection of science but as a deliberate political strategy, served the purpose of maintaining power by ignoring scientific recommendations and the health needs of the population. Bolsonaro and Trump embedded denialism at the core of their conservative political projects as a social and historical phenomenon. The data allowed us to understand it as a source of manipulation of the truth, systematic production of lies, and ignorance aimed at mass manipulation.

The denialist management of the pandemic had effects that reverberated through the population's emotions: fear, insecurity, and helplessness were exacerbated by the lack of a coherent and evidence-based governmental response. This aspect of the research is of particular importance as it highlights the precariousness of life and the human cost of the adopted policies, an element often underestimated in political and economic analyses.

Regarding economic issues, the concerns of both presidents reveal a struggle against protective measures such as lockdowns, border closures, physical isolation, and social distancing. Therefore, these measures were deemed harmful to maintaining economic activity and were attacked by both leaders. Neither Bolsonaro nor Trump implemented a national lockdown, avoiding the political burden of such measures and leaving their implementation to local governments.

Moreover, the article underscores the economic consequences of these policies, emphasizing a false dichotomy between health and the economy that guided the decisions of both governments. Analysis of editorials from the Washington Post and O Estado de São Paulo reveals a consistent critique of how Trump and Bolsonaro downplayed the impacts of the pandemic, promoted false information, and discouraged science-based mitigation practices and recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO).

Emotions were addressed in the articles in close connection with the denialist coordination of the pandemic and the economic issues raised by the Presidents. Although specific emotions were not individually named, the category of emotions encompasses the effects of the pandemic on the feelings and affections of the populations in both countries. The manipulation of fear, loneliness, abandonment, despair, helplessness, loss, and mourning reflects the sentiment of a population unprotected by state policies manifested in denial and the absence of vaccines, effective therapies, hospital beds, and basic supplies. At the same time, it was observed that the presence of the theme of emotions in both newspapers increases with each new outbreak of the virus. Generally, a new variant of the virus updates the set of emotions considered here.

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*Pandemic coordination, economy, denialism, and emotions
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