

Populism and Religion in Brazil: The View from Education Policy

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This article is a case study of Brazil, a country where Catholic-based organizations have historically played a key role in providing education and welfare services. Since the 1980s, these organizations have supported progressive changes at both the national and subnational levels. Nevertheless, the influence of religion on education policy has shifted in the last few decades. Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups have gained prominence through representatives in the National Congress, and, in 2018, formed a coalition enabling the election of a right-wing populist President. We analyse the trajectory of religious groups' influence on Brazil's education policy over time (colonization to the 1980s, the 1980s to the beginning of the 2000s, and the 2000s until now) through a qualitative-historical analysis of primary and secondary data. This article argues that both Catholic and Protestant groups have influenced progressive changes in Brazil's education policy, but they also share conservative ideas impeding further advances.

Keywords: Populism, religion, education policy, Brazil.

Introduction

In Brazil, religious organizations have played a significant role in the development of education policy. Until 1890, the Catholic Church was considered to be part of the Brazilian State and played an important role in providing educational services for vulnerable groups. This changed at the beginning of the First Republic (1889-1930), especially with the 1891 Constitution when the Brazilian State became responsible for schools (Scampini, 1978; Landim, 1997). However, this did not prevent the Catholic Church from shaping 'the non-governmental universe' (Landim, 1997: 354). In the following decades, the Catholic Church provided educational services, including child-care services, through non-governmental organizations (Landim, 1997; Albuquerque, 2006). Moreover, individuals and organizations linked to the Catholic Church were key in calling attention to specific issues, particularly poverty and inequalities, and supported progressive policy changes at both the national and sub-national levels (Cohn, 2000; Leubolt, 2016). As in other Latin American countries (Löwy, 1996; Cancian, 2016), Catholic organizations also became an important force of opposition to the authoritarian

governments that controlled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, though the upper echelons of the Church hierarchy supported the 1964 military coup (Nascimento, 2017).

In the last few decades, the influence of religious organizations in politics and policies has shifted in Latin America, including in Brazil (Guadalupe and Grundberger, 2018). The number of politicians affiliated with Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups has increased in Brazil so that, after the 2014 elections, 'seventy-four out of 513 seats in the Lower House of the Federal Congress' were won by representatives supported by these groups (Costa *et al.*, 2019: 3). There is some debate about whether the election of these candidates is a result of the growth of Protestantism over the last few decades (Oro, 2003; Reich and Dos Santos, 2013; Rodrigues and Fuks, 2015; Nascimento, 2017; Guadalupe, 2018; Lacerda, 2018; Lacerda and Brasiliense, 2018). In 2000, Protestants represented 15.4 per cent of Brazil's population (26.2 million Brazilians); in 2010, this number had increased to 22.2 per cent (42.3 million Brazilians) (Queiroz, 2019). Scholars do agree, however, that this shift was a result of the strengthening of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal organizations. Churches were built, especially in vulnerable areas, and members of the upper and middle classes converted. Increasingly, Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups acquired political influence and began participating in politics and political parties. They also came to control non-governmental and private organizations, including the media. All of this ended the Catholic Church's hegemony in the country (Mariano, 2013; Nascimento, 2017; Lacerda, 2018; Lacerda and Brasiliense, 2018). The situation in Brazil is part of a larger Latin American trend; the Catholic Church has lost ground throughout the region mainly due to its lack of flexibility and rigid hierarchy, its repression of progressive groups, and its narrow geographical range (Queiroz, 2019).

Since 1986, an increasing number of politicians affiliated with Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups have been elected to the National Congress, as well as to state and municipal executive and legislative bodies (Nascimento, 2017; Dip, 2018). These politicians, especially federal and state deputies, have sought to block progressive policies: for example, related to abortion and gender recognition, and since 2004 have started to promote conservative and moralistic proposals and bills with the support of other religious groups, including conservative Catholics (Dip, 2018). In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, a retired army captain who had served multiple terms in the House of Representatives, campaigned on a platform that combined conservative and moralistic ideas with a populist and a neoliberal agenda. As in other countries, this populist right-wing discourse reinforces the idea that 'we' are struggling against dangerous 'others,' including the 'corrupted elite' and 'traditional politicians,' as well as ethical and racial minorities (Benveniste *et al.*, 2016; Müller, 2016; Speed and Mannion, 2017; Van Acker, 2019). Populism is a concept that scholars traditionally use to explain the rise of left-wing presidents in Latin America and in Brazil in particular (see Ianni, 1968; see also Weffort, 1978), yet it is now being used to understand the rise of right-wing governments worldwide, aligning the Brazilian experience more closely with Western Europe.

This article seeks to contribute to broader debates about the rise of right-wing populism by understanding the factors that influenced the shift in Brazil. The article discusses the role of religion in Brazil's education policy path through a historical and qualitative analysis of three periods of time: 1) colonization to the 1980s, during which time the Catholic Church had a prominent role in public service provision; 2) the 1980s to the beginning of 2000s, when politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal

churches started to influence policy; and 3) since the beginning of 2000s as politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches strengthened their influence on the government's policy agenda. The analysis of these three periods shows that progressive groups linked to both Catholic and 'historic' Protestant (i.e. not Pentecostal and Neopentecostal) groups were key in changes made to education policy over time, reinforcing ideas related to social justice, inclusion, and equality. Nevertheless, more conservative groups linked to Catholic and Protestant (i.e. Pentecostal and Neopentecostal) groups have gained prominence in political debates by opposing progressive changes. This allowed them to form a coalition that supports Bolsonaro's government.

Methodology and research design

This study was based on a qualitative and historical analysis of Brazilian education policy and uses the process tracing method (Collier, 2011). This method allowed critical juncture moments in Brazilian education policy that shifted the previous policy path to be identified in three different historical periods. We seek to identify how religion affected policy changes in each period, and the factors that explain these shifts.

Empirical research included a range of data sources. To analyse the first time period (colonization to the 1980s), we reviewed the scholarly literature since previous studies discuss this topic. To analyse the second time period (1980s to the beginning of 2000s), we reviewed the scholarly literature and analysed education legislation and bills and data collected in in-depth interviews. Finally, to analyse the third period (since the beginning of 2000s), we reviewed the scholarly literature and analysed education legislation and bills related to key changes that seek to promote diversity and equality in the education policy in the last two decades; legislative transcripts of bill debates in Congress and speeches and public statements made by government representatives and members of Congress related to key education policy changes, particularly, since Bolsonaro's election; media coverage (we searched for articles on recent changes in Brazil's education policy in *Folha de São Paulo*, which covers education policy, and *Nexo Jornal*, which covers politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups); and in-depth interviews. The interviews, conducted between June and August 2019 and lasting from forty to ninety minutes, were with two academic experts (interviewees 1 and 2) and two government informants (interviewees 3 and 4). The interviews were important in collecting primary data on recent changes and in validating the critical junctures identified from other sources. The secondary and primary data were analysed through a qualitative and historical lens.

Colonization to the 1980s: the rise of the Catholic Church

The formal separation of State and Church was introduced in Brazil in 1889 with the beginning of the First Republic and was reinforced in the 1891, 1934, 1937, 1946, and 1967 Constitutions. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church and the Brazilian State maintained a close relationship, which has influenced the path of education policy (Scampini, 1978; Landim, 1997).

Religious orders established Brazil's first health care, education, and social assistance organizations. From Portuguese colonization in the sixteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, the Catholic Church was the main provider of services in these three policy fields with the creation and maintenance of nursing homes, orphanages, and

religious schools. The Holy Houses of Mercy (*Santas Casas da Misericórdia*), created in 1543, were the first organization to provide hospital services. Similarly, religious organizations pioneered foster care to children and young people in conditions of vulnerability until Brazil's independence in 1822 (Landim, 1997; Albuquerque, 2006).

As Gonçalves (2011) notes, mercy homes were founded in the sixteenth century because the characteristics of Iberian administration in the Americas meant that the Church occupied the space deliberately left by 'a slavery-based, exclusionary, disengaged, and unconcerned State' (Gonçalves, 2011: 320, our translation) that did not guarantee minimum care to the most vulnerable. The relationship between the Church, the State, and the vulnerable was based on the exchange of financial assistance for health care, hospital, and poverty alleviation service provision; the Church's wish to be a source of social power; and a politics of privilege characterized by the charity practices that dominated Christian thinking.

Religious organizations were also important as Brazil became industrialized and urban in the 1930s, supporting social and labour movements that advocated for an expansion of social protections. Social policy expansion during Getúlio Vargas' government (1930-1945) relied on a model that included non-governmental organizations (including Catholic organizations) as health care, education, and social assistance service providers (Souza, 2004). The Catholic Church also influenced the introduction of religious content into public school curriculum in the 1934 Constitution (Azevedo, 2004).

In the 1950s and 1960s, new religious groups, in alliance with labour, social, and campesino movements, called for basic reforms (*reformas de base*) related to land, education, and health care. As a result of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, Brazil's Catholic Church decided to expand its work providing social and political services, promoting rural unionization and popular education, and creating the 'popular progressive Church' and Liberation Theology (*Teologia da Libertação*) that advocated for human rights in the 1970s (Souza, 2004). In this context, Paulo Freire, a left-wing Catholic, called for a 'liberating pedagogy.' He believed that teaching and learning processes were based on dialogue, must consider local contexts and people's experiences, and are intrinsically ideological and are key in promoting critical thinking, social inclusion, and engagement to change reality. Paulo Freire's ideas inspired the government and Catholic Church to implement a national program, the Basic Education Movement (*Movimento de Educação de Base*), in 1961. The program was essential in diffusing Freire's ideas across the country (Haddad, 2019).

The alliance between religious organizations connected to Liberation Theology and rural and urban social movements continued during the authoritarian period (1964-1985) through the creation of the Christian Basic Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, CEBs) (Löwy, 1996). Within this context, religious organizations opposed governmental repression, denouncing violations of human, political, and social rights, including freedom of speech, and promoting re-democratization (Cancian, 2016). One example of this was the Catholic University of São Paulo's (*Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo*) support of a 1977 protest against the authoritarian regime. The Catholic Church was also important in providing settlement and integration services for political refugees and displaced people from other Latin American countries ruled by under authoritarian governments (Segatto, 2019). In 1980, a part of this activism was formalized, when local and political leaders linked to more progressive groups of the Catholic Church, as well as Catholic priests, participated in the creation of the left-wing Worker's Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) in 1980 (Rocha, 2018).

There were, however, conservative groups within the Catholic Church. One of them was Tradition, Family, and Propriety (*Tradição, Família e Liberdade*), organized by Plínio Corrêa de Oliveira, who opposed the *reformas de base* (Rocha, 2018). Moreover, high levels of the Catholic Church supported the military coup in 1964 and organized the March of Family with God for Liberty (*Marcha da Família com Deus pela Liberdade*) just a few days before the coup. This march involved different conservative social groups that supported the military coup and opposed the progressive policies implemented by then-President Goulart. In response, the Church silenced and discouraged its progressive groups, a move that was reinforced with the shift to the right in the international Catholic Church's political position with the election of João Paulo II in 1978 (Azevedo, 2004). Even though progressive groups continued to influence policies, especially locally, their importance was significantly reduced (Nascimento, 2017).

During the 1950s, new religious denominations came to Brazil, weakening the Catholic Church's hegemony.¹ The first Protestant groups, called 'historic Protestants,' supported some progressive ideas including the separation of State and Church and civil and social rights. They had a role in social assistance, but were absent from the political arena. However, this context changed as conservative groups gained more importance. Conservative groups were influenced and supported by North American conservatives, and reinforced anti-communist feeling, fearing a radicalization of Latin American Protestants to socialism (Guadalupe, 2018). 'As a result, in this political dispute, the conservative view won. [...] It established an unbreakable Manichean view of the relation Church-world: the celestial in opposition to the earthly, and the spirit with the material; the believers versus the gentiles, and Christians (Protestants) in opposition to pagans (Catholics). The God-Devil dichotomy was even extended to ideological categories between North American capitalism (God) and Atheist Communism (Devil); and even the absolute rejection of political life and, above all, politics' (Guadalupe, 2018: 33, our translation). Moreover, these groups, called Pentecostals, introduced ideas related to resignation, individual effort through labour, denied politics and discouraged political and social engagement. In the 1970s and 1980s, Neopentecostals emerged in Brazil. Unlike Pentecostals, they supported individual, not communitarian, prosperity and political engagement. Members were expected to participate in social and political processes and their private interests were supposed to dictate their political positions. Neopentecostals embrace the Theology of Prosperity (*Teologia da Prosperidade*), where those having faith will receive more material goods from God than others (Nascimento, 2017; Guadalupe, 2018).

The 1980s to the beginning of 2000s: the rise of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal Churches

During the 1980s, social movements were critical in the opposition to the authoritarian governments established since 1964 and came to have political weight, proposing policy changes and influencing politicians during the Constituent Assembly in 1985 (Weyland, 1995). With the return to democracy, the first representatives linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups were elected to the National Congress and Legislative Assemblies. Shortly thereafter, in 1987, the Evangelical Bench (*Bancada Evangélica*) was created to coordinate efforts and vote together in specific topics related to moral and ethical issues (Oro, 2003; Nascimento, 2017). They also influenced the Constituent Assembly, opposing

the expansion of the Catholic Church's privileges, feminist and LGBTQ rights, and the liberalization of abortion and drug use (Prandi and Santos, 2017). The liberalization of abortion was a common topic to the Catholic Church, which also opposed it. However, there were progressive groups linked to the Catholic Church that campaigned for land reform and child welfare (Azevedo, 2004; Machado, 2015; Wohnrath, 2017).

As a result, the 1988 Constitution included the universalization of social policies, which represented a milestone in the institutionalization of social policies as a State responsibility. In education, the new Constitution maintained a decentralized and 'dual' model (Cury, 2008), with states responsible for elementary and secondary education and municipalities for elementary education while the federal government provided financial and technical assistance (Brasil, 1988).² This represented a shift in the previous path; the federal government had not previously been a key player in education policy or provision (Abrucio, 2018).

Pressure from religious groups influenced the 'education chapter' of the Constitution, making education the responsibility of both the State and families (Brasil, 1988). According to interviewee 1, sharing responsibility for education was a response to lobbying by the Catholic Church. 'In the National Constituent Assembly, there was a fight: what does come first? 'Responsibility of the State and family.' The Catholic Church claimed 'family and State.' In a semantic point of view, this makes no difference; but, in a symbolic point of view, it does – because 'family and State' means a prevalence of the family in relation to the State. This means that education is a responsibility of the family supported by the State. This is the doctrine of the Catholic Church' (interviewee 1, our translation). The new Constitution also allowed private and non-governmental organizations to provide health, social, and educational services. This does not represent a new path, as the Catholic Church had previously played a key role in providing those services (Machado, 2015).

As the 1989 elections neared, Pentecostal and Neopentecostals in the legislature became increasingly concerned about left-wing candidates, especially Lula. They argued that Lula's election would bring an alliance between Communist groups and the Catholic Church to power. This reasoning led them to support Collor for the presidency. According to Edir Macedo, pastor of Brazil's largest Neopentecostal Church, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*), 'if Lula wins, the Church [Catholic] will command the country' (Pierucci and Mariano, 1992: 104, our translation). However, 'historic Protestants' supported both Lula and more progressive policy proposals (Pierucci and Mariano, 1992), and maintained that support until Lula was finally elected in 2002.

The governments that followed the 1988 Constitution had neoliberal agendas, especially the Cardoso government (1995-2003), focused on economic stability and reducing inflation, which led to restrictions over subnational institutions' finances. Within this context of financial constraints, the federal government implemented an administrative reform inspired by new public management ideas that reinforced the provision of social services by non-governmental organizations (MARE, 1995). In practice, these new ideas meant that non-governmental organizations linked to Catholic and now Protestant groups continued to provide services. Non-governmental organizations linked to Protestant groups increased in number during the 1990s and 2000s, operating schools, day-cares, rehabilitation programs, and job-training services, among others (Reich and Dos Santos, 2013). One example of this is the Christian Charitable Association (*Associação Beneficente Cristã*), created in 1994 to strengthen UCKG's participation in the provision

of social services. This organization had a key role in mobilizations to fight hunger and poverty, organizing events to collect donations, food, and provisions to be sent to grassroots organizations. These kinds of activities had a great impact on UCKG's reputation (Machado, 2012).

During the 1990s and 2000s, Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups also increased their importance with an expansion of temples and private organizations, and an extensive use of radio and television. In the case of the UCKG, Lacerda (2018: 6) argues that 'the Church has considerable media influence, controlling a national network of AM and FM radio, the Aleluia network and the Record TV station. Besides being the most famous, Igreja Universal [UCKG] is also the most politically and electorally successful Brazilian Pentecostal church.' Similarly, Reich and dos Santos (2013: 10) points out that 'the UCKG's business interests are even farther reaching, reflecting the group's Prosperity Theology – influenced promotion of entrepreneurial success: it owns Brazil's second-largest television network (TV Record), thirty-five radio stations, two mass circulation newspapers, and a bank.'

Moreover, Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups shifted their political strategy by launching their own candidates and organizing their religious organizations similar to political parties. As a result, they started to influence politics in three different ways: 1) through their own politicians, 2) through politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups, and 3) through Pentecostal and Neopentecostal leaders that influence public opinion on political issues. Over time, this allowed them to increase the number of politicians elected in the National Congress, state assemblies, and municipal councils (Lacerda, 2018; Lacerda and Brasiliense, 2018; Nascimento, 2017). In 2005, they also institutionalized their organization in the National Congress with the creation of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (*Frente Parlamentar Evangélica*, EPF), which also included members linked to the Catholic Church, thereby forging an alliance with part of the Catholic Church (Nascimento, 2017).

In 2002, Lula was elected with the support of progressive Protestants and Catholics. Just after his election, he visited the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (*Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*, CNBB) to confirm his commitment to promoting social justice and combatting inequality. At the same time, according to interviewees 2 and 3, following the lead of previous presidents, such as Sarney (Lacerda, 2018), Lula nominated politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups to cabinet positions. Benedita Silva, linked to the Pentecostal God's Assembly (*Assembleia de Deus*), was nominated to the Ministry of Work and Social Assistance (2003-2007). She was affiliated with the PT and had just finished her term as governor (2002-2003) and vice-governor (1999-2002) of Rio de Janeiro.² She also had previous experience in Black and feminist movements. Marina Silva, also linked to God's Assembly and affiliated with the PT, was appointed as Minister of the Environment (2003-2008) due to her previous work in her state, Acre, with communities living in the Amazon Forest. Marcelo Crivella, linked to the UCKG, was named Minister of Fishing and Aquaculture (2003-2017). Although he was affiliated with the more right-wing Republican Party (*Republicanos*), he had worked on the Northeast Project that promoted irrigation projects in rural communities. These alliances were also used to support Dilma Rouseff (2011-2016).

In 2008, the Lula government signed an agreement with the Vatican (*Acordo Brasil-Santa Sé*), which was approved by the National Congress in 2010. Among other things, the government agreed to include religious history in public school curriculum, even though

Ministers pointed out that this was unconstitutional (Carreira, 2017).³ Interviewee 2 argues that the agreement was key to align conservative Catholic and Protestant groups around a common agenda, as 'at first, the Catholic Church supported this [the agreement], despite the opposition of Protestant groups, but later... during negotiations in the National Congress, an agreement between Catholics and Protestants was reached, especially among the most conservative groups. This alliance influenced the agreement's approval... There is a common agenda that will be built there, particularly among the ultra-religious groups' (interviewee 2, our translation).

The Cardoso government promoted important policies to increase the access of children and young people to school by guaranteeing students' rights and valuing diversity. Some programs either continued in subsequent governments or influenced their policies. However, it was during the Lula and Dilma governments that the most relevant changes took place regarding ethnic diversity and gender recognition. Influenced by social movements, Law 10.639/2003 introduced Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture classes in schools. The 2003 Law was reformed in 2004 by the National Curriculum Guidelines for Education about Ethnic/Racial Relations and the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture in elementary and high schools (Brasil, 2003, 2004). In 2008, indigenous history was included in public schools' curricula (Brasil, 2008). The Ministry of Education's Secretariat for Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity (*Secretaria de Educação Continuada, Alfabetização e Diversidade*, SECAD) was created in 2004 to bring various equity programs spread across different ministries together in one administrative unit. In 2011, the Special Education Secretariat was added and the unit was renamed as the Secretariat for Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion (*Secretaria de Educação Continuada, Alfabetização, Diversidade e Inclusão*, SECADI). SECADI assumed responsibility for national policies on special education, youth and adults, rural, indigenous and quilombola education, ethnic/racial relations and human rights (Brasil, 2012). Principles such as citizenship, inclusion and diversity were emphasized in the 2014 National Education Plan.

To maintain the support of politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups, the Lula and Dilma governments did not send any proposals to reform key issues to Congress, particularly related to the liberalization of abortion. The EPF, however, opposed progressive proposals that originated within Congress, and started to introduce their own conservative proposals (Oro, 2005; Prandi and Santos, 2017; Dip, 2018).⁴

Since the early 2000s: convergence between conservative Catholics and Protestants

In 2004, a conservative Catholic lawyer organized a social movement called the 'No Party School' as 'a joint initiative of students and parents concerned about the degree of political-ideological contamination in all levels of Brazilian schools, from elementary school to higher education' (Escola Sem Partido, 2019, our translation). This movement mobilizes religious principles, particularly the idea of the traditional family, to oppose gender recognition and advocates for policies to 'de-ideologize' teaching, denouncing the influences of Marx's and Paulo Freire's ideas. It is important to notice that, though he was Christian, Freire became the target of this group because he was against the authoritarian governments of the 1960s and 1970s and defended critical and liberating pedagogy (Haddad, 2019).

Despite the 'No Party School' movement's creation in 2004, interviewees 1 and 2 declared that its ideas only really entered the political debate in 2011, 2014, and 2016 as right-wing politicians backed by different religious groups, particularly conservative Catholic and Protestant ones, gained prominence. In 2011, leaders and politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups opposed the federal government's distribution of an information booklet to primary school students about eliminating homophobia. Bolsonaro was one of the leaders of the discussion in the National Congress about the issue (Folha de São Paulo, 2018).⁵ This victory put 'gender ideology' in the public debate in Brazil. Until then, the use of the term 'gender ideology' had been restricted to religious groups, having first been coined by the Catholic Church in the mid-1990s and subsequently promoted by episcopates, pro-life, and pro-family groups and 'therapeutic' organizations for sexual reorientation. For them, gender recognition was a leftist ideology that went against both nature and the traditional family (Junqueira, 2018).⁶

In 2014, the National Congress was debating the executive's National Education Plan proposal when federal deputies linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups opposed the mention of 'gender,' 'sexual diversity,' and 'sexual orientation' in the text. These terms were eliminated then, as was the goal of tackling discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality. It is important to mention that the executive's proposal was the result of a series of participatory conferences and committees organized across the country that included representatives from different organizations that work in the education policy and from society in general.

In 2016, Congress was in initial discussions about the national curriculum proposal when different groups accused the Ministry of Education of eliminating important curriculum contents (Cancian, 2017). The 'No Party School' movement used this opportunity to criticize the proposal, arguing that the 'left wing hegemonic thinking in the universities' (Marinho, 2016 in Macedo, 2017: 516, translation ours) guided the proposal and that it was easy to identify 'the hegemonic Marxist epistemology and the critic-cultural method not only in the human sciences, but also in the so-called hard science' (Silva, 2016 in Macedo, 2017: 516, translation ours). Moreover, 'if the MEC's proposal was approved, Brazilian students who want to study something about Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece; the Roman Empire and the emergence of the Christianity; the Middle Age, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and even the French Revolution will be obliged to learn by themselves. In the classroom, they will study the Amerindian, African, and Afro-Brazilian worlds; interpret the Black social and Quilombola movements; [and] value and promote respect of African and Afro-American cultures. This is amazing' (Nagib, 2016 in Macedo, 2017: 516, translation ours).

Even though this coalition was not able to introduce topics to the national curriculum, they were successful in influencing politicians to eliminate issues related to race, gender, and sexuality, specifically topics related to 'gender identity' and 'sexual orientation' (Cancian, 2017). Other bills inspired by the 'No Party School' movement began to be proposed in the National Congress in 2014 (Dip, 2018). These advocated for state deputies and municipal councillor to remove the term 'gender' from municipal and state plans and propose bills inspired by the movement's proposals (Reis, 2016; Reis-Quadros and Madeira, 2018). In relation to the mention of gender in municipal and state education plans, the CNBB declared that 'the introduction of this ideology in the pedagogical practice of schools will bring disastrous consequences to the lives of children and families' (CNBB, 2015 in Britto and Reis, 2015, translation ours).

Of the 201 bills inspired by the 'No Party School' that were proposed across the country, forty-six were approved (Ximenes and Vick, 2020). Some of the proposed bills were informally labelled unconstitutional (Ximenes, 2016), while others were questioned in courts. The movement also encouraged students to record teachers' lessons and to report and denounce teachings inspired by 'Marxist' or 'gender ideology,' as interviewee 4 noted. Interviewees 1 and 4 reported that teachers were intimidated by extrajudicial notifications to curb their supposed 'ideological indoctrination' of students, imposing limits on how much time teachers could speak in class. Many teachers self-censored to avoid receiving negative performance reviews.

This shows that politicians linked to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups changed their political strategy. Instead of opposing progressive changes, they began to propose more moralistic and conservative bills in collaboration with other conservative actors. According to Dip (2018), their success in both Executive and Legislative elections at the national and subnational levels combined with their success in lobbying for more conservative proposals gave these groups the necessary confidence to register their own candidate (i.e. Bolsonaro) for the 2018 presidential elections. This also allowed them to build a broader coalition with conservative politicians and others with a more neo-liberal political agenda, creating an alliance between conservative Protestants, neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, and populist actors.

Jair Bolsonaro's election to the Presidency in 2018 shifted the influence of religion in education policy. Even though Catholic and Protestant groups had been able to influence policymaking at different moments, they are now an important force in Bolsonaro's government. The FPE also increased its numbers in the National Congress with 195 deputies (out of 513) (Binde, 2019).

From 2018 to 2019, ideas related to the 'No Party School' and 'gender ideology' gained prominence in the political debate and constituted a very important component of Bolsonaro's populist right-wing discourse. Bolsonaro has opposed the idea of gender recognition more than once. According to him, 'the ill-fated gender ideology, which says that nobody is born a man or woman, that these are societal constructs' (Bolsonaro, 2018 in Rangel, 2018, translation ours) was introduced in society, denying Christian values. 'What cannot happen is that a father arrives at home and finds six-year-old Joãozinho playing with dolls' (Bolsonaro, 2018 in Bragon, 2018, translation ours). Were this to happen, it would be a result of the school's influence.

Recent scholarship explores and tries to explain the rise of populists like Bolsonaro. The literature suggests that recent economic and social changes have led people, especially the working class, to 'share a deeply rooted dissatisfaction with the way the current democracy works' (Van Acker, 2019: 5). They feel frustrated, resentful, and disenchanted with politics and institutions, and vote for populist politicians (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Müller, 2016; Mondon, 2017; Van Acker, 2019). In Brazil, the policy changes implemented in the last few decades, especially during the PT's governments, created a backlash that conservative politicians are now taking advantage of, according to interviewee 3. 'I personally did not believe that reducing inequality in the country – guaranteeing education as a tool to access goods and rights – could threaten the conservative middle class' (interviewee 3, translation ours). Moreover, the PT's various corruption scandals reinforced Bolsonaro's anti-political system discourse that targeted the 'immoral' and 'corrupt elites' and 'traditional politicians.' Only the election of an 'outsider,' it seemed, would eliminate corruption.

Claiming that there is one, single, homogenous, and authentic people who are law-abiding, hardworking, decent, and virtuous, Bolsonaro delegitimizes dangerous 'others' and pluralistic and multiculturalist views, as the scholarship notes (Benveniste *et al.*, 2016; Müller, 2016; Speed and Mannion, 2017; Van Acker, 2019). The Minister of Education's comments during a 2020 meeting with the President and other Ministers sums up this idea. He said, 'I hate the term 'Indigenous people', I hate this term. Hate. The 'Gipsy community.' There is only one people in this country. (...) It is the Brazilian people, only one people. You can be Black, can be white, can be Japanese, can be descendent of Indigenous people, but you have to be Brazilian. It has to end this thing of peoples and privileges. There can only be one people' (Weintraub, 2020 in Folha de São Paulo, 2020, translation ours). In 2020, the Federal Supreme Court judged a few 'anti-gender' lawsuits related to municipal legislation, voting against them and eliminating 'anti-gender' ideas from municipal legislation (Ximenes and Vick, 2020).⁷ Nevertheless, interviewees 1 and 2 argued that they were not successful in changing these and other laws that weakened, or even eliminated, the focus on diversity and inclusion in Brazil's public education. SECADI was eliminated on the second day of the Bolsonaro government, and textbooks distributed by the federal governments to all schools across the country are being revised and might be replaced with others considered 'non-ideologized' (Bertoni, 2020). 'Gender ideology' became one of the key components of the ideological basis that sustains this coalition of populism, Neopentecostalism, and conservatism in Brazil, mobilizing different conservative politicians, Protestant leaders and even Catholic groups, not only to oppose progressive policy changes, but also to diffuse the dangers of gender recognition in Brazil.

Conclusions

Attacks on welfare policies, deliberative institutions, multiculturalism, and gender-balance policies provided fuel for populist rhetoric and helped create a strong right-wing populist coalition. Education policies were the preferred arena where this coalition had exercised its power.

The participation of both Catholic and Protestants groups in education policies in Brazil has been important, although non-linear. As the main religious affiliation since colonial times, the Catholic Church was pivotal not only in terms of the provision of education, but also in terms of policy formulation. However, even the Catholic Church did not operate as a homogeneous actor; on the contrary, internal ideological divisions and a plethora of interests reflected the sometimes ambiguity of the Catholic Church in different policy areas. Thus, whereas parts of the Catholic Church maintained a more conservative approach to policy and service delivery, parts of the church, especially during the military regime, were inspired by Liberation Theology and were much more sympathetic to distributive and egalitarian policies.

While Protestants are also a heterogeneous group, it is indisputable that their most visible representatives show a strong commitment to conservative politics, particularly Pentecostals and Neopentecostals. Moreover, conservative Protestants have become more prominent in the political sphere. United in their opposition to policy changes that focus on diversity and inclusion, they formed a coalition with other conservative actors and Catholic groups that allowed the right-wing populist coalition that helped win Jair Bolsonaro the presidency in 2018 and now constitutes his major support in the National Congress. This coalition endorses a non-pluralistic and non-multicultural society

and reinforces conservative religious beliefs and neoliberal ideas that promote prosperity and the achievement of private interests against communitarian and societal ones.

Notes

1 The first Protestant groups came to Latin America, including Brazil, in the beginning of the twentieth century but they were few in number (Nascimento, 2017; Guadalupe, 2018).

2 Now she is a Presbyterian.

3 The Senate has not approved this bill yet.

4 It is important to mention that the Federal Supreme Court recognized homosexual marriage in 2011 and the abortion of anencephalic fetuses in 2012.

5 The federal program, Brazil without Homophobia (*Brasil sem Homofobia*), was created in 2004 during Lula's government but only implemented during Dilma's government.

6 According to Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), the idea of 'gender ideology' – or 'gender theory' in other countries – was diffused through a document elaborated by the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that relies on John Paul II's and Ratzinger's theologies. The Catholic Church elaborated and diffused this idea to counterattack the advancements in gender recognition and sexual and reproductive rights that happened in the UN rights system during the 1990s, which could influence the liberalization of abortion in different countries.

7 The Federal Supreme Court voted on lawsuits from four municipalities, but there are fifteen in total (Ximenes and Vick, 2020).

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