More than Words: Leaders’ Speech and Risky Behavior During a Pandemic

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Question: Could leaders’ examples and words drive behavioral change among citizens, on top and above incentives and institutions even during the pandemic?
Bolsonaro defies coronavirus to rally against Congress

Brazilian president criticised for rubbing elbows with crowds while awaiting second virus test results

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who is supposed to be in quarantine, clasped hands and took selfies with supporters on Sunday © AFP via Getty Images

Figure: FT, 16 March.
Brazilian Context

- Brazil is a three-tiered federation with 26 states, a federal district, and 5,571 municipalities;

- Brazil is a polarized country.

- State governments have real power to implement their own social distancing policies - and they did.

- Bolsonaro has encouraged people to go out and has made appearances in stores, markets and joined rallies on the streets contradicting his own health ministry and sub-national social distancing measures.
Timeline: Not always an uniform message

▶ 6 March (official pronouncement): people “must strictly follow experts’ recommendations on the best protective measures”.

▶ 12 March: Wearing mask on TV with his health minister, Bolsonaro stated that the public demonstrations on his support for 15 March should be “reconsidered”.

▶ **15 March - Demonstration:** Bolsonaro joined one of the demonstrations in Brasilia. He posted a record number of tweets (47) since becoming president.

▶ 18 March (official pronouncement): Toned down the voice against social distancing.

▶ **March 24 (Official pronouncement):** Directly referred to the social distancing policies implemented by the states. Minimised the effects of the disease and argued against closing schools and business. Praised the effectiveness of chloroquine.

▶ Since then, the message has been against social distancing measures and emphasised the effectiveness of chloroquine.
President Bolsonaro takes a selfie photograph with supporters at the Planalto Palace in Brasilia on March 15. *Photographer: Andre Coelho/Bloomberg*

**Figure:** Bloomberg, 15 March.
Bolsonaro critica fechamento de escolas e ataca imprensa

Pronunciamento também tem governadores como alvo e é acompanhado por painelões pelo país.

O presidente disse ainda que governadores e prefeitos precisam "abandonar o conceito de terra arrasada."

"Não se passa no mundo mostrar que o grupo de risco de pessoas acima de 60 anos. Então, por que fechar escolas?, questionou Bolsonaro, que voltou a comparar a Covid-19 a uma "gripe" ou "resfriado.”

Davi Alcolumbre (DEM-AP), presidente do Senado, criticou o pronunciamento e pediu seriedade e responsabilidade a Bolsonaro, que, durante a transmissão, foi alvo de painelões pelo restante da seção.

24 March

Figure: Folha de Sao Paulo, 25 March.
Data

- **Granular geo-localized mobile phone data**
  (https://www.inloco.com.br/en/) from 60 millions of anonymous devices in Brazil;

- **Support to Bolsonaro:** "Pro-Bolsonaro" municipalities:
  Locations where he obtained more than 50% of the votes in the first round of the 2018 election.
Social Distancing Index

Social distancing index: Percentage of mobile phones that remained within a 450-metre radius. Average value: Feb - 0.25; April - 0.53.
Empirical Strategy

\[ SocialDistancing_{md} = \sum_{l=-10}^{+10} \alpha_l \text{Treated}_{md-l} + \alpha \text{Treated}_{md} + \phi_d + \rho_m + \lambda X_{md} + \delta Z_{sd} + \varepsilon_{smd} \]

- Two-way fixed effects model (day, municipality), with leads and lags;
- We define \( t=0 \) (treatment) as the first day after the demonstration (15 March) and the first day after the official pronouncement (24 March).
Av Eff on Social Distancing

Figure: Percent change in number of people moving more than 450m from their home.
Av Eff on Social Distancing - Support for Bolsonaro Above State Median

Figure: Percent change in number of people moving more than 450m from their home.
Av Eff on Social Distancing – Support for Bolsonaro Above State Median in pro-Bolsonaro States

Figure: Percent change in number of people moving more than 450m from their home.
Placebo: Av Eff on Social Distancing (Unrelated Official Pronouncements)

Figure: Percent change in number of people moving more than 450m from their home.
Further Analysis

- Effects are stronger for the following cases:
  - Municipalities with higher levels of media penetration;
  - Municipalities where there is a larger population of Evangelical parishioners;
  - Municipalities where the share of potentially active workers (male, between 15-64 years old) is larger.
What Does It Mean Quantitatively?

- Approximately 1 million people strayed further than 450 metres from their home on each of the ten days following the key events under study.

- Social distancing index increased from Feb to April:
  - Increase in top-5% cities in support to Bolsonaro: 24pp
  - Increase in bottom-5% cities in support to Bolsonaro: 31pp
  - Difference of 7pp

- We show evidence of a shift in the trend in reported cases and Covid19 deaths.
Next Steps for this Research Agenda

▶ We are getting death data on notary’s office to investigate deaths - more reliable data.

▶ We are also getting data on hospital utilisation during the pandemic.

▶ We are getting transaction data to investigate the local economic activity.

▶ We are getting data on forest fires.
Concluding Remarks

- Leaders’ examples and words can drive behavioral change among citizens, on top and above incentives and institutions (even in a Pandemic!).

- Results are relevant beyond Brazil and the pandemic.