

References to climate and environmental issues in Bolsonaro's discourse before multilateral arenas: a brief content analysis

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Speeches are more than words, they are expressions of the ideas and interests of the actors who give them, especially when it comes to the president of a nation. By analyzing the content of the discourse of political actors, such as Brazil's president, one can accurately identify the ideas and the interests behind its political outlook on specific issues. As controversial as Bolsonaro's statements may be, hereafter we will analyze Bolsonaro's views in relation to climate and environmental issues when addressing multilateral audiences, in an attempt to clarify which subject-matters were addressed and which were not (and under which circumstance) and to identify possible changes across statements. Our analysis is based on four speeches given by Bolsonaro in multilateral arenas where environment was addressed: his speech at the Opening of the General Debate of the of the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly, on September 24, 2019; at the Opening of the General Debate of the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly, on September 22, 2020; at the UN Biodiversity Summit on September 30, 2020; and his speech at the Climate Leaders Summit on April 22, 2021.

In this analysis, we identified categories representing relevant topics on the climate agenda and encoded the paragraphs corresponding to the topics in each category. Using the NVivo 12 software, it was possible to quantify the encoded material, organize the textual material and submit it to a qualitative analysis. The number of references identified in each category can be seen below (Table 1).

Table 1 shows how many excerpts relating to the topics in each category dealing with the climate agenda were identified in the analysis. It is possible to observe the presence and absence of certain categories depending on the speech, and an increase or decrease in the number of references to such categories across speeches. Some categories - such as “Indigenous and traditional communities” – are mentioned several times in certain instances, such as the Opening of UN General Assembly, in 2019; in other speeches, however, this issue is mentioned only once. This demonstrates the inconsistency of the Bolsonaro administration’s approach to certain topics on the climate and environmental agenda, which may be due to factors originating in the domestic or international scenario, or even due to underlying interests and objectives of such speeches.

CLIMATE AGENDA IN THE DISCOURSE OF JAIR BOLSONARO

References to climate and environmental issues in Jair Bolsonaro’s discourse before multilateral arenas from 2019 to 2021

| | UNGA September 24, 2019 | UNGA September 22, 2020 | UN Biodiversity Summit September 30, 2020 | Climate Leaders Summit April 22, 2021 | Total |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|-------|
| Multilateral actions | 3 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 13 |
| Agriculture and mining | 3 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 12 |
| External aid and cooperation | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Amazon | 5 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 12 |
| Biodiversity | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Bioeconomy | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Commitments | 1 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 16 |
| Development | 3 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| Deforestation and fires | 4 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 15 |
| Emissions | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4 |
| Energy | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Indigenous and traditional communities | 12 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 15 |
| Media | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Climate change | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| NGOs | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Protection | 2 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 11 |
| Sovereignty | 5 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 9 |
| Sustainability | 1 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 9 |

Source: Prepared by Danielle Silva, using NVIVO12

Labmundo, 2021

A qualitative analysis of the excerpts of the quantified speeches in each of the categories allows us to produce a more detailed analysis on this issue. Table 2, below, summarizes the results obtained from a content analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. It is, then, possible to identify the profile of the references to each issue and the features of the stance adopted by Bolsonaro when it comes to each analytical category in the climate-environmental agenda.

In general, we can identify that Bolsonaro's positioning stems from a 'sovereignistic' and economy-centric vision of the management and exploration of Brazilian natural resources, including foreign aid and the setting of parameters for sustainable development. By 'sovereignistic' we mean a position that does not necessarily defend national interests, rather it regards any denunciation of the insufficiencies of environmental and climate policies as an attack against Brazil's sovereignty. This excessively pro-sovereignty visions distorts the sense of sovereignty associated with responsibility and paints the picture of a sovereign state that can deforest, neglect its population and the national environment simply because it is a 'sovereign state'. By an economy-centric stance we mean any vision of development that is restricted to the economic dimension, the defense of financial interests and the maintenance of macroeconomic stability, irrespective of the social, environmental and cultural dimensions of development. It is observed that, behind this stance, there is a justification, for example, for changing environmental protection laws or breaching international commitments in order to facilitate predatory and exploratory actions, reflecting exclusively the prospect of economic growth of Brazilian mineral and natural resources.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE OF JAIR BOLSONARO

Summary of the content analysis of Bolsonaro's speeches dealing with the climate and environmental agenda before multilateral stances, between 2019 and 2021

| | Profile of the presence of the category | Characteristics of the stance |
|--|---|--|
| Multilateral actions | Constant presence, with decline. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Criticism to countries and multilateral actions deemed "colonialist" and to economic protectionism; - Support for historical concepts and certain multilateral measures; - Two stances: criticism of actions and support for measures originating from multilateral bodies. |
| Agriculture and Mining | Constant presence, with decline and stability. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exaltation of the productive capacity of Brazilian agriculture and livestock; - Defense of the agricultural sector as respectful of environmental norms; - Ambition to explore legally protected resources. |
| Foreign aid and cooperation | Much less frequent, but constant. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial position of respect for Brazilian sovereignty to support the receipt of foreign aid; - Recent positive receptivity to international cooperation; - Subtle change in the stance about the receipt of aid. |
| Amazon | Constant presence. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Manifestation of the pro-sovereignty and negationist stance when it comes to Amazon issues; - Defense of development in the region through economic exploration – the Amazon paradox. |
| Biodiversity | Much less frequent, but constant. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generic statements about Brazilian rich biodiversity; - Criticism of external exploration interests; - Bolsonaro's intention to economically explore Brazilian biodiversity. |
| Bioeconomy | Much less frequent at specific climate events. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generic statements about the potential and benefits of bioeconomy; - Defense of the economic nature of forest conservation in favor of the interests of Brazilians. |
| Commitments | Constant presence, but rising. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Criticism of the goal of expanding indigenous demarcated lands and the non-regulation of the international carbon market; - Recent support for emission reduction and climate neutrality targets; - Combination of support and opposition to commitments; - Incongruence between words and actions. |
| Development | Average presence, constant and emerging. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainable development with sovereign management of resource; - Radical environmentalism and indigenism regarded as obstacles to development; - Recognition of the right to development; - Recent softening of the pro-sovereignty discourse. |
| Deforestation and fires | Constant, oscillating and declining presence. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative and accusatory speeches against indigenous populations, local populations, the media and NGOs; - Use of data relating to previous administrations to indicate environmental preservation; - Recent softening of the speech, without self-criticism. |
| Emissions | Much less frequent, and absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - References to the historic low emission of carbon and greenhouse gases; - Commitment to climate neutrality by 2050; - Incongruence between words and actions. |
| Energy | Much less frequent, and absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - History of production of clean energy in Brazil. - Absence of new proposals or positions. |
| Indigenous and traditional communities | Presence, but declining. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Doubtful statements: reference to indigenous rights, without definition of such rights; indigenous individuals portrayed as landowners; - Timid references to the fulfillment of indigenous interests; - Change in the stance from invasive to discreet. |
| Media | Much less frequent, and absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attacks on media coverage of Amazon fires; - Attempt to create an unreal image of Brazil abroad. |
| Climate change | Much less frequent, and absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gaps in the speeches show a negationist stance; - Reference to historical data and positions; - References to this category reflect changes in the external environment - Biden election in the US. |
| NGOs | Much less frequent, and absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NGOs accused of environmental crimes; - Position against the actions of NGOs. |
| Protection | Constant presence, but declining and increasingly absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generic claims of environmental protection and exaltation of sovereignty; - Stance reflects the state's obligation to protect; - Contrast with the domestic agenda. |
| Sovereignty | Average presence, and absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sovereign management and protection of Brazilian natural resources; - Criticism of "international greed"; - Sovereignty used to shield the government from international criticism and to justify the economic exploration of resources. |
| Sustainability | Average presence, and absent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generic references to the benefits of sustainable development; - Sustainability rhetoric as a means to dodge criticism and evidence of historical commitment. - Uneven treatment of the issue. |

Source: Prepared by Danielle Silva, 2021.

Labmundo, 2021

In addition, there is the hostile stance adopted by the administration against certain multilateral actions, which could limit the Brazilian management power and the role of NGOs that criticize Bolsonaro's decisions. Denialism seems to explain both in the initial absence and in the subsequent timid approach to the climate change topic, as well as in statements about fires in the Amazon and Pantanal.

On the other hand, stances in favor of protection, sustainability, potential bio-economy growth and Brazilian biodiversity have a generic nature and do not provide specification as to the types of public policies to be implemented. References to adherence to multilateral commitments are recent, possibly due to the change in the US position after Joe Biden's election. The use of historical data, mentioning data from past administrations to demonstrate engagement with environmental and climate causes, has also been a tool recently used to show a more favorable stance when it comes to such issues.

Therefore, we have few changes in terms of the stance adopted by Bolsonaro, such as the alleviation of hostile and excessively pro-sovereignty positions on certain topics, such as indigenous and development issues, or decreased criticism addressed to certain international actors (state or otherwise), which can be interpreted as occasional adjustments to the position adopted by the Bolsonaro administration in multilateral settings. Moreover, we have found inconsistencies relating to the difference between international discourse and actions implemented domestically, as in the case of the verbally accepted commitments that lack concrete policy actions to be implemented (in terms of budget, human resources, etc.).

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