

Pluralistic Ignorance and Domestic Tourism After a Close Presidential Election: Evidence from the Field

Ignorância Pluralística e Turismo Doméstico Após uma Eleição Presidencial Apertada: Evidências do Campo



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the occurrence of pluralistic ignorance in relation to travelling to domestic tourist destinations, where there is a political divergence between tourists and residents. Brazil was chosen for our research setting due to the characteristics of the polarization observed in recent years, after the emergence of a far-right wing and conservative movement. In our preliminary results, we found the occurrence of pluralistic ignorance among left-wing voters, but not right-wings. More specifically, we found that left-wings think their in-groups would feel systematically less comfortable than themselves visiting domestic tourist destinations where a political divergence is in place. Though the same results were not found among right-wing voters, we discuss on the avenues for future studies.

Keywords: Pluralistic ignorance, Tourist animosity, Political polarization, Domestic tourism.

RESUMO

Este artigo investiga a ocorrência de ignorância pluralística em relação a viagens para destinos turísticos domésticos, onde há divergência política entre turistas e residentes. O Brasil foi escolhido para o contexto de nossa pesquisa devido às características da polarização observada nos últimos anos, após o surgimento de um movimento de extrema-direita e conservador. Em nossos resultados preliminares, encontramos a ocorrência de ignorância pluralística entre os eleitores de esquerda, mas não entre os de direita. Mais especificamente, descobrimos que as pessoas de esquerda acham que as demais pessoas do seu grupo se sentiriam sistematicamente menos confortáveis do que elas próprias visitando destinos turísticos domésticos onde existe uma divergência política. Embora os mesmos resultados não tenham sido encontrados entre os eleitores de direita, discutimos os caminhos para estudos futuros.

Palavras-chave: Ignorância pluralística, Animosidade do turista, Polarização política, Turismo doméstico.

INTRODUCTION

The 2022 Presidential election is considered one of the most polarized ones in Brazil's recent history. A little over 2 million votes were cast for president-elect Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (from the Workers' Party) ahead of his competitor, who sought re-election, president Jair Bolsonaro (from the Liberal Party). When put into geographical terms, Lula's votes stemmed predominantly from the Northeast and Northern regions, while Bolsonaro voters resided mainly in the South and the Mid-West (TSE, 2022).

After the ballot was over, the pre-existing political unrest continued. Some news companies documented the dissemination of xenophobic-like material through social networks, targeted at Northeastern voters, as well as regionalist accusations of poor electoral choice from voters from both sides (Pedra, 2022; Wiziack, 2022). This animosity, sometimes directed toward regions in the country, sometimes toward its people, raises the question as to how domestic tourism may be impacted by this on-going political crisis (Shoham et al., 2006), which had a new chapter after the recent electoral process.



Moreover, there has been an increased interest into the effects and causes of tourist animosity over the past few years (Abraham & Poria, 2020). Typically, tourism studies address the occurrence of international-level animosity (Campo & Alvarez, 2019; Yu et al., 2020), and socio-cultural aversion (Holder et al., 2021), between tourists and destinations. In this paper, we set out to fill an existing gap in the literature of further investigation on domestic animosity, or the one that is observed in an intracountry setting (Shimp et al., 2004; Hinck, 2005; Shoham et al., 2006).

In this context, it is relevant to try to understand heuristics and biases that may derive from misinterpretations of normative group behavior, in particular, the pluralistic ignorance effect (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Pluralistic ignorance occurs when individuals think their attitudes and behaviors systematically differ from those of their reference group (Sargent & Newman, 2021), even though everyone else seems to agree in public.

The present study is intended to identify the extent to which personal perceptions, concerning travelling to places where there is a political divergence between tourists and residents, may deviate from that of their political reference groups. In other words, we aim to document the existence of pluralistic ignorance in relation to the idea of travelling to domestic destinations, where a hostile political relationship is in place.

PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE AND TOURIST ANIMOSITY

We define pluralistic ignorance as a condition in which group behavior or overall cognitions (attitudes, beliefs, feelings) seem to be convergent for a given topic or situation, but at an individual level, members of the group may diverge (Sargent & Newman, 2021). A classic example may happen in class when, after a teacher asks if anyone has any questions no one raises their hand,



making it look like all students understood the class, even though intimately many may not have (Prentice & Miller, 1993).

Pluralistic ignorance is particularly prone to flourish in topics that elicit political and social disputes, such as climate change, and racial relations. In their study, Van Boven et al. (2018) found that people systematically underestimate Republicans' climate-change beliefs, even though Republicans, themselves, report higher levels of concern on the topic. Also, in the context of interracial group relations, Shelton and Richeson (2005) found evidence that both white and black people are willing to have more contact with one another, but they think that their out-group is not.

Given the social and political aspect of the phenomenon, we argue that pluralistic ignorance may be an important effect to be investigated within the current tourism context in Brazil. Tourism studies have paid increased attention to the occurrence of animosity between visitors and tourist destinations (Abraham & Poria, 2020), particularly when motivated by political reasons, and in an international level. Tourist animosity is stably known to lead to decreased intentions to visit a destination both directly but also indirectly, through the evaluation of the country as a tourist destination (Campo & Alvarez, 2019). Also, animosity may lead to boycott intentions, and other longer-term consequences when its motivation has political roots (Yu et al., 2020).

Fewer studies have investigated the role played by consumer animosity and hostile attitudes within the same country, or regional animosity, as proposed by Shimp et al., (2004). Shoham et al. (2006) show that, after the second Arab Intifada in 2000, Jewish Israeli consumers indeed reduced purchasing from Arab Israeli manufacturers and companies, due to increased animosity. Likewise, in the years that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, Eastern German consumers would reject products from Western Germany (Hinck, 2005). Overall, the aforementioned studies point to the need for a better understanding of domestic tourist animosity, and we propose to address it from a pluralistic ignorance perspective.



Brazilian context

Alongside other western democracies, like the US, Brazil has recently experienced the rise of a far-right movement, that had its peak with the election of President Jair Bolsonaro, in 2018. Back then, he managed to capitalize from voters' pursuit of a social and moral conservative agenda, coupled with economic liberalism ideals, and *antipetismo*, or the resentment of the Worker's Party – PT, due to previous corruption scandals (Rennó, 2020).

Political commentators claim that some of the setbacks of Bolsonaro's first presidency include the undermining of environmental laws and preservation structure, the flexibility of gun regulation, and a poor confrontation of the COVID-19 health crisis (Nunes, 2022). Despite this criticism, Bolsonaro succeeded in developing an innovative and effective communication strategy within his supporters, through the use of social networks, and an on-going discrediting propaganda online (Rennó, 2020; Pereira & Nunes, 2021).

This communication structure was also used in the 2022 electoral cycle, and was responsible for the spread of xenophobic content toward regions of the country that supported his opposition, candidate Lula, notably the Northeast (Pedra, 2022; Wiziack, 2022). It is against this backdrop, that we came up with the inquiry as to what extent the context observed in Brazil may undermine domestic tourism, due to political divergences and animosity.

METHOD

In the behavioral sciences, empirical studies typically document the existence of pluralistic ignorance by following Prentice and Miller's (1993) research on drinking behavior and attitudes of young students on campus. In their studies, these authors ask students to report how comfortable they feel about drinking habits of their peers on campus, and then ask how comfortable

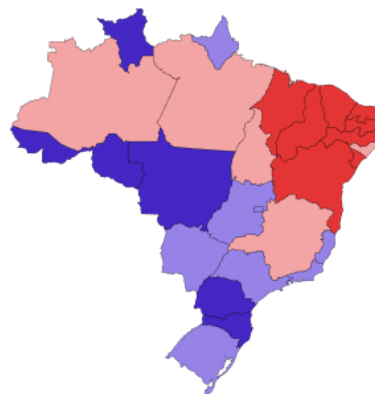


they think their peers feel about these same habits. This type of discrete questioning provides researchers with flexibility, and allows clear conclusions by simply comparing means difference in self- and other-scores, making it the most recommended approach to operationalizing pluralistic ignorance (Sargent & Newman, 2021).

We approached respondents by presenting a colored map of Brazil, featuring each state's election results on the 2022 Presidential election (Figure 1). After the map exposure, we asked how comfortable they would feel visiting Northeastern and Southern destinations of Brazil in the next six months, in an 11-point scale (from 0 to 10). Next, participants were asked how comfortable they think either one of two groups would feel visiting the same areas: half participants were asked about Lula's voters, to whom the South is where a political divergence is in place, and the other half, about Bolsonaro's voters, to whom the Northeast represents a divergent political destination.

Finally, we asked who they voted for in the 2022 elections, and how they self-identified in an 11-point left-right political ideology scale. We ended the research with demographic questions.

Figure 1. State electoral behavior on the 2022 Presidential Election. In red states, Lula won, in blue states, Bolsonaro won. The darker the tone, the greater the difference in votes.



Source: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/eleicoes/2022/analise/presidente-1-turno/o-mapa-mostra-o-candidato-a-presidencia-mais-votado-em-cada-municipio-do-estado/?uf=sp>

RESULTS

We now present our preliminary results. Thirty-nine participants were approached on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, approximately two weeks after the results of the elections, on November 2022. Respondents were 66% women and 44 years-old, on average. 52% earned from one to six minimum wages (in BRL), and the majority (36%) had at least a high school degree. Twenty-three respondents declared having voted for Lula (59%), while nine (23%) voted for Bolsonaro in the 2022 election. Three people nullified their vote and four did not show up to vote.

In-group perception

In this preliminary analysis, we based groups on electoral behavior, since we wanted to know perceptions about how comfortable groups of voters would feel while traveling to places where a divergence exists. Since we randomly allocated respondents to answer questions either about Lula's voters or Bolsonaro's voters, we had to first identify the cases where there was a match between the allocated questionnaire and the political group of the respondent. Our sample was then composed of twenty-two cases, fourteen Lula supporters who got the Lula questionnaire, and eight Bolsonaro supporters who got the corresponding questionnaire. The seventeen remaining cases were not considered for analysis.

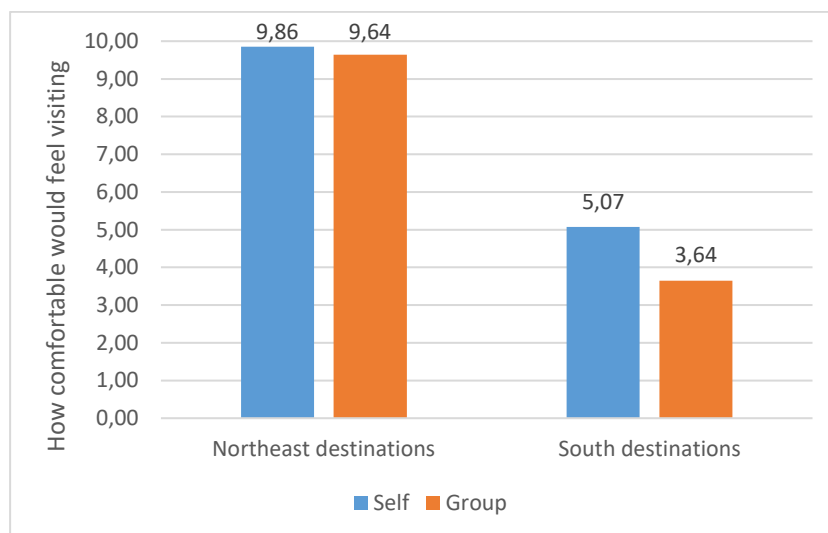
Our results show that Lula voters would feel significantly more comfortable travelling to Northeastern destinations ($M = 9.8$), than to Southern destinations ($M = 5.0$, $t(13) = 5.37$, $p < 0.05$), where an electoral divergence is present. As for Bolsonaro supporters, we did not find any statistically significant difference in



how comfortable they would feel travelling to either a Northeastern or a Southern destination.

When asked to estimate the perceptions of their political group peers, Lula voters did not perceive any difference between how comfortable they would feel visiting a Northeastern destination ($M = 9.8$), and their peers ($M = 9.6$, $t(13) = 1.0$, NS). On the other hand, for Southern destinations, Lula supporters think their peers would feel significantly less comfortable ($M = 3.6$) than themselves ($M = 5.0$, $t(13) = 2.5$, $p < 0.05$) (Figure 2). This suggests that for destinations where a political divergence is in place, we have documented the existence of a pluralistic ignorance effect among Lula (left-wing) supporters.

Figure 2. Self and Groups Perceptions of Lula Supporters



Source: The authors

As for Bolsonaro supporters, no statistical difference was observed between how comfortable they and their peers would feel visiting either destinations where a political divergence exists, or not. This group of respondents stated a relatively high level of comfort visiting no matter which destination, as well as the perception of comfort on their peers. A

representation of these scores, that have no statistically significant difference, may be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Self and Group perception of Bolsonaro supporters

	Northeast destinations	South destinations
Self	8.62	8.62
Group	8.0	9.0

Non-significant differences ($p > 0.05$)

Source: The authors

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A few days before the second round of Brazil's Presidential election in 2022, Beto Carrero World, one of the biggest theme parks in the South of the country, put out a controversial piece of advertisement in its social networks. In the ad, it read that a 25% discount would be offered to whoever visited the park on October 30th, wearing a red T-shirt. For the deal to apply, though, the attendee would have to enter the park before 8:00 am, and do not leave until 5:00 pm, which also corresponds to the official starting and ending time of the ballot, scheduled for that day.

The ad was interpreted as a clear-cut attempt to increase the abstention rate within voters of candidate Lula da Silva, from the Worker's Party, and a compelling demonstration of poor management decisions of a tourism company in a politically polarized context. We argue that the possibility of tourist animosity, motivated by a national political unrest, needs to be addressed professionally so that tourism companies may learn how to navigate and maintain competitiveness.



In our paper, we have measured how personal perceptions of comfort in travelling to tourist destinations where an electoral divergence is in place, deviate from the perception of how the group feels. We have documented in a preliminary test that the pluralistic ignorance effect is present among left-wing voters, notably the ones who voted for president-elect Lula da Silva. This group of people systematically believes that their in-groups would feel less comfortable than them, visiting tourist destinations from the South of the country, where the majority of residents voted for opponent Jair Bolsonaro. Our current sample has offered limited ability to derive definitive conclusions on the occurrence of a similar effect among right-wing Bolsonaro voters.

Our findings contribute to the scarce literature on domestic animosity, showing that group-level misperceptions, like pluralistic ignorance, may be in effect concomitantly to a hostile inter-group relation between compatriots. A follow-up application of this study with a nationwide sample should be carried out next, allowing for more conclusive results and, in addition to it, we indicate future studies.

Most notably, there is a need to address the ostensible lack of discomfort manifested by Bolsonaro voters in visiting places where a political divergence is in place. Empirical evidence has shown that most xenophobic-like content spread online were targeted at Northeasters (Pedra, 2022; Wiziack, 2022). Xenophobia is a known component of socio-cultural aversion, which is expected to hinder tourism (Holder et al., 2021), so further studies must try to identify, based on the tourist animosity literature, which constructs may or may not explain our preliminary results.

Also, other possible antecedents and consequences of animosity should be further tested based on the literature, such as anger, risk perception (Nunes et al., 2022), and willingness to learn from the local culture (Abraham & Poria, 2020). These are examples of variables prone to pluralistic ignorance under the state of political unrest Brazil and other countries find themselves in.



Another possibility of future investigation involves the use of secondary data to supplement the evidence found in this paper. In affiliation with Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), research institutes may explore their databases for search and booking patterns between regions. One possible avenue to be pursued is by making a yearly comparison from search and bookings from Lula states to Bolsonaro states (and vice-versa), and check for the existence of any drops after the 2022 electoral process. A combination of primary data stating that people think their in-groups would not feel comfortable visiting places with political divergence, and secondary data showing that a drop in that kind of reservations was not observed, may be further evidence of pluralistic ignorance.

In terms of managerial implications, the preliminary results of this study are of particular interest for tourism companies and Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), responsible for advertising tourist destinations. If left-wing voters have the documented bias in relation to their in-groups, it may hinder their planning and booking of group trips with politically like-minded friends. Even though left-wings would not feel as comfortable visiting the South as they would visiting the Northeast, in the event of an opportunity to travel to these Southern destinations, they may feel that their in-groups will not profit as much from the same trip as them. Future studies could investigate ways to attenuate pluralistic ignorance in domestic tourism.

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