

Yes, Trump made huge mistakes in the coronavirus outbreak. But no, he's not the worst world leader in this respect. That prize currently goes to Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. Like Trump, he's a rightwing populist leader. He's even been called "the Trump of the Tropics." But he's far more unmoored. When asked about Brazil's record number of deaths on Tuesday, he shrugged in reply, "So what? I'm sorry. What do you want to do?"

Not that Trump has been a paragon. You'll recall that until mid-March, Trump pooh-poohed the dangers of the coronavirus and said it was no worse than seasonal flu. He also accused the media and his political opponents of drumming up hysteria about the disease. He was eventually talked down by public health experts, particularly after British researchers predicted up to two million deaths in the absence of serious control measures. Nearly every day, Trump gets up at a press conference and provides a blend of useful information, complete misinformation, and political remarks. But he does give public health experts like Dr. Fauci an opportunity to provide more reliable information.

Contrast Bolsonaro. As William Boyd discussed in a [post](#) earlier this week, he's done little to help in dealing with the coronavirus. But actually, he's gone out of his way to make things work. Trump had spoken about reopening churches on Easter, but never really followed through. Here's what Bolsonaro did on Easter (from the [Guardian](#)):

Over Easter, Brazil's far-right leader repeatedly sniffed at his own health ministry's distancing recommendations by going out for doughnuts, glad-handing fans and proclaiming: 'No one will hinder my right to come and go.' During one outing, Bolsonaro was filmed wiping his nose with his wrist before shaking an elderly lady's hand.

Bolsonaro has spent weeks scoffing at the risks. He has called the coronavirus "a measly cold" and "a little flu," telling Brazilians to "face the virus like a man, dammit, not a boy." He issued [decrees](#) overturning state social distancing orders and exempting lottery parlors and churches, before being overturned by the courts. He has [claimed](#) that Brazilians already have the antibodies to protect them, because their immune systems are so strong they can "dive into sewage" without catching anything. Like Trump, Bolsonaro promotes an unproven anti-malaria drug as a remedy for the coronavirus, but with even more fervor.

On April 16, Bolsonaro fired his health minister, who had been patiently trying to get Brazilians to follow the best scientific guidance available. A few days beforehand, while visiting a hospital along with the health minister, Bolsonaro [had](#) "walked into a crowd, took

off his mask, extended his hand for a supporter to kiss and autographed jerseys.” The health minister made no secret of his horrified reaction.

Since Bolsonaro and Trump have similar styles and political bases, we need to ask why Trump hasn’t gone down this road, or at least nowhere near as far. He’s clearly been tempted to do so. What has held Trump back from hurtling down the same road?

One difference may be that Trump’s political position is weaker. Trump is much closer to his next election. (For Bolsonaro, it’s 2022). In addition, while Trump has a great deal of control over the Republican Party, Bolsonaro actually founded his own party. Bolsonaro may also feel more self-confident because unlike Trump, he won the popular vote in the last election. Like Bolsonaro, Trump badly wants to reopen the economy. Yet he needs to exercise some care, because of the risk that a major flare-up in the Fall might impact the election.

Bolsonaro may also be more of an ideologue than Trump. Bolsonaro has spent his career in far-right politics. Trump used to be a Democrat and became a Republican only on his way to running for President. For him, winning is the point, not remaining true to an ideological movement.

Finally, despite all the hits that the bureaucracy and scientists have taken under Trump, expertise may still matter more in the U.S. context. Recent [polls](#) show that Americans trust Dr. Fauci more than they do Trump. I doubt that this endears Dr. Fauci to him, but it remains a reality that Trump cannot afford to ignore.

In the meantime, Bolsonaro seems to be in deeper and deeper political trouble. Besides his destructive stance on the coronavirus, he’s also fired his Justice Minister, and Bolsonaro’s son has been [linked](#) to some dodgy connections. Now Bolsonaro himself is under investigation by the Supreme Court. We’ll see how the politics works out for him and for his American counterpart.

[Note: The initial version of this post referred to the Justice Minister as a “public symbol of incorruptibility.” This is not as clear as I had originally thought, so the phrase has been deleted.]