

Rushing to the altar? Same-sex marriages when rights feel at risk

Mateus Maciel¹ Sara Parente² David Zuchowski³

¹Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

²EBS Universität für Wirtschaft und Recht

³Universitat de València

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- On October 10th, 2018, the far right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro won the presidential elections in Brazil.
- He is a retired Captain of the Brazilian Army who served in the Chamber of Deputies from 1991 to 2018.
- In 2018, the total number of same-sex marriages¹ in Brazil increased by 61.7% compared to the previous year (IBGE).
- The number of unions increased from 5,887 to 9,520, most of which occurred in December, **one month before Bolsonaro's mandate begin.**

¹The commonly used term same-sex marriages typically refers to same-sex relationships that are legally recognized as civil unions. Furthermore, to distinguish between marriages between two women and those between two men, we refer to the former as lesbian marriages and the latter as gay marriages.

The New York Times

By Mariana Simões

Oct. 28, 2018

Brazil's Polarizing New President, Jair Bolsonaro, in His Own Words

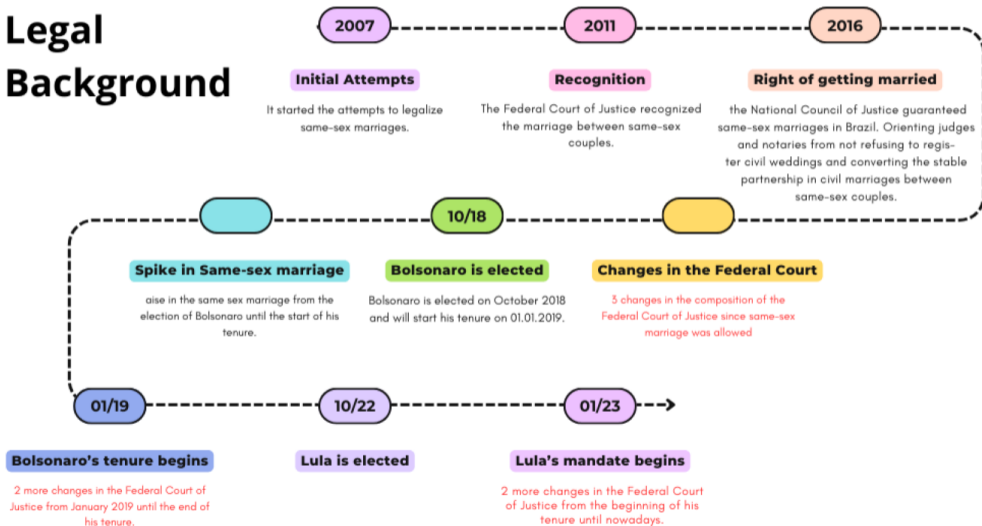


In June 2011, he said he would “rather his son die in a car accident than be gay,” adding:

“If a gay couple came to live in my building, my property will lose value. If they walk around holding hands, kissing, it will lose value! No one says that out of fear of being pinned as homophobe.”

In 2013, he said that he would “rather have a son who is an addict than a son who is gay,” and that he was “proud to be homophobic.”

Legal Background



Motivation (Cont.)

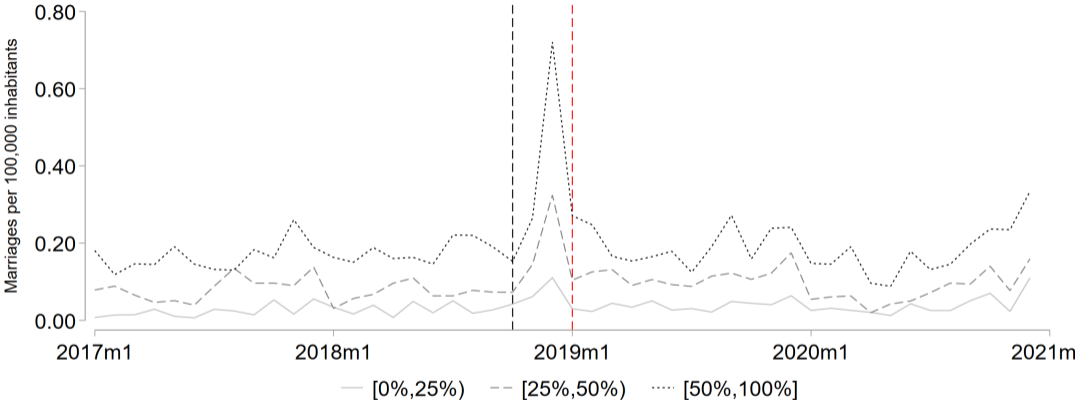


Figure: Monthly same-sex marriages from 2017 to 2021

Motivation – Men-to-Men Marriages

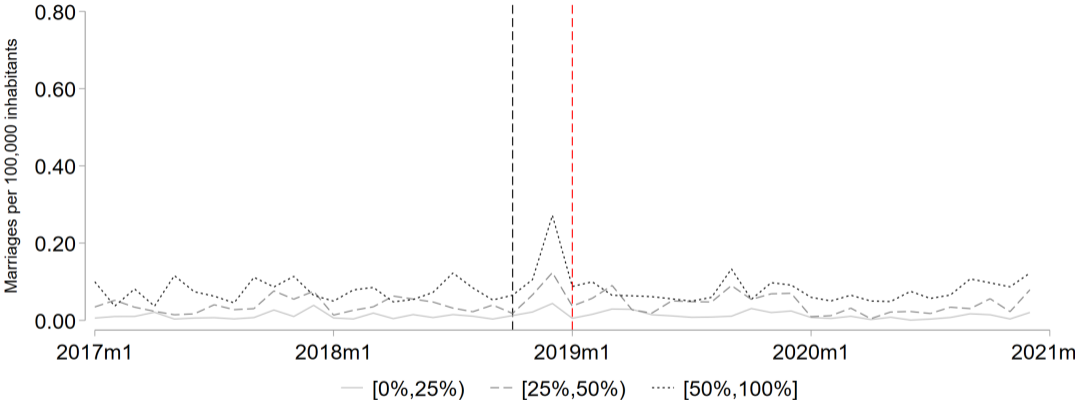


Figure: Monthly gay marriages from 2017 to 2021

Motivation – Women-to-Women Marriages

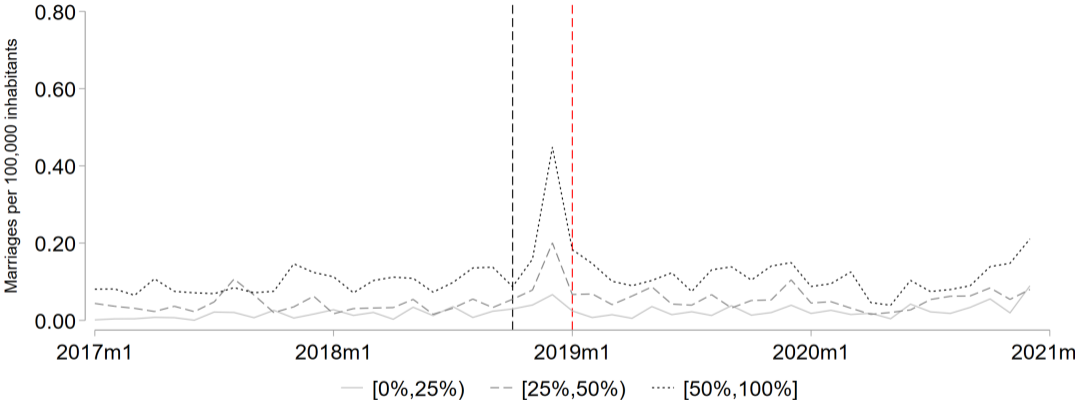


Figure: Monthly lesbian marriages from 2017 to 2021

Research Question

How revealed local support for a homophobic political leader can influence the marriage decisions of same-sex couples?

Same-sex marriage outcomes:

- Aksoy *et al.* (2020): Legal recognition of same-sex relationships is associated with statistically significant improvements in public attitudes toward sexual minorities.
- Sansone (2019): Marriage equality increased the probability of being employed between individuals in same-sex couples.
- Matouschek & Rasul (2008): In same-sex relationships, not allowing homosexuals to marry destabilizes their relationships and also imposes costs on them
- Aksoy *et al.* (2018): found that partnered gay men earn significantly less than their partnered heterosexual counterparts, whereas partnered lesbians earn significantly more than partnered heterosexual women.

Change in behavior:

- Tankard & Paluck (2017): Major institutions, like the U.S. Supreme Court, can shift public attitudes by changing perceptions of social norms, as seen after the 2015 ruling that increased support for same-sex marriage.
- Ajzenman *et al.* (2023): Bolsonaro's anti isolation speech impact during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Bursztyn *et al.* (2020): Donald Trump's rise in popularity and eventual victory increased individuals' willingness to express xenophobic views publicly.
- Goldberg & Smith (2025): A threat to the right to be married may lead to changes in the population's pattern. In the US, the potential legal threat over Obergefell v. Hodges led LGBTQ+ Americans to wanting to move out of their state or the country.

- The Superior Electoral Court (TSE) - election results.
- Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) - number of civil unions, by sex.
- Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) - GDP per capita, population, density, etc.
- Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) - registry offices.

Difference-in-Differences with a continuous treatment:

$$y_{mt} = \alpha + \beta(\text{post}_t \times B_m) + \gamma_m + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{mt}, \quad (1)$$

where:

- y_{mt} is the density of marriages (per 100,000 inhabitants) occurring in municipality m during month-year t ,
- post_t is a binary indicator equal to 1 after the election of Bolsonaro,
- B_m is the share of votes for Bolsonaro in the first round of the 2018 elections,
- γ_m is a municipality fixed effect,
- τ_t is a month-year fixed effect,
- ε_{mt} is the error term.

To explore the dynamics of the effect and provide evidence for the parallel trend assumption, we obtain event study coefficients by interacting B_m with the months to treatment (leads and lags) indicators θ_{t+k} :

$$y_{mt} = \alpha + \sum_{\substack{k=-12 \\ k \neq -1}}^{12} \beta_k \theta_{t+k} \times B_m + \gamma_m + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{mt} \quad (2)$$

- All other variables are defined as in the equation 1.
- Identification using equations 1 and 2 relies on unconditional parallel trend assumption.
- To provide evidence for the conditional parallel trend assumption we also show specification that include a set of controls X_{mt} (GDP per capita, population density, and density of registry offices).

Table: Share of votes for Bolsonaro and same-sex marriages

	Same-sex		Lesbian		Gay	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DiD	0.133*** (0.030)	0.121*** (0.031)	0.104*** (0.022)	0.095*** (0.023)	0.029 (0.020)	0.026 (0.020)
Controls		✓		✓		✓
Observations	240,296	240,296	240,296	240,296	240,296	240,296

Notes: This table presents results based on a difference-in-differences approach with varying treatment intensity. Our outcome variable is the share of same-sex marriages per 100,000 inhabitants. The treatment is the share of votes for Bolsonaro in the first round of the 2018 presidential election. Columns (2), (4), and (6) include controls for GDP per capita, population density, and density of registry offices. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Results (cont.): Straight Marriages

Table: Placebo test: heterosexual marriages

	(1)	(2)
DiD	-1.675 (1.149)	-1.440 (1.153)
Controls		✓
Observations	127,376	127,376
Adjusted R^2	0.214	0.214

Standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Robustness: Event study (same-sex marriages)

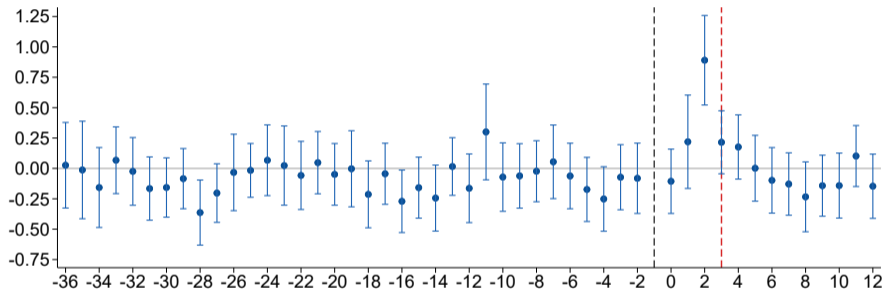


Figure: Event Study (same-sex marriages). X-axis represents the months.

Robustness: Event Study (gay marriages)

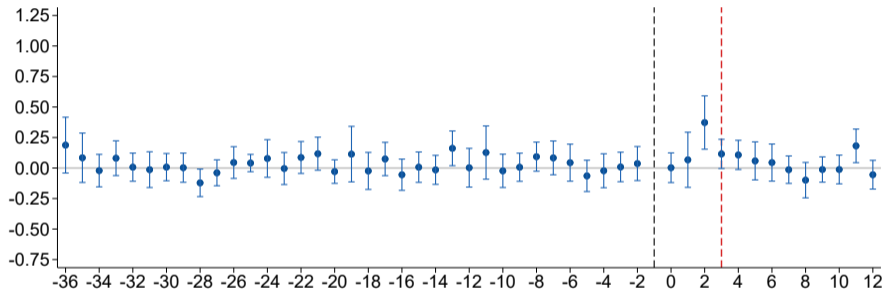


Figure: Event Study (gay marriages). X-axis represents the months.

Robustness: Event Study (lesbian marriages)

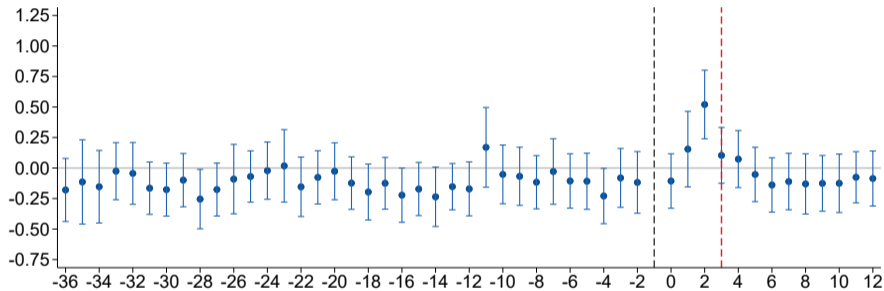


Figure: Event Study (lesbian marriages). X-axis represents the months.

Our Results are robust to multiple specifications:

- Robust to including control variables (GDP per capita, population density, and density of registry offices) to account for conditional parallel trends.
- Robust to an alternative treatment definition using the second-round vote share for Bolsonaro instead of the first-round share.
- Robust to excluding large municipalities with more than 500,000 inhabitants.
- Robust to restricting the sample to only large municipalities (more than 500,000 inhabitants).
- Robust to excluding municipalities with very high support for Bolsonaro (vote share $> 80\%$) and with very low support for Bolsonaro (vote share $< 20\%$).
- Robust to a leave-one-out analysis, where each of Brazil's five regions is excluded one at a time; results are not driven by any single region.

- Bolsonaro's election led to a significant, short-term increase in same-sex marriages.
- The effect is concentrated in the month before his mandate.
- No comparable response is observed among heterosexual couples.
- Results are robust to multiple specifications and alternative treatments.
- Political shocks can trigger anticipatory behavior in response to perceived threats to rights.
- Adds to evidence on behavioral responses to political uncertainty.
- First paper that analyzes a political event on same-sex marriage.

Thank you!

sara.parente@ebs.edu

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