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Populists and Regional Organizations: lessons from Bolsonaro's Brazil

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that a right-wing populist leader's support of regional organizations depends on how domestic supporters are affected by populist engagement with them. If the regional organization does not affect groups of the populist project, then the leader enjoys latitude to question the regional institution. However, whenever undermining the regional organization damage a group, the leader does not target the regional organization, and assumes an ambivalent approach. We use the case of Bolsonaro's Brazil engaging two regional organizations: MERCOSUR and PAHO to test our argument. Our findings reveal that right-wing populist leaders are aware of domestic costs.

Keywords: right-wing populism; foreign policy; regional organizations; domestic preferences; Bolsonaro.

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Introduction

Regional organizations (ROs) are targets of right-wing populist leaders. Right-wing populist leaders question the value of ROs to regain the sovereignty of the state and revindicate the people of the nation. Right-wing populist leaders in Europe have recurrently targeted the EU as undermining their states' sovereignty and the general will of their people. Yet, right-wing populists once in power adopt a pragmatic approach to ROs even if this goes against the populist predicament of these institutions being against the general will of the people.

Donald Trump criticized NAFTA. He blamed this institution for the conditions of American workers and for not protecting citizens from the dangers of immigration. In fact, Trump engaged with NAFTA and renegotiated some trade aspects of it. President Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022) from Brazil followed a similar path of questioning the country regional commitments at times, while at

others he engaged with them despite carrying on criticising RO alike. He decided to withdraw from the South American Union (UNASUR), while he supported a new RO (Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America - PROSUR) (Wehner 2023). He also questioned the value of the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR). While he did not show up to some MERCOSUR's meetings, he never withdrew totally from it and his government ended supporting MERCOSUR institutional makeup. He also adopted a controversial position against the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) during COVID-19 to then adopt a policy of reluctant cooperation.

The right-wing populist pattern towards ROs is full of contradictions of criticisms and actions that undermine these institutions, as much as of adopting pragmatic cooperation at times. The expectation is that right-wing populists will act accordingly with the ideological premises of the project and thus undermine ROs as being against the will of the people. Thus: why do right-wing populist leaders adopt these contradictory patterns of behaviour regarding ROs? What are the key drivers behind these contradictions in right-wing populist leaderships regarding ROs?

We argue that it is within the supporters' group of the right-wing populist project in which the explanation for this contradiction lies in. Whenever the RO does not affect societal preferences or specific key groups of the populist project, then the leader enjoys more latitude to question and undermine a specific RO. Moreover, whenever eroding the ROs seem to potentially damage the interests of a specific key group of the populist project with the potential to politicise and manipulate the issue against the leader, then the government follows the domestic group preference and does not target the institution in a direct way. Instead, he/she adopts a positive communication strategy in which the decision that seems as supporting the ROs is communicated to the domestic audience as a win-win for the people's benefit.

We contribute to the debate on how right-wing populist leaders erode key pillars of the Liberal International Order (LIO) by focusing on ROs as integral components of global governance and closer to voters' daily lives, holding significant salience for right-wing populist projects. Our exploration of the domestic dimension of right-wing populist foreign policy (PFP) towards ROs enhances understanding of the social manipulable category of the people. It reveals how a fragmented base of supporting groups can enable or constrain populist promises and actions on the international stage. This approach challenges the notion of a unified "will of the people" political strategy, diverging from the traditional view of a populist leader mobilizing a broad citizenry to challenge entrenched interests.

This paper focuses on Brazil under Bolsonaro to illuminate the causes and actors behind the contradictory behavior of right-wing populists globally, particularly in Europe and North America, from a Global South perspective. Latin America, with its rich history of populism and regionalism, provides a unique landscape for theory development and empirical evidence on right wing PFP at the regional level. Brazil's case is crucial for understanding the recent rise of right-wing populist political projects. This rise of populism is part of a fourth wave of this type of leadership in Latin America that is predominantly right-wing oriented vis-à-vis a center-left third wave i.e. part of

the Pink Tide (Wajner and Wehner 2023).¹ This fourth wave in Latin America converges with a fourth phase of global far-right (Mudde 2024). This right-wing populist leadership, whether in government or political opposition, significantly impact external relationships and regional cooperation and thus subject to be analyzed on its own merit.

We analyze two ROs: MERCOSUR, a sub-regional project in South America with a trade focus, and PAHO, a regional health governance entity covering the Americas. The structure of the paper includes a literature review on populism and PFP, the presentation of our theoretical framework, and propositions based on a societal approach to foreign policy. Methodological considerations are also briefly outlined.

The third section examines Bolsonaro's views on ROs, particularly focusing on MERCOSUR in two key moments: the change of government in Argentina and MERCOSUR's relationship with the EU during their partnership agreement negotiations. Additionally, within this section, we analyze Bolsonaro's policy towards PAHO. The paper concludes by discussing our results against and outlining a future research agenda.

Populism in International Politics

Populism has been conceptualised as a political strategy, discourse, thin-centred ideology and political style. In all these approaches, there is a core premise: people versus elite and the general will. Yet, these conceptualizations have their own nuances. Populism as a thin-centred ideology needs an ideological companion to gain action (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). As a political discursive strategy, populism seeks to create a collective identity (Laclau 2005). The discursive practice of antagonizing the people vs an elite has structuring effects on the political domain. Populism has also been conceptualised as a distinct political style emphasising his performative dimension to a specific audience. As a style, populists appeal to the people against an elite and features a performance of recurrent threats and crisis (Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2020). As a political strategy, populism becomes a purposeful action of a personalistic leader that exercises power based on unmediated and uninstitutionalised support of unorganised followers i.e the people (Weyland 2001).

We prioritise a strategic approach to populism. This approach departs from Weyland's notion as he stresses how populists exercise power in an unmediated manner and directly appeal to the people. Yet, we question the notion of the people as a homogenous and amorphous entity and show the diversity of actors with divergent and vested interests behind this people's notion. Further, all other approaches to populism have a strategic component. After all populists once in power make of the governing process a permanent campaign trail (Müller 2017). Thus, the

¹ Right-wing populists governed in Brazil and are on power in Argentina and El Salvador. Right-wing populists have also become a political competitive alternative in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Uruguay.

leader as part of a strategic approach needs to show awareness of the different domestic groups and interests underpinning the project, that are vital to the populist future.

Comparative Politics research has shaped the examination of PFP. Scholarly works on PFP have proliferated in recent years and some have started developing a research agenda on how populism can shed light on IR debates (Wajner and Guirlando 2024; Chryssogelos et al. 2023). PFP research has focused on different regional realities from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Middle East, North America and Western and Eastern Europe (Lacatus 2023; Plagemann and Destradi 2018; Löfflmann 2022; Wajner and Wehner 2023; Lopes et al. 2022; Wehner 2023; Guirlando 2021; Jenne 2021). Initial works on international populism engaged in conceptualizing PFP, with a focus on its manifestations and characteristics (Chryssogelos 2018; Destradi and Plagemann 2019; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Wehner and Thies 2021). International populism involves projecting an anti-elite dimension while strategically presenting ‘the people’ to legitimize domestic and international endeavors (Wajner 2022). Populists position themselves against both national and global elites, sidelining the traditional foreign policy elite (Chryssogelos 2018; Destradi and Plagemann 2019). This personalization in PFP allows the leader to symbolically prioritize the people’s interests and advocate for foreign policy revisionism to regain lost sovereignty (Jenne 2021). However, these leaders are not entirely unconstrained; they adjust their rhetoric emphasizing conservative ideology or toning it down depending on whether they face a similar peer or an ideological rival (Guimarães and Silva 2021).

Others explore the connection between populism and the LIO. These works reveal how populist leaders with structural capacity target multilateral institutions and liberal norms, essentially deglobalizing globalization (Miller 2021). Despite this, populists still cooperate, prioritizing state strength over mutual gains in cooperation games (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019). Yet, these studies focus on the multilateral level, with less attention to regional cooperation as a distinct unit of analysis.

Few studies delve into regional dynamics, with Spandler and Söderbaum (2023) focusing on how populists legitimize or delegitimize ROs. However, their work does not explore (de)legitimacy as rooted in domestic vested interests. Furthermore, Söderbaum et al. (2021) illustrate how right-wing populists prefer easily manipulable regional cooperation formats to advance their agenda, offering alternative frameworks.

Our study complements these insights by incorporating a domestic politics perspective, suggesting that populist contradictions regarding ROs arise from a normative view of leadership and the imperative to restore the general will of the people. Specific domestic interests of key actors supporting strategically the populist project at times drive the ambivalent approach to ROs. These actors create a set of constraints for the future of populism at home and when advancing a specific view of ROs internationally. The discursive approach also has a clear focus on the plural domestic composition of populism (Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis 2004), and how such plurality shapes the type of foreign policy adopted by populist actors (Chryssogelos 2023).

The discursive approach stresses that the connecting element for domestic actors under the populist leader is their exclusion from the system (Stavrakakis 2004). Populists seek to subsume the societal divisions in and through the gap people vs elite. Thus, populism ends diluting these societal demands in the search of the general will against an established system (Mouzelis 1985; Chryssogelos 2023).² While this discursive approach has shown its value in the study of PFP (Chryssogelos 2020; 2023; Löffmann 2022), it does not consider the possibility that not all domestic actors following the leader are excluded in a systematic manner by the political system. Some groups are still able to keep their own interests and identity despite the leader's aspiration to subsume them in the populist discursive practice. In fact, some of the domestic groups jump on the populist wave and accommodate to it for strategic reasons, especially once the leader achieves political power creating a mutual pragmatic dependency. These domestic groups constrain the leader's motives to achieve such aspired homogeneity of the movement as described by the discursive approach. This interpretation contributes to the contradictory patterns of behaviour of right-wing populists towards ROs and thus reaffirms the need to study the set of vested interests of domestic actors.

Finally, few studies on PFP include the populist approach to Latin American ROs. Yet, this is done as part of the overall PFP approach of leaders in Brazil, or comparatively within and beyond Latin America (Wajner 2021; Wehner and Thies 2021; Wajner 2022; Wajner and Roniger 2019; Thiers and Wehner 2022). While these studies engage with some aspects of regional cooperation, they do not unpack the drivers behind the contradictory pattern of behaviour of right-wing populists towards ROs. Others analyze the erosion of regionalism in Latin America before the phenomenon of right-wing populism. Nolte and Weiffen (2021) show how regionalism have experienced stress overtime. In this sense, right-wing populist leaders can be considered agents of stress for ROs as a domestic political challenge to regionalism (Weiffen 2021).

Thus, while right-wing populists certainly erode institutions as documented by the works mentioned in this literature review, they also at times adopt a reluctant pattern of regional cooperation, which goes against their nationalistic and sovereigntist rhetoric. This is precisely our task, which is to make sense of this contradictory pattern through Bolsonaro's case.

Theoretical Approach

We use a societal approach to governmental preference formation in foreign policy (Moravcsik 1997; Schirm 2020). We complement this approach with other elements that are compatible with a focus on domestic actors such as domestic contestation and external expectations on state action (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Wehner 2015), and strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al. 2013).

² Thanks to one of the reviewers for this point on the discursive approach.

Governments' external positions are influenced by societal demands (Moravcsik 1997). Schirm (2020) explores how societal interests, ideas, and institutional forces shape government preferences. Domestic actors, expressing sectorial preferences, contest the selection of foreign policy goals and policies by leaders (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012). Interest groups influence state preferences on specific foreign policy issues, signaling potential costs for the government.

A societal approach highlights potential costs for the government if it does not address sectorial interests but does not fully capture the relevance of external demands. Leaders respond to domestic preferences while also considering external expectations. When deciding, leaders weigh domestic costs and the expectations of other states. States can communicate expectations to a specific actor, and leaders can follow systemic cues (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012).

Populist leaders sometimes accommodate domestic groups' demands. This pragmatic approach sidelines the government's ideals, especially when specific sectorial interests risk being politicized against the leadership. The populist leader's ability to respond to domestic demands and adopt positions inconsistent with the project becomes a strategic necessity. The leader can mitigate the impact on the government's popularity and electoral support by framing decisions positively within a communication strategy. Strategic narratives demonstrate how actors manipulate their environment to justify decisions and present them positively to specific audiences or the broader public opinion. This strategic narrative aims to minimize costs for the project when a decision is perceived as deviating from the inherently people-centered nature of populism (Miskimmon et al. 2013).

This PFP strategic dimension provides the framework to understand what seems at times consistent with and/or in contradiction towards the own populist ideal of then president Bolsonaro regarding ROs. This theorization helps anchoring the following propositions:

Proposition 1: If a RO mission and policy programme does not affect the base or specific groups of the populist project and eventual costs are diffuse for them, then the leader enjoys more latitude to question, criticise and undermine a specific RO and existing mechanisms of regional cooperation.

The expectation is that conservative and sovereigntist values and groups of the project become the cornerstone of the moments of anti-ROs and anti-regional cooperation of populists. The normative ideological positioning of the leader and of conservative and nativist groups of the project will predominate as costs for specific sectorial groups are diffuse. Contrarywise, such a leader's latitude will tend to be reduced if costs become tangible and concentrated i.e. affecting a powerful domestic group of the populist leader's project.

Proposition 2: If the populist leader's eventual actions towards ROs are seen as damaging a specific influential interest group, or the entire populist base and subject to being politicised against the leader, then the populist government will prioritise the demands of the group.

The expectation is that the leader and/or his closer group will adopt a communication strategy of selling the decision of not going against ROs to his followers as something positive and as a pragmatic need to sustain the leader's vocation for the people. Framing and adopting a positive

communication style of something that goes against the values of the project is to minimise and eventually prevent economic, and electoral costs. It is also expected that the leader will assume an ambivalent approach of delegating the task to other government's members to minimise even more potential personal political costs and the chance of being seen as acting against the populist promise of always acting on the general will of the people.

Methods: Both cases rely on qualitative data such as speeches, documentation and third-party interviews. We collected a vast amount of data of Bolsonaro's foreign policy in our research group (Far-Right and Foreign Policy: Brazil under Bolsonaro (2018-2022), Institute of International Relations, University of São Paulo) from 2018 through 2022. We collected 4,000+ speeches, hundreds of documents and interviews from key Bolsonaro's cabinet members. For this paper, we selected key evidence on ROs that would support (or not) our general argument.

When an inference applies to other target populations, it corresponds to transportability. Based on evidence gathered for this study, we do believe that there is a possible transportability aspect on the relationship between far-right populist and regional organizations. That is, it is likely that similar populist far-right presidents in democratic systems feel constrained by domestic audiences while enacting foreign policies concerning ROs.

However, transportability inferences depend on the extent to which it can account for multiple dimensions, including mechanisms, settings, treatments, outcomes, units, and time (Pearl and Bareinboin 2014). This study does not fully match these criteria, but it does generate an intuition from which it would be possible to consider some sort of replication in other political settings.

Bolsonaro against Regional Organisations

The initial coalition supporting Bolsonaro was different from any previous one. Bolsonaro's tenure reflected a shift in domestic political forces. Bolsonaro's government brought together different sectors with different views, many with no previous governing experience, especially in the area of foreign policy³. Among these groups, none expressed clear interest in Latin America or its regional organizations (Lopes et al. 2022). During the government, other support sectors were added, including parliamentarians from a group of parties of physiological origin, as well as businessmen from the industrial sector.

The rise of new supporters in foreign policymaking was combined with changes in the diplomatic corps. The reduction in the centrality of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) whose administrative standards historically served as resistance to innovations, was a necessary condition

³ (i) evangelicals (...) that defends the traditional family, (ii) squatters, prospectors and loggers, who (...) hinder Brazil's performance in negotiations on climate issues; (iii) anti-globalists and denialists, who express their repudiation of multilateral organizations; (iv) agribusiness (...); (v) and the liberals, (...) who advocate the negotiation of free trade agreements through MERCOSUR, (Saraiva and Albuquerque 2021, 38-39).

for the government to move forward with changes and have more space in the decision-making process (Saraiva and Albuquerque 2022)

Moreover, Bolsonaro administration found a favourable scenario to delegitimize ROs in Latin America. This new moment was marked by the historical decomposition of the post-liberal regionalism and the rise of liberal and conservative governments. However, Brazil avoided a greater involvement with regional governance - including the PROSUR liberal profile initiative. On the contrary, its conservative leadership despised traditional regional organizations.

In the 2018 campaign trail, candidate Jair Bolsonaro opposed MERCOSUR by claiming that it has been used with “ideological bias” by the Worker Party against Brazil’s interests (Leal 2018). After Bolsonaro’s electoral victory in 2018, the future Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, stated that “MERCOSUR will not be a priority” (Carmo 2018). Once in power, Bolsonaro announced Brazil’s withdrawal from UNASUR and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), both identified with the left-wing ideas. Actions to distance Brazil from the RO of the region followed enjoying more latitude, due to a lack of interest in the region from his closest supporters.

Due to Bolsonaro’s sympathy for Iván Duque and Sebastián Piñera’s governments and its identification as preferential allies, Brazil participated in the creation and joined PROSUR in March 2019. PROSUR is a Chilean-Colombian project to replace UNASUR, but with a very limited institutionalality. According to minister Ernesto Araújo,

“The replacement of UNASUR by PROSUR, grounded in democracy and economic freedom, provides us with a new integrationist leverage capable of transforming South America into a great space of economic dynamism, free once and for all from caudillismo and the totalitarian project of the San Paulo Forum.” (Araújo 2019).⁴

The ideological issue was present. However, PROSUR never came to occupy a relevant role in the Brazilian government as Bolsonaro did not attend the summits that followed during the pandemic (Wehner 2023).

In April 2019, the Brazilian government denounced the UNASUR constitutive treaty (“Brasil formaliza saída da Unasul para integrar Prosul.” 2019). The organization was already in decline since the end of Rousseff administration (Fuccille et al. 2017). The advance of conservative governments hampered the functioning of traditional regional organization, and the institution gradually abandoned its activities. In 2018, during Michel Temer’s government, along with five other countries, Brazil suspended its participation and contribution to the organization. Bolsonaro put the icing on the cake by denouncing the treaty.

In January 2021, Brazil withdrew from CELAC, staying out of the Latin American concertation initiative (“Brasil suspende participação na CELAC.” 2020).⁵ According to minister Araújo

⁴The São Paulo Forum is a regional space for coordination of left-oriented political parties and organizations in Latin America.

⁵ CELAC has no constitutive treaty.

(Valente 2020), “CELAC did not have results in defense of democracy or any other area. On the contrary, it gave a stage to non-democratic regimes such as those in Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua”. Brazil did not participate in the CELAC summit to discuss the pandemic, nor in the third meeting between China and CELAC in 2021. Outside CELAC, it disengaged from the European Union, Latin America, and the Caribbean Strategic Partnership. Moreover, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization was practically paralyzed during the mandate since the Brazilian government did not recognize the government of Nicolás Maduro. Because of this, Venezuela’s seat in the Organization became an object of dispute.

Some piece of evidence shows how Bolsonaro’s key cabinet members perceive ROs. Eduardo Bolsonaro argued that UNASUR was facade for the Sao Paulo Forum’s. UNASUR was depicted as an initiative that only brought political and financial damages to Brazil (Bolsonaro 2019a). Ernesto Araújo had the same perception. For example, in 2020, at the opening of a PROSUR Summit, he claimed that:

“When Chile proposed the creation of PROSUR, Brazil effusively embraced the idea. Therefore, it was not only the correct and urgent replacement of an experience as negative as that of UNASUR but also an opportunity to rescue the real ties that unite the South Americans.” (Araújo, 2020a).

The idea of regional leadership was also present in Ernesto Araújo’s speeches but from a very different perspective. For him, others led Brazil in previous administrations, and Brasília had never truly become a regional leader. On one occasion, he clearly rejected Brazil’s regional leadership:

“I think that for a long time, perhaps, Brazil was a leader, but a rather strange leader. It was a leader who did what others wanted; a leader who went where others wanted to take him. I think we were an always driven leader, driven by the ideas of others and driven by the interests of others.” (Araújo 2020b).

Bolsonaro against Regional Organisations: the case of MERCOSUR

In contrast to a long period, Brazil’s perceptions of South America turned predominantly negative. Bolsonaro aimed to rescue the region from socialists, but a deeper analysis of the government’s position on MERCOSUR reveals a more complex stance towards the “socialist regional organization.” In reality, policy fragmentation within MERCOSUR contributed to constant tension between defending ideas and practical results. Bolsonaro’s populist narrative clashed with domestic groups seeking sectoral gains in specific foreign policy actions, leading to a constant interplay of conciliation and confrontation. While Bolsonaro followers neglected and attacked the regional political and institutional dimension, the same did not occur in the economic sphere, with groups capable of producing damage.

For Bolsonaro's cabinet, MERCOSUR had to be rescued from the leftists' governments of the past. In 2019, Eduardo Bolsonaro claimed that Presidents Bolsonaro and Macri were overhauling an organization that had traded on leftist ideologies for decades at the expense of its original trade mission. In a spirit of salvation, Araújo claimed in 2020 that "in the last two years, MERCOSUR has been returning to its original spirit, (...) We were guided in this rescue of the origins for the purpose to generating concrete benefits for our citizens" (Araújo 2020c).

Regarding the institutional capacities, with latitude, Bolsonaro followed the initiative of the institutional dismantling of MERCOSUR, seeking the supposed efficiency of human and financial resources with impacts on the budget. The members decided to deepen the restructuring of the bloc's institutions, and Ad Hoc groups, which have agency power, were dismantled (Granja Hernández 2023). This initiative has reduced the bloc's institutional capacity. As an aggravating factor, he did not attend some meetings of the bloc.

The Argentina-Brazil interaction within the bloc's scenario has historically been marked by bilateralism, a key feature of MERCOSUR (Granja Hernández 2019). However, the rise of Alberto Fernández led to a distancing of the strategic partnership between Brazil and Argentina, accompanied by criticisms and offenses from the Brazilian government, particularly during the Argentine primary elections. President Bolsonaro and his family openly criticized Fernández, identified him as a leftist, and campaigned for Mauricio Macri (Sperb and Uribe 2019). Until mid-2022, the two leaders never met in person. This strained relationship undermined the bloc's agency capacity.

In contrast, regarding the MERCOSUR economic dimension, despite Minister Guedes' electoral campaign comments against the bloc's multilateral agreements and the Common External Tariff (CET), there were no significant changes from the previous government. Brazil, being the country benefiting the most from CET for exporting manufactured products, faced resistance from the industrial sector against modifying the bloc's rules (Confederação Nacional da Indústria 2019). Entrepreneurs argued that ending CET would harm Brazilian industries' long-term benefits. Initially, under Mauricio Macri's liberal government, efforts were made to establish trade agreements with a liberal profile (Confederação Nacional da Indústria 2020). Consequently, after the start of Bolsonaro's term, Minister Paulo Guedes revised his stance on the bloc, leaving decisions about its future for later.

In 2021, the Brazilian ministry of Economy reinforced pressure to lower the CET, in line with the Uruguayan president. It suggested reducing by 20%, divided into two steps of 10% during the year. The Argentine government, concerned with the defence of Argentine industries, made it difficult, and the debate continued throughout the year. At the end of 2021, the Argentine government agreed to reduce the CET by 10%, (Figueiredo 2021a). Lacalle Pou, considering the reduction limited, for his part, insisted that member countries can negotiate free trade agreements with third parties individually. In this case, the National Confederation of Industry showed its fear again and pointed out the damage that the end of the CET would bring to the Brazilian economy ("CNI e IndustriALL-Brasil pedem a suspensão de proposta para a redução da TEC do

Mercosul.” 2021). At the same time, the minister França limited itself to saying it was a timely statement (Figueiredo and Oliveira 2021).

When the Association Agreement with the European Union was signed in 2019, Eduardo Bolsonaro said that “results started to show. (...) In a few months of Bolsonaro and Macri have borne more fruit than in decades of previous left-wing governments”.⁶ The signing of the agreement reinforced the gains of the minister of economy, who worked for the success of the agreement.

At the MERCOSUR’s 30th anniversary summit in March 2021, Alberto Fernández proposed the creation of an observatory for the environment that could defend the environment according to member countries’ preferences. Bolsonaro left the summit before the end and did not respond to the Argentine proposal (“Celebração de 30 anos de Mercosul vira troca de farpas e pedidos de flexibilização que isolam Argentina.” 2021). As one can see, at any given point where the ideological confrontation with the leftists government in Argentina was possible, Bolsonaro made sure to attack his ideological opponent. But when the economic dimension of the ROs was at stake, Bolsonaro preferred to frame as a rescuing mission of his administration. That is, ROs per se are not a problem; they have to be revamped according to conservative ideals.

In this case study, Bolsonaro’s contradictory behavior follows a people vs. elite rationale, consistent with the populist view of ROs as representatives of a corrupt elite. This approach aligned with the normative preferences of sovereigntist and conservative domestic groups supporting the project. However, these ideological underpinnings became secondary when Bolsonaro’s government had to accommodate the material demands of key groups. The industrial sector advocacy and pressure group voiced their preferences about maintaining membership in MERCOSUR. Consequently, Minister Guedes had to backtrack on his promise to reduce the CET system to retain the industrial sector’s support for Bolsonaro’s project.

Bolsonaro against Regional Organisations: the case of PAHO

Bolsonaro’s administration has been widely criticized for its controversial approach to combating the pandemic. Since March 2020, his government not only adopted a denialist stance, as evidenced by numerous studies (Duarte 2020; Fonseca et al. 2021; Casarões and Magalhães 2020), but it also pursued a health policy that appeared to intentionally expose Brazilians to the virus. This approach was rooted in the idea of achieving herd immunity, despite mounting evidence suggesting that his administration may have knowingly contributed to the infection and subsequent deaths of thousands of citizens (Ventura and Bueno 2021).⁷

⁶ Bolsonaro, E. “Bolsonaro’s Facebook posts.” *Facebook*, June, 2019.

⁷ On his controversial response during COVID-19, see the report ‘Mapeamento e análise das normas jurídicas de resposta à Covid-19 no Brasil’ produced by the NGO Conectas Human Rights. This report was delivered to the Parliamentary Investigation Committee about the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2021.

President Bolsonaro opted to diverge from the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the PAHO. His decision seemed driven by concerns about potential negative economic consequences and the potential impact on his chances of reelection and had the support of a large part of his closest followers. In place of following evidence-based recommendations, his administration endorsed health policies grounded in pseudoscience, which gave the appearance of scientific legitimacy (Fonseca et al. 2021).

Therefore, the fundamental and widely accepted scientific advice was either ignored or actively undermined by the federal government. This not only hindered efforts to contain the virus but also had a detrimental impact on the ability of businesses to operate effectively. In essence, Bolsonaro's administration appeared to prioritize political considerations over public health and scientific consensus during a critical time.

One of the most significant missteps in the history of the Brazilian health system was the consistent endorsement of ineffective drugs, such as chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, by the President ("Economia não pode parar por causa do vírus, diz Bolsonaro a empresário." 2020). This led many citizens in general particularly president's supporters to believe in a mythical cure, despite a lack of scientific evidence supporting their efficacy against COVID-19 (Kirkpatrick and Cabrera 2020).

When the Chinese vaccine Coronavac began production at the Butantã Institute, a research center in the State of Sao Paulo responsible for a significant portion of Brazil's vaccination campaigns, the federal government actively sought to hinder production. This obstructionist approach was motivated by political rivalry with the governor of Sao Paulo, resulting in a substantial delay in the national vaccination effort (Bentines 2021).

Moreover, offers from the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, which promised up to 70 million vaccine doses with the potential to deliver 1.5 million by the end of 2020, went unanswered for months, reflecting a deliberate act of neglect. These actions collectively reflect a series of unfortunate decisions and political considerations that severely hindered Brazil's ability to effectively respond to the pandemic and protect its citizens' health (Mattos et al. 2021)

In this context, the Brazilian foreign policy became an essential instrument for the President's approach. In May 2020, Ernesto Araújo created a neologism to explain a Chinese/globalist plot against Brazil through the pandemic: "the comunavirus would be trying to take advantage of the destructive opportunity opened by the coronavirus (...) to expand the globalist project." Meanwhile, Bolsonaro decided to withdraw Brazil's participation from the G-20 Summit, whose goal was to organize a global response to the crisis (Chade 2020a). Soon after, the Brazilian ambassador in Washington, Nestor Foster, celebrated the donation of 2 million hydroxychloroquine pills to Brazil by Donald Trump. Then, in his own words, he declared: "Habemus hidroxicloroquinam." (Rodrigues 2021).

When Brazil had the opportunity to purchase 86 million doses of vaccines from the international consortium Covax Facility, Brasilia deliberately decided to obtain only half of that number to 'buy time.' In a series of diplomatic cables revealed by the local media, the Brazilian government claimed

that the vaccines offered by the consortium were still under development (Oxford-Astra Zeneca, Moderna, etc.) and unnecessary risks should be avoided (Chade 2021). Finally, following his anti-globalist preferences, Araújo firmly believed that Brazil should avoid any international entanglements or responsibilities to fight the virus. He declared in December 2020 that:

“Brazil reaffirms the primary responsibility of governments to adopt and implement responses to COVID-19 specific to national contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. We must not transfer any responsibility from the national to the international level.” (Duchiade 2020)

Moreover, for him

“an international body that overtakes national governments, who know what their own people need, is not the best practice (...) We have much respect for the WHO, but perhaps part of this problem stems from this perception that what the WHO says has to be a global rule.” (Chade 2020b).

In his view, the ‘new Brazil’ must be an international pariah to preserve its ‘freedom.’ That is, “*If talking about freedom makes us an international outcast international, that we are an outcast,*” said Araújo in a press conference (Bitencourt and Schuch 2020). The Brazilian foreign minister was likely referring to the freedom to create policies contrary to what international bodies decide, mainly WHO and PAHO. Bolsonaro’s anti-globalist foreign policy has been explored by the specialize literature (Guimarães and Silva 2021).

In this sense, any regional policy to fight the pandemic would not escape Brazil’s nationalistic assault. The UNASUR Health Council, created in 2008, aimed to improve regional cooperation in health policies and sanitary/phytosanitary measures. As some studies pointed out, the Council was effective for a while (Buss and Ferreira 2011; Riggiozzi 2020). Faria et al. (2015) analysed the positions of UNASUR members at the WHO assembly between 2010 and 2014 and found consistent similarities between what the Health Council decided and UNASUR countries’ positions. Nevertheless, after Brazil departed from UNASUR in 2018, the Council could not coordinate regional efforts any longer. Paulo Buss, former President of Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, Brazil’s leading public health research foundation, stated that “Today, our situation is summarized in two words: fragmentation and fragility. We once had a fortress, called Unasur” (Figueiredo 2021b).

Regional health governance had (and still has) its mechanisms for consultation and decision-making in MERCOSUR. When the pandemic broke out, with the Structural Convergence Fund, the member states approved resources for a project on research and biotechnologies applied to health for the fight against COVID-19. MERCOSUR adopted the ‘Declaration on Regional Coordination for the Containment and Mitigation of the Coronavirus and its Impact’, which coordinated the exchange of information on initiatives to combat the pandemic in member states. Nevertheless, it had few practical results due to bureaucratic obstacles. In PROSUR, in 2020,

President Piñera convened three virtual meetings for debates on possible cooperation, which did not count on the presence of Jair Bolsonaro (Barros et al. 2021). In practice, the domestic level and unilateral decisions, and closing borders, were prioritized over regional cooperation.

Bolsonaro also worked against PAHO with the support of Donald Trump. Before the pandemic, both presidents drove out 10,000 Cuban doctors and nurses from Latin America, who could work in many countries through PAHO agreements. Bolsonaro accused PAHO of abetting “modern-day slavery” and vowed to expel the Cuban doctors from Brazil. In 2020, Donald Trump suspended regular funding of US\$ 110 million and did not contribute to PAHO’s initial appeal for US\$ 94.8 million in special coronavirus funding. Dr. Washington Alemán, a senior infectious disease specialist and a former deputy health minister in Ecuador, who diagnosed the country’s first confirmed case of COVID-19, said that “No one from the Pan-American Health Organization was here, and we felt their absence. The support was not like it used to be in previous years, in previous epidemics” (Kirkpatrick and Cabrera 2020).

Bolsonaro, enjoying considerable latitude, injected his values into the international arena, undermining regional cooperation against the pandemic, notably within MERCOSUR. Economic losses for specific groups were less salient than the perceived encroachment on Brazil’s national sovereignty by global elites. This narrative resonated strongly with Bolsonaro’s extreme followers, including nationalists and religious groups, who supported his dismissal of strict lockdown measures and criticism of governors.

However, Bolsonaro’s agency to challenge COVID measures and the PAHO approach faced limitations due to domestic demands and visible costs for the populist project. Criticism from opposition sectors and even supporters in the legislature, leading to the resignation of Minister Ernesto Araújo, signaled growing discontent. Under pressure from economic actors and the and from the support group in the legislature, Bolsonaro’s government shifted its diplomatic discourse, reinforcing the word “health” and reluctantly signing a cooperation strategy with PAHO. Adopting a transactional approach, Bolsonaro managed to appoint a Brazilian doctor as the head of PAHO, framing it as a win-win for domestic audiences and asserting control over the institution’s involvement in sovereign domestic issues.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the reasons behind the contradictory patterns of behaviour that right-wing populists show towards ROs. While right-wing populist leaders sometimes criticise and undermine ROs, these leaders also end adopting pragmatic cooperation at times. This puzzling pattern is based on the expectation that right-wing populists will act accordingly with the ideological premises of the project and thus overall undermine ROs as being against the general will of the people. Our approach focused on unveiling the set of domestic vested interests that constrained the attempt of the right-populist leader to create a homogenous movement. We show that some domestic groups

are able to keep their own societal material interests and identity despite the leader's aspiration to subsume them in the populist discursive practice.

The case of Brazil under Bolsonaro highlights the significance of domestic actors with vested interests in understanding the sometimes contradictory approach of right-wing populist leaders to ROs. Bolsonaro framed ROs as left-wing elite constructions but adopted a pragmatic approach when such attacks posed economic costs to his supporters. This behavior explains his contradictory stance towards ROs, from defiance to strategic engagement and dismantling.

In the MERCOSUR case, Bolsonaro aligned with nationalist values, distancing himself from Latin America and its organizations. However, the economic interests of groups like the National Confederation of Industries influenced his ambiguous stance, supporting MERCOSUR's economic dimension while neglecting its political aspects. In the PAHO instance, legislative pressures led to cooperation with the RO after the foreign minister's resignation. Thus, economic pragmatism and confrontational rhetoric coexist within populist projects (Wajner 2021).

Our study confirms that domestic actors' interests shape the coexistence of pragmatism and confrontation in right-wing populist projects. Future research should explore the diversity within the populist support base and the impact of inner group dynamics on PFP. Additionally, comparing this fourth wave of populism to previous left-wing oriented waves will reveal similarities and divergences in navigating domestic interests and regional expectations.

Understanding the heterogeneous domestic support for right-wing populist leaders is crucial for crafting policies to safeguard democratic practices internationally. Policy programs can be maximized when domestic agents are socialized into the risks of populism and adopt corporate values of democratic responsibility. Thus, right-wing populism in the international order is constrained by the diverse domestic preferences that shape the PFP adopted by leaders.

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