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## **Right-wing populism in Brazil: A story of crises and dissatisfaction**

Meneses, Santiago

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# **Right-wing populism in Brazil: A story of crises and dissatisfaction**



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

Santiago Meneses

s2442305

BAP 15: Democracy in Latin America

Dr. Diana Davila Gordillo

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### **Right Wing Populism in Brazil: A story of crises and dissatisfaction**

Right-wing populism has had a presence in Europe since, at least, the early 1980s (Rydgren, 2007, p. 242). However, in more recent decades, right-wing populist movements have been emerging, and sometimes thriving, in certain contexts. In the United Kingdom, the UK Independent Party and the Brexit party succeeded in getting Britain out of the European Union with their right-wing, anti-immigrant and anti-globalization rhetoric (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 2). In the United States, Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential elections running on a campaign based on anti-elitism and hyper-nationalism with slogans like ‘Make America great again’ (Kazin, 2016).

Populism has played a major role in Latin American domestic politics for decades; so much so that there is an academic agreement on three waves of populism in the region (Kaltwasser, 2014ab; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). The first of these waves was led by Juan Peron in Argentina and Getulio Vargas in Brazil who expanded the state, partially nationalized the economy, and implemented protectionist trade policies (Salgado & Sandrin, 2021, p. 266). The second wave saw a reaction to the state-centric policies of earlier populist leaders. Among others, Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Carlos Menem in Argentina supported neoliberal policies following the Washington Consensus and promised to incorporate the informal sectors into the market economy (p. 267). Lastly, the third wave marked yet another reversal of policy patterns, mainly towards state control. Largely influenced by Hugo Chavez ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism’ model, these populist leaders were outspokenly against neoliberalism and imperialism, fostering majoritarian and participatory democracy (p. 267-268).

The political tensions as results of the economic downturn in the region sparked popular protests and created the opportunity for a resurgence of the right in Latin America (Robinson, 2020, p. 92). This re-emergence of the right has been characterized by increased repression, and mobilization of far-right parties and business groups (Robinson, 2019, p. 92). From 2015 onwards, popular support for the Pink Tide governments decreased, and frustration and discontent increased. After years of left-wing leaders in, the turn to the right has become more salient .“The elections of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018 and the ousting of Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2019 would signal the move towards the far right of the political spectrum” (Salgado & Sandrin, p. 268). This turn to the far right has also been marked by the election El Salvador’s leader Nayib Bukele. Furthermore, in Costa Rica, right-wing populist Fabricio Alvarado came

second in the presidential elections of 2018 (Siles et al., 2021, p. 7). And, in Chile, Jose Antonio Kast, leader of the populist *Partido Republicano*, came in second during the 2022 elections (Campos, 2021).

The 2018 election of right-wing strongman Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil came as a surprise to Brazilian and international audiences. Bolsonaro ran with the Social Liberal Party (PSL; from its Portuguese acronym), a minor party that was not expected to win against the established mainstream parties – the center-right Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB) and the center-left Worker's Party (PT) (Layton et al., 2021, p. 1; Bloch & Vallada Lemonte, 2019, pp. 10-11). Given PT's political dominance prior to Bolsonaro, his election marked a prominent break from leftist politics and a shift towards RWP.

Current literature on the factors that explain the emergence of right-wing populism focuses heavily on the European and U.S. cases (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde, 2011; Onis & Kutlay, 2020; Rodrik, 2021; Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017). On the other hand, the literature on Latin America mainly focuses on left-wing populism (Doyle, 2011; Kaltwasser, 2014ab Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Roberts, 2007; Schamis, 2006). Research on right-wing populism in the region tends to either focus on specific manifestations or the mechanisms of populism in a country (Araujo & Prior, 2021; Burni & Tamaki, 2021; Daly, 2019; Neto, 2020; Salgado & Sandrin, 2021; Siles et al., 2021) or on the history, context, and characteristics of right-wing populism (Campos, 2021; Monestier & Vommario, 2021; Zanotti & Roberts, 2021). However, existing research has failed to pinpoint and understand the factors that explain the contemporary rise of right-wing populism in Latin America. This thesis hence addresses the following research question: *what factors explain the recent rise of right-wing populism in Latin America?*

To answer the research question, a single case study will be conducted on Brazil and the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. The analysis uses primary data from public opinion surveys, and secondary academic sources to investigate the factors that led to the victory of Bolsonaro. Rather than focusing on discrete factors connected to the rise of RWP, the argument put forward emphasizes the importance of looking at these factors together as part of wider causal mechanism. Integrating the economic inequality thesis and the cultural backlash theory, as well as supply-side and demand-side factors, allows for a richer analysis of what leads to the rise of RWP in the Brazilian context. The research concludes that several factors interact with each

other in a complex set of causal mechanisms to produce the conditions necessary for the rise of RWP. The analysis presents an initial framework through which to analyze other case of RWP the region.

The remainder of this thesis will be divided in five parts. The first section will provide a discussion on the different factors that have been theorized to explain the rise of right-wing populism. In the second section, a theoretical framework integrating the theories discussed will be presented along with a set of theoretical expectations and the variables that will guide the analysis and discussion. The third part includes the research design that discusses the methodology followed, as well as the case selection and data collection process. The fourth section features an analysis of the data and a discussion on the factors accounting for the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil connected to theories on the emergence of right-wing populism. Finally, this paper will present a conclusion of the findings and the implications and recommendations for future research.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical accounts for the rise of right-wing populism**

#### Demand-side and supply-side factors

Demand-side explanations deal with the role that the attitudinal motivations of voters play in the election of right-wing populists. Radical right parties, especially in Western Europe, are assumed to attract individuals that identify with the parties' platform. These platforms are founded on anti-immigrant and anti-establishment messages that appeal to fear (Perloff, 2003, p. 187).

Kehrberg (2015, p. 568) argues that "the fear message of radical right parties attracts voters with similar attitudes," particularly attitudes towards immigration, social conservatism, and populism. The successful framing of immigrants as a threat to both economic and cultural security and the desire to hold *status quo* social norms increased the probability for voting of right-wing populist parties (p. 569). Guiso et al. (2017) argues that populist support comes from a combination of high economic insecurity and low levels of confidence for the establishment. Supply-side explanations highlight the importance of the "constraints and opportunities" (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017, p. 911-912) in explaining the successful mobilization of right-wing populists. Furthermore, supply-side factors focus on how populist parties and leaders target voters' skepticism towards political elites, and on the use of extremism as a strategy to maximize

support (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 3; Glaeser et al., 2005, p. 1283). This argument is further divided into external and internal supply-side factors.

#### Demand-side factors: Economic v. cultural explanations

From the demand-side factors, the two main explanations for the success of RWP are the economic inequality thesis and the cultural backlash theory. Firstly, the economic inequality thesis, argues that mass support for populism reflects divisions between the winners and losers of globalization and related processes; those economically vulnerable people tend to seek out authoritarian-esque leaders in the face of threats (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 11). In this understanding, “populism is a product of income inequality, grievances among the losers from global markets, dissatisfaction with mainstream center-left parties, and loss of faith in the capacity of the mainstream parties to respond to these concerns” (p. 12). However, scholarship does not fully agree on the explanatory power of the economic inequality argument (Mudde, 2007), arguing that social factors are complex and so the rise of right-wing populism cannot be fully attributed to growing unemployment or economic insecurity.

The second explanation, the cultural backlash thesis, emphasizes that the support for populists can be understood as a social psychological phenomenon (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 13). The rise of progressive values in the West – associated with environmental protection, LGBT rights, racial and gender equality, human rights, and more – triggered a countermovement of older rationalists whose values felt threatened (pp. 13-14). This cultural resentment then fueled support for populist outsiders that claim to protect traditional values. It is crucial to note that these explanations are not exclusively competing, but rather complementary. The motivation behind supporters of right-wing populist parties stems from both a perceived loss of culture and economic deprivation (Golder, 2016, pp. 484-485). Inglehart and Norris (2016) suggest that while the economic inequality argument is valid, it cannot explain the rise of populism by itself; on the other hand, psychological and social factors seem to play a bigger role in explaining it (p. 30).

### External supply-side factors

These explanations focus on the “constraints and opportunities that the political-institutional context offers” right-wing populists to mobilize voters around their cause (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017, p. 913). Political opportunity structures are defined as “consistent resources external to the individual, movement or party in question (Tarrow, 1998, pp. 19-20). These include the type of electoral systems, the types of party systems, the political space, dealignment and realignment processes, success of right populist parties (pp. 913-915).

Indeed, the type of electoral system has been shown to influence success of right-wing populist parties. Majoritarian electoral systems constrain the emergence of new parties since the third and fourth parties receive a smaller share of seats in parliament in comparison to the votes they received (Rydgren, 2007, p. 254). John and Margetts (2009), for example, argue that the failure of the radical right in Britain, for example, is given due the majoritarian electoral system. While evidence across the literature is mixed, studies show that support for right-wing parties tends to be higher in proportional electoral systems (Swank & Betz, 2003; Jackman & Volpert, 1996; Golder, 2003; Veugelers & Magnan, 2005).

The dealignment and realignment process has been suggested to provide room for new radical right-wing parties to enter the political space – “the degree to which mainstream parties occupy the electoral terrain of the radical right” (Rydgren, 2007, p. 252; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017, p. 913). These processes form and transform cleavages based on social identities or interests. It is argued that the sociocultural cleavage – akin to cultural backlash thesis – has increased at the expense of the economic cleavage, “expanding the political opportunities for the new radical right-wing parties” (Rydgren, 2007, p. 253).

### Internal supply-side factors

Internal supply-side explanations (Rydgren, 2007, p. 256) argue that the emergence of right-wing populist parties also relies on how parties manage themselves and their opportunities. To this end, both the ideological profiles of the party and its internal structure matter.

According to Muis and Immerzeel (2017, p. 916), right-wing populist parties have distinct ideological character and framing, that have to be adapted to national contexts. Right - wing populist parties rely heavily on an anti-establishment ideology, combined with nativism and authoritarianism (p. 911). Economically speaking, right-wing populist parties have varied in



their ideological stances, shifting from pro-market positions to protectionism and welfare chauvinism (p. 916).

Additionally, Zanotti and Roberts (2021, p. 32) argue that since social and economic structures can produce different types of populism, considering the political agency of populist leaders to identify and politicize cleavages in society is also necessary to understand the emergence of right-wing populism in Latin America, and elsewhere.

#### Explanations for the election of Bolsonaro

Literature on the rise and victory of Bolsonaro have explored the factors that influenced the election of a right-wing populist. According to Bloch and Vallada Lemonte (2019), “one of the most determinant factors was a diffuse feeling of dissatisfaction with the previous ruling party [PT]” amidst several corruption scandals, “in a climate of political, institutional and economic crisis” (p. 10). Bolsonaro emerged during a time when the Brazilian population deeply frustrated with long-running political institutions and leaders, making him a popular outsider amongst those dissatisfied. Initial observations by experts after the election also point to *antipetismo* (anti-PT-ism) as a factor of Bolsonaro’s success (Davis & Straubhaar, 2019, p. 83). Furthermore, the implosion of the center-right contributed to Bolsonaro’s rise (Zanotti & Roberts, 2021, p. 35). Bolsonaro’s election demonstrates an increase in the importance of identity in informing voting behavior. Bolsonaro’s campaign brought to saliency of gender, race and religion as divisive issues previously untapped (Layton et al., 2021, p. 3). Similarly, Bloch and Vallada Lemonte (2019) argue that Bolsonaro’s success is “strongly associated with the identity crisis prevailing in Brazil” (p. 19).

#### Theoretical gap

Existing literature on the emergence of RWP, fails to consider the importance of combining supply- and demand-side explanations, as well as economic and cultural theories. Focusing on Brazil, although there is extensive literature on the rise of Bolsonaro and his authoritarian, conservative and populist tendencies, the literature fails to connect this rise with the wider literature on the emergence of RWP. Extant literature tends to highlight the influence of single, discrete factors – from the increase of dissatisfaction amongst voters (Bloch & Vallada Lemonte, 2019) and antipetismo (Davis & Straubhaar, 2019) to the role of the media (Araujo & Prior

(2021). The present thesis aims to integrate existing explanations for the emergence and victory of Bolsonaro to the wider discussion on supply- and demand-side explanations of RWP. This will frame the causal mechanism chain that led to the election of Bolsonaro, providing a potential framework through which to study the recent rise of RWP in the Latin American region.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The thesis will develop an integrating analytical framework based on existing explanations, combining combination of economic, cultural, supply- and demand-side factors that might account for the rise of right-wing populism in Latin America. It is important to note that social, structural, and economic conditions of Western countries are different from Latin America countries, as such, the theories will be used to match with local contexts.

Neither internal nor external supply-side factors have been proven to fully explain the success of right-wing populist parties and the changes in support. Van der Brug and Fennema (2007, p. 475) argue that demand-side explanations cannot account for differences between countries that otherwise look similar. The authors further argue that a valid and comprehensive explanation for the success and variations of right-wing populist parties should integrate demand- and supply-side factors (p. 483).

Both the economic inequality thesis and the cultural backlash theory can be expanded to integrate demand-side and supply-side factors influencing the rise of RWP. (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 32). From the cultural backlash theory, demand-side factors shape public values and opinions while supply-side factors focus on the appeals made by parties and leaders, the mobilization of support, and the institutional context. The cultural shift that has been taking place since the mid-twentieth century has increased post-materialist values in society. The rising role of progressive values in politics has tilted the balance of public opinion, eroding traditional, materialist values that prioritize economic and physical security (p. 34). Support for right-wing populism comes from reaction of social conservatives that feel threatened by the rise of progressive values. Supply-side explanations connect how these changing attitudes in society produce electoral success. Populist leadership “can activate latent authoritarian attitudes among conservatives” (p. 43) which is then translated into votes depending on electoral rules, electoral turnout patterns, and party competition. Increased immigration, and support for it, in a country

will trigger an anti-immigration reaction which then will be co-opted by potential populists to garner support amongst conservative populations.

O'Connor (2017) has theorized the mechanisms through which income inequality can lead to RWP. It is expected that countries with large economic inequality will see the rise of right-wing populists. Economic inequality fosters the election of right-wing populist leaders in at least three ways (O'Connor, 2017). Firstly, economic inequality leads to crises that unfreeze existing political allegiances and creates a space for new political actors to emerge. Secondly, increasing economic inequality that is not successfully cut down by mainstream parties is used by rising right-wing populist parties to delegitimize the mainstream parties. Lastly, right-wing populists mobilizing along the socio-economic cleavage capitalize on the living experience of economic inequality, beyond just distribution data, targeting economically marginalized communities (pp. 32-40). These mechanisms also show the integration of demand-side and supply-side factors.

### **Theoretical expectations**

Based on the literature, it is expected that what accounts for the rise of Bolsonaro and RWP in Brazil, and elsewhere in Latin America, is a complex interaction of several factors. It is predicted that the following theoretical expectations will be met.

- 1) The presence of long-running political, institutional or economic crises creates a breeding ground for RWP to emerge on
- 2) The electoral success of a RWP candidate follows increasing economic inequality
- 3) The living experience and perception of economic inequality further fosters the rise of RWP
- 4) A cultural backlash against liberal values precedes the rise of RWP

To answer the research question, it is necessary to identify the variables that will be investigated. The dependent variable is the rise of right-wing populism. The independent variables constitute the factors that influence the rise of RWP that will be investigated – economic inequality; the presence of crises; voters' attitudes towards progressive values; party organization; public attitudes towards the established political elite.

## Conceptualization

### Populism

This paper will use the concept of populism following Mudde's (2004) definition:

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the... general will of the people (p. 543).

This definition identifies three core elements of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 151): (1) the people which is homogeneous and virtuous, (2) the elite which is homogeneous and a pathology, and (3) an appeal to the general will that sees "popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power." Under populist rhetoric, the people and the elite are portrayed as antagonistic groups. By labeling the elite as a pathology, populists frame them as a threat to the virtuous people. Conceptualizing populism as a thin-centred ideology allows the concept to be composed of a "restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts" (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). This understanding creates conceptual room for populism to adhere to different, and sometimes contrasting, parties, policies, and ideologies.

### Right-wing populism

Right-wing populism (RWP) has been referred to by several terms – 'radical right,' 'far right,' 'extreme right.' Right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) tend to follow a nationalistic program focused on becoming ethnically homogeneous and returning to traditional values (Rydgren, 2007, p. 242). RWPPs pit the virtuous 'people' – usually middle- to lower-class citizens that have been victims of globalization – against a corrupt established elite that promotes internationalism and its own interests above the nation and the interests of its people (Rydgren, 2007, p. 242; Onis & Kutlay, 2020, p. 110). Mudde (2011) further adds that what makes a party a right-wing populist party is a combination of populism, authoritarianism, and nativism (p. 12). However, RWP is not a monolithic phenomenon that looks the same cross-nationally. Wodak and Krzyzanowski (2017) emphasize that "each national or other variant of RWP is necessarily different and must be approached in a distinct and context-dependent way" (p. 474).

For the purpose of this research, the rise of RWP refers to the successful election of a right-wing populist leader or party for executive office.

### Presence of long-running crisis

According to Robinson (2019) a crisis refers “to the existence of obstacles to the ongoing accumulation of capital, and therefore to the tendency towards stagnation and declining profits” (p. 93). This definition deals with an economic understanding of a crisis, which is also characterized by an economic recession and rising economic inequality. A political crisis is marked by periods of increasing distrust for political institutions and leaders, a re-alignment of voters’ values, and political instability. In social terms, a crisis refers to a disjuncture in the societal values of a body politics, and extreme polarization within the society. This paper understands a long-running crisis (or crises) as a period of time through which a country faces economic, political and social obstacles to its own stability, whether these happen simultaneously or as a consequence of the other. The most important aspect of a long-running crisis is that it causes enough instability that the political space is opened to new actors to emerge.

### Economic inequality

In numerical terms, rising economic inequality refers to an increase in the wealth gap between the poorer and richer groups of a population. Furthermore, by increasing economic inequality it is also meant that the effect of economic inequality is also worsened, including decreasing purchasing power, rising debts and inflation, and reduced perceptions of wealth.

### Cultural backlash

Cultural backlash refers to the process through which conservative groups have a reactionary response to an increase in liberal and progressive values in society (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). This comes from a perceived loss in both social and economic status, and a general sense of fear against progressive values.

## **Research Design**

### **Methodological approach and case selection**

The present thesis aims to study the factors that influence the rise of right-wing populism in combination with each other, rather than treating the factors as isolated explanations. The paper will follow a single case qualitative study. This type of research provides an in-depth and

“intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). Although studying a single unit might limit the transferability and applicability of the findings, it allows for a richer understanding the different factors that facilitate the rise of RWP in a given context, while also exploring how these factors might interact with one another.

Based on its recent economic and political history, and the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, Brazil was chosen as a most-likely case for the rise of RWP leader. As per Bennett and Elman (2010), a most-likely case is one in which a theory is considered likely to provide a good explanation (p. 505). In the current Latin America political landscape, Brazil represents a crucial example of right-wing populism and initial observations point to the rise of Bolsonaro being explained by the theories introduced earlier. Based in theory, the context surrounding the election of Bolsonaro would be expected to be fertile ground for right-wing populism. As Brazil represents a crucial example to analyze how different the factors and theories interact with one another to explain the rise of RWP.

### **Data selection/collection**

The paper will look at a number of sources to analyze the factors that influenced the rise of RWP in Brazil. For the demand-side factors, the analyzed data consists of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (2021) AmericasBarometer database from 2010 to 2021, covering the years prior to and after the election of Bolsonaro. These surveys measure democratic public opinion and behavior across the Americas, providing an insight into citizens’ attitudes. In addition, the Center for Studies of Public Opinion’s (2014; 2018) Brazilian Electoral Survey will be used to analyze voters’ attitudes and behaviors in instances of elections. To analyze supply-side factors, the paper will look at secondary sources on the Brazilian electoral and party systems and literature on the ideology of Bolsonaro and the structure of PSL.

It is important to acknowledge that the analysis will be conducted at different, but interconnected levels of analysis. On the one hand, the surveys used to analyze the demand-side factors are individual and group level measures of citizens’ attitudes. On the other hand, the analysis of supply-side factors mostly relies on domestic level data associated with the make-up of Brazil’s electoral and party system, and individual-level data linked to Bolsonaro’s ideology. The presence of different levels of analysis might initially presuppose a muddled analysis.

However, as the research makes clear, the factors studied interact with and influence each other. As such, a multi-level analysis is not only helpful but essential to analyze the various factors associated with electoral success of RWP.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Economic and political context**

Under the presidencies of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, Brazil saw sustained economic growth, an increase in social spending, and a decrease in poverty and inequality (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 8). However, starting in 2014 Brazil's economy entered into a recession, with two years of consecutive GDP fall (Brinca & Costa-Filho, p. 4). During same year, operation *Lava Jato* (Car Wash), Brazil's largest anti-corruption operation in terms of misappropriated funds, was unveiled (Mello and Spektor, 2018, p. 113). Quickly, the economic crisis developed into a complex social and political one. The economic crisis culminated in the summer of 2016 with the impeachment of then-president Rousseff. Vice-president Michael Temer assumed the presidency and enacted a series of austere economic policy involving limits on social spending. Temer's reforms, however, "have been blamed for the worsening of social conditions and increasing dissatisfaction (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 8). The economic growth that Brazil experienced under PT rule has been shown to have benefitted two main groups – the poorest percentiles and richest percentiles. This squeezed the growth of the Brazilian middle class. And, it is this middle class that has become Brazil's left-behind (Gethin & Morgan, 2018, p. 3). As shown by the data on Table 1, people's own economic conditions and their perception of the country's economic situation worsened.

**Table 1. Living economic situation in Brazil, 2012-2016**

	2012	2014	2016
Respondents rating the country's economic situation worse than previous year (%)	19.7	44.4	74.5
Respondents rating personal economic conditions worse than previous year (%)	16.2	22.9	47.2

*Source: Latin America Public Opinion Project, 2021*

The mainstream Brazilian parties saw the effects of this economic and political crisis in the 2018 elections. PSDB, the major center-right party has contested and lost every election against PT since 2003 (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 9). After 2014, several PSDB senior officials became implicated in corruption scandals (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 9). Geraldo Alckmin, 2018 PSDB presidential candidate, suffered the political and electoral consequences of the party's recent trajectory. In the first round of the elections Alckmin came in fourth with 4.76 percent of votes – the worst result in party's history (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 9). On the other side of the political spectrum, ex-president Lula da Silva was chosen as the PT presidential candidate; however, after he was convicted for corruption related to the Lava Jato scandal the Federal Electoral Court prevented his candidacy. His running mate, Fernando Haddad, then became the presidential candidate, contesting the election with Bolsonaro (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 10). The political turmoil caused by these events and the response of mainstream political parties created a feeling of alienation within the population against political institutions generally, and against the ruling party specifically – *antipetismo*. Table 2 shows the difference in support for the two mainstream parties in the 2014 and 2018 elections. The data taken from the CESOP post-electoral survey shows a significant reduction in support for both PT and PSDB.



**Table 2. Electoral Support for mainstream parties, 2014 and 2018 elections**

	Support for PT's Presidential Candidate (%)		Support for PSDB's Presidential Candidate (%)	
	2014 Elections	2018 Elections	2014 Elections	2018 Elections
First Round	41.4	22.1	29.8	2.1
Second Round	47.3	28.4	36.2	N/A

*Sources: Center for Studies on Public Opinion, 2014; Center for Studies on Public Opinion, 2018.*

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due to a “rooted feeling of *antipetismo*... and a strong antisystem feeling of disenchantment with political institution” (Rennó, 2020, p. 2). As shown by the LAPOP data in Table 3, there was an increase in dissatisfaction towards the Brazilian political system from 2012 to 2016.

Furthermore, by the end of 2017, 77 percent of individuals interviewed for the Ibope survey rated the government as ‘bad or terrible, while 92 percent did not trust the president (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019, p. 9). However, these explanations only account for demand-side factors. Equally as important is the role of supply-side factors in explaining the rise of RWP. Rennó (2020, p. 2) argues that the 2018 elections exhibited an alignment of right-wing issue positionings and vote choice for a conservative candidate. Bolsonaro presented himself as a “political outsider, a national saviour, and the only honest politician” (Bloch & Vallada Lemonte, 2019, p. 11). In a rally in 2018, Bolsonaro yelled, “Let’s shoot down Acre’s [a state in the north of Brazil] PT supporters!” while holding a tripod pretending it was a machine gun. Bolsonaro capitalized on the economic and political turmoil caused by the recession and the corruption scandal, positioning himself against corruption and in favor of “cuts to public spending and privatization programs” (Gethin & Morgan, 2018, p. 7). This allowed him to gain the support of voters that no longer identified with PT and PSDB, and were unsatisfied with the political establishment (Gethin & Morgan, 2021, p. 17).

**Table 3. Dissatisfaction in the political system, 2012 and 2016**

	2012	2016
Respondents feeling no pride at all on the political system (%)	20.2	45.5
Respondents feeling no respect at all towards political institutions (%)	10.8	21.3
Respondents not trusting political parties (%)	31.3	55.6

*Source: Latin America Public Opinion Project, 2021.*

### **Economic inequality thesis**

With the economic recession and the *Lava Jato* corruption scandal in 2014, Brazil's economic and political system entered a state of crisis that perpetuated itself in the years to come. As per O'Connor (2017), the economic crisis, which worsened economic conditions in the country, resulted in a freezing of existing partisan identities and the start of de(re-)alignment process that mostly affected allegiances to the mainstream parties PT and PDSB, as shown in Table 2 and 3. This exhibits a change in both demand-side and supply-side factors. From the demand-side, voters unhappy with mainstream political elites and with the political system were no longer identifying with them, creating demand for a new candidate. From the external supply-side, fragmentation within the mainstream political parties increased, as evidenced by the decrease in support for both parties. Between 2014 and 2018 (see Table 1). PT failed to produce a convincing post-Lava Jato image and platform, and PSDB was not able to rid itself from its association to corruption scandals and poor macroeconomic policies. This further fueled the de(re-)alignment process and transformed the economic and political crisis into a social crisis of representation as well. The fragmentation of the mainstream parties also resulted in a breakdown of the bi-partisan system present in Brazilian presidential elections since 2003. As argued by Rydgren (2007, p. 253), since a large part of the supporter base of the mainstream parties no longer identified with them, the mainstream parties lost control of an electoral majority. This opened the political space for a new party to successfully capture those 'party-less' voters and establish themselves in the political arena.

Bolsonaro emerged as a presidential candidate in the middle of these shifts in the political environment and voters' attitudes. Labeling himself as a political outsider, Bolsonaro constructed an ideology that captured the votes of those that disassociated themselves from the mainstream parties. In his campaign, Bolsonaro framed the political elite as an internal enemy, targeting them in his rally speeches, blamed PT for the recession and the rise of unemployment, and advocated for less state involvement in the economy. Through this rhetoric Bolsonaro "appealed a broad group of poorer voters, and many middle class and business elites" (Gethin & Morgan, 2021, p. 17). The internal supply-side factor made up by Bolsonaro and his platform matched the demands of a large portion of the voters, who ultimately elected Bolsonaro president.

In summary, the presence of long-standing economic, political, and social crises in Brazil created an environment ripe for the success of RWP in the country. Economic conditions worsened by the crisis exacerbated the living conditions of lower- and middle-income groups, who became unsatisfied with the political establishment. A number of shifts in voters' attitudes and demands, and a strategic campaign platform ran by Bolsonaro allowed him to succeed in a fragile political environment.

### **Differential effects of the economic crisis**

Barros and Santos Silva (2019) find that the gendered differential effect of the economic crisis helps explain the 2018 electoral outcome (p. 12). Ballard-Rosa et al. (2021, p. 3) argue that globalization-related economic losses damage the social identity of historically dominant groups; the group then seeks authoritarian values to force minority group to conform to the status quo and compensate for the loss in status. In the case of Brazil, the inclusionary economic policies of PT empowered "disadvantaged groups through visibility, recognition, and affirmative action" (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2020, p. 23). This 'inclusion via consumption' created economic opportunities to marginalized communities, especially lower-income groups. Greater access to consumption and cash transfer programs like *Bolsa Familia* provided financial autonomy to these groups, helping break them out of cycles of poverty and servitude. As women were becoming increasingly economically independent in the PT era, men's sense of authority and recognition diminished, developing into an existential crisis of masculinity (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2020, p. 25).

The 2014 economic crisis had differential effects on men and women in Brazil (Barros & Santos Silva, 2019), influencing their reactions to the loss of economic power. With the political and economic instability, men's existential crisis developed into concrete voting behavior. Barros and Santos Silvas (2019) and Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2020) find that without the material comfort of the pre-2014 commodity boom, men sought to revendicate for their loss in relative and economic status. Bolsonaro entered the presidential race running a conservative, populist platform with extreme and misogynous views. In their research in a low-income neighborhood of Porto Alegre, Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2020) witnessed a gendered response to the economic shock and the emergence of Bolsonaro. They found most women rejecting Bolsonaro and his open misogynistic beliefs while men became inspired by the "conservative, individualistic, misogynist, and punitive worldviews" of Bolsonaro (pp. 22-25). Similarly, Barros and Santos Silvas (2019) argue that "once faced with difficult economic conditions, males responded by voting for a candidate that exacerbates the imaginary of masculinity as a way of compensating for the loss in relative status" (p. 13).

Bolsonaro's campaign offered simple solutions to Brazil's complex problems. As an example, he promised to legalize firearms for citizens to defend themselves as a solution to violence problem (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2020, p. 25). This type of solution attracted male voters dissatisfied with Brazil's political, social and economic position, as "the masculinity crisis was constructed within a wide context suggestive of anger, vulnerability, and frustration with the issues of unemployment, impoverishment, and public security" (p. 26). By portraying traditional masculine stereotypes, Bolsonaro gained the support of Brazilian men emasculated by the inclusionary economic policies of the PT era and the economic recession of 2014. Barros and Santos Silva's (2019) research shows that in the places where the economic shock affected men harder, Bolsonaro received a higher percentage of votes (pp. 36-37). They also suggest that the political gender gap experienced in the election of Bolsonaro is specific to the 2018 elections (p. 13). Based on IBOPE data, the gender gap in the 2014 elections was smaller than the gender in the 2018 elections, even when the 2014 elections saw a female candidate running against a male one (p. 13).

The differential effect of the economic crisis demonstrates how supply- and demand-side factors build upon each other to produce an environment that favors the success of RWP. The period of economic growth in Brazil under PT rule integrated previously marginalized and low-

income communities into the formal economy through ‘inclusion via consumption.’ With the greater inclusion of women men, in some cases, felt a loss in authority in the economic and political arena. This commenced the shift in voting behavior of some men who were unhappy with their perceived loss of status. This was further exacerbated by the 2014 economic crisis. Lower-income communities that had their economic situation improved under PT rule were suddenly left worse-off by the recession, including men. The gradual loss of social and economic status that lower-income men experienced left them upset at the Worker’s Party and their economic policies, shifting their demands. As the economic, political and representation crises were ongoing, men specifically faced an identity crisis characterized by their relative loss of status. As Ballard-Rosa et al. (2021) argue, this traditionally dominant group shifted their attitudes towards authoritarian values and Bolsonaro’s conservative ideology matched the newly-formed demands of this group of voters. With his misogynistic speech and his anti-establishment rhetoric Bolsonaro provided a way for men to reconcile their masculine identity with their political presence.

### **Brazil’s Cultural Backlash**

So far, the discussion has been limited to an exploration of the economic inequality thesis. However, the election of Bolsonaro was also made possible due to growing cultural backlash. Against a backdrop of increasing political and economic instability, the *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Pass Movement) mobilized in 2013 against an increase in bus fares across Brazil (Purdy, 2019, p. 16). The movement quickly shifted its focus towards an ampler, progressive agenda, including better infrastructure, public security, education, public service improvement and other demands (Purdy, 2019, p. 25; Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020, p. 35). Taking from Inglehart & Norris (2019, p. 23), *Movimento Passe Livre* arguably represents a manifestation of *The Silent Revolution* akin to that of the Western countries. Although the movement did not explicitly represent post-materialist values such as “environmental protection, peace movements, sexual liberalization, democracy and human rights, gender equality...” (p. 33), it served as a progressive catalyzer for a cultural backlash.

Against the same economic and political background, the Free Brazil Movement (MBL from its English initials) also gained ground with a platform against corruption, economic crisis, and left-wing ideology (Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020, p. 35). MBL incited fear that LGBT

movements were promoting homosexuality in schools, engaged in anti-LGBT and anti-feminist attacks, promoted traditional gender roles, and advocated against abortions (p. 36). MBL represents the cultural backlash that Inglehart and Norris (2019) theorize, and this backlash has had repercussions for the Brazilian political scene in the years following the 2013 protests. “Instability and economic downturn are the two conditions most commonly associated with the rise of right-wing mobilization” (Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020, p. 34). The economic crisis and *Lava Jato* scandal of 2014 provided the opportunity for right-wing movements like MBL to emerge and capitalize from them. Combining anticorruption and neoliberal messages with anti-LGBT and heteronormative agenda allowed MBL to rally together conservative and religious Brazilians, Brazilians affected by the economic crisis, and Brazilians dissatisfied with the political institutions after the corruption scandal. With a diverse support base, right-wing values such as conservatism, nationalism, and authoritarianism were already spreading amongst voters prior to Bolsonaro’s election in 2018.

During his campaign, Bolsonaro co-opted the message of MBL to run his campaign. He distanced himself from corruption schemes, vocalized against LGBT right and feminist values and in favor of stronger military and police presence, and increased ties with both Evangelicals and Catholic groups across the country (Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020, p. 36). Bolsonaro’s populist rhetoric framed liberal values as the enemy of conservatism. As a way of example, Bolsonaro, on several occasions, defended the military dictatorship in Brazil and even praised military officials who tortured opponents during the dictatorship (Ker, 2019). He also urged parents to beat their effeminate boys (Epoca, 2011). Following the social turmoil caused by the 2013 protests, Bolsonaro mobilized anti-PT voters who had previously voted for the more moderate right, PSDB (Renno, 2020, p. 18). Scared of the rise of liberal values, conservative voters turned to Bolsonaro for political comfort.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The economic and political context of Brazil, as well as the cultural backlash experienced within Brazilian society throughout the 2010s illustrate the complexity surrounding the rise of RWP and the election of Bolsonaro. Firstly, neither the economic inequality thesis nor the cultural backlash theory could account for the victory of Bolsonaro by themselves. The fact that the economic downturn, and its effects on Brazilian politics, and the cultural backlash happened during the

same period is not just a coincidence. Rather, the simultaneity of these events shows the interconnectedness and complementary nature of these two theories. Economically and culturally, those who voted for Bolsonaro experienced a loss in their social standing prior to the election. Feeling let down by mainstream parties and politics and afraid of increasing liberal progressiveness, voters shifted their support away from bi-partisan lines or left-right cleavages.

Similarly, the Brazilian example shows the importance of integrating supply-side and demand-side explanations to explain the rise of RWP. The realignment of Brazilian voters' values and behavior along economic and cultural lines cannot explain why Bolsonaro was elected. Rather, it is the interaction between demand and supply that explains how a RWP leader was elected. Bolsonaro's ideology strategically matched the demands of voters disillusioned by Brazil's political, economic, and cultural state of affairs.

The decreasing popularity of PT as a trustable party, the collapse of the PSDB, and the aftermath of the economic crisis and corruption scandal of 2014 have fueled a crisis of representation amongst the Brazilian population. A crisis of representation comes from the exclusion of citizens from the political process, lack of direct democracy, or the inadequacy and inefficiency of representation mechanisms (Mainwaring, 2006, p. 15). Discontent Brazilian voters were facing a crisis of representation which extended from representation in economic terms to include social belonging. This allowed voters to match their increased conservative demands with Bolsonaro's extremist populist message.

The analysis mostly confirms the theoretical expectations set out at the start of this thesis. Firstly, although income inequality in Brazil had been falling during PT rule, the economic crisis foregrounded the fragility of Brazil's economy and worsened the living experience of lower- and middle-income Brazilians that benefitted from PT economic and social policies. This, in turn, unfroze existing political allegiances and fostered dissatisfaction towards political elites amongst these voters. Secondly, the rise of RWP in Brazil, manifested in the election of Bolsonaro, was preceded by a period of economic, political, and social crises that had a two-fold effect. The interconnected crises simultaneously triggered a shift in voters' values and opened the political space for a new political figure to emerge. Lastly, Brazil experienced a cultural backlash against progressive values, which fueled support for a RWP conservative candidate.

The case of Brazil and Bolsonaro and the analysis presented in this thesis provide a potential reference for future research on RWP in Latin America, and elsewhere. By conducting

an analysis integrating different theoretical approaches to explaining the rise of RWP, it is found that the interaction between different factors is crucial for fully understanding and explaining the election of Bolsonaro. Future research can improve the limitations of this paper by focusing on theorizing the mechanisms through which these factors affect one another. To this end, these mechanisms can be then applied to different cases in Latin America to further study the rise of RWP in the region and its effects on regional politics. The implications of the findings go beyond the election of Bolsonaro by providing a base framework to study the rise of other RWP leaders in Latin America (i.e. Nayib Bukele in El Salvador) or to understand why some RWP candidates have not achieved electoral success (i.e. Jose Antonio Kast in Chile).

Lastly, the gendered differential effect of the economic crisis was the most striking finding of this thesis. Whilst the analysis was limited by its scope, future researchers should further study the gendered impact of economic crises, and the connection with right-wing populism. Developing nuanced linkages between the role of gender and the rise of right-wing populism would allow for an inclusion of feminist perspectives on the study of RWP, which this paper failed to account for.



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