

# **Economy, Geography, Articulation: Ecosystems of Right-Wing Populism in the Global South**

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## *Abstract*

Three paradoxes emerge from the global rise of twentieth-first century populist politics. In early-industrialized countries, the role of global trade in reducing manufacturing jobs correlates with popular support for authoritarian parties. On the contrary, in primary exporting environments, commodity booms have been cited as a correlate of growth, but the working class has been largely associated with the rise of a populist left. Thus, while changes in global terms of trade have explained conservative *reaction* in the industrialized world, they should have led to left-wing *stability* in the Global South. Relatedly, an emphasis on the *global* nature of populist reaction also calls into question the historically shared association between working-class support and left-wing populism in the South. Finally, a third puzzle lies in the virtual lack of party structures of many right-wing populist leaders across the Global South. Even if there were a strong political economy argument explaining the structural base of populist reaction, it is not clear how leaders rapidly articulated popular support without an organizational base.

To shed light over these three related puzzles, we propose an “ecosystem-based” (Tilly 1995) approach to explain the emergence of right-wing populism in the Global South. We focus on the paradigmatic case of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, which remains puzzling given that (a) Brazil’s commodity boom was limited and ended before Bolsonaro arrived to power, (b) the key swing vote was located in working-class urban peripheries, (c) Bolsonaro lacked a political party to articulate a new sociopolitical bloc. We theorize these three dimensions of populist ecosystems (economy, geography, and articulation), and explain their emergence in Brazil through the triangulation of economic data, geographic analysis of voting trends, and interviews with government and both right and left wing social movement actors. We finally illustrate our approach with other cases across the Global South.

## ***Introduction***

A paradox lies within the burgeoning literature on the global rise of twentieth-first century populist politics. In early-industrialized countries, the role of global trade in reducing manufacturing jobs has been frequently cited as a correlate of both low stagnant growth and support for ethnonationalist and authoritarian parties and candidates. However, in commodity exporting environments, the boom in exports of primary commodities has been cited as a key correlate of growth, but has not been clearly identified as having a relationship with the political turn to the right. In fact, the working class has been largely associated with the rise of a populist left. Thus, while changes in global terms of trade have explained conservative *reaction* in the industrialized world, they have explained left-wing *stability* in the Global South.

Relatedly, an emphasis on the *global* nature of populist reaction also calls into question the historically shared association between working-class support and left-wing populism in the Global South. The predominance of support for Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil concentrated in the country's largest cities, with the most significant swings from prior elections in urban working class peripheries (Nicolau 2020; Bradlow 2019; Richmond 2018). Similar dynamics have been found in other recent critical cases in the Global South such as India (Heller forthcoming) and Philippines (Garrido 2021). Finally, a third puzzle lies in the lack of party structures of many right-wing populist leaders, a key characteristics shared mostly across the Global South (Evans 2020). Thus, even if there were a sufficient political economy argument to explain the structural base of populist reaction, it is not clear how were peripheral leaders able to turn the popular support in their direction without a credible and carefully built organizational base.

To shed light over these three related puzzles, we propose an “ecosystem-based” approach to explain the emergence of right-wing populism in the Global South. Following Charles Tilly (1995: 366), we argue that explaining the emergence of conservative populism in the South requires putting into question the validity of the general character and timescale of the phenomenon in the Global North. Thus, to “take Tilly South” (Heller and Evans 2010) we propose an ecological approach able to bring together both short and long-timescales to explain the conditions under which right-wing populist politics is most likely to take place. We dub this an “ecological approach” in order to distinguish it from a more contingent form or a conjunctural account. We highlight the evolution of deeply entrenched structures related to scale and time, which in turn paved the way for the strategic and agentic rise of right-wing populism. As a result, this approach highlights three dimensions of analysis: political economy, political geography, and political articulation.

## ***Specifying the “ecosystem”***

We emphasize that a Southern perspective on the contemporary rise of right-wing populism cannot be understood in mechanical, linear terms. The Brazilian case does share some surface features with cases in the Europe and the United States. However, the underlying causal chain appears quite different. In order to provide a more universal account, we propose that Tilly's (1995) concept of an “ecosystem” of factors that explain democratization can be used to explain the rise of contemporary right-wing populism. This approach highlights the methodological critique of “third wave” comparative-historical sociology, which has emphasized the difficulty of a closed, linear logic of “necessary, and sufficient conditions” for explaining large-scale social change: “Within an open system like the social, and in contrast to artificially closed systems like the scientific experiment, empirical events are inevitably multiply

overdetermined by a plurality of conjuncturally interacting causal mechanisms” (Adams, Clemens and Orloff 2005).

Here, we aim to systematize elements of such “conjunctural” interactions. Tilly pushed back against the “top-down” and “instrumental” analyses of democratization. Instead, he argued that “valid explanations of the presence or absence, waxing and waning, of democracy will combine very long histories with dense accounts of short-term dynamics.” Our task here is to lay out not only a historical narrative, but to provide a degree of conceptual order to how events concatenate into such a “conjunctural,” yet simultaneously “causal” story. In order to do so, we lay out three dimensions of analysis that, taken together, characterize an “ecosystem” of right wing populism: political economy, political geography and political articulation. Each of these dimensions can be understood in scalar terms. Political economy emphasizes the global scale. Transnational flows of trade and finance both enable and constrain political possibilities for nation-states. Political geography emphasizes the urban scale. By this, we mean that inequalities between city and countryside, as well as that between peripheral suburb and urban core, are key dividing lines of constructing political blocs. And finally, political articulation, emphasizes a cultural sociology of individual agency. That is, the role of political leadership to stitch together narratives that can bring into being national political change rooted in changes at both the global and subnational scales. The concept of an “ecosystem” therefore lends itself to a generalizable form of argument. The dimensions of political economy, political geography, and political articulation, that comprise such an ecosystem, provide a systematic basis for specifying the features of a political conjuncture.

We theorize these dimensions through a case study of the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and then expand our insights briefly to other cases across the Global South. The Brazilian case should be understood as a critical case, precisely because: (a) its commodity boom was limited and ended before Bolsonaro arrived to power, (b) the key swing vote was located in working-class urban peripheries, (c) Bolsonaro lacked a political party to articulate a new sociopolitical bloc. As we will show in this section, our findings contradict current accounts of the rise of right-wing populism (see Table 1).

Table 1. Brazil as a Critical Case

	Prediction	Brazil
Political Economy	Turn to the Right as a logical result of negative terms of trade (end of commodity boom)	Turn to the Right as a result of financial and credit-based crisis
Political Geography	Working class peripheries as core bloc ensuring left-wing stability	Working class peripheries as core bloc of political change towards right-wing populism
Political Articulation	Political party as the key actor for populist political articulation	Charismatic leader with no party organization

We show that Bolsonaro was able to exploit a local ecosystem marked by three important processes: (1) local shifts in the political economy of financial markets and currency valuation related to the impact of the global crash of 2008, (2) changes in the geographical distribution of working class-based support for right-wing outsiders, which concentrated in the main urban peripheries, and 3) a slow disarticulation of the Brazilian party system, which Bolsonaro exploited with the support of a multi-organizational base that included social movements, business associations, and advocacy think tanks.

### *Political Economy*

Literature on political economy and populism in the Global North has focused on the “losers” of globalization as the social base of right-wing populism. Indeed, it is common to cite the role of global trade in reducing manufacturing jobs as a correlate of both low stagnant growth and support for ethnonationalist and authoritarian parties and candidates (Rodrik 2020), an effect that becomes more pronounced across the elderly, less educated, and lower classes (Ballard Rosa et al 2017, Roodujin et al 2017, Rama and Cordero 2018, McVeigh and Estep 2019, Colantone and Stanig 2019). On the contrary, in commodity exporting environments, the boom in exports of primary goods has been cited as a key correlate of growth, but has not been clearly identified with the political turn to the right. In fact, the “commodity boom” has been largely associated with the rise of the left (Richardson 2009; Weyland 2009, Beasley-Murray, Cameron, and Hershberg 2010, Kaufman 2011, Mazzuca 2013, Ocampo 2017; Riofrancos 2020). This suggests a mirror image, where changes in global terms of trade have been used as a dominant explanation for right-wing reaction in the industrialized world, while accounting for left-wing stability in less industrialized countries.

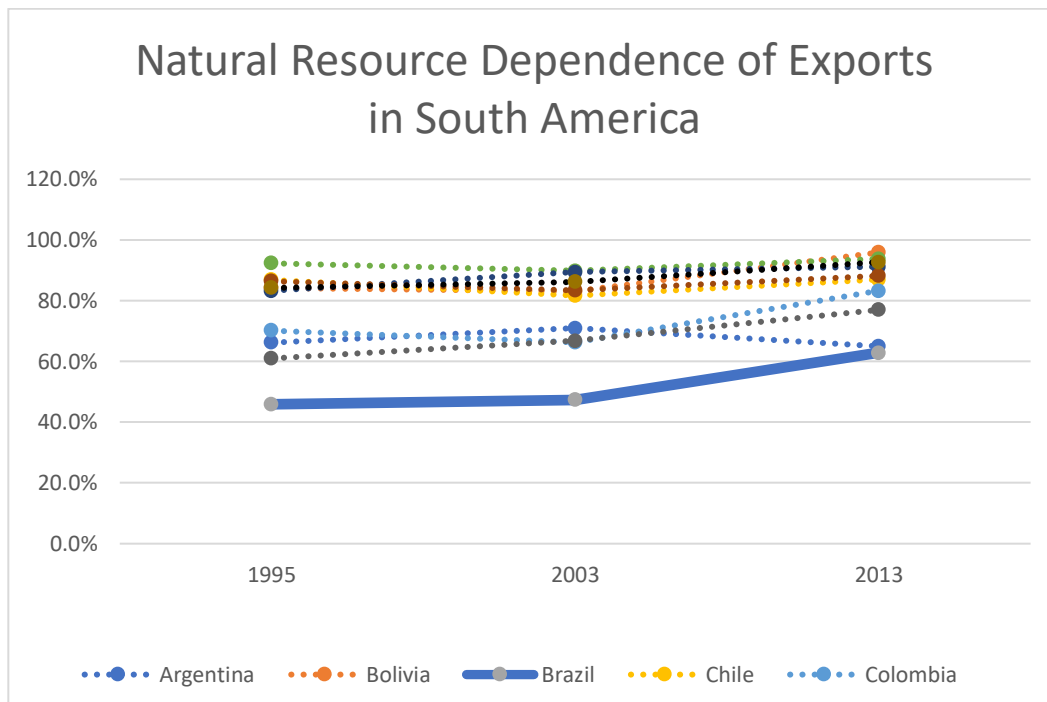
We argue this mirror image might well be convincing were it not for the problem of timing. Deindustrialization in the Global North is understood as a long-term process tied to changes in political organization. As legacy center-left parties transformed from parties of relatively low-education blue-collar workers to parties of highly-educated white collar workers, they underwent a process of “Brahminization” (Piketty 2020), through which their support base became more elite. As a result, they no longer were responsive to the priorities of their previous social base and faced weaker electoral prospects (Mudge 2011, 2018). In contrast, the “commodity boom” in middle-income countries is understood as a relatively short term response to the 2008 financial crisis. As China’s government injected unprecedented fiscal spending into its economy, primarily investing in infrastructure, commodity-exporting countries were able to ride a wave of China’s increased need for importing primary goods. Once we introduce the timescale to assess these two explanations, then rich and middle-income contexts no longer appear as mirror images.

Moreover, literature on the rise of right-wing authoritarianism in the Global South has been linked to a narrative about the global political economy that does not fit easily with that focused on the Global North. The left-wing “Pink Tide” in Latin America was sustained by a commodity boom associated with the rise of China both before and after the 2008 financial crisis. Among political economy explanations for politics in Latin America, the trend had been precisely that the new terms of global trade had benefited the left and a renewed focus on building social welfare states. The structural trend had been precisely to buck predictions of an encompassing global “neoliberal” turn. If the 2008 financial crisis did indeed light a match under

longer-term trends in the Global North, then we need a commensurate narrative to explain contexts in the Global South. The terms of trade alone cannot suffice.

This is particularly salient in the case of Brazil. While Bolsonaro is the most extreme case of a right-wing populist leader in South America, the country had comparatively lower levels of dependence from the commodity boom to sustain the PT in power. Over the past three decades, Ocampo (2017) finds that Brazil has always had a much lower natural resource dependence in its mix of exports than any other South American country. In 1995, this figure was 15% lower than the Uruguay, reflecting the relatively high degree of manufacturing value added in its exported goods. It is true that the global commodity boom grew the natural resource share of exports by 2013 to 62.9% compared to 45.9% in 1995. Even so, in 2013, Brazil maintained a share of natural resource dependence in its export mix that was lower than any other South American country (see Figure 1). Consequently, we can conclude that Brazil was not as tied to changes in the global terms of trade than its neighbors.

Figure 1. Natural Resource Dependence of Exports in South America



Source: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

This finding undermines the importance of changes in the global political economy as a structural driver of the shift to right-wing populism. The stylized political economy story is that commodity-led growth booms should have left “Pink Tide” governments in power. Instead, we find that the financial basis of trade — currency markets and the political economy of monetary policy — has played a role that more clearly tracks the rise and fall of the PT. This account emphasizes the combination of long-term trends in “premature deindustrialization” (Rodrik 2015) in the Global South coupled with the halting, but meaningful expansion of credit and public goods during the period of the so-called “commodity boom.” Thus, the terms of trade have to be seen as underpinning a specific repertoire of public policy, not merely a global

structural determinant of policy. In particular, it is the changing role of finance, not industry that plays the main role in explaining how the global political economy generated domestic political change. The increasingly “interlocked matrix of balance sheets” (Tooze 2018) in global banking is where acute shifts brought on by the 2008 financial crisis have far-reaching domestic implications. It is this global interrelationship of finance where wild swings in middle-income currency values has tracked political shifts, whereas shifts in exports have a much more tenuous relationship.

The 2008 global financial crisis led central banks in the United States and European Union to go on an unprecedented spree of buying bonds to introduce credit liquidity to spur growth. These programs of “quantitative easing” led to a rise in the value of “emerging market” currencies against the US dollar. As investors struggled to find returns for their money in the West, they increasingly invested in these “emerging markets.” This process explains the juicing of growth much more clearly than the natural resource dependence of exports. When the US Federal Reserve began to “taper” its program of bond buying in 2013, it unleashed what the financial press referred to as a “taper tantrum.” Foreign investment in emerging markets like Brazil were quickly reversed, as yields began reappearing in richer nations deemed to be generally safer. Since Lula’s reelection in 2006, the value of the Brazilian real had hovered around two to one US dollar. The “taper tantrum” unleashed a cycle that led to the real dropping to four to one at the beginning of 2016. Export growth continued to be positive, but overall growth in investment dropped precipitously.

The point here is that the financial terms of trade, and not trade itself, is where we see the real movement in the structural shift in the political economy. This focus on the structural role of money, instead of trade, has meso and micro-level consequences. The shifting value of money affects both the aspiration and capacity to consume on the part of individuals, along with the capacity of middle-income states to weather further crisis. In other words, it may very well be not the terms of commodity trade, but the terms of financial inclusion or exclusion that determine how global shifts shape local politics. As we will see, the Brazilian case illustrates how a “precarious middle” class shaped by early forays into the inherent risk of financialized daily life during boom years, faced deep disillusion once it became clear that they would be unable to secure a more long-lasting economic stability.

### *Political geography*

These broad structural factors therefore require a clearer elucidation of their connection to class formation and the social coalitions that underpin changes in political regimes, which also gives us two different historical ideal types. The role of agrarian peasants has been central to the sociology of European fascism and the role of the urban working class has been central to the sociology of left-wing populism in Latin America. The rural peasantry in Europe has been associated with European fascism explained by either the lack of encompassing class organizations (Moore 1966; Snowden 1972) or the strength of traditional rural associational life (Riley 2005).

This ideal type has led recent accounts of right-wing populism to emphasize the importance of geography in processes of political change. The rise of Donald Trump and the Republican Party’s turn toward authoritarianism has been explained by a “revolt of the Rust Belt” (McQuarrie 2017) and other semi-peripheral or rural strongholds (Cramer 2016, Hochschild 2018), with similar effects found to explain the popularity of Brexit and the populist

turn in the United Kingdom's Conservative Party (Dorling, Stuart and Stubbs 2016, Ballard Rosa et al 2017) or the French "new right," where the metropolitan centers have become "the new citadels," walled off politically from an increasingly angry rural and suburban periphery (Guilluy 2019). Thus, literature on contemporary populism in the Global North describes the geography of populist politics as largely reminiscent of the model in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, where the liberal politics of metropolitan elites faces a revanchist reaction of deindustrialized towns and villages.

From this perspective, the recent ascendance of far-right populism in the Global South remains equally puzzling. The social base for the populist left in Latin America has been rooted in an urban base, mirroring the populist right in Europe. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the extent to which the urban working class was able to be incorporated in organizational forms compatible with left parties was associated with the degree of "populist" politics pursued by these parties (Collier and Collier 1991). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century "pink tide" of left political ascendancy in Latin America, the urban working class -be it formally employed or organized through social movements of unemployed (Rossi 2017, Rossi and Silva 2018)- has been understood as the driving force of left politics (Seidman 1994; Goldfrank and Schrank 2009; Hetland 2018).

The role of segments of the urban working class as a bulwark for contemporary right-wing authoritarianism is therefore surprising in this context. The predominance of support for Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 was concentrated in Brazil's largest cities, with the most significant swings from prior elections in working class peripheries (Nicolau 2020; Bradlow 2019; Richmond 2018). These urban working class peripheries are lower-middle class in national terms, while sites of deep exclusion in the urban context. Relevantly, similar dynamics have been found in other recent cases in the Global South such as the ascendance of Narendra Modi in India (Heller forthcoming) or the support for Rodrigo Duterte in Philippines (Garrido 2021). Putting a focus on the social base makes the ideological directionality of rising populism much more salient.

It is the geography of the social base of right-wing populism in the Global South that makes the grafting explanations of right-wing populism in the Global North particularly suspect. But we still lack a third piece of the puzzle: How are these sectors articulated within broader sociopolitical blocs?

### *Political Articulation*

The most common answer to the question of political support in the Global North has come from "reflection" models of partisan representation, in which political parties are understood to mirror the preferences of demographically arranged groups of voters along major social divisions (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). These cleavages are understood to be stable in the long-term, representing class, racial, religious or geographical differences. Thus, electoral dealignments and realignments are indicative of structural changes that happen only rarely in History, such as white-collar workers moving from Republican to Democratic support in the US during the second half of the twentieth century (Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995), or the emergence of a new cleavage around European integration in most Western European countries during the last decades (Kriesi et al 2008).

In line with the political economy narrative, a common explanation for the emergence of far-right populism has been the salience of a new cleavage between 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization, thus explaining their success by the support of citizens who found themselves left

behind by historical partisan actors (CITES). However, when applied to the Global South, reflection models face two main problems in order to explain shifts in populist support. First, the main competitors within party systems are not as institutionalized as their European counterparts, incrementing political volatility and uncertainty (Mainwaring and Zoco 2007, Mainwaring 2018). Second and relatedly, most parties across the Global South do not follow stable societal cleavages, but rather cross-cut them in order to appeal to different sectors of the citizenship. This is the particular case of Brazil, in which classical cleavages have been historically shallow (Samuels and Zucco 2015).

This led many scholars to shift from a reflection to an articulation model of partisan representation, in which “politically significant social blocs are constituted by parties, and not vice versa” (Mudge and Chen 2014). In contrast to the first, articulation models understand political parties as organizations that exacerbate or erase social cleavages, naturalizing social identities that are not always based on sedimented demographic distinctions but rather emerge from hegemonic efforts (Gramsci 1972, Riley 2014, De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2014). Examples of articulation include the restructuring of the support base of the BJP in India and the AKP in Turkey (De Leon, and Tuğal 2009), labor party formation in Canada (Eidlin 2014), or the partisan efforts to naturalize white supremacy in the American South (De Leon 2019).

A lingering problem with this perspective in terms of explaining populist support, is that articulation scholars have focused exclusively on parties as agents of social change, and are therefore unable to explain the complex basis of support gathered by populist leaders who lack strong and stable partisan structures. As Evans (2020) has recently argued, the destabilization of party systems has been common to the emergence of far-right populism in the Global South, and yet parties are taken as the point of departure for understanding the phenomena of populist ascendance. The Brazilian case is particularly puzzling in this respect. Bolsonaro became a member and Presidential candidate of PSL, a minor and almost insignificant political party, only a few months before reaching the Presidency. PSL was, politically speaking, an empty shell: it barely sustained any legitimacy within the Brazilian party system, and after its foundation in 1994 and electoral debut in 2002, it had only achieved one seat in a Chamber of Deputies composed of 513 members.

Thus, PSL could not serve as a political articulator itself, as it did not have the resources, organizational structure, or social legitimacy to integrate Brazilian complex social arrangements into a coherent sociopolitical bloc. While the structural-material conditions and the political space were “available” for a populist reaction of some kind, it is not clear why would it go in the direction of the far-right, which did not previously had a credible organizational base given the success of the left (especially the PT) during more than a decade. This suggests that Bolsonaro himself deployed particular contingent strategies in order to promote a rearticulation of the Brazilian political field in such a short period of time. We need to look at processes of partisan articulation in multi-institutional contexts in order to understand the ecosystem by which Bolsonaro became elected.

## **Data and Methods**

In order to explain the emergence of far-right populism in the Global South, Brazil becomes both a deviant and a paradigmatic study case. As illustrated by the three puzzles developed in the theoretical section, the rapid ascendance of Jair Bolsonaro is poorly explained by current theoretical approaches to populism coming from fields as diverse as political



economy, political geography, and party politics. Thus, the case can be labeled as ‘deviant’ insofar its surprising outcome requires an in-depth study to explain this theoretical anomaly, providing generalizable hypothesis about this phenomena elsewhere -for example, India and the Philippines (Gerring and Cojocar 2016: 399). Furthermore, the case can also be labeled as ‘paradigmatic’ precisely because it can become a ‘prototypical’ example of how to analyze the emergence of right-wing populism in Global South contexts (Flyvbjerg 2006), a problem yet unaddressed by current sociological literature.

In order to address the three theoretical puzzles using a single parsimonious model, we leveraged and triangulated multiple data sources. First, we analyzed public data on flows of trade and finance from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. This was coupled with election results taken from the Brazilian Supreme Election Tribunal. We also drew upon 120 interviews with bureaucrats, politicians, social movements, and private sector actors in the city of São Paulo, as well as X interviews with social movement activists and free-market think tank elites who were engaged in Bolsonaro’s articulation strategies, working across the cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Porto Alegre. Finally, we also drew upon a protest event database which mapped over two thousand contentious episodes between 2013 and 2016, a crucial period where these actors converged in the streets.

This combination of descriptive longitudinal data and fine-grained qualitative data allowed us to disentangle the evolution of long-term structures related to economic and geographical developments in the country, while also developing a dynamic account of Bolsonaro’s articulation strategy, accounting for both institutional and contentious events over a relatively long period of time (2013-2018).