**The Rise of the Contentious Right: Digitally-Intermediated Linkage Strategies in Argentina and Brazil**

**Abstract**

This article analyzes novel patterns of interaction between right-wing parties and protest movements during major contentious cycles in Argentina (2012-2013) and Brazil (2013-2016), which preceded the arrival to power of the *Cambiemos* coalition in the former and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in the latter. Drawing upon a dual process-tracing strategy and a wide range of data sources, we show that these interactions are central to understand why and how right-wing parties leverage novel repertoires and resources from digital activists during contemporary protest cycles, a dynamic that we conceptualize as a new party linkage strategy through digital intermediation. We trace its three-phased development in both countries, revealing how differences in institutional contexts and the strength of activist groups contributed to divergent trajectories of partisan opposition towards the end of the cycles, regarding both the reconfiguration of the right in subsequent elections and the entry of digital activists to institutional arenas.

**Keywords***:* political parties, contentious politics, party linkages, digital activism, conservatism.

During October 2015, a group of jurists and the leader of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) in the Chamber of Deputies Carlos Sampaio signed and turned in a request for President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment, the first one yet to be accepted by Eduardo Cunha (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, PMDB), the vice-president and head of the Chamber. Interestingly, this group of signatures was accompanied by that of three independent activists who had been at the forefront of online and offline protest movements agitating contentious opposition against the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) since 2014. Similarly, in April 2013, the heads of the partisan opposition in Argentina met with a small group of cyber-activists in one of the side chambers of the Congress building, coordinating with them the details of a third mass protest against the left-wing government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (*Frente para la Victoria*, FPV). The meeting was only the tip of the iceberg of a series of long-standing secret meetings between opposition politicians and cyber-activists taking place since mid-2012, when the latter started to rally discontent against the government.

This collaborative interaction between right-wing parties and independent digital activists is puzzling, given the fact that scholars studying the Latin American region have not yet developed a consistent model for understanding the relationship between conservative parties and grassroots actors (Bowen 2011; Eaton 2011, 2014; J. Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014). The main theoretical concepts for understanding this type of interaction have been modeled after the left, failing to account for cases such as the above, and leaving rather unresolved not only the question of why right-wing parties engage with contemporary contentious movements, but also how do they manage to do so.

The article tackles this gap by providing a dual process-tracing analysis of two cases, Argentina and Brazil, where major political victories against left-wing incumbents – in both cases in power for over a decade – were preceded by a series of mass protests led by a new generation of tech-savvy conservative activists, who had a central role in coordinating protest actions and framing discontent against the ruling parties. Linking our findings to relevant literature exploring the strategies of conservative actors in Europe and the US, we offer a theoretical framework to understand how contemporary right-wing parties in Latin America seek to deploy innovative linkage strategies during contentious cycles (Kitschelt 2000; Poguntke 2002). Our main argument is that by aligning with digital activist groups right-wing parties can access additional organizational resources that enable them to bypass historically weak ties with grassroots actors, an affinity only recently being explored in the literature (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2018; Gerbaudo 2018). Conceptualizing this process as an emergent “digitally-intermediated” party linkage strategy and then comparatively tracing its development in both countries, we reveal that it required right-wing parties to shed their historical aversity to popular mobilization, learn the benefits of digitally-enabled collective action, and change their organizational practices and repertoires during contentious protest cycles.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Moreover, by tracing these interactions during and after the contentions phase, this comparative approach enables us to evaluate the implications this linkage strategy can have for the reconfiguration of the conservative opposition. More specifically, we show how differences in actors’ decisions and in institutional settings influenced the trajectory of right-wing party politics in each country once protests were over. This way, our work calls for further comparative research on the scope conditions under which this emergent linkage strategy can shape the success of right-wing parties in electoral and institutional terms.

## Linkage Strategies and Partisan Mobilization in Latin America

Historically, political parties have relied on a variety of vehicles to mobilize support, either in electoral or contentious directions. European mass parties combined ideological alignment around salient social cleavages with the activities of ancillary organizations penetrating civil society, such as trade unions or churches (Katz and Mair 1995; Koole 1996). More elite-centered and leader-centered parties, on the other hand, have prescinded on mediating organizations and relied on the resources of influential allies to implement patronage and co-optation mechanisms that could mobilize support in specific circumstances, such as electoral contests, or reproduce loyalty around a charismatic figure (Barr 2009; Wolinetz 2002).

This process has been amply studied in the party linkage literature, which assessed different formats through which parties leverage the supply of opportunities for participation and representation and solve problems of collective action and social choice (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Kitschelt 2000; Lawson 1988), while also segmenting their engagement with different collective actors and electorates (Luna 2014). While this literature uses the terms “linkage” and “linkage strategies” somewhat interchangeably to refer both to strategic preferences and investment in organizational structures (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2009; Lawson 1988), in this article we will leverage the latter term to consider the strategic decisions parties make to exploit a given support channel, irrespective of whether this decision consolidates into a stable linkage model in the medium or long-term.

Within the Latin American context, Kenneth Roberts (2002) proposed an original typology of linkage strategies distinguishing five non-exclusive modalities (marketing, programmatic, brokerage/patron-client, personalistic/charismatic, and encapsulating). Admitting that most contemporary parties adopt marketing and brokerage activities in one way or another, Roberts noted that Latin American centrist and conservative parties tended to rely heavily on ‘hierarchical chains of patrons, brokers and clients rather than strong mass organizations’ (Roberts 2002:16), where political loyalty is reproduced by periodic material exchange and personalized bonds rather than programmatic (ideological) commitment. Instead, left-wing parties – particularly mass ones such as the Brazilian PT and Argentine PJ – preferred to combine brokerage with more programmatic and encapsulating linkages, where party organs were supplemented by a web of social and organizational networks, including local branches, grassroots units, and mass secondary associations of workers or peasants. These organizational repertoires serve to create resilient modes of collective association, socially embedding political parties while providing members and *militantes* with permanent opportunities of political activism (Anria 2019). From this perspective, grassroots activism and social movements have been traditionally useful organizations for leftist parties, providing them with ‘mobilizing structures’ – i.e. informal and formal channels which facilitate collective action by aggregating opinions and distributing the cost of participation (McAdam 1982) – that help anchor the party across different societal segments.

While the validity of Roberts’ model was somewhat put under question during the eighties and nineties, as neoliberal policy inconsistencies resulted in the dilution of party brands and the erosion of partisan alignments in the region (Lupu 2014), the 2000s saw the restructuring of ‘political competition along a more programmatic left-right axis’ and a reassembling of party-society linkages, particularly for the left (Roberts 2014: 280). As a matter of fact, the electoral success of the left through the pink tide period was directly related to the capacity some parties had to re-generate ideological and organizational bonds with different segments of society, to mobilize overlapping identities across leaders, activists and civil society actors, and to form oppositional coalitions capable of sustaining national-level campaigns and influencing policy-making trajectories (Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Silva and Rossi 2018).[[2]](#endnote-2)

This attention granted to left-wing parties contrasts with the lack of research on the nexus between right-wing linkage strategies and contentious politics in the region. The main works shedding light on party-society linkages after the democratic transitions have tended to focus on strategic coalitions developed with non-partisan interest groups and organizations such as business federations, the Catholic church, international think tanks and NGOs, and prior to the last wave of democratization, the military and US-based intelligence agencies (Chalmers, Souza, and Borón 1992; Dominguez, Lievesley, and Ludlam 2011; Middlebrook 2000; Payne 2000; Schneider 2004). This way, even while some of the most recent works on electoral mobilization by right-wing parties elaborate on attempts to widen their appeal via state-centered territorialized strategies (Eaton 2014; Giraudy 2015; Loxton 2016; Luna 2014; Montero 2014), connections with contentious movements or grassroots actors remain rarely discussed (Bowen 2011).

Contrary to Europe and even the US, where the right has historically been successful in mobilizing socio-cultural grievances at grassroots level (Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012; McVeigh 2016), the limited scholarship looking at right-wing movements in Latin America points to the difficulty conservative parties have to connect with them due to their extreme ideology and practices (Payne 2000) or their limited territorial reach (Eaton 2011). Understandings of rightist organizational repertoires and linkages have remained anchored on traditional alliances with elite interest groups and top-down mechanisms of influence, used by parties and their allies to transcend the narrow boundaries of core conservative constituencies (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014: 9). This insight has been reinforced by the fact that after the last democratization wave right-wing parties faced difficulties in constructing the poly-classist coalitions and segmented linkages necessary to ascend to power, partly because patrimonial links with influential groups (i.e. the military) are no longer effective, partly because the high levels of inequality in the region entail that the median voter leans invariably to the left (Gibson 1996; J. P. Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014a; Pribble 2013).

While Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014: 8) accurately acknowledge that for conservative parties “such challenge can only be successfully addressed by combining alternative sources of electoral mobilization targeted at different social segments”, and certain recognition exists that the Latin American right has come “to embrace forms of participation in civil society that look decidedly leftist” (Eaton 2014: 85), democratic conservative party-movement coalitions are still considered relatively rare and weak, facing the challenge of balancing support received from elites with the opportunities to recruit a broader base of allies and voters (Eaton 2011; Luna 2014).[[3]](#endnote-3) As a result, studies on how right-wing parties manage to mobilize popular discontent given their weak linkages with grassroots actors remain lacking.

### Mobilization via Digital Intermediation: An Emergent Linkage Strategy

This narrow conception of rightist organizational repertoires and linkages can be updated by drawing insights from a body of literature looking at changing patterns of political participation and mobilization, particularly pertaining the use of new communication technologies such as social media. There is increasing scholarly attention to the ways in which new technologies are supporting innovation in terms of party organization, leading to the emergence of more personalized, informal, and flexible connections with supporters, and “multispeed” partisan affiliation modalities (Scarrow 2015; Vaccari 2013). These new patterns of membership and interaction have been noted to provide a number of benefits to parties across the political spectrum, such as enabling more targeted electoral campaigning (Kreiss 2016), accessing “non-mainstream” interest groups and diffused constituencies (Barberà, Barrio, and Rodríguez-Teruel 2019), enhancing the reach of populist communications and personalized leaderships (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017), and bridging contentious and electoral mobilization (Della Porta et al. 2017).

While environmental, human rights, and other types of “new” social movements were noted to provide relevant linkage opportunities for leftist political parties at the end of the twentieth century (Kitschelt 1989; Poguntke 2002), this article underlines the increasingly noted complementarities between the associational patterns of digitally-enabled collective action and the vertical models of linkage and engagement preferred by conservative parties in the last decade (Gerbaudo 2018; Kriesi 2014; Schradie 2019). As elaborated by Bennett et al. (2018: 1661), the ‘meta-ideology of diversity and inclusiveness and demands for direct or deliberative democracy’ often found among citizens of the left presents important challenges to reconcile bureaucratic party functions, technological capabilities, and demands for greater inclusiveness and horizontal decision-making (Gerbaudo 2019; Kitschelt 1989). Instead, the support of conservative citizens for simpler moral, racial and nationalist agendas is more compatible with the focalization and aggregation mechanisms inherent in social media logics and the populist leader-centric communications preferred by right-wing parties, resulting in more effective electoral mobilization (Polletta and Callahan 2017; Schradie 2019).

On the basis of these findings, we hypothesize a novel linkage strategy of partisan mobilization in the Latin American region, emerging as an alternative to both the “militant-centric” model of the left, which rests on ideological alignment and/or the mobilizing structures provided by the party and allied ancillary organizations, and the “elite-centric” one of the right, where mobilization, less demanding and confined to electoral periods, rests on the vertical strategies used by the party and its elite allies to rally individualized support or co-opted social blocs. This emerging linkage strategy recognizes the often clouded, but increasingly relevant, leadership and brokerage functions performed by social media activists and “digital vanguards” in contemporary contentious mobilization.[[4]](#endnote-4) Through their use of digital communications and the provision of mobilizational and coordinating resources via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, these activist groups have been noted to facilitate network-bridging and the formation of weak-tie links across groups and individuals, functioning as relevant organizing hubs for offline collective action (Howard and Hussain 2013; Vaccari and Valeriani 2016; Walgrave et al. 2011).

Therefore, we claim that to the extent that digital activists support a procedural change in “the modes of exchange between constituencies and politicians” (Kitschelt 2000: 850), they play a crucial intermediating role in what we conceptualize as a new type of “digitally-intermediated” party linkage strategy. Albeit digital activist groups can remain autonomous, their coordinating role during major protest cycles offer parties incentives to exert influence over them, seeking to steer social discontent into partisan directions even if this role is not fully institutionalized or is only activated during phases of high mobilization (Poguntke 2002: 49).[[5]](#endnote-5) With this aim, the development of the novel linkage strategy involves the learning, coordination, and alignment of repertoires of action between parties and activists, in both contentious and institutional arenas of interaction.

While this linkage strategy might be appealing to all types of parties, it can be considered to be particularly luring for the Latin American right. As noted above, digital activists offer an organizational repertoire to compensate, at least in the short term, the mentioned structural deficits of right-wing partisan structures (lack of strong militant layer, weak party-civil society alignment, and limited demographic appeal), while at the same time they provide mobilizing tools to rally constituencies with a limited history of political activism but high digital engagement, as its often the case among the Latin American middle and upper-classes (Somma 2013). Such digitally-intermediated form of linkage can help conservative parties reduce the trade-offs inherent in combining multiple linkages strategies, providing a relatively low-cost alternative to gain political legitimacy among grassroot sympathizers, while not compromising their ties with elite social actors (Kitschelt 2000; Luna 2014: 327-28).

## Data and Methods

To explain the emergence of this linkage strategy we adopted a paired process-tracing methodology (Falleti and Lynch 2009; Tarrow 2010), an approach well-suited to follow the multi-causal sequence of interactions between right-wing parties and activist groups during prolonged contentious cycles. Therefore, both Argentina and Brazil are treated here as “positive” cases, insofar as the political defeats of left-wing incumbents were preceded by mass protests where conservative political parties aligned with digital activist groups, coordinating actions both in social media and in the streets. We see the interface of protest cycles and electoral contest as a propitious environment for these interactions to evolve, as protests are recognized to change the salience of issues, encourage changes in party platforms, and alter opposition dynamics, thus influencing electoral outcomes, while elections may shape the identities and preferences of activists, and their orientation to the political system (Heaney 2013; McAdam and Tarrow 2010). As we conceive these dynamic effects constitutive of a linkage formation process, we trace them across three analytical phases within each cycle, denominated respectively Activist, Alignment, and Institutional, as detailed in Figure 1 below.

This initial outcome is then complemented by a comparative assessment of the impact of this linkage strategy over longer partisan trajectories. Following the main tenets of the comparative sequential method (Falleti and Mahoney 2015), we explore how a similar linkage strategy intertwined with specific contexts and decisions in each country, affecting the trajectory of right-wing opposition parties once the contentious cycle was over. Without attributing sole explanatory power to this linkage, we evaluate how in combination with relevant institutional variables (characteristics of the electoral and party systems), and conditions related to the development of the three phases (activists’ resources and mobilizing structures), it contributed to the (re)organization of the right-wing opposition after the protests subsided.

The process-tracing analysis relied on the triangulation of multiple data sources. The overall evolution of each country’s contentious cycle was informed by a protest event analysis based on a database constructed within a collaborative project in which one of the authors participated, mapping over two thousand protest events during this period. [[6]](#endnote-6) As digital activists were first movers in the cycles, we also manually web-scrapped data from the official Facebook fan pages of the leading activist organizations during the main protest events of the period (see Figure 2 below). In Brazil, this involved *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL)*, Revoltados Online* (ROL), and *Vem pra Rua* (VPR), whose leaders were central during the pro-impeachment campaign taking place between 2014 and 2016. In Argentina, this involved mainly two activist groups – *El Cipayo* and *El Anti-K* – with a central role in coordinating the series of mass protests between mid-2012 and April 2013.

This data was triangulated with findings from semi-structured interviews conducted in both countries. In Argentina, twelve interviews were conducted with anonymous cyber-activists at the core of the digital vanguard, which provided unprecedented insights on their interactions with political parties. These contacts remained clandestine through the contentious cycle, mostly unreported in the press, and denied by party actors, making post-event access difficult, as most of the involved party figures went to occupy high roles in the Macri administration after 2015. We use these insights to inform our analysis of the Brazilian situation, where we were not able to draw upon an extensive number of interviews with right-wing Brazilian activists due to difficulties of access given the long and constantly unfolding protest cycles.[[7]](#endnote-7) However, given that party-activist interactions were often public, we combined our limited data from personal interviews with numerous media interviews granted by both leading politicians and activists during the protest cycle, facilitating the tracking of strategies and contacts during the period analyzed.

Lastly, this data was contextualized against findings in recent scholarly literature regarding the popularity and centrality of these activist groups in the media ecosystem, particularly Facebook and Twitter, while secondary survey data was used to track changes in the demands and perceptions of the protesters. Datafolha was the main source for the Brazilian case, and several private polling studies were used in the Argentine case. These sources were triangulated with polling data coming from scholarly work in both countries, which proved to be consistent along the contentious cycles with the private sources.

## The Development of A New Linkage Strategy: From Street Mobilization to Partisan Trajectories

The analysis starts with an overview of the main events defining the different phases within each country’s protest cycle (see Figure 1). The initial activist phase comprises the period of rising contention in the cycle, when digital groups became protagonists of the protests. However, some preliminary nuances need highlighting as they are relevant to understand the context of emergence of the new linkage strategy in each country.

#### Figure 1. Phases of Linkage Strategy Development

[Figure 1 here]

In Argentina, this first phase was shorter and condensed around three major protests between mid-2012 and the legislative elections of mid-2013. The main grievances catalyzed by right-wing parties and activists emerged a few months after the presidential election of 2011, when Cristina Fernández was reelected with a historical 54% share of the votes in first round, outperforming the runner-up by 32 points. The election contributed to building up a “moral panic” among activist groups and elites related to the fact that Kirchnerism had always lacked a strong organized opposition (Vommaro 2017), activating initial collaborations among digital activists who organized minor protests in Buenos Aires city immediately after (Author 2019).[[8]](#endnote-8)

In Brazil, the contentious period was longer, presenting two main protest cycles: one comprising the plural and anti-partisan character of mid-2013 through mid-2014, and another marked by the increasing *anti-petismo* of the 2015-2016 period preceding Rousseff’s impeachment (Alonso 2017; Alonso and Mische 2017; Tatagiba and Galvão 2019). This contextual difference is important because the massive *Jornadas de Junho* in 2013 had already altered the landscape of protest, signaling a widespread discontent with mainstream political elites (Saad-Filho and Morais 2014). The triumph of Dilma Rousseff in the presidential election of 2014, against Aècio Neves from the PSDB (*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*) and the progressive business-friendly Marina Silva, was not as overwhelming as in the Argentine case. On the contrary, after defeating both candidates in the general elections, Rousseff won the ballotage against Neves by a margin of three percent (51.6% vs 48.4%), the smallest in Brazilian modern political history, contributing to polarize the political scene and re-activate discontent against the president and her party (Ferreira Do Vale 2015).

Summing up, in both countries activist groups drew strongly on the widespread dissatisfaction with the political class, declining economic trends since 2010, and the aggravation of grievances among middle-class sectors.[[9]](#endnote-9) However, an important difference, which conditioned future developments, was the public positioning the activists assumed given this different contentious background. While in Brazil some activists had participated anonymously in the 2013 events, after 2014 they moved towards providing infrastructure in the streets, with their leaders addressing the public directly either by participating personally in online materials or by addressing crowds in the streets. This contributed to making them highly visible and widely recognized figures (Globo 2015b) In Argentina the activists behind *El Cipayo*, *El Anti-K,* and other online groups remained mostly clandestine throughout the cycle, with few of them giving short interviews to newspapers, expressing a desire to exercise a decentralized leadership as citizens, while reaffirming the horizontality of the movement they promoted (Rodriguez Niell 2012). This initial positioning will not affect the development of the new linkage strategy, but rather its impact over the party system once the contentious cycle was over, as shown in the last section.

### The Activist Phase: Anti-Partisanship and Digital Vanguards

In both cases, the activist phase was characterized by the peripheral involvement of mainstream opposition in protest events and their outflanking by activist groups, both in terms of the radicality and visibility of their anti-incumbent positions, and the level of trust enjoyed in the public eye.

From the start, Argentine digital activists assumed an explicit anti-Kirchnerist stance even if they also expressed frustration with the opposition.[[10]](#endnote-10) Material published in their Facebook pages showed a rapid convergence on their antagonism to Kirchnerism and Peronism, and also the defense of republican institutions, equating Kirchnerism with populist authoritarianism, corruption, and clientelism (Author 2019: 122-126). In Brazil, anti-incumbent alignment among activists developed more gradually, as prior to 2014 groups such as *ROL* and *Nas Ruas* were part of a fragmented and diffuse conservative camp, sharing the street with autonomist and left-wing actors in a complex and multifaceted protest cycle (Alonso and Mische 2017).

However, while the 2013 protest cycle consolidated social media as a space of political dispute where conservative activist cores could grow and interact (Silveira 2015), it was only in 2014 that digital right-wing activism condensed and targeted the PT directly, with pre-existing groups such as ROL and *Nas Ruas* linking with newly-created groups such as *Vem Pra Rua* and *Movimento Brasil Livre* (Alonso 2017: 54). A series of small protests organized by these groups between October and December 2014 were marked by the presence of anti-PT slogans that would become later dominant, such as ‘*Fora Corruptos*’, ‘*Fora* *PT’*, and ‘*Fora* *Dilma*’, although there was not yet a consensus on the strategy to challenge the government (ROL activists called for military intervention, while VPR had a moderate view, rejecting early calls for impeachment), and the number of protesters mobilized in São Paulo did not exceed the few thousands (Tatagiba, Trinidade, and Chaves Teixeira 2015: 199).

In both countries, the activists viewed themselves as vanguards leading a national opposition and rejuvenation movement to ‘wake up’ the citizenry, re-energize the opposition, and cleanse the political class. In our interviews, Argentine activists claimed they were performing a “civic duty” in challenging Kirchnerism, while groups in Brazil framed their actions as “patriotic”, aimed at saving the nation from corruption and opportunistic political behavior, particularly as *Lava Jato* investigations widened. The calls for a new round of protests, planned for 13th September 2012 in Argentina, and 15th March 2015 in Brazil, and the material that circulated via social media both drew on strong anti-government epithets, combined with the use of national colors and references to highlight the non-partisan and national character of the events. The success of these calls shocked government and opposition alike, attracting around 500 thousand people in Argentina and over two million in Brazil, and catalyzed the role of the activist groups as referents of sectors of the population that did not identify with the ruling parties. This early success validated the appeal of their online mobilizing strategies, with subscriptions to their social media sites growing dramatically (see Figure 2).

#### Figure 2. Main Characteristics of Digital Vanguards and Subsequent Partisan Trajectories

[Figure 2 here]

During this first phase, opposition parties were still cautious about participating in the protests, fearing a spill out of popular discontent in their direction, particularly as activists in both countries considered that the opposition shared many of the ills of the incumbent (i.e. incompetence, corruption, lack of representation, etc.). Argentine activists indicated that party figures even rejected initial approaches, worried that popular discontent could transform into “another 2001” (Interview with GG, December 27th 2016, Buenos Aires). No major opposition party participated in the September demonstration, with only minor figures visible during the second (and larger) event on November 8th (Pereyra 2017).

In the Brazilian case, the main parties also refrained from attending the initial events until mid-2014, although there was an earlier discursive alignment by the opposition, possibly a result of the experience of been outmaneuvered by the “inclusive” reaction of the PT government during the 2013 protests (Author 2017). MBL representatives casted blame on the PSDB for “four defeats in a row” and not listening to citizens’ demands, warning that “Aècio [Neves] will have to start speaking our language” (M. Martin 2014). In the same manner, the national coordinator of *Vem Pra Rua* referred to Rousseff’s reelection as “the best thing that happened in the last 20 years!”, because “if she hadn’t won […] we would be satisfied with the coward of Aécio [Neves] in power, [and] he was going to make some deals, he was going to hide Dilma’s dirt under the rug… And the people would still be deceived” (Interview with LL, November 24th 2016, Sao Paulo).

### The Alignment Phase: Organizational Complementarities and Coordination of Repertoires

While the first phase was marked by extreme anti-partisanship and the co-existence of mixed repertoires that reflected the diversity of grievances and actors mobilized in both countries, the second phase featured a growing alignment between conservative parties and activists, who recognized the value of each other’s resources. This alignment is key to understand changes in patterns of partisan mobilization, as during this phase the Argentine and Brazilian right managed to reposition from outsider – even rejected – actors in the protests, to active participants in national opposition movements, accepting the effectiveness of mobilizing structures the right either lacked, as in Argentina, or that had been dormant for over three decades, as in Brazil.

The incentives for right-wing parties to pursue a more active role within anti-government mobilizations increased as the contentious cycles expanded. On the one hand, they needed to address their low levels of approval among protesters: surveys in Argentina indicated that 75% of protesters lacked partisan identification while 43% claimed that no known politician represented them – albeit Mauricio Macri was the most mentioned by 13% of respondents (CEIS 2013) – while in Brazil 75% of protesters expressed high levels of mistrust in the mainstream opposition (Ortellado and Solano 2016), which had failed to take electoral advantage of the generalized rejection for the PT after 2013 (Samuels and Zucco 2018: 24-28). On the other hand, the evident resonance of activists’ online campaigns and the growing number of participants in the protests provided strong signals for the partisan opposition to engage with digitally-related organizational repertoires, monopolized by activist groups.

Following the success of the mobilizations in 2012, Argentine party figures across the center and the right started to communicate with digital vanguards more proactively, gaining their trust through coordinating frames and tactical interventions. This coordination was a result of a series of clandestine meetings held in activists’ apartments in Buenos Aires, serving both groups to reassess their previous mistrust and the need for collaboration (Author 2019). At this point, some activists expressed a pragmatic vision, considering that engaging with the opposition had become necessary to achieve the electoral defeat of the Kirchnerist government, with one pointing out that “[…] in a fight against the entire political class you lose. And if you lose, the winner is the one already in office” (Interview with KK, January 6th 2017, Buenos Aires). Relevantly, a similar opinion was voiced by Rogerio Chequer (VPR) in Brazil, who stated that “the objective here is to create the voice of the people, because without opposition in Congress the PT does not fear anyone” (Martin 2014).

The partisan realignment became explicit in the period extended between the second march on November 8th 2012 and the third on April 18th 2013.During the former event, participant researchers had expressed surprise for the absence of partisan logos or indications of political affiliation (Pereyra 2017), with a few opposition leaders attending the marches wearing white t-shirts to indicate involvement “as citizens” – a repertoire devised by activists and communicated to party figures, according to our interviews (Interview with AA, October 3rd, 2014). Some *militantes* from PRO, the conservative party governing Buenos Aires City, distributed pamphlets after knowing that Mauricio Macri supported the rally, but interviews and newspaper data indicate that the pamphlets also stayed clear of partisan references (LN 2012).

The success of the event, which gathered hundreds of thousands of protesters across the country, confirmed the opportunity the partisan right had to engage with sectors of the citizenry that shared their opposition to Kirchnerism, and the value of the mobilizing resources the activists wielded. Thus, the opposition readily embraced the activists’ proposal to frame the third April protest as a response to a judicial reform project (the ‘Justice Democratization’ bill) advanced by the government, portraying it as a direct attack on the country’s constitutional order. Additional meetings were celebrated to pressure indecisive politicians, while a large encounter took place in one of the Congress buildings, reported by the press as “an invitation [to the opposition] to participate in the pot-banging event” (LN 2013).

In the days prior to the event, multiple right-wing politicians publicly stated their participation or support in social media and TV shows, even appearing in activists’ YouTube channels calling for citizens to march to save the republic from populism and authoritarianism[[11]](#endnote-11). Interestingly, while opposition leaders walked freely among the crowds during the protests, activists opted to remain in anonymity. One of the most famous images of the day, printed in many newspaper frontpages, showed a number of politicians walking along a large Argentine flag in one of Buenos Aires’ central avenues. In interviews, activists reported this to be a choreographed action (Interview with AA, November 2nd, 2016, Interview with FF, December 26th 2016), with them walking in between the flag-holding politicians, a detail that went unnoticed to the press.

This coordination of repertoires was more extensive in Brazil than in Argentina, arguably due to the stronger mobilizing structures of the actors, but also because of the opening of opportunity structures for opposition mobilization (see Figure 1). These included recent developments within the *Lava Jato* scandal related to the public prosecution of public officials, and the opening of a possibility of impeachment given the weak position of the PT within the ruling alliance after losing the presidency of both houses to the PMDB by early 2015 (Braig, Power, and Renno 2015).

By late 2014, opposition parties started bandwagoning behind the anti-PT frames pushed by the activists, seeking to present themselves as part of a national movement in-the-making. Aècio Neves uploaded a video in his official Facebook account calling for mobilization on December 5th, which ended with a hyperlink to the VPR activist website (Neves 2014), while other leaders from the PSDB such as Aloysio Nunes, or Eduardo Jorge from the *Partido Verde,* also expressed support for mobilizing against the PT (Martín 2014). In February 2015, Neves referred to the protests as “democratic but non-partisan” during a PSDB convention (Lima 2015), and leaders of the conservative Democrats Party (DEM, successor to the official party during the dictatorship) and the Popular Socialist Party (PPS) (which had broken with the PT in 2004) all expressed support for the protests convened for March and April of the same year.

Despite these signals, only smaller actors within the fragmented party system such as *Solidaridade* (center-left, created in 2013), DEM, and a number of outsider figures such as Jair Bolsonaro (then congressman for the conservative *Progressistas* party, PP), were visible in the April 12th event (Globo 2015a).[[12]](#endnote-12) Activist groups remained the most visible actors pushing political confrontation: from its own truck-stage, MBL leaders launched attacks against both the government and the PSDB, while Rogerio Chequer (VPR) accused the head of the Congress (Eduardo Cunha, PMDB) of stalling the impeachment procedure and corruption inquiries (Globo 2015a).

From this moment onwards, however, party-activist interactions led to the coordination of both institutional and contentious strategies. In October 2015, the leader of PSDB in Congress endorsed the first official request for the president’s impeachment on crimes of responsibility, which, as mentioned, was co-signed by Kim Kataguiri (MBL), Rogerio Chequer (VPR), and Carla Zambelli (Nas Ruas). The latter signed as representative of the “43 movements against corruption” coalition (Aragao 2015), one of the most striking examples of the level of coordination achieved by these groups. By December 2015, when the impeachment request was accepted in Congress and the first senior members of the PMDB quitted the administration (anticipating the official break from the ruling alliance a few months later), the partisan opposition had indeed fully integrated into the pro-impeachment campaign promoted by the activists.[[13]](#endnote-13) The protests on 13 March 2016, which some observers estimated mobilized 3 million people across the country, saw the top leadership of the PSDB taking pictures in front of the stands of activist groups such as MBL and VPR (Globo 2016).

Most notably, the PSDB subsequently called its supporters to attend a new massive protest planned for August 2016, running tv ads with a legend stating “*o PSDB apoia as manifestacões de 16 de Agosto*” (PSDB 2015), with party leaders such as Aécio Neves and José Serra, a senior PSDB senator, personally attending the rallies (Haubert 2015). That same day, Neves addressed the crowds from a MBL truck stand, highlighting the patriotic and national character of the movement. Leaked audios to the press revealed substantial collaboration between activists and parties at this point, with MBL acknowledging the contribution of the PSDB, PMDB, DEM and *Solidaridade* in the organization of the March event. This collaboration included sharing material through their websites and platforms, printing pamphlets, and providing sound equipment (though declaring they did not accept monetary donations), with one of their main visible leaders, Renan dos Santos, declaring that “an approximation with political leaders is fundamental to pave the road to impeachment” (Lopes and Segalla 2016).

President Rousseff was formally impeached on April 17th 2017 and removed from office on 31 August, upon confirmation by the Senate. The final vote on the lower chamber presented almost complete alignment by centrist and right-wing parties against Rousseff, with all members of the PSDB, DEM, *Solidaridade,* and the liberal-conservative Brazilian Republican Party (PRB), voting in favor.[[14]](#endnote-14) The impeachment would shift the center of contention back to the institutional arena, but the success of the campaign consolidated the once radical frames of the activists and put them at the center of Brazilian politics, increasing their political salience.

In sum, while in Argentina the activist and alignment phases saw the crystallization of a ‘republican’ framing pitting a right-wing institutionalist camp against a left-wing populist one, which would be appropriated by the opposition from then onwards (Ferrero 2017), in Brazil the pro-impeachment mobilizations configured a dual ‘moralizing rhetoric’, targeting corruption and statism, on the one hand, while boosting traditional views of society, family, and religion, on the other (Alonso 2017: 56). In both countries right-wing parties consolidated a new mode of linkage strategy, which consisted of coordinating both contentious and institutional repertoires with popular digital vanguards that fostered oppositional mobilizations and frames. In the final section, we explore the different evolution of this linkage strategy as contention shifted from the streets to institutional arenas.

### The Institutional Phase: Opportunity Structures and Trajectories of Partisan Opposition

In this section we consider how the development of this linkage resulted in divergent trajectories of opposition during the institutional phase, one where activists joined a revitalized “new right” in which their groups remained active (Brazil), and one where the mediated linkage was temporarily dissolved (Argentina).

The trajectory of the Argentine case was marked by the closing of political opportunities for subsequent mobilization and the exclusion of activists from the partisan terrain. On the one hand, the brief character of the contentious cycle and activists’ preferred anonymity and weak mobilizing structures prevented them from building legitimacy during the protests, facilitating their displacement from party elites’ electoral negotiations (Author 2019). On the other, the proximity of a significant electoral instance accelerated coalition-building efforts among opposition parties, with the launch of the centrist front FAUNEN in June 2013, and the appearance of the centrist Peronist faction *Frente Renovador* seeking to appeal to both anti-Kirchnerist sectors and disaffected Peronist voters (Mauro 2017: 29).[[15]](#endnote-15)

Interviews indicate that some activists perceived coalition-building as a confirmation of their success (Interview with JJ, January 6th, 2017), but the fact that parties monopolized the process divided the activist camp between those considering the time of protesting was over, and those promoting further action. When a final (and failed) protest was called before the August primaries but rejected by opposition parties, the activist front demobilized (see Figure 1). Relevantly, activists entertained the possibility of launching a new independent party, but the lack of resources and the main activists’ limited public appeal led them to abandon the project (Interview with AA, November 2nd, 2016 and Interview with HH, December 28th 2016; see also Author 2019).

The electoral success of novel opposition party coalitions in both the August primaries and the October 2013 legislative elections were widely perceived as a confirmation of the national appeal of aggressive anti-Kirchnerist frames catalyzed during the protests, which served to agglutinate social strata behind a new conservative political project (Murillo 2015; Vommaro 2017). Importantly, the recruitment of party cadres for *Cambiemos* was tightly connected to the moral panic triggered by the triumph of Fernández in 2011, and significantly exacerbated by the digital vanguards during the protest cycle analyzed in this paper (Vommaro 2017, 2019). This logic of polarization guided coalition-building projects through 2014 and 2015, favoring Macri and PRO, which hegemonized the right-wing *Cambiemos* coalition against the more leftist members of FAUNEN and the Peronist *Frente Renovador*, a strategy validated in the presidential elections of 2015 (Mauro 2017).

In Brazil, instead, the development of the new linkage strategy contributed to generate a strong rightist coalition promoting the removal of Rousseff both via institutional and contentious repertoires. Some of the activists heading the digital vanguards were recognized as the primary faces of the movement, with groups like VPR enjoying of acceptance levels as high as 70%, and even the extremist ROL relying on higher numbers than any major opposition party (Ortellado and Solano 2016: 170-73). Moreover, during the contentious cycle activist groups had not only engaged with the partisan opposition but also with other influential conservative actors, such as Christian evangelical churches, landowners, business associations, and the mainstream media (Alonso 2017; von Bülow 2018: 15-17), indicating the possession of a more comprehensive, and valuable, set of organizational resources and mobilizing structures than Argentine ones.

 The success of this right-wing coalition in impeaching Dilma Rousseff generated a political vacuum due to the long-standing erosion of traditional opposition parties (Samuels and Zucco 2018), which in turn opened opportunities for smaller radical parties to exploit the linkage strategies built during the protest cycle. The capacity of Brazilian digital vanguards to organize smaller protests events against the interim government and the PT well into 2018 benefited the consolidation of a “new right”,[[16]](#endnote-16) with small and radical parties deciding to include many leading activists in their lists seeking to compete in the 2018 elections (see Figure 2).[[17]](#endnote-17) This convergence was arguably facilitated by institutional features of the Brazilian party and electoral systems, the former characterized by hyper-fragmentation, and the latter structured around open lists advantaging recognized and popular figures (Nicolau 2006; Zucco and Power 2019).

These factors contributed to strengthen the linkage strategy in Brazil in the long-term vis-à-vis Argentina, showing distinctive processes of self-amplification in the first case and self-erosion in the latter, using the terms of Falleti and Mahoney (2015: 221). In Brazil, grassroots activists were instrumental in the formation of a radical *anti-petista* coalition from 2013 to 2016, and contributed to the ascendance of a radical “new right” opposition from 2016 through 2018, when the mainstream center-right opposition revealed as a major electoral loser. The new linkage strategy provided by digital vanguards helped radical parties to pave the way for the ‘illiberal backlash’ that brought Bolsonaro to power, helping far-right parties such as PSL and PP to become the second and third largest forces in Congress (von Bülow 2018; Hunter and Power 2019). In Argentina, by contrast, party elites could get away in electoral terms without ceding space to activist groups, who were far less visible and powerful, and also faced higher costs to create new partisan alternatives given the closed electoral rules and less disjointed party system.

## Conclusions

This article theorized and illustrated how the emergence of a new form of linkage strategy, based on low-risk mobilizing resources offered by digital activist groups, enabled Latin American right-wing political parties to appropriate popular oppositional demands and steer contention into institutional channels. By tracing dynamic and evolving patterns of party-movement interaction during major protest cycles in Argentina and Brazil, we conceptualized three phases (Activist, Alignment, and Institutional) in which conservative parties gradually learnt and leveraged this linkage, using it to align contentious repertoires against left-wing incumbents.

Following this, the article examines subsequent political trajectories related to the emergent linkage, which were affected by particular institutional constraints and agentic decisions in both contexts. We showed that the Brazilian case was marked by an increasing visibility and legitimacy of the main activists *vis-à-vis* traditional party leaders, which conjointly with a more fragmented party system and open electoral system contributed to their easy recruitment by new “far right” peripheral parties such as PSL or PP. The Argentine case presented the opposite pattern, where the limited public engagement and weak mobilization structure of activists, added to a closed list electoral system and limited party fragmentation, restricted opportunities for the creation of a new movement party, and therefore isolated activists from party politics. By examining both these trajectories, the article contributes to the understanding of recent political transitions affecting the region, claiming that the novel linkage strategy, even if transient, was crucial to translate contentious grievances into partisan support for the right, thus adding to the processes leading to the election of Mauricio Macri in 2015 and Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.

While we have theorized and illustrated the influence of this party linkage strategy over the reconfiguration of the party system in both countries, our analysis has certain limitations insofar the processual development of the linkage strategy makes it difficult to disentangle the influence of other institutional conditions that might also affect the ascendance of new right-wing parties to power after protests are over. Therefore, we do not claim this linkage is by itself sufficient for explaining the ascendance of new right-wing parties in the region. However, we do claim that by theorizing and showing the importance of these new ways of engagement between right-wing parties and digital activists, the article provides a valuable theoretical angle to advance further research on the emergence of linkage strategies and organizational investment involving contentious actors, and on how institutional variables might affect their development.

Our theoretical framework and findings constitute an open call for the comparative study of related cases, in three main (but not exclusive) ways. First, scholars could better establish the scope conditions leading to the institutionalization of this linkage in the long-term, and also assess its impact over the subsequent electoral performance of right-wing parties. Second, although we argued that the establishment of linkage strategies involving digital vanguards is more pressing for the right than for the left given the weakness of its programmatic and organizational linkages with grassroots actors, this begs the question of how can this new digital repertoire be combined with more traditional and/or territorial organizations, both for the left and the right. Furthermore, understanding why the Latin American left seems to lag in adopting the same type of repertoire, or examining how and when it is doing so, might be fruitful to further specify the boundaries between different types of party structures and strategies. Finally, future work on similar cases might be helpful to refine our understanding of the scope conditions under which activists influence party politics, either by joining existing parties (such as the Brazilian case), creating new partisan vehicles (as in some European countries), or indirectly shaping partisan preferences.

## Tables and Figures

#### Figure 1. Phases of Linkage Strategy Development



#### Figure 2. Main Characteristics of Digital Vanguards, and Posterior Political Trajectories

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Activist Groups | Year of Creation | Operating Platforms | Followers in Facebook (at peak) | Current Status | Leaders\* | Became Partisan Leaders |
| Argentina | El Cipayo | 2011 | Facebook, Twitter, YouTube | (+) 400,000 | Active | Luciano Bugallo and other members | No\*\*\* |
| El Anti-K | 2012 | Facebook, YouTube | (+) 250,000 | Active | Marcelo Morán, Mariana Torres, and other members | No |
| ONG Salvemos Argentina | 2012 | Facebook | (-) 50,000 | Inactive | Anonymous | No |
| Ciudadanía Activa | 2012 | Facebook | (-) 50,000 | Inactive | Anonymous | No |
| Brazil | Movimento Brazil Libre  | 2014 | Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Website | (+) 3,200,000 | Active | Kim Kataguiri, Renan dos Santos, Fernando Holiday | Yes, Elected Federal Deputies |
| Vem Pra Rua | 2014 | Facebook, Twitter, Website | (+) 2,000,000 | Active | Roguerio Chequer | Yes, Candidate to Governor of Sao Paulo |
| Revoltados Online | 2010 | Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogspot | (+) 2,000,000 | Active\*\* | Marcello Reis | No |
| Nas Ruas | 2011 | Facebook, Twitter, website | (+) 800,000 | Active | Carla Zambelli | Yes, Elected Federal Deputy |

\* We only mention by name those visible and public leaders, to maintain anonymity.

\*\* Banned from Facebook, and relaunched again in 2016.

\*\*\* Luciano Bugallo was elected as Local Deputy in the Legislative Chamber of Buenos Aires Province in 2019, in the ticket of the *Cambiemos* coalition. However, data from our interviews and the temporal gap indicate that although his role as digital vanguard granted him access to the coalition, his candidacy cannot be attributed directly to this role.

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## Notes

1. Drawing from Charles Tilly’s use of the term “repertoire”, we follow (Clemens 1993) in defining organizational repertoires as common and culturally available models that organizations develop for interpreting a situation or acting in it, comprising strategic modes of political action. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The literature on the relation between leftist parties and social movements in the region is better known and extensive. We decided not to cover it here due to space limitations. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The recent mobilization of evangelicals in Brazil challenges these traditional models, albeit this is not incompatible with the linkage strategy outlined in this article (see Smith 2019). We return to this point in the conclusion. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Digital vanguards constitute independent but politically interested actors composed by small social media teams who manage the official accounts of social movements. See

Gerbaudo (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Attempts to formalize digitally-intermediated linkages, and the challenges of doing so, are covered by a sub-literature dealing with the emergence of “digital” parties, with recent salient examples being ‘pirate’ parties or the Italian *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S), among others (Della Porta et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ANONYMIZED INFORMATION ON COLLABORATIVE PROJECT. This database was constructed using traditional protest event analysis techniques and definitions (Hutter 2014; Pereyra, Pérez, and Schuster 2015: 335-337), and sampling was based on national newspapers with significant geographic coverage: *La Nación* for Argentinaand *Folha de São Paulo* for Brazil. Data collection resulted in a sample of 1600 unique protest events during the presidency of Cristina Fernández, and 1285 during Dilma Rousseff’s term (until the impeachment), and coding was based on commonly used variables related to types of organizations, demands, location, tactics, among others. While acknowledging that news outlets are always biased in ideological terms, a limited comparison with other media sources showed that both newspapers reconstructed more extensively and comprehensively the protests analyzed in the paper than other available options. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Despite these difficulties, we were able to draw upon 16 interviews conducted with different social movement activists mobilized during this period within the framework of the project above mentioned. Four of them comprised high-ranked leaders or coordinators from *Vem Pra Rua*, *Students for Liberty Brazil*, and *Endireita Brazil*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Interviews show that some activists’ *individual* trajectories started during the rural protests against Cristina Kirchner’s first government in 2008, although this does not affect the causal logic of the analysis given the different political and institutional context. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. By 2014, 72% of Brazilians expressed dissatisfaction with the political situation and 67% stated that the economic situation was bad, the higher numbers since the PT was in government (PEW 2014). For data on the similar situation in Argentina, see (Tagina and Varetto 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. As reflected in the names chosen for their Facebook platforms: *El Cipayo* – a historical derogatory term used by Peronists against ‘anti-national’ opponents – and *El Anti-K.* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See videos between April 10-17th published in *El Cipayo* (2013)’s YouTube channel. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The *Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*, is a catch-all centrist party, and one of largest in Brazil in terms of members. As such, as a key allied of PT administrations, when it held the largest Congressional bench, until its break late in 2016 when it supported Rousseff’s impeachment. In December 2017 it dropped the P from its name to present itself as a Brazilian Democratic ‘Movement’. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The VPR launched in February 2016 an online ‘Impeachment Map’ to identify the stance of congresspeople and senators on the matter, publishing their contact details and social media accounts, and the MBL promoted a trending ‘Tschau Querida’ (Bye Dear) campaign, appropriating a phrase heard during a phone conversation between Lula and Dilma leaked to the press (Galinari 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. They also counted with the support of the majority of social democratic and socialists deputies. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The Frente Amplio UNEN was a coalition of centrist and center-left parties, including the traditional UCR and the Socialist Party. Its larger parties and more salient figures would defect in 2014 and 2015 to join the electoral front led by the PRO. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. As indicated by Alonso (2017: 57), when the groups launched large protests against the Temer government on December 2016 and in defense of Lava Jato investigations on March 2017, the different groups attended the marches with their own colors, symbols, and separate stages. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Through 2017, Kim Kataguiri flirted with the small far-right PSL (which Bolsonaro would join in January 2018) and the youth-wing of the PSDB, but ultimately affiliated with DEM and was elected to Congress. Also from MBL, Fernando Holiday had already been elected City Counselor for DEM in 2016, and Paulo Martins and Jeronimo Goegen were elected congressmen for the PSC and PP respectively. Rogerio Chequer (VPR) joined the PP in 2017 and run as governor candidate for São Paulo (getting 3% of the votes), while Carla Zambelli (*Nas Ruas*) was elected to Congress for the PSL. Marcelo Reis (ROL) run as Congressman for the PSL, failing to get elected. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)