

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

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes novel patterns of interaction between right-wing parties and protest movements during major contentious cycles in Argentina (2012–13) and Brazil (2013–16), which preceded the advent of the Cambiemos coalition in the former and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in the latter. Drawing on a dual process-tracing strategy and a wide range of data sources, this study shows that these interactions are central to understanding why and how right-wing parties leverage novel repertoires and resources from digital activists during contemporary protest cycles, a dynamic conceptualized as a new party linkage strategy through digital intermediation. The study traces its three-phase development in both countries, revealing how differences in institutional contexts and the strength of activist groups contributed to divergent trajectories of partisan opposition toward the end of the cycles, regarding both the subsequent reconfiguration of the right and the entry of digital activists into institutional arenas.

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

In 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 to be accepted by Eduardo Cunha (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, PMDB), the president of the Chamber of Deputies. Interestingly, this group of signatures was accompanied by those of three independent activists who had been at the forefront of online and offline protest movements agitating contentious opposition against the Workers' Party (PT) since 2014.

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Similarly, in April 2013, the heads of the partisan opposition in Argentina met with a small group of cyberactivists in one of the side chambers of the congressional building, coordinating with them the details of a third mass protest against the left-wing government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of the Frente para la Victoria (FPV). The meeting was only the tip of the iceberg of a longstanding series of secret meetings between opposition politicians and cyberactivists 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 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; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014b). The main theoretical concepts for understanding this type of interaction have been modeled after the behavior of the left, failing to account for cases such as the above and leaving partly unresolved not only the question of why right-wing parties engage with contemporary contentious movements, but also how they manage to do so.

This 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 more than 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 the findings to relevant literature exploring the strategies of conservative actors in Europe and the United States, this article offers a theoretical framework for understanding how contemporary right-wing parties in Latin America seek to deploy innovative linkage strategies (Kitschelt 2000; Poguntke 2002) during contentious cycles.

The 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 explored in the literature (Bennett et al. 2018). Conceptualizing this process as an emergent “digitally intermediated” party linkage strategy and then comparatively tracing its development in both countries, this study reveals that it required right-wing parties to shed their historical aversion to popular mobilization, learn the benefits of digitally enabled collective action, and change their organizational practices and repertoires during contentious protest cycles.¹

Moreover, by tracing these interactions during and after the contentious phase, this comparative approach enables us to evaluate the implications this linkage strategy can have for the reconfiguration of the conservative opposition. More specifically, this study shows 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, this 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 put aside 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 could reproduce loyalty around a charismatic figure (Barr 2009; Wolinetz 2002).

This process has been amply studied in the party linkage literature, which has 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 et al. 2011; Kitschelt 2000; Lawson 1988) while also segmenting their engagement with different collective actors and electorates (Luna 2014). 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 2007; Lawson 1988); nevertheless, this article will leverage the latter term to consider the strategic decisions parties make to exploit a given support channel, irrespective of whether this decision consolidates the relationship into a stable linkage model in the medium or long term.

In the Latin American context, Kenneth Roberts (2002) has proposed an original typology of linkage strategies that distinguishes five nonexclusive 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 notes that Latin American centrist and conservative parties tend to rely heavily on “hierarchical chains of patrons, brokers, and clients rather than strong mass organizations” (Roberts 2002, 16), so that political loyalty is reproduced by periodic material exchange and personalized bonds rather than programmatic (ideological) commitment. By contrast, left-wing parties—particularly mass ones, such as the Brazilian PT and the Argentine PJ—prefer to combine brokerage with more programmatic and encapsulating linkages, wherein party organs are 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 for political activism (Anria 2019). From this perspective, grassroots activism and social movements traditionally have been useful organizations for leftist parties, providing them with “mobilizing structures”; that is, informal and formal channels that facilitate collective action by aggregating opin-

ions and distributing the cost of participation (McAdam 1982). These structures help anchor the party across different societal segments.

Although the validity of Roberts's model was subject to some question during the 1980s and 1990s, 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 regenerate 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 policymaking trajectories (Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Silva and Rossi 2018).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 that shed light on party-society linkages after the democratic transitions tend to focus on strategic coalitions developed with nonpartisan interest groups and organizations such as business federations, the Catholic Church, international think tanks, NGOs, and, before the last wave of democratization, the military and US-based intelligence agencies (Chalmers et al. 1992; Domínguez et al. 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 United States, where the right has historically been successful in mobilizing sociocultural grievances at the grassroots level (Caiani et al. 2012; McVeigh 2016), the limited scholarship looking at right-wing movements in Latin America points to the difficulty of connecting with conservative parties, due to their extreme ideology and practices (Payne 2000) or their limited territorial reach (Eaton 2011). Understanding of rightist organizational repertoires and linkages has remained anchored in 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 2014a, 9). This limitation has been reinforced by the difficulties right-wing parties faced, after the last democratization wave, in constructing the polyclassist coalitions and segmented linkages necessary to ascend to power. These difficulties accrued partly because patrimonial links with influential groups (i.e., the military) were no longer effective, and partly because the high levels of inequality in the region cause the median voter to lean invariably to the left (Gibson 1996; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014b; Pribble 2013).

While Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014a, 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

while 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. They face 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 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 that looks at changing patterns of political participation and mobilization, particularly the use of new communication technologies, such as social media. Scholars are paying increasing attention to how 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 (Scarow 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 “nonmainstream” interest groups and diffused constituencies (Barberà et al. 2019), enhancing the reach of populist communications and personalized leadership (Engesser et al. 2017), and bridging contentious and electoral mobilization (Della Porta et al. 2017).

While environmental, human rights, and other types of “new” social movements have been 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 evident 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 on the left present important challenges to reconciling bureaucratic party functions, technological capabilities, and demands for greater inclusiveness and horizontal decisionmaking (Gerbaudo 2019; Kitschelt 1989). By contrast, 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 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 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. Although digital activist groups can remain autonomous, their coordinating role during major protest cycles offers 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 activated only during phases of high mobilization (Poguntke 2002, 49).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 appeal to all types of parties, it can be considered particularly alluring to the Latin American right. As noted above, digital activists offer an organizational repertoire to compensate, at least in the short term, for the deficits of right-wing partisan structures (lack of a strong militant layer, weak party–civil society alignment, and limited demographic appeal). At the same time, they provide mobilizing tools to rally constituencies with a limited history of political activism but high digital engagement, which often characterizes the Latin American middle and upper classes (Somma 2013). Such digitally intermediated forms of linkage can help conservative parties reduce the trade-offs inherent in combining multiple linkage strategies, providing a relatively low-cost alternative means to gain political legitimacy among grassroots 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 following the multicausal 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 in which 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 contests 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 they influence 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). We conceive of these dynamic effects as constituting a linkage formation process, and therefore we trace them across three analytical phases in each cycle, denominated respectively activist, alignment, and institutional, as detailed in figure 1.

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 more than two thousand protest events during this period.⁶ As digital activists were first movers in the cycles, we also manually web-scraped data from the official Facebook fan pages of the leading activist organizations during the main protest events of the period (see table 1). In Brazil, this involved *Movimento Brasil Livre* (Free Brazil Movement, MBL), *Revoltados Online* (Outraged Online, ROL), and *Vem Pra Rua* (Come to the Streets, 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 Argentino* and *El Anti-K*, with a central role in coordinating the series of mass protests between mid-2012 and April 2013.

These data were triangulated with findings from semistructured interviews conducted in both countries. In Argentina, 12 interviews were conducted with anonymous cyberactivists at the core of the digital vanguard, which provided unprecedented insights into 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 used these insights to inform our analysis of the Brazilian situation. There, we were not able to draw on an extensive number of interviews with right-wing Brazilian activists, due to difficulties of access, given the long and constantly unfolding protest cycles.⁷ However, given that party-activist interactions were often public, we com-

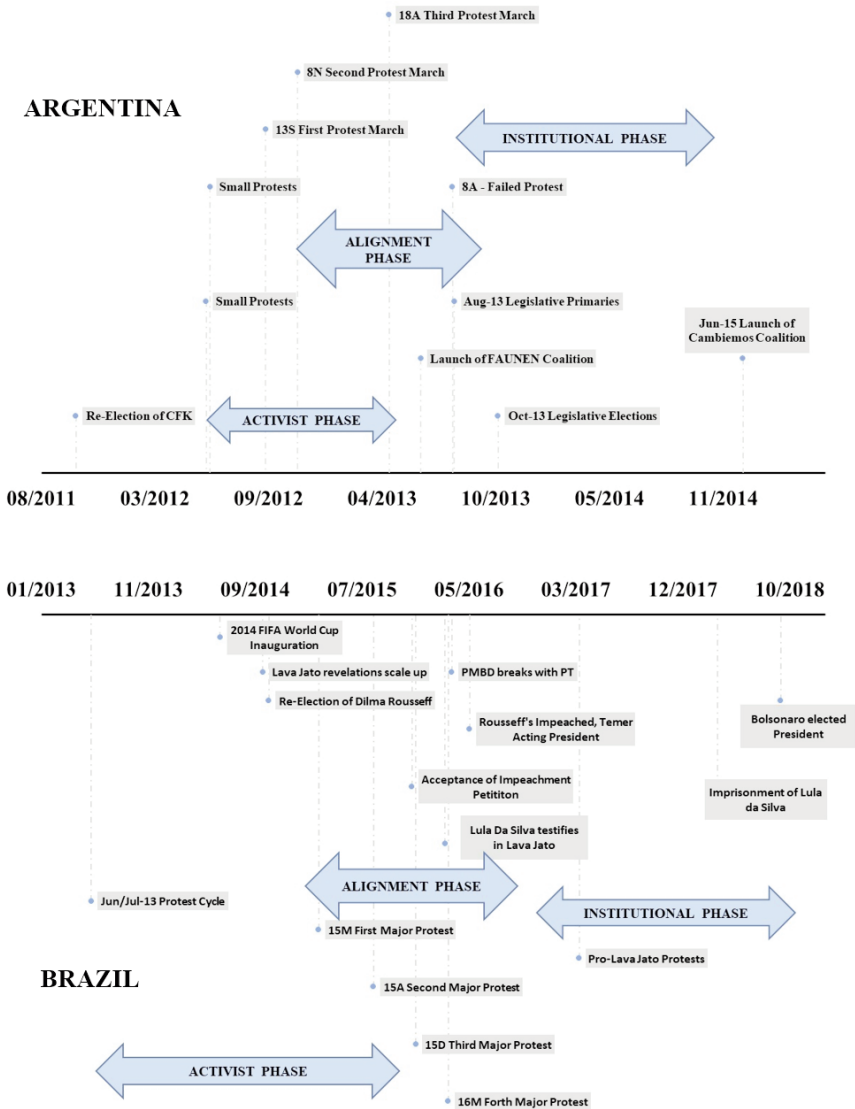


Figure 1. Phases of Linkage Strategy Development

bined 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.

Last, these data were contextualized against findings in recent scholarly literature regarding the popularity and centrality of these activist groups in the media ecosystem, particularly Facebook and Twitter. Secondary survey data were used to

Table 1. Main Characteristics of Digital Vanguard and Posterior Political Trajectories

Activist Groups	Year of Creation	Operating Platforms	Followers on Facebook (at peak)	Current Status	Leaders ^a	Became Partisan Leaders
Argentina						
El Cipayo	2011	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	(+) 400,000	Active	Luciano Bugallo, other members	No ^b
El Antri-K	2012	Facebook, YouTube	(+) 250,000	Active	Marcelo Morán, Mariana Torres, other members	No
ONG Salvemos	2012	Facebook	(-) 50,000	Inactive	Anonymous	No
Ciudadanía Activa	2012	Facebook	(-) 50,000	Inactive	Anonymous	No
Brazil						
Movimento Brasil Livre	2014	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Website	(+) 3,200,000	Active	Kim Kataguirí, Renan dos Santos, Fernando Holiday	Yes, elected federal deputies
Vem Pra Rua	2014	Facebook, Twitter, Website	(+) 2,000,000	Active	Rogério Chequer	Yes, candidate for governor of São Paulo
Revolutados Online	2010	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogspot	(+) 2,000,000	Active ^c	Marcello Reis	No
Nas Ruas	2011	Facebook, Twitter, website	(+) 800,000	Active	Carla Zambelli	Yes, elected federal deputy

^a We mention by name only those visible and public leaders, to maintain anonymity.

^b Luciano Bugallo was elected a local deputy in the Legislative Chamber of Buenos Aires Province in 2019, on 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.

^c Banned from Facebook and relaunched again in 2016.

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.

A NEW LINKAGE STRATEGY: FROM STREET MOBILIZATION TO PARTISAN TRAJECTORIES

The analysis starts with an overview of the main events defining the different phases in each country's protest cycle (see figure 1). The initial activist phase covers 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 understanding the context of emergence of the new linkage strategy in each country.

In Argentina, this first phase was shorter, and coalesced 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 re-elected with a historic 54 percent share of the votes in the 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). This perception activated initial collaborations among digital activists, who organized minor protests in Buenos Aires City immediately after the election (Gold 2019).⁸

In Brazil, the contentious period was longer, presenting two main protest cycles, one encompassing the plural and antipartisan character of mid-2013 through mid-2014 and another marked by the increasing *antipetismo* of the 2015–16 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 Aécio Neves from the PSDB 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 balloting against Neves by a margin of 3 percent (51.6 percent vs. 48.4 percent), the smallest in Brazilian modern political history, helping to polarize the political scene and reactivate discontent with 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 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 toward providing infrastructure in the streets, their leaders addressing the public directly, either by participating personally in online materials or by addressing crowds. This helped to make them highly visible and widely recognized figures (*O Globo* 2015b). In Argentina, the activists behind El Cipayo, El Anti-K, and other online groups remained mostly clandestine throughout the cycle; a few of them gave short interviews to newspapers, expressing a desire to exercise a decentralized leadership as citizens while reaffirming the horizontality of the movement they promoted (Rodríguez Niell 2012). This initial positioning would not affect the development of the new linkage strategy, but rather its impact over the party system once the contentious cycle was over.

The Activist Phase: Antipartisanship and Digital Vanguard

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 Material published on their Facebook pages showed a rapid convergence of their antagonism to Kirchnerism and Peronism, and also the defense of republican institutions, equating Kirchnerism with populist authoritarianism, corruption, and clientelism (Gold 2019). In Brazil, anti-incumbent alignment among activists developed more gradually, as before 2014, groups such as ROL and Nas Ruas were part of a fragmented and diffuse conservative camp, sharing the streets with autonomist and left-wing actors in a complex and multifaceted protest cycle (Alonso and Mische 2017).

However, although 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 coalesced and targeted the PT directly, with preexisting 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 later would become dominant, such as *Fora Corruptos*, *Fora PT*, and *Fora Dilma*, although there was no consensus yet 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 a few thousand (Tatagiba et al. 2015, 199).

In both countries, the activists viewed themselves as vanguards leading a national opposition and rejuvenation movement to “wake up” the citizenry, reenergize the opposition, and cleanse the political class. In personal interviews, Argentine

activists claimed that 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 September 13, 2012 in Argentina and March 15, 2015 in Brazil, and the material that circulated via social media both drew on strong antigovernment epithets, combined with the use of national colors and references to highlight the nonpartisan and national character of the events. The success of these calls, attracting about five hundred thousand people in Argentina and more than two million in Brazil, shocked government and opposition alike. They 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 the activists’ online mobilizing strategies. Subscriptions to their social media sites grew dramatically (see table 1).

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 the opposition to share many of the ills of the incumbent (e.g., incompetence, corruption, lack of representation). Argentine activists indicated that party figures even rejected initial approaches, worried that popular discontent could transform into “another 2001” (GG 2016). No major opposition party participated in the September demonstration, and only minor figures were visible during the second (and larger) event on November 8 (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 (Peña and Davies 2017). MBL representatives cast blame on the PSDB for “four defeats in a row” and for not listening to citizens’ demands, warning that “Aécio [Neves] will have to start speaking our language” (Martín 2014a). In the same manner, the national coordinator of *Vem Pra Rua* referred to Rousseff’s re-election 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” (LL 2016).

The Alignment Phase: Organizational Complementarities and Coordination of Repertoires

While the first phase was marked by extreme antipartisanship and the coexistence 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 understanding 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 more than three decades, as in Brazil.

The incentives for right-wing parties to pursue a more active role in antigovernment mobilizations increased as the contentious cycles expanded. On the one hand, parties needed to address their low levels of approval among protesters. Surveys in Argentina indicated that 75 percent of protesters lacked partisan identification, while 43 percent claimed that no known politician represented them—although Mauricio Macri was the most mentioned by 13 percent of respondents (CEIS 2013). In Brazil, 75 percent 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 of 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 to the partisan opposition to engage with digitally related organizational repertoires, monopolized by activist groups.

Following the success of the 2012 mobilizations, Argentine party figures across the center and 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, encouraging both groups to reassess their previous mistrust and the need for collaboration (Gold and Peña 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 Fernández de Kirchner government. One pointed out that “in a fight against the entire political class you lose. And if you lose, the winner is the one already in office” (KK 2017). (It is relevant that a similar opinion was voiced by Rogerio Chequer [VPR] in Brazil, who stated, “the objective here is to create the voice of the people, because without opposition in Congress the PT does not fear anyone” [Martín 2014a]).

The partisan realignment in Argentina became explicit in the period between the second march, on November 8, 2012, and the third, on April 18, 2013. During the former event, participant researchers had expressed surprise at the absence of partisan logos or indications of political affiliation (Pereyra 2017). A few opposition leaders attended 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 (AA 2014). Some *militantes* from PRO, the conservative party governing Buenos Aires City, distributed pamphlets after learning that Mauricio Macri supported the rally, but interviews and newspaper data indicate that the pamphlets also stayed clear of partisan references (*La Nación* 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 its opposition to Kirchnerism, and the value of mobilizing the resources the activists wielded. Thus, the opposition readily

embraced the activists' proposal to frame the April 18 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 convened to pressure indecisive politicians, while a large encounter took place in one of the congressional buildings, reported by the press as "an invitation [to the opposition] to participate in the pot-banging event" (*La Nación* 2013).

In the days before the event, numerous right-wing politicians publicly stated their participation or support on social media and TV shows, even appearing on activists' YouTube channels, calling for citizens to march to save the republic from populism and authoritarianism.¹¹ Interestingly, while opposition leaders walked freely among the crowds during the protests, activists opted to remain anonymous. One of the most famous images of the day, printed on many newspapers' front pages, showed a number of politicians walking beside a large Argentine flag on one of Buenos Aires' central avenues. In interviews, activists reported this to be a choreographed action (AA 2016; FF 2016), a detail that went unnoticed in 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 in the Lava Jato scandal related to the public prosecution of public officials and the opening of a possibility of impeachment, given the PT's weak position in the ruling alliance, after losing the presidency of both houses to the PMDB by early 2015 (Braig et al. 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. Aécio Neves uploaded a video on his official Facebook account on December 5 calling for mobilization, which ended with a hyperlink to the VPR activist website (Neves 2014). 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 2014a). In February 2015, Neves referred to the protests as "democratic but nonpartisan" 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 to convene in March and April.

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

From this moment on, however, party-activist interactions led to the coordination of both institutional and contentious strategies. In October 2015, the leader of the PSDB in Congress endorsed the first official request for the president's impeachment on crimes of responsibility, which, as mentioned, was cosigned by Kim Kataguirí (MBL), Rogerio Chequer (VPR), and Carla Zambelli (Nas Ruas). The activists signed as representative of the "43 movements against corruption" coalition (Aragão 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 quit 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 The protests on March 13, 2016, which some observers estimated mobilized three 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 (*O Globo* 2016).

Most notably, the PSDB subsequently called its supporters to attend a new massive protest planned for August 2016, running TV ads with the tagline *O PSDB apoia as manifestações de 16 de Agosto* (The PSDB supports the demonstrations of August 16 [PSDB 2015]). Party leaders such as Aécio Neves and José Serra, a senior PSDB senator, personally attended the rallies (Haubert 2015). That same day, Neves addressed the crowds from an MBL truck stage, highlighting the movement's patriotic and national character. Audio files leaked to the press revealed substantial collaboration between activists and parties at this point: MBL acknowledged the contribution of the PSDB, PMDB, DEM, and Solidaridade to organizing the March event. This collaboration included sharing material through the parties' websites and platforms, printing pamphlets, and providing sound equipment (though declaring that they did not accept monetary donations). One of the MBL's main visible leaders, Renan dos Santos, declared 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 17, 2017 and removed from office on August 31, on approval by the Senate. The final vote in the lower chamber presented almost complete alignment against Rousseff by centrist and right-wing parties, with all members of the PSDB, DEM, Solidaridade, and the liberal-conservative Brazilian Republican Party (PRB) voting in favor.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 the opposition would appropriate from then on (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. This linkage strategy evolved differently as contention shifted from the streets to institutional arenas.

The Institutional Phase: Opportunity Structures and Trajectories of Partisan Opposition

The development of this linkage resulted in divergent trajectories of opposition during the institutional phase, one in which activists joined a revitalized “new right” in which their groups remained active (Brazil), and one in which 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, enabling party elites to remove them from electoral negotiations (Gold and Peña 2019). On the other hand, the proximity of a significant electoral instance accelerated coalition-building efforts among opposition parties. The launch of the centrist front FAUNEN in June 2013 and the appearance of the centrist, Peronist faction Frente Renovador sought to appeal to both anti-Kirchnerist sectors and disaffected Peronist voters (Mauro 2017, 29).¹⁵

Interviews indicate that some activists perceived coalition building as a confirmation of their success (JJ 2017), but the fact that parties monopolized the process divided the activist camp between those who concluded that the time of protesting was over and those who promoted 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 (AA 2016; HH 2016).

The electoral success of novel opposition party coalitions in both the August primaries and the October 2013 legislative elections was widely perceived as a confirmation of the national appeal of aggressive anti-Kirchnerist frames catalyzed during the protests, which served to consolidate social strata behind a new conservative political project (Murillo 2015; Vommaro 2017). Importantly, the recruitment of party cadres for *Cambiamos* 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 study (Vommaro 2017, 2019). This logic of polarization guided coalition-building projects through 2014 and 2015, favoring Macri and PRO, which dominated the right-wing *Cambiamos* coalition and distanced itself from 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 helped to generate a strong rightist coalition promoting the removal of Rousseff via both 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 acceptance levels as high as 70 percent, 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 engaged not only with the partisan opposition but also with other influential conservative actors, such as 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 those in Argentina.

The success of this right-wing coalition in impeaching Dilma Rousseff generated a political vacuum, due to the longstanding 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 protest events against the interim government and the PT well into 2018 benefited the consolidation of a “new right.”¹⁶ Small and radical parties decided to include many leading activists in their lists seeking to compete in the 2018 elections (see table 1).¹⁷ This convergence was arguably facilitated by institutional features of the Brazilian party and electoral systems, the former characterized by hyperfragmentation and the latter structured around open lists advantaging recognized and popular figures (Nicolau 2006; Zucco and Power 2019).

These factors contributed to strengthening the linkage strategy in Brazil in the long term compared to Argentina, showing distinctive processes of self-amplification in the first case and self-erosion in the latter, to use the terms of Falletti and Mahoney (2015, 221). In Brazil, grassroots activists were instrumental in the formation of a radical *antipetista* 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 itself to be 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, which 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 has 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, this study conceptualized three phases (activist, alignment, and institutional), in which conservative parties gradually learned and leveraged this linkage, using it to align contentious repertoires against left-wing incumbents.

This article then examined subsequent political trajectories related to the emergent linkage, which were affected by particular institutional constraints and agentic decisions in both contexts. It showed that the Brazilian case was marked by an increasing visibility and legitimacy of the main activists compared to traditional party leaders, which, together 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, in which activists’ limited public engagement and weak mobilization structure, added to a closed-list electoral system and limited party fragmentation, restricted opportunities for the creation of a new movement party, and thus 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 the study has theorized and illustrated the influence of this party linkage strategy over the reconfiguration of the party system in both countries, this analysis has certain limitations insofar as the development process 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 that this linkage is, by itself, sufficient to explain 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 argue 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 link-

ages with grassroots actors, this raises the question of how this new digital repertoire can be combined with more traditional or territorial organizations, for both 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.

NOTES

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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.

2. The literature on the relation between leftist parties and social movements in the region is better known and more extensive. We decided not to cover it here due to space limitations.

3. The recent mobilization of Evangelicals in Brazil challenges these traditional models, although this is not incompatible with the linkage strategy outlined in this article (see Smith 2019). We return to this point in the conclusion.

4. Digital vanguards constitute independent but politically interested actors, composed by small social media teams that manage the official accounts of social movements. See Gerbaudo 2017.

5. Attempts to formalize digitally intermediated linkages, and the challenges of doing so, are covered by a subliteration dealing with the emergence of "digital" parties. Recent salient examples are "pirate" parties or the Italian Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), among others (Della Porta et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2019).

6. The construction of the protest event database was part of the collaborative project "The End of the Left Turn in Latin America?" financed by the University of Bath (Ferrero et al. 2019). Researchers in both countries used traditional protest event analysis techniques and definitions (Hutter 2014; Pereyra et al. 2015, 335–37), sampling protest events from national newspapers with significant geographic coverage: *La Nación* for Argentina and *Folha de São Paulo* for Brazil. Data collection resulted in a sample of 1,600 unique protest events during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and 1,285 during Dilma Rousseff's term (until the impeachment), and coding was based on commonly used variables related to types of organizations, demands, location, and 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 study than did other available options. The database is publicly available at the University of Bath (Ferrero et al. 2018).

7. Despite these difficulties, we were able to draw on 16 interviews conducted with different social movement activists mobilized during this period within the framework of the abovementioned project. Four of them were high-ranking leaders or coordinators from *Vem Pra Rua*, *Students for Liberty Brazil*, and *Endireita Brazil* (Brazil to the Right).

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.

9. By 2014, 72 percent of Brazilians had expressed dissatisfaction with the political situation and 67 percent had stated that the economic situation was bad, the highest numbers since the PT took over the government (Pew Research Center 2014). For data on the similar situation in Argentina, see Tagina and Varetto 2013.

10. As reflected in the names chosen for their Facebook platforms: *El Cipayo*—a historically derogatory term used by Peronists against “antinational” opponents—and *El Anti-K*.

11. See videos between April 10 and 17, 2013 posted on *El Cipayo's* YouTube channel.

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, it was a key ally 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 the Brazilian Democratic “Movement.”

13. The VPR launched in February 2016 an online Impeachment Map to identify the stance of congress members 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).

14. They also counted the support of the majority of Social Democratic and Socialist deputies.

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.

16. As indicated by Alonso (2017, 57), when the groups launched large protests against the Temer government in December 2016 and in defense of Lava Jato investigations in March 2017, the different groups attended the marches with their own colors, symbols, and separate stages.

17. Through 2017, Kim Kataguirí flirted with the small, far-right PSL (which Jair 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 the MBL, Fernando Holiday had already been elected a city counselor for DEM in 2016, and Paulo Martins and Jerônimo Goergen were elected to Congress for the PSC and PP, respectively. Rogerio Chequer (VPR) joined the PP in 2017 and ran for governor of São Paulo State (winning 3 percent of the vote), while Carla Zambelli (Nas Ruas) was elected to Congress for the PSL. Marcelo Reis (ROL) ran for Congress for the PSL but failed to get elected.

INTERVIEWS

Interview subjects have been kept anonymous.

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 ———. 2016. Buenos Aires, November 2.
 FF. 2016. Activist. Buenos Aires, December 26.
 GG. 2016. Activist. Buenos Aires, December 27.
 HH. 2016. Activist. Buenos Aires, December 28.
 JJ. 2017. Activist. Buenos Aires, January 6.
 KK. 2017. Activist. Buenos Aires, January 6.
 LL. 2016. São Paulo, November 24.

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