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THE LOGIC OF PARTY SWITCHING: THE IMPACT OF THE FAR RIGHT ON THE BRAZILIAN LEGISLATURE

***A LÓGICA DA MIGRAÇÃO PARTIDÁRIA: O
IMPACTO DA EXTREMA DIREITA NO
LEGISLATIVO BRASILEIRO***

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dynamics of party switching underlying the rise of the far right in the Brazilian legislature, focusing on federal deputies who joined Jair Bolsonaro's parties across two electoral cycles – the PSL (*Partido Social Liberal*, Social Liberal Party) in 2018 and the PL (*Partido Liberal*, Liberal Party) in 2022. Drawing on an original dataset linking over 22,000 candidacies between 2014 and 2022 through individual taxpayer identification numbers (CPF), we construct a novelty index for party lists and map migration flows using Sankey diagrams. We then propose a typology distinguishing five profiles: loyalists, migrants, newcomers/outside, traditional PL members, and opportunists. Logistic regression and OLS (ordinary least squares) models show that loyalty to Bolsonarism was electorally rewarding: loyalists – who followed Bolsonaro in his move to the PL – and opportunists – who joined the PL from other parties – obtained substantially better electoral outcomes than migrants who defected to other parties. The PSL in 2018 exhibited an exceptionally high novelty index (0.91), with 75% of its elected deputies lacking prior electoral experience, whereas the PL in 2022 showed greater institutionalization (novelty index of 0.71) and a substantial influx from the PSL (31.7% of all migrants). Contrary to the literature that attributes party switching in weakly institutionalized systems exclusively to opportunistic motivations, Bolsonarism established political and identitarian ties strong enough to retain significant parliamentary support despite organizational rupture, producing structural effects on legislative representation and reshaping strategic calculations beyond formal party organizations.

Keywords: Party Switching; Far Right; Bolsonarism; Brazilian Party System; Linear Regression.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as dinâmicas de migração partidária subjacentes à ascensão da extrema direita no Legislativo brasileiro, examinando os deputados federais que se filiaram aos partidos de Jair Bolsonaro em dois ciclos eleitorais (PSL em 2018 e PL em 2022). Os achados revelam que o PSL, em 2018, exibiu um índice de novidade excepcionalmente elevado (0,91), com 75% dos deputados eleitos sem experiência eleitoral prévia, enquanto o PL, em 2022, demonstrou maior institucionalização (índice de novidade 0,71) com substancial afluxo proveniente do PSL (31,7% dos migrantes) e de partidos tradicionais de direita. Empregando uma tipologia que distingue leais, migrantes, novatos, membros tradicionais do PL e oportunistas, modelos de regressão logística e MQO (mínimos quadrados ordinários) demonstram que a lealdade ao bolsonarismo foi eleitoralmente rentável: candidatos leais (que seguiram Bolsonaro em sua migração para o PL) e oportunistas (que se filiaram ao PL advindos de outros partidos) colheram enormes benefícios eleitorais, se comparados aos migrantes (que desertaram para outros partidos). Contrariamente à literatura que enfatiza motivações exclusivamente oportunistas para a troca de legenda em sistemas fracamente institucionalizados, o bolsonarismo estabeleceu vínculos políticos suficientemente robustos para reter apoio parlamentar significativo apesar de ruptura organizacional, produzindo efeitos estruturais substantivos sobre a representação legislativa e alterando cálculos estratégicos para além das organizações partidárias formais.

Palavras-chave: Migração Partidária; Extrema Direita; Bolsonarismo; Sistema Partidário Brasileiro; Regressão Linear.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, countries across the globe have witnessed the rise of far-right and radical-right political forces, often posing significant threats to the institutions and practices of liberal democracy in a variety of contexts. The emergence of leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and Javier Milei in Argentina appears to reflect a broader process of conservative realignment (Eatwell; Goodwin, 2018; Mudde, 2019), one that has contributed to the phenomenon the literature has termed democratic backsliding. These movements share common elements – nationalism, authoritarianism, cultural conservatism, anti-politics, and the rejection of cosmopolitan elites – yet express themselves in distinct ways depending on their institutional and historical contexts (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner; Lust, 2018; Encarnación, 2023). The scholarly literature has produced two major explanations for this phenomenon. Some authors link it to a *cultural backlash*, whereby groups that previously held cultural hegemony come to feel threatened by shifting values in their societies (Norris; Inglehart, 2019; Pappas, 2019). Others argue that globalization has created economic losers – industrial workers in developed countries, non-competitive sectors – who respond by supporting authoritarian populist solutions (Dorn; Hanson; Majlesi, 2020; Rodrik, 2021).

In Brazil, the rise of the far right took shape primarily through Jair Bolsonaro's victory in the 2018 presidential election, which served as the catalyst for the identification, by commentators and scholars alike, of "Bolsonarism" (*bolsonarismo*) – a movement combining anti-systemic rhetoric, religious moralism, militarism, and anti-PT sentiment (*antipetismo*, that is, hostility toward the Workers' Party) (Kaysel; Codas; Cruz, 2016; Telles, 2016; Krause *et al.*, 2019). Bolsonaro's figure appears to have become a marker for the expression of discontent with the political system and traditional democratic institutions, reconfiguring the links between representation and ideology while propelling new conservative actors and networks to national prominence (Guadalupe; Carranza, 2020). The PSL (*Partido Social Liberal*, Social Liberal Party), virtually irrelevant until 2018, became one of the largest blocs in the Chamber of Deputies, and its successor within the Bolsonarist arrangement, the PL (*Partido Liberal*, Liberal Party), became the largest party in the house following the renewed electoral success of Bolsonarism in 2022 (Codato; Berlatto; Bolognesi, 2018; Melo, 2024). This electoral and organizational shift signals that the impact of Bolsonarism was not confined to the discursive, symbolic, or even behavioral sphere – almost always the focus of the academic literature – but reverberated directly through the party system and the individual trajectories of legislators.

Scholarship on Bolsonarism in Brazil has advanced on multiple analytical fronts. The sociological perspective emphasizes the crisis of representation and the erosion of traditional linkages between voters and parties (Singer, 2018; Pinheiro-Machado, 2019). The anthropological approach explores the moral and religious *ethos* sustaining Bolsonarism in local communities and evangelical networks (Machado, 2019). Studies of political behavior have sought to identify the main demographic characteristics and value orientations of self-identified Bolsonarists (Rennó, 2020; Feres Júnior, 2025). Other studies examine the language of anti-politics, the construction of "the people" and "the enemy" in digital media and presidential discourse (Moffitt, 2016; Cesarino, 2020). Research in political communication, in turn, explores the specific patterns of information consumption among Bolsonaro's electorate (Feres Junior; Schaefer; Barbarela, 2024). While these contributions have illuminated crucial dimensions of the phenomenon, relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of Bolsonarism on the Brazilian party system, particularly

with respect to party switching and the reorganization of parliamentary forces on the right – topics already addressed in the broader literature (Desposato, 2006; Zucco; Power, 2021). This article seeks to contribute to filling that gap by analyzing how the rise of Bolsonarism affected the partisan and electoral behavior of federal deputies between 2018 and 2022.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, we briefly discuss the literature on party switching, party systems, and the rise of the radical right, situating these debates in the Brazilian context and in relation to Bolsonarism. We then present the historical and institutional context of the far right in Brazil, highlighting how Bolsonaro's trajectory reconfigured the right-wing field and created new career opportunities for federal deputies. In the methodology section, we detail the construction of the original dataset linking over 22,000 candidacies between 2014 and 2022 through individual taxpayer identification numbers (CPF), the operationalization of the party list novelty index, the mapping of migration flows through Sankey diagrams, and the proposed typology of political trajectories (loyalists, migrants, newcomers/outside, traditional PL members, and opportunists), along with the logistic regression and OLS models employed in the analysis. The results section is divided into three blocks: (i) analysis of party list novelty and the exceptional character of the PSL in 2018 in contrast to the greater institutionalization of the PL in 2022; (ii) examination of the partisan origins of candidates and the patterns of migration toward Bolsonaro's parties; and (iii) assessment of the determinants of loyalty to the Bolsonarist camp and the electoral effects of different migration strategies. The conclusion revisits the main findings, discusses their implications for the debate on party switching and the institutionalization of the Brazilian party system, and identifies the study's limitations and future research directions.

PARTY SWITCHING AND THE FAR RIGHT

REASONS FOR PARTY SWITCHING

Party switching is not a phenomenon exclusive to Brazil. Wherever it occurs, it appears to have multidimensional causes and consequences (Matlosa; Shale, 2007; Klein, 2021; Arriola *et al.*, 2022). Contributions to this literature are mostly concerned with identifying the motivations behind a politician's decision to switch parties. Among the variables identified are institutional and contextual factors (Heller; Mereshon, 2009), ideological factors (Hix; Noury, 2018), actor strategy (Tavits, 2008), and cultural factors along with demand-side changes originating from the electorate (Dalton; Wattenberg, 2000).

The institutional and contextual perspective frames party switching as a rational action. Politicians decide to change parties by weighing gains and losses against the institutional variables that govern the political game. Electoral systems and rules, party affiliation regulations, models of party and campaign finance, and the electoral calendar all encourage or discourage party switching (Carey; Shugart, 1992; Heller; Mereshon, 2009). Contexts of low institutionalization and high party fragmentation are also factors that shape the decision to change party labels, since instability presents both risks and opportunities for a politician's career (Mainwaring, 1999; Desposato, 2006). Moreover, Hix and Noury (2018) show that ideological identification and programmatic coherence cannot be excluded from the calculus of party switching. Programmatic and ideological coherence is not necessarily disconnected from the pursuit of maximized electoral gains and resources, for the simple reason that ideology enters into the strategic calculation of migration depending on how voters orient their choices.

The "actor strategy" variable enters explanatory models not so much as a counterpoint to the institutional-contextual and ideological perspectives, but as a complementary dimension. According to this approach, actors act and react in response to particular constellations and changes in institutional design. As Przeworski (2019) emphasizes, conditions do not determine outcomes; rather, outcomes are determined by the actions of the people who find themselves in those conditions. Migration is not solely determined by the institutional framework, since actors develop distinct strategies and options within the same environment in pursuit of alternatives that enhance their political careers, reduce risks, and increase electoral prospects.

It is also important to recognize that strategic decisions made within a given institutional framework do not guarantee the maximization of gains or the mitigation of losses (Przeworski, 2019; Tavits, 2008). Voters and political actors are embedded in dynamic contexts full of uncertainty (Katz; Mair, 1995), which affect not only the supply of representatives but also the demand for representation (Dalton; Wattenberg, 2000; Mainwaring, 2018). Accordingly, transformations within the electorate are expected to reverberate through the dynamics of party switching. The growing weakening of party-voter ties, electoral volatility, and political polarization all challenge political actors. Changes in *party linkage* patterns are connected to political culture and value transformation (Inglehart; Welzel, 2005; Lupu, 2014; Carreirão, 2015).

Understanding the causes of party switching requires an analysis of how the variables highlighted in the literature interrelate and of their interdependencies. This is because the interactions among these variables produce diverse effects on the logic of party switching depending on their configuration within the dynamic environment of the political system (Easton, 1957).

PARTY SWITCHING IN BRAZIL

Party switching is not a new phenomenon in Brazilian politics. It has been observed across regimes and party systems characterized by distinct institutional arrangements, political actors, and electorates. The democratic regime of 1945–1964 witnessed significant migratory movements, the causes of which have been extensively analyzed. The literature has highlighted important institutional variables, including the low institutionalization of parties and the party system (Souza, 1990; Lamounier, 2004), electoral rules, and the absence of legislation prohibiting party switching under penalty (Zulini, [20--?]). Actor strategy was also identified as one of the key drivers of switching (De Castro Gomes, 2015). The shift toward the PTB and PSD was motivated by the electoral ascendance of Vargas (1950) and Juscelino Kubitschek (1955). The apparent intention of these politicians was to obtain electoral gains and resources by moving closer to the Executive branch. The weak ideological identification of both politicians and the electorate was similarly considered a contributing cause, compounding the institutional variables and the political context. As a result, the risk of electoral losses from changing party labels was not significant for parliamentarians (Souza, 1990).

Party switching in the democratic regime of the New Republic unfolded in distinct institutional configurations and electoral competitive landscapes. Broadly speaking, three waves can be identified. The first was shaped by the political opening in the context of the 1979 party reform (Law No. 6767), which established multipartyism. The dynamics of this wave were driven by traditional political actors who had dissented from the ruling party of the authoritarian regime, ARENA. These

parliamentarians sought new partisan "garments" offered by the newly founded parties – a movement that has been explained as strategic (Nicolau, 1996; Melo, 2000), aimed at softening electoral resistance and creating distance from the undemocratic past, particularly for politicians coming from ARENA (Braga, 2010).

The promulgation of Constitutional Amendment No. 25 in 1985 removed the requirement of party loyalty, thereby facilitating party switching among parliamentarians. However, this rule change alone is insufficient to explain the second wave of migration. Disenchantment with the PMDB following the failure of the Cruzado Plan, the low popularity of the Sarney government, and internal dissent among party leaderships were the main drivers of the exodus from that party label (Mainwaring, 1995). In the two years between the publication of the Constitutional Amendment in 1987 and the promulgation of the Constitution in 1988, a massive defection from the PMDB took place and five new parties were created – evidence that reinforces the argument that institutional rules alone are insufficient to explain the causes of party switching. In other words, the more permissive rule opened a window of opportunity for migration, but the context and the strategic decisions of parliamentarians to change their "garment" in order to stay in the game and maximize gains were equally necessary (Krause; Paiva, 2002).

The third wave begins after the first direct presidential election in 1989, and its operating logic is shaped by the dynamics of the newly established democratic regime (Melo, 2000; Freitas, 2008). While strategic calculations by actors seeking to maximize gains and minimize risks remain central, they do not tell the whole story. Migration from the 1990s onward rests primarily on five factors: (1) seeking proximity to or distance from the party holding the Executive branch, depending on a government's approval ratings (Nicolau, 1997; Krause; Paiva, 2002); (2) joining smaller parties in response to regional disputes or dissidences, in pursuit of better career alternatives within one's electoral base (Zucco; Power, 2021); (3) gaining greater access to financial resources and electoral advertising time (Freitas, 2008; Speck; Campos, 2014); (4) programmatic and ideological affinities or divergences (Roma, 2007; Freitas, 2008); and (5) adaptation to institutional reforms, with politicians migrating toward parties with greater representation (Pereira, forthcoming). These factors are not mutually exclusive and may even compete with one another, carrying different weights depending on the context.

In 2007, the TSE issued two resolutions – No. 22,610/2007 and No. 22,526/2007 – aimed at disciplining and restricting party switching within the legislature. These rules established, among other provisions, that an elected mandate belongs to the party rather than to the individual parliamentarian, enabling parties to petition for the loss of a mandate in the event of unjustified defection. A significant reduction in switching was anticipated, given that the cost of leaving one's party would henceforth be high. However, as Bins (2017) demonstrates, party changes continued to occur on a large scale even after the resolutions came into effect, with no statistically significant decline. This finding makes clear that institutional factors alone are insufficient to contain party instability. Individual strategies of political survival, regional dynamics, and electoral conjunctures continued to influence decisions to change party labels. In short, the rules created formal barriers but did not alter the underlying political incentives driving the practice of migration.

Although the causes of party switching are multiple – ranging from institutional incentives to political conjunctures and individual strategies – the literature converges on the identification of one essential motivation: the pursuit of individual political gains (Desposato, 2007; Diniz, 2000). In a system marked by low party institutionalization and high fragmentation, such as Brazil's, parties tend to function

less as programmatic structures and more as instruments for accessing resources and electoral opportunities (Cheibub; Gandhi; Vreeland, 2022). Accordingly, the decision to change party labels is frequently guided by strategic calculations – securing financing, expanding advertising time, or aligning with a party that has greater prospects of victory in a given conjuncture.

Multiple studies confirm that party label changes rarely stem from ideological ruptures or programmatic incompatibilities between the parliamentarian and their party (Desposato, 2007). On the contrary, such changes are predominantly pragmatic movements, motivated by career considerations, the redistribution of power, and access to Executive resources. This logic reflects the functioning of a political system in which party discipline is weak, ideological ties are diffuse, and electoral survival depends on the individual's ability to navigate between parties in search of strategic advantages.

Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that party switching occurs asymmetrically across the ideological spectrum, being more intense among right-wing parties (Melo, 1999; Araújo, 2000). This predominance reflects both the greater fragmentation and internal competition within that field and the ideological fluidity of conservative party labels, which have historically been less tied to consistent programs and more open to pragmatic alliance negotiations. Unlike the left, where party identities tend to be more cohesive and ideologically structured – as in the cases of the PT and the PSOL – the Brazilian right is characterized by flexible networks of parliamentary cooperation, within which party switches form part of the ordinary strategies of political survival.

THE RADICAL RIGHT AND PARTY SWITCHING

The rise of the far right in Brazil must be understood within the broader political and social crisis that opened with the wave of protests in June 2013, initially a left-wing movement against increases in public transport fares that rapidly expanded into a diffuse challenge to the political system as a whole. The appropriation of the anti-politics discourse – which had already been circulating in the mainstream press for nearly a decade – opened space for moralist and anti-left narratives voiced by the unorganized masses of protesters (Gohn, 2014; Tatagiba; Galvão, 2019; Ortellado; Solano, 2016). In this context, a new discursive repertoire emerged, centered on the delegitimization of political institutions, the demonization of the traditional political class, and the association between corruption and the left, especially the Workers' Party.

The impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 was the inflection point that consolidated this shift in the political center of gravity. Under conditions of growing polarization, the right and conservative sectors managed to capitalize on the anti-PT sentiment that had been accumulating since the June 2013 protests. The impeachment process, though legally framed as a response to fiscal irregularities, assumed a strongly political and moral character, portraying the PT as the symbol of a corrupt and illegitimate system (Miguel, 2016; Saad-Filho; Morais, 2018). During this period, the anti-political and punitive discourse of Operation Car Wash (*Operação Lava Jato*) found resonance in broad segments of the middle class and the business community, further weakening the institutional mediations of democratic representation (Feres Júnior; Barbarela; Bachini, 2018).

Jair Bolsonaro's victory in 2018 appeared to be the culmination of this legitimacy crisis. A former Army captain and low-profile deputy for nearly thirty years,

Bolsonaro managed to articulate latent antagonisms between morality and politics, the people and the elite, security and disorder, presenting himself as the spokesman of a "nation betrayed" by left-wing corruption (Casarões; Magalhães, 2021). His party, the PSL, until then irrelevant, became the second-largest bloc in the Chamber, leaping from 1 to 52 federal deputies – a clear demonstration of the mobilizing power of Bolsonarism and its capacity to reconfigure the right-wing field.

During the Bolsonaro government (2019–2022), the far right consolidated itself as an organized political force, albeit one anchored more in personal and ideological loyalties than in stable party structures. Rather than presenting itself as a solution to the crisis of representation, Bolsonaro opted to sustain it, adopting a discourse openly hostile to institutions – Congress, the Supreme Court (STF), the press, and universities – with the aim of eroding confidence in the democratic system and legitimizing a personalist and plebiscitary model of power.

Despite the health and economic crisis aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro maintained a solid core of popular support, sustained by emergency income-transfer policies, anti-establishment rhetoric, and a strong social media presence. This nearly secured him a second victory in 2022, as he amassed 58 million votes. His electoral success had an even more sweeping effect on the partisan composition of the federal legislature, this time in favor of the PL (*Partido Liberal*, Liberal Party), his new party. If the PSL claimed 10% of the seats in the Chamber in 2018, the PL nearly doubled that proportion in 2022, electing 99 federal deputies – 19.3% of the total.

Bolsonarism survived electoral defeat and transformed itself into a mass political movement, with broad social reach, presence in both traditional and digital media, and a significant parliamentary base. But what is most important to note here, for the purposes of this article, is that the recent political ascendance of the radical right in Brazil produced at least two waves of reconfiguration of partisan representation in the federal legislature, in 2018 and in 2022. Where did the deputies elected in the wake of Jair Bolsonaro's electoral successes come from on each occasion? Was this reconfiguration driven primarily by party switching or by the entry of newcomers? And if switching occurred, from which parties did these candidates migrate?

METHODOLOGY

We investigate the origins of far-right candidates elected to the Chamber of Deputies. We define as far right those candidates affiliated with the presidential candidacies of Jair Bolsonaro – that is, the PSL in 2018 and the PL in 2022. Candidacy data were collected from the TSE (Brazil's Superior Electoral Court) using the R package developed by Dahis *et al.* (2022), for the years 2014, 2018, and 2022. We adopted the following procedure: (1) we collected information on candidacies, vote shares, and campaign revenues for all federal deputy candidates across the three electoral cycles; (2) we merged this information into a single dataset totaling over 22,000 candidates; (3) we coded each candidacy according to the candidate's prior status – whether they had competed in the immediately preceding general election (a 2018 candidate may also have run in 2014, for any office in a general election), what the prior result was (elected or not elected), and which party they belonged to at that time. This data linkage was performed using each individual's CPF (Brazilian individual taxpayer identification number) as the key connecting the datasets, following standard procedures in the literature (Faganello; Fernandes, 2018; Schaefer; Krause; Mancuso, 2024).

From these three steps, we were able to quantify the proportion of each party list that was new – that is, had not competed in the previous election. For the main analysis, we focus exclusively on the 2018 and 2022 elections, yielding a total of 17,083 observations. Of all candidacies, 815 were running with an existing mandate (383 in 2018 and 432 in 2022), 2,326 had been unsuccessful candidates in the previous election (964 in 2018 and 1,362 in 2022), and 13,942 had not been candidates in the immediately preceding election (6,280 in 2018 and 7,662 in 2022). This dataset is used to examine party list novelty and candidate migration flows between elections.

We also constructed two subsidiary datasets from the main one. The first includes only PSL candidates from 2018 who competed again in 2022, in order to identify the predictors of loyalty to Bolsonarism – that is, candidates who moved from the PSL to the PL between elections. The second includes PL candidates from 2022 (the full list) and PSL candidates from 2018 who returned to compete in 2022, whether with the PL or another party. The aim was to assess the electoral impact of different migration strategies. All analyses were conducted in R.

RESULTS

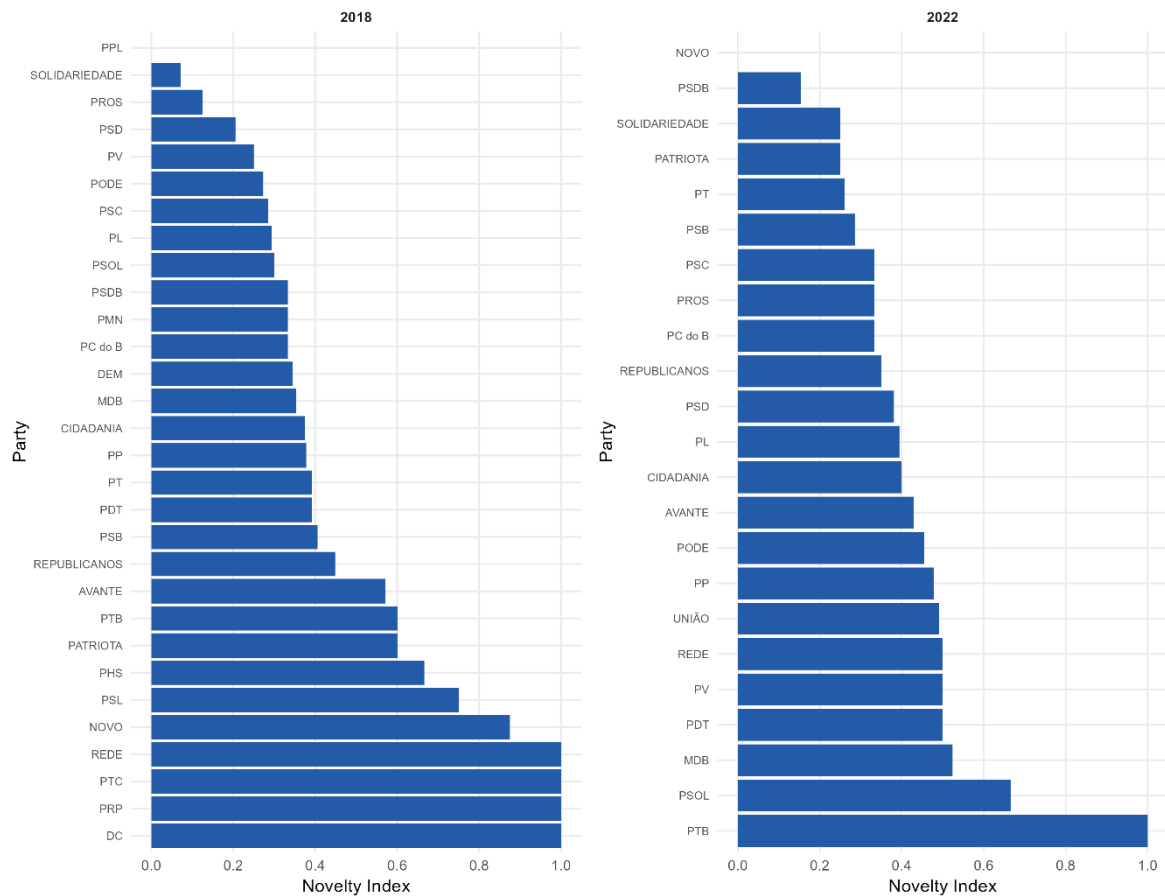
NOVELTY OF PARTY LISTS

We begin by calculating the novelty index for party lists in both elections. To do so, we summed the total number of candidates in each party who had competed in the immediately preceding general election for any office (experienced competitors),¹ divided that figure by the total number of candidates on each list, and subtracted the result from 1:

$$\text{novelty_index} = 1 - (\text{total_experienced_candidates} / \text{total_candidates})$$

The novelty index ranges from 0 to 1: the closer to 1, the greater the proportion of new candidates (Figure 1).

In 2018, the five parties with the highest novelty indices were the PCO, Novo, PMB, Rede, and PSL. The PSL fielded 434 candidates for the Chamber; of these, only 42 had competed in the 2014 election (9%, novelty index of 0.91). In 2022, the five parties with the highest novelty indices were UP, PMB, PCB, DC, and PRTB. Bolsonaro's PL appears in the third-to-last position, fielding 475 candidates, of whom 141 had competed in 2018 (29%, novelty index of 0.71).

Figure 1 – Novelty index among candidates (2018 and 2022)

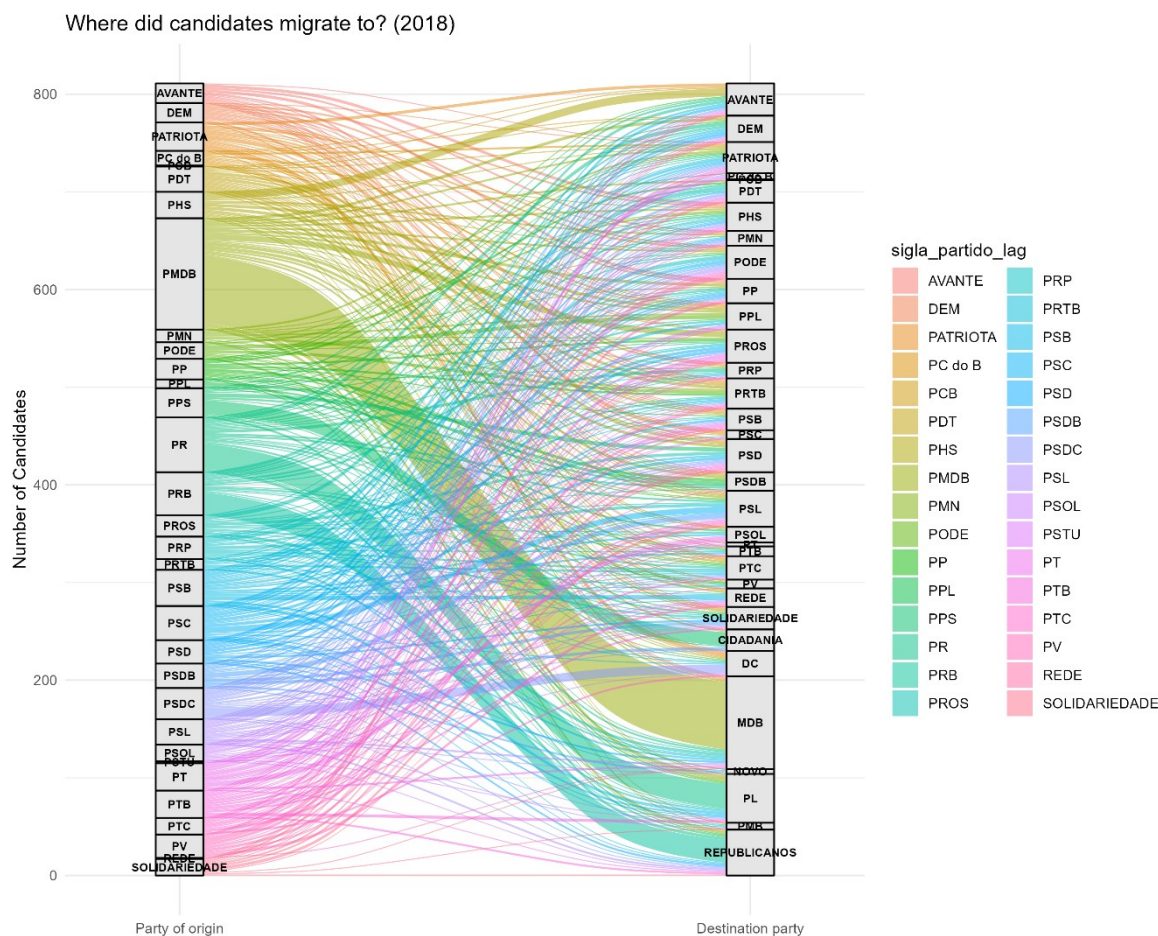
Source: Created by the authors.

PARTISAN ORIGINS

Where did PSL candidates in 2018 and PL candidates in 2022 come from? In Figure 2, we present a Sankey diagram to evaluate the flow of party switches between 2014 and 2018. The thicker the lines, the larger the migration flow between the two elections.

In 2018, the largest flows do not represent actual party switches but rather the transfer of candidates to parties that changed their names (PMDB to MDB, PR to PL, and PRB to Republicanos). The PSL received candidates from 18 parties. Of the 42 PSL candidates who had competed in the previous general election (2014), the majority came from small center-to-right parties, with the exception of the PSDB. The main "supplier" parties were the PSC, with 6 names (14.3%), and the PSDB, with 5 (11.9%), followed by the PRP, PTC, and Solidariedade, each with 3 candidates (7.1%). In smaller numbers, migration also came from the PMDB, PR, and PHS, each contributing 2 names (4.8%).

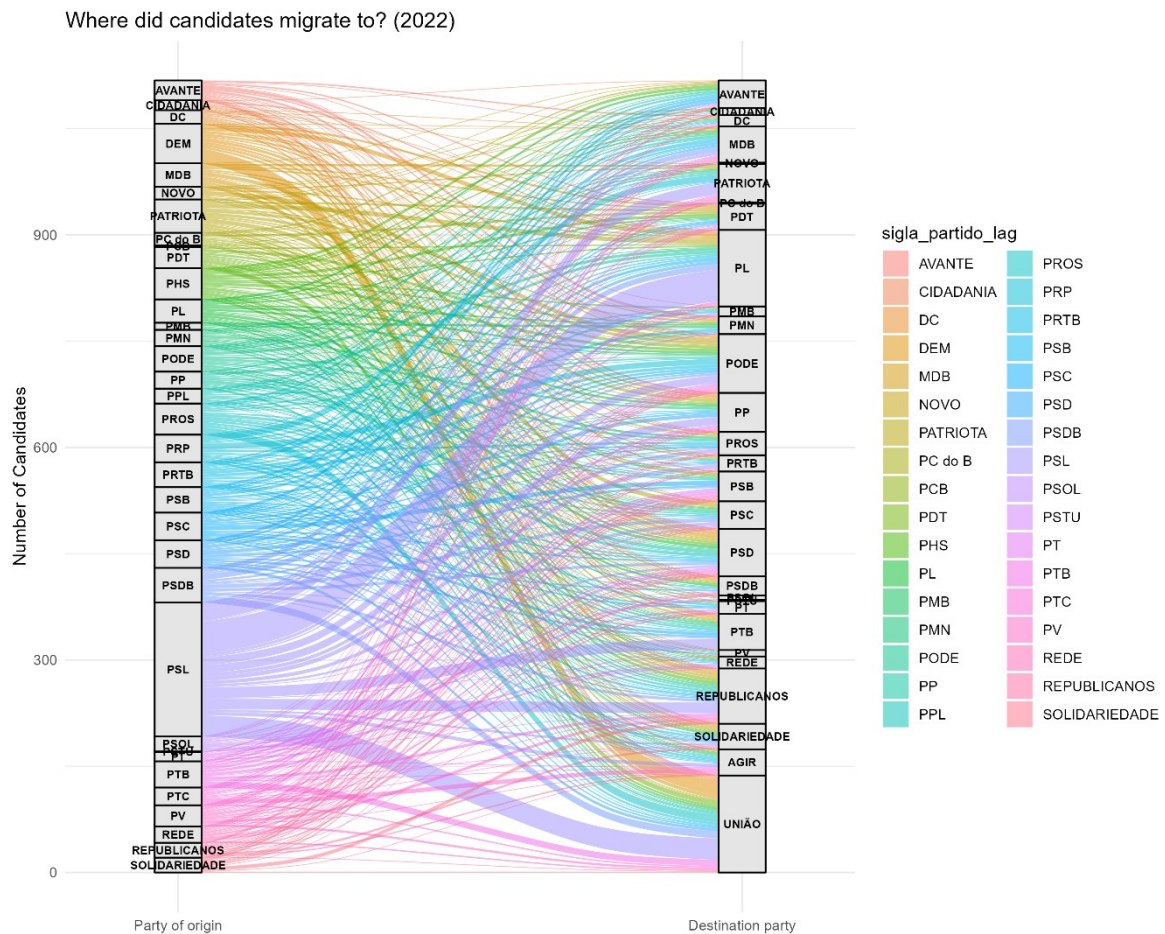
We also calculated the observed values, expected values, and standardized residuals of party flows using a chi-square test. The PSC, PSDB, PTC, and Solidariedade sent more candidates to the PSL than expected (standardized residuals of 3.64, 3.75, 2.61, and 2.61,² respectively).

Figure 2 – Sankey diagram (2018) – Party migration flows

Source: Created by the authors.

In 2022, the largest migration flows occur among right-wing parties, particularly as a result of the merger of the PSL and the DEM to form União Brasil. Bolsonaro's departure from the PSL in the first year of his presidency (2019),³ and his subsequent affiliation with the PL (2021),⁴ strongly shaped the flow between the two parties.

In 2022, the PL fielded a list of 475 candidates, 142 of whom had prior electoral experience (having competed in 2018), with 33 already belonging to the PL. The migration pattern is dominated by candidates from right-wing and center-right parties. The PSL was by far the largest "supplier" to the PL, contributing 45 candidates (9.5% of the full list and 31.7% of all migrants) – a figure far above what would be expected statistically (standardized residual of 7.22). Next are the PSDB, with 8 names (1.7% of the total list; 5.6% of migrants), and DEM and Patriota, with 6 names each (1.3% of the total; 4.2% of migrants). The PP follows with 4 names (0.8% of the total; 2.8% of migrants).

Figure 3 – Sankey diagram (2022) – Party migration flows

Source: Created by the authors.

Between 2018 and 2022, the profile of the origins of Bolsonaro's party candidates changed substantially. In 2018, migrants to the PSL were few (most of the list consisted of newcomers), and those who did switch came from small right-wing parties (with the exception of the PSDB). In 2022, the PL list included numerous electorally experienced candidates – many of them incumbents – with migration coming primarily from the PSL and from more established right-wing parties such as the DEM and PP. The PSDB continued to supply candidates to the Bolsonarist camp.

In the following section, we propose a typology of party switches to assess the extent to which the strategic decisions of far-right candidates proved successful.

A TYPOLOGY OF PARTY SWITCHES: THE 2022 CONTEXT

As the novelty index and migration flow data indicate, Bolsonaro's PSL in 2018 was a party with many newcomers – most likely elected on the strength of the presidential candidate's charisma (Vasquez *et al.*, 2024) – whereas the PL in 2022 already fielded politicians with electoral experience. In terms of migration flows, the PL in 2022 became the destination of numerous PSL candidates and elected deputies. Following Bolsonaro's departure from the party, those who had run under the PSL banner and were competing again in 2022 faced a set of options: they could follow Bolsonaro (remaining loyal), or they could break with him – either by staying in the PSL (which had merged with the DEM to form União Brasil) or by joining another party.

In the following sections, we examine how these movements unfolded and what their electoral outcomes were. We propose a typology (Box 1) based on candidates' party of origin and destination, focusing exclusively on PL candidacies for federal deputy in 2022 and on PSL candidates from 2018 at their respective 2022 destinations. From this origin-destination mapping, we identify five main types. "Loyalists" are those who remained within the Bolsonarist camp, migrating directly from the PSL to the PL in 2022 and maintaining political and ideological ties with Bolsonaro (e.g., Carla Zambelli-SP, Bia Kicis-DF). "Migrants," by contrast, left the PSL after 2018 and affiliated with other parties in 2022, breaking with their group of origin (e.g., Alexandre Frota-SP, Joice Hasselmann-SP). "Newcomers/outsideers" are new candidates who had not competed in 2018 and entered the PL in 2022 (e.g., Alexandre Ramagem-RJ).⁵ The "Traditional PL" type comprises those who already belonged to the PL in 2018 and remained there in 2022, representing the party's traditional base (e.g., Antônio Carlos Rodrigues-SP). Finally, "opportunists" are candidates who came from other party labels and affiliated with the PL in 2022, seeking to capitalize on the electoral prestige associated with Bolsonaro (Brandão, 2022) (e.g., Marcelo Ramos Rodrigues-AM, formerly of the PSB). In the sample, we identify 45 loyalists (8%), 334 newcomers/outsideers (59%), 144 migrants (26%), 33 traditional PL members (6%), and 63 opportunists (11%).

Box 1 – Typology of party switches (PSL × PL)

Origin (2018) / Destination (2022)	PL	Another party
PSL	"Loyalists" (45)	"Migrants" (144)
Did not compete	"Newcomers" (334)	
PL	"Traditional PL" (33)	
Another party	"Opportunists" (63)	

Source: Created by the authors.

THE DECISION TO REMAIN LOYAL

As discussed in the literature review, there are many factors explaining why candidates and officeholders change party labels. There is, however, broad consensus that switching or staying are associated with the prospect of electoral gains (Samuels, 2003; Desposato, 2006). Here we focus exclusively on PSL candidates from 2018 who ran in 2022, either with the PL (loyalists) or with another party (migrants) – a total of 181 cases.

Model 1 presents a binary logistic regression in which the dependent variable indicates whether a 2018 PSL candidate remained loyal to the Bolsonarist camp in 2022 (i.e., ran with the PL) or migrated to another party. The aim is to test the hypothesis that prior electoral success increases the probability of party loyalty, on the premise that elected candidates tend to value their ties to the party label and political network that delivered their victory. In addition to the main variable – having been elected in 2018 – the model includes vote share and campaign revenues in the previous election as explanatory variables.

The results indicate that electoral success in 2018 significantly increases the probability that a candidate will remain in the same political camp in 2022. The estimated effect ($\beta = 1.49$; $p < 0.05$) means that, holding other variables constant, candidates elected in 2018 are four times more likely to remain loyal than those who were not elected ($\exp(1.15) = 4.43$), reinforcing the hypothesis that prior electoral

success is a strong predictor of continuity within the Bolsonaroist camp. Vote share and campaign revenues, by contrast, did not yield statistically significant effects, suggesting that electoral performance and resource volume, taken in isolation, do not explain continued membership in the Bolsonaroist group.

In Model 2, we include a variable measuring candidate experience: whether the candidate was experienced in 2018, that is, whether they had competed in the 2014 election. The underlying idea is that candidates elected in 2018 without prior experience "owed" greater loyalty to Bolsonaro compared with those who had experience in previous elections. The interaction term runs in the expected direction – candidates with prior political experience who were elected showed a somewhat lower probability of following Bolsonaro from the PSL to the PL (approximately –9%) – however, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, as the relationship is not statistically significant.

Table 1 – Probability of remaining loyal

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
	<i>Logit (loyal)</i>	<i>Logit (loyal)</i>
(Intercept)	-1.74*** (0.26) [OR = 0.18]	-1.74*** (0.28) [OR = 0.18]
Elected (t-1)	1.49*** (0.39) [OR = 4.43]	1.50*** (0.42) [OR = 4.49]
Competed in 2014 (via 2018)		0.04 (0.82) [OR = 1.04]
Vote share % (t-1)	0.04 (0.08) [OR = 1.04]	0.04 (0.08) [OR = 1.04]
Total campaign revenues (t-1)	-2.45 (2.76) [OR = 0.09]	-2.46 (2.77) [OR = 0.09]
Elected (t-1) × Competed in 2014		-0.09 (1.06) [OR = 0.91]
AIC	187.88	191.87
BIC	200.67	211.06
Log Likelihood	-89.94	-89.94
Deviance	179.88	179.87
Num. obs.	181	181

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

Source: Created by the authors.

GAINS AND LOSSES: WHAT PAID OFF?

In this final section of the results, we test the relationship between the different types of party movement – presented above – and candidates' electoral performance and success. We draw on the typology constructed from the origin and destination of candidates between 2018 and 2022, which distinguishes loyalists, migrants, newcomers/outsidere, traditional PL members, and opportunists. To this end, we expand the analytical dataset to include not only candidates who competed in 2018 and returned in 2022, but also those who had not participated in the previous election and ran for the PL as first-time federal deputy candidates. The dataset comprises 614 cases when newcomers who debuted with the PL in 2022 are included, and 284 cases when only those who competed in both elections are considered.

In Models 3 and 4, we test the relationship between the migration typology and electoral performance, expressed as the continuous variable of the candidate's vote share, using OLS (ordinary least squares) estimation. In Models 5 and 6, we test the relationship between the migration typology and electoral success (a binary variable) using logistic regression. In all models, the reference category is the migrant – the candidate who broke with Bolsonaro between the two elections, leaving the PSL for a party other than the PL. We include controls typically associated with electoral performance and success: sex, race/color, education level, age, and campaign revenues (weighted by the size of the district electorate). Models 4 and 6 also include the variable "elected (t-1)," indicating whether the candidate was an incumbent. As a result, the newcomers/outsidere category is excluded from these models, as newcomers did not compete in 2018.

The results confirm that the migration typology is strongly associated with electoral performance and success in 2022. Compared with migrants, loyalists, opportunists, and traditional PL members all exhibited significantly superior electoral performance, both in vote share and in the probability of winning a seat. Loyalists, who followed Bolsonaro by migrating directly from the PSL to the PL, obtained higher average vote shares – 0.79 percentage points (pp) in Model 3 and 0.59 pp in Model 4 – and odds of victory more than six times greater than migrants, suggesting that maintaining ties with the Bolsonarist camp was politically rewarding. Similarly, opportunists who joined the PL from other party labels also benefited from Bolsonaro's electoral capital, with odds of success more than twenty times greater than migrants.

Candidates from the traditional PL base – those who remained with the party across both elections – showed the best overall performance, reflecting the institutional and organizational advantage of belonging to the party after Bolsonaro's entry. Migrants, by contrast, constitute the group with the worst performance, reinforcing the hypothesis that distancing oneself from the Bolsonarist camp carried significant electoral costs. These results indicate that, alongside prior experience and individual political capital, partisan trajectory and alignment with the Bolsonarist core were decisive for electoral success – while the cost of leaving that camp was electorally high. The case of Joice Hasselmann is illustrative: elected in 2018 on the PSL ticket with one of the highest vote totals in the history of the Chamber (over one million votes), she received only 13,000 votes in 2022 running for the PSDB and was not reelected (Cavicchioli, 2022).

Table 2 – Models of the relationship between electoral performance and party switching (2022 election)

Variable	Model 3 (OLS)	Model 4 (OLS)	Model 5 (Logit)	Model 6 (Logit)
	% Votes	% Votes	Elected (1) / Not elected (0)	Elected (1) / Not elected (0)
(Intercept)	0.65* (0.28)	0.25 (0.41)	-3.09*** (0.79) [OR=0.05]	-6.49*** (1.45) [OR=0.00]
Group: Traditional PL	1.05*** (0.24)	0.72** (0.25)	3.31*** (0.56) [OR=27.50]	3.18*** (0.69) [OR=24.13]
Group: Loyalists	0.79*** (0.21)	0.59** (0.22)	2.12*** (0.51) [OR=8.36]	1.84** (0.61) [OR=6.32]
Group: Newcomers	0.26* (0.13)	–	0.96* (0.43) [OR=2.60]	–
Group: Opportunists	0.80*** (0.19)	0.71*** (0.19)	2.38*** (0.47) [OR=10.80]	3.15*** (0.62) [OR=23.23]
Male	0.25* (0.11)	-0.12 (0.19)	1.12*** (0.33) [OR=3.07]	0.67 (0.56) [OR=1.95]
White	0.13 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.16)	0.90** (0.28) [OR=2.47]	1.30** (0.50) [OR=3.67]
University education	0.15 (0.11)	0.17 (0.17)	0.38 (0.30) [OR=1.46]	0.66 (0.59) [OR=1.93]
Age	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01) [OR=0.96]	-0.01 (0.02) [OR=0.99]
Total revenues (per voter)	1.30*** (0.10)	0.99*** (0.12)	1.53*** (0.29) [OR=4.60]	1.16** (0.43) [OR=3.21]
Elected (t-1)	–	0.90*** (0.17)	–	3.30*** (0.49) [OR=27.14]

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

Source: Created by the authors.

DISCUSSION

This article has analyzed the dynamics of party switching associated with the rise of the far right in Brazil, focusing on the trajectories of parliamentarians who affiliated with Jair Bolsonaro's parties in two consecutive legislatures – the PSL in 2018 and the PL in 2022. Our findings confirm that Bolsonarism was not merely an electoral or

discursive phenomenon, but produced structural effects on the Brazilian party system, reconfiguring parliamentarians' career strategies and reorganizing political forces to the right of the ideological spectrum.

The analysis of novelty indices in party lists revealed that the PSL in 2018 constituted an atypical case in contemporary Brazilian politics: a party with a high proportion of candidates lacking prior electoral experience (novelty index of 0.91) that, contrary to the usual negative correlation between novelty and electoral success, managed to elect 52 federal deputies, 75% of whom were newcomers. This exceptional result corroborates the findings of Vasquéz *et al.* (2024) on the determining role of Bolsonaro's presidential charisma in the 2018 electoral mobilization, which functioned as a "cognitive shortcut" (Kam; Zechmeister, 2013) that reduced the traditional importance of political experience and name familiarity (Abramowitz, 1975). However, the comparative analysis with 2022 demonstrates that this configuration was conjunctural rather than structural: the PL exhibited a lower novelty index (0.71) and a higher proportion of electorally experienced candidates, signaling a process of institutionalization within the Bolsonarist camp that is approaching conventional patterns of partisan recruitment.

The examination of migration flows between 2014–2018 and 2018–2022 sheds important light on the partisan origins of Bolsonarism in the legislature. In 2018, migrations to the PSL came primarily from small center-right parties (PSC, PTC, Solidariedade) and from the PSDB, reflecting a movement of politicians with limited individual electoral capital who were, as Tavits (2008) suggests, seeking to maximize their political survival prospects by associating with a rising presidential candidacy. This migration strategy reflects what Desposato (2006) identified as a structural feature of Brazilian politics: the instrumentalization of parties as *parties for rent*, mobilized pragmatically on the basis of cost-benefit electoral calculations.

In 2022, the migration profile changed substantially. The PL attracted candidates from more established parties of the traditional right (DEM, PP, and again the PSDB), but especially from the PSL itself – reflecting a trajectory of loyalty to the Bolsonarist camp. The data show that 31.7% of migrants to the PL came from the PSL, a flow statistically far above expectations (standardized residual of 7.22). This bloc migration partially contradicts the literature that emphasizes the exclusively opportunistic nature of party label changes in Brazil (Diniz, 2000; Freitas, 2008), suggesting that Bolsonarism, although not a programmatic party in the classical sense, established political and identitarian ties robust enough to retain a significant portion of its parliamentary base even after the organizational rupture between the PSL and the PL.

The typology constructed in this study – distinguishing loyalists, migrants, newcomers/outsideers, traditional PL members, and opportunists – allowed us to test empirically the electoral consequences of different migration strategies. The statistical model results provide evidence that remaining within the Bolsonarist camp was electorally rewarding, while departing from it carried significant costs. Loyalist deputies showed odds of reelection more than six times greater than migrants, and opportunists (who came from other party labels) had odds of winning more than twenty times greater than those same migrants. These findings are in dialogue with the literature on the electoral value of incumbency (Carson; Engstrom; Roberts, 2007) and on the effects of party brand recognition (Kam; Zechmeister, 2013), but add a specific dimension: in the Brazilian context of low party institutionalization, association with charismatic leaders and mass political movements can function as a functional substitute for the traditional advantages of incumbency and legislative experience.

The emblematic case of Joice Hasselmann illustrates dramatically the electoral costs of defection: elected in 2018 on the PSL ticket with over one million votes, she received only 13,000 votes in 2022 running for the PSDB and was not reelected. This trajectory suggests that her accumulated electoral capital was more tied to the association with Bolsonaro than to her individual characteristics as a parliamentarian – reinforcing the thesis that, in the Brazilian political system, the links between voters and representatives are mediated less by candidates' personal attributes or coherent party programs than by more diffuse and personalistic political identifications (Mainwaring, 1999; Carreirão, 2015).

The analysis of the decision to remain loyal revealed that candidates elected in 2018 were four times more likely to migrate from the PSL to the PL than candidates who were not elected, confirming that prior electoral success is an important predictor of loyalty. Interestingly, prior political experience showed no statistically significant effect on the probability of loyalty when controlled for elected status, suggesting that electoral gratitude toward Bolsonarism cut across the spectrum, regardless of political capital accumulated before 2018. This result partially challenges the expectation that veteran politicians with established electoral bases would have greater autonomy to abandon the Bolsonarist movement, indicating that the reputational and electoral cost of defection was perceived as high even by experienced parliamentarians.

The evidence presented contributes to the debate on the causes of party switching by demonstrating the interdependence of institutional, ideological, and strategic variables (Heller; Mereshon, 2009). In the case of Bolsonarism, contextual factors – the post-2013 crisis of representation, the consolidated anti-PT sentiment following the 2016 impeachment, the intensified polarization – created the window of opportunity for the electoral emergence of the far right. The individual strategies of political actors to associate with or distance themselves from the Bolsonarist camp were conditioned by these contextual factors, but not determined by them: parliamentarians in similar institutional positions made divergent choices with distinct electoral consequences. The ideological dimension, although secondary in comparison to pragmatic incentives, cannot be entirely dismissed: the cohesion of the loyalist group suggests the possibility that some form of programmatic or identitarian identification with the Bolsonarist project complements the strictly instrumental calculations of electoral maximization (Hix; Noury, 2018).

This study also engages critically with the literature on party institutionalization (Mainwaring, 1999) and *party linkages* (Katz; Mair, 1995; Lupu, 2014). The trajectory of legislative Bolsonarism between 2018 and 2022 suggests that, in contexts of low institutionalization such as Brazil's, political movements can function as substitutes for programmatic parties, establishing links between voters and representatives based not on coherent ideological platforms but on political antagonisms, cultural identities, and charismatic leadership. Bolsonarism constituted an alternative form of structuring political competition that dispensed with conventional party institutionalization, mobilizing instead evangelical networks, militarism, conservative moralism, and, above all, anti-PT sentiment (Kaysel; Códas; Cruz, 2016; Machado, 2019; Cesarino, 2020).

It is nonetheless necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this research. First, the analysis focused exclusively on the federal level and does not address how the party switching dynamics associated with Bolsonarism manifested themselves in state and municipal legislatures – contexts in which regional political logics may produce distinct patterns (Faganello; Fernandes, 2018). Second, the temporal scope restricted to the 2018 and 2022 elections precludes definitive conclusions about the long-term

sustainability of Bolsonaroism as a structuring force within the Brazilian party system. Future studies will be able to assess whether the political loyalties forged during this period persist following Bolsonaro's removal from electoral competition – he was rendered ineligible until 2030 following a court ruling in which he was convicted of abuse of political power and improper use of communications media, and is now serving a prison sentence after being convicted of the crimes of attempting to violently abolish the democratic rule of law, attempted coup d'état, participation in an armed criminal organization, aggravated destruction of property, and damage to listed heritage property. Third, although we controlled for important variables such as campaign financing, sex, education, and political experience, other potentially relevant factors – such as ties to evangelical denominations, insertion in military networks, or digital media performance – were not systematically incorporated into our statistical models.

In sum, the analysis of party switching associated with Bolsonaroism reveals that the rise of the far right in Brazil produced not merely discursive and electoral transformations, but substantively reconfigured the party system, creating new patterns of political recruitment, altering parliamentarians' strategic calculations, and establishing links between voters and representatives that transcend formal party organizations. The question raised by Przeworski (2019) – whether the rise of the radical right stems from the growing polarization of political opinion or from the loss of contact between traditional parties and their supporters – finds, in the Brazilian case, a nuanced answer: both processes operated simultaneously, with the crisis of representation of established parties creating the political space that Bolsonaroism occupied, mobilizing latent conservative identities and radicalizing anti-PT sentiment. The Brazilian party system, historically characterized by fragmentation, low institutionalization, and high mobility of politicians between party labels (Zucco; Power, 2021; Cheibub; Gandhi; Vreeland, 2022), was not immune to these transformations. On the contrary, its structural features facilitated the rapid reconfiguration of right-wing political forces, enabling Bolsonaroism to consolidate itself as a relevant pole of political-electoral competition by attracting experienced parliamentarians, mobilizing newcomers, and creating incentives for politicians to strategically calculate the advantages of remaining associated with this camp – or stepping away from it.

NOTES

¹ In order to capture the dimension of political experience in electoral competition, we considered all offices contested in general elections (state/district deputy, federal deputy, senator, governor, and president). This reflects the fact that many candidates run for state assemblies and subsequently seek a federal deputy seat, for example.

² Standardized residuals indicate how much the observed number of migrations between parties deviates from what would be expected in the absence of any association between party of origin and party of destination. When this value exceeds 1.96 or falls below -1.96, the deviation is considered statistically significant at the 5% level, suggesting that the observed migration did not occur by chance.

³ Bolsonaro joined the PSL on March 7, 2018, and left the party on November 19, 2019 (Mazui; Rodrigues, 2019).

⁴ Bolsonaro joined the PL only on November 30, 2021 (Gomes; Borges; Oliveira, 2021).

⁵ See: <https://graficos.poder360.com.br/9nab3/1/>, accessed October 25, 2025.

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