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**ECHOES OF THE TEA
PARTY MOVEMENT:
PROGRAMMATIC
CONVERGENCE AND
DIVERGENCE WITHIN
THE NEW LATIN
AMERICAN RIGHT**

*ECOS DO MOVIMENTO TEA PARTY:
CONVERGÊNCIAS E DIVERGÊNCIAS
PROGRAMÁTICAS NA NOVA DIREITA
LATINO-AMERICANA*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the rise of right-wing populism in Latin America, challenging the common assumption that it is largely a regional variant of the European Populist Radical Right (PRR). Although figures like Jair Bolsonaro, José Antonio Kast, Javier Milei, and Nayib Bukele exhibit populist tendencies and culture-war rhetoric, the article argues that their programmatic differences are significant and create tensions within the right-wing spectrum. Existing approaches based on the PRR category risk obscuring these internal fault lines. To provide a more nuanced framework, the article draws on the history of the United States conservative movement, which has long encompassed diverse strands, including classical conservatism, right-wing populism, evangelical Christianity, and libertarianism. These strands have sometimes converged, but have rarely achieved sustained unity. The analysis shows that Latin America's right similarly comprises analogous ideological currents, as well as the regional peculiarity of *mano-dura* populism. Based on an analysis of programmatic texts, current cases of right-wing populism in Latin America are analyzed. A preliminary overview of programmatic profiles shows significant divergences among these cases, which are grouped into three programmatic clusters.

Keywords: Right-Wing Populism; New Latin American Right; Right-Wing Ideology; Mano-Dura Populism; Populist Radical Right (PRR).

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a ascensão do populismo de direita na América Latina, contestando a ideia comum de que se trata apenas de uma variante regional da Direita Populista Radical Europeia (PRR). Embora figuras como Jair Bolsonaro, José Antonio Kast, Javier Milei e Nayib Bukele apresentem tendências populistas e uma retórica de guerra cultural, o artigo defende que as suas diferenças programáticas são significativas e criam tensões no seio do espectro de direita. As abordagens existentes baseadas na categoria PRR correm o risco de obscurecer estas linhas de fratura internas. Para fornecer um quadro mais matizado, o artigo recorre à história do movimento conservador dos Estados Unidos, que há muito engloba diversas vertentes, incluindo o conservadorismo clássico, o populismo de direita, o cristianismo evangélico e o libertarianismo. Estas vertentes por vezes convergiram, mas raramente alcançaram uma unidade sustentada. A análise mostra que a direita latino-americana combina, de forma semelhante, correntes ideológicas parecidas, bem como a peculiaridade regional do populismo de “mano dura”. Com base numa análise de textos programáticos, são analisados os casos atuais de populismo de direita na América Latina. Uma análise preliminar dos perfis programáticos revela divergências significativas entre esses casos, que são agrupados em três categorias programáticas.

Palavras-chave: *Populismo de Direita; Nova Direita Latinoamericana; Ideologia de Direita; Populismo de Mano Dura; Direita Radical Populista (PRR).*

INTRODUCTION

Populism is not a new phenomenon in Latin America—quite the contrary. Since the mid-20th century, it has resurfaced in waves; for instance, around the turn of the millennium, with the so-called *Pink Tide*: a wave of moderate- to radical-left governments that lasted until the mid-2010s. Since then, the political wind in the region has shifted once again, with the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction (Reid, 2025; Monestier; Vommaro, 2021).

The election of right-wing populist outsider Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 marked the beginning of a series of remarkable successes for candidates on the far right who, to varying degrees, employ populist rhetoric and style. Notable examples include José Antonio Kast, the new Chilean president, inaugurated in March 2026, and Javier Milei, the Argentine president, elected in 2023. Another prominent case is Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, re-elected in spring 2024, albeit in violation of the re-election ban.

A range of other figures stand for this trend. In Chile, not only Kast but also other right-wing candidates, notably the radical libertarian Johannes Kaiser, scored substantial vote shares in the 2025 elections. In Colombia, far-right candidate Abelardo de la Espriella was narrowly elected president in a polarized runoff election. In Peru, the religious fundamentalist Rafael López Aliaga came third in the first rounds of the 2021 and 2026 presidential elections, narrowly missing the runoff both times. In Paraguay, the populist candidate Paraguayo (“Payo”) Cubas won a significant vote share on an anti-corruption, law-and-order platform in 2023. Taken together, these examples suggest a broader right-wing wave in Latin America (Borges; Zanotti, 2024; Pereira, 2023; Torrico, 2021). This has sparked a debate about how to typologize the representatives of this “new Latin American right,” as Monestier and Vommaro (2021) call them.

To date, Cas Mudde's (2007) description of the *Populist Radical Right* (PRR) has served as the main reference point for classifying current manifestations of right-wing populism in Latin America.¹ Jair Bolsonaro, in particular, is widely seen as evidence that the PRR has found its way to the region (Kestler, 2023; Rovira Kaltwasser; Zanotti, 2023; Zanotti; Rama; Tanscheit, 2023). Díaz, Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti (2023) identify José Antonio Kast as another representative of the PRR, though they note certain differences vis-à-vis its European counterparts. Borges and Zanotti (2024) discuss the concept more broadly in the Latin American context. Based on an expert survey, they identify regional specificities of right-wing populism, in particular the fact that nativism, an eminent feature of the European PRR, is largely absent in the region. As a solution, they propose a modified, more parsimonious definition that relies solely on illiberalism and ideological radicalism.

However, this definitional generality comes at a cost. It obscures important differences and leaves open the question of how to capture variation within Latin American right-wing populism. This question becomes more pressing when the analysis extends beyond clear-cut cases like Bolsonaro to others such as Javier Milei, Nayib Bukele, and Payo Cubas. How can Milei's anti-statist libertarianism be reconciled with Kast's social conservatism or Bukele's *mano-dura* authoritarianism? How meaningful is it to put these diverse phenomena into a single category?

While previous approaches have highlighted the commonalities within the new Latin American right, this article will focus on programmatic differences. It argues that these differences are

¹ The core features of the PRR, according to Mudde, are nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Nativism refers to "[...] an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007, p. 19).

mostly gradual but significant in some cases, and that they touch on core programmatic convictions, generating tensions and potential fault lines within the right-wing spectrum. To identify pertinent dimensions of programmatic identity and difference, the article turns to the United States, where the political right – the Republican Party as well as the conservative movement – has a long tradition of internal divisions, punctuated by episodes of reapproachment, most recently in the Tea Party movement of 2009–2010. Episodes like this convey the impression of a homogeneous movement, while in fact the political right is internally heterogeneous, comprising different currents: classical conservatism, libertarianism, religious fundamentalism, and radical populism rooted in Southern segregationism.² This latter current, which eventually developed into the so-called paleoconservatism, is closest to the present-day PRR, but it is only one among several expressions of right-wing ideology.³

In the following section, it will be demonstrated that also within the Latin American far right there are significant ideological differences that limit the applicability of the PRR model. To capture these differences, an analytical framework based on five programmatic dimensions is developed. Section three applies this framework to analyze representatives of the far right in Latin America to identify programmatic profiles and ideological differences. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications following from these observations.

² There are many studies and historical accounts of the conservative movement in the United States and its various strands. Essential contributions include Kabaservice (2012), Horwitz (2013), and Dionne (2016).

³ The term “paleoconservatism” originated in the United States in the 1980s and refers to a movement of traditionalist conservatives who opposed globalization, “big government,” and interventionist foreign policy – in contrast to neoconservatives (Kiely, 2022).

FACETS OF THE NEW LATIN AMERICAN RIGHT BEYOND THE PRR

One distinguishing feature of the new Latin American right is its higher degree of radicalism compared to earlier right-wing actors, which has led some observers to describe them as extreme right or *ultraderecha* (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024; Sanahuja; López Burian, 2020). These terms point to shared characteristics such as radicalism and authoritarianism that are typically associated with the populist radical right (PRR) (Zanotti; Roberts, 2021).⁴ However, this categorization has recently been questioned, both because of significant differences between its European and Latin American manifestations and because of variation within the Latin American right itself (Borges; Zanotti, 2024; Kestler, 2022). These differences concern not only the degree of radicalism, but also ideological profiles – an aspect that is rarely considered because populism is usually regarded as ideologically diffuse or “thin-centered” (Mudde, 2004). Right-wing populists in Latin America in particular have been described as “post-ideological” (Giordano, 2014). Yet, the recent wave of right-wing populism is marked by a stronger ideological agenda, suggesting that a closer examination of ideological profiles is warranted.

In fact, the attribute “right-wing” is anything but uniform. The right-wing spectrum includes market liberals as well as statist, along with actors holding conservative and religious views on social policy. In a two-dimensional cleavage model, right-wing positions may align more closely with either the economic or the

⁴Terms like “radical right,” “extreme right,” or “ultra-right” are often used synonymously, which obscures conceptual and empirical differences. For a conceptual discussion clarifying the boundaries between conservatism, right-wing radicalism, and right-wing extremism, see Kestler (2022). In this article, I will use the terms “right-wing populism” and “far right” as umbrella categories encompassing varying ideological strands across regions, thus also including the “new Latin American right.” The term radical right populism refers to Mudde’s narrower concept as defined in footnote 1.

cultural axis (Bornschiefer, 2010). The latter applies to most right-wing actors in Latin America, but to different degrees and with significant differences from the European far right. While cultural issues feature prominently in many cases, nativism plays a minor role. Instead, religious or traditional conceptions of society come to the fore, resting on the belief that human beings are anchored in a preexisting natural or divine order. Kast, Bolsonaro, and López Aliaga are primary examples of such an ideology

In other cases, however, culturally right-wing positions are less prominent. For instance, Nayib Bukele's law-and-order agenda is not grounded in an ideology of natural order. Paraguayo Cubas likewise shows few indications of such an ideological orientation. Javier Milei occasionally engages in historical revisionism, but cultural issues are clearly subordinated to radical libertarianism, placing him closer to the economic cleavage axis.

To capture these differences, it is useful to turn to the United States, where the conservative movement exhibits striking similarities to the Latin American right (more so than the European far right) and thus provides a useful analytical framework for distinguishing different strands of right-wing ideology. Conservatism in the United States has always been characterized by divergent factions that have only occasionally united for collective action, most recently during the Tea Party movement of 2009–2010 – an influential but short-lived episode of conservative mobilization (Skocpol; Williamson, 2012; Van Dyke; Meyer, 2014). The currents of modern U.S. conservatism developed from the 1940s onward, when a conservative counter-movement to the New Deal formed around William F. Buckley Junior and the magazine *National Review*. The ideological roots of this movement lay in classical conservatism inspired by Edmund Burke and Friedrich August von Hayek. Anti-communism was another defining feature of this current, which reached a preliminary peak with Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential candidacy (Kabaservice, 2012).

Alongside classical conservatism, the 1960s also saw the emergence of an authoritarian and racist current opposed to the civil rights movement (Kazin, 2017), most prominently represented by George Wallace's 1968 presidential campaign. This current bears the strongest similarities to today's PRR and to Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement. During the 1980s, it evolved into what became known as "paleoconservatism," characterized by isolationism and cultural traditionalism (Kiely, 2022). Its leading figure, Pat Buchanan, became a prominent cultural warrior.

A third strand developed in the 1970s as evangelical communities became politicized, partly in response to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision and mobilized by influential televangelists and activists. The evangelical current emphasizes moral issues summarized as "family values," which had played no significant role in classic Goldwater conservatism. Finally, a libertarian current emerged independently in the 1970s with the formation of the *Libertarian Party*, while maintaining loose connections to the broader conservative movement (Doherty, 2007). Programmatically, libertarianism drew on the Austrian School of Economics and scholars like Robert Nozick and Murray Rothbard, who advocated radical skepticism toward State authority.

These currents can be found in a similar form in Latin America, although there the distinctions between them are more difficult to draw and their longer-term lines of continuity are less clear. Moreover, some adaptations are required to fit the Latin American context and intellectual traditions. One specific feature of the region is the variant of *mano-dura* populism, which represents a distinct current within the Latin American right. *Mano-dura* populism is characterized by a focus on security, the militarization of politics, and disregard for the rule of law (Meléndez-Sánchez; Vergara, 2024; Rosen; Cutrona, 2023). Another specification concerns the

paleoconservative current, because in Latin America the isolationist element is largely missing due to the region's greater international dependence. Moreover, as seen above, racist (or nativist) tendencies are weaker, although the issue of migration has gained importance in Latin America, and racist overtones are not entirely absent from the right-wing populist discourse. A clear commonality is the typical culture war issues, including gender relations and the preoccupation with sexual identities.

In addition, conservatism in the region is shaped by the region's history of Catholicism and corporatism (Pinto, 2019). In Chile, for example, an influential conservative current is the so-called *gremialismo*, which emerged in the 1960s and emphasized the importance of intermediary social bodies – *gremios* or guilds – which should mediate between the State and the individual (Sznajder, 2019). Chile's 1980 constitution was based on this ideology. Its partisan representation was the UDI (*Unión Demócrata Independiente*), to which Kast belonged until 2016 (Bustamante Olguín, 2025). Together with the Catholic heritage, *gremialismo* and other corporatist, nationalist, and fascist ideologies, such as Plínio Salgado's *integralismo* in Brazil, left a strong collectivist imprint on Latin American conservatism. Moreover, the State plays a more prominent role in Latin American conservative thought than in traditional U.S. conservatism. What is common to all conservative traditions in the North and the South is their proclaimed anticommunism, which generally targets left-wing ideologies associated with universalist and egalitarian principles.

Regarding the religious current, there are also differences from the U.S., given the Catholic majority in Latin America, though there has been convergence in recent decades as evangelical churches have expanded rapidly in the region. While there are programmatic intersections between these denominations, for example, regarding the question of abortion, there are also divergences in their political

orientation. Evangelicals tend to place stronger emphasis on cultural conflict, moral traditionalism, and individualistic economic ideas, all of which are fertile ground for right-wing populist politics (Boas, 2023). In contrast, Catholics are more politically heterogeneous and institutionally embedded. In addition, progressive currents within the Catholic Church make it more difficult for right-wing populists to mobilize the Catholic electorate. Typically, they focus on morally charged issues and points of agreement, such as abortion, which find resonance among all Christian voters.

Additional regional specificities concern the libertarian current. While strongly influenced by U.S. libertarians such as Murray Rothbard, the Latin American exponents of this current focus on somewhat different topics, such as inflation and corruption.

Taken together, these developments suggest the existence of five distinct currents or ideological dimensions within the contemporary right in Latin America. These currents rarely appear in their pure form, but rather as hybrids with varying proportions of programmatic ingredients. Despite these overlaps, however, there are significant ideological differences and even incompatibilities. It is therefore advisable to consider these currents separately and to categorize the Latin American right accordingly. To do so, typical programmatic features of the five currents are derived from prototypical cases and from their historical roots. Although distinctions are not always clear-cut, the systematization presented in Table 1 can serve as an analytical framework for a preliminary categorization of right-wing actors in Latin America by their predominant ideological orientations.

**Table 1: Currents of right-wing populism in Latin America
and programmatic indicators**

Libertarianism
Emphasis on the issue of inflation
Attacks on bureaucracy and the state
Emphasis on the issue of corruption
Religious fundamentalism
Use of religious terms (such as God, Jesus, providence, Bible, virgin)
Emphasis on the topic of abortion
Narratives about Christian renewal and the divine mission of a leader
Classical conservatism
Attacks on the left (“communists”)
Emphasis on the family and small communities
Corporatist elements: organic view of society, nationalism
Paleoconservatism
Emphasis on issues of sexual identity
Emphasis on minority issues, especially sexual minorities
Emphasis on the issue of immigration
Mano-dura populism
Emphasis on the issue of security
Disregard for the rule of law
Focus on the security forces—police and army—as a means of establishing order

Source: The author.

**PROGRAMMATIC PROFILES OF THE NEW LATIN
AMERICAN RIGHT**

To assess the programmatic profiles of far-right actors in Latin America, a select sample of speeches, programmatic documents, and interviews is used for each case. The sources, listed in the Appendix,

are limited in scope but are intended to provide a homogeneous, transparent, and sufficiently representative sample.⁵ The cases of interest are Jair Bolsonaro, José Antonio Kast, Johannes Kaiser, Javier Milei, Payo Cubas, Rafael López Aliaga, Nayib Bukele, and Abelardo de la Espriella. The analysis is limited to programmatic statements because concrete policies cannot be assessed – half of these actors have not yet been in a government position. The texts are analyzed holistically, similarly to Hawkins' (2009) approach. However, while Hawkins assesses only the degree of populism, here five programmatic dimensions are scrutinized, which renders the analysis more demanding. Instead of using a scale for each dimension, the five dimensions are arranged hierarchically by identifying the first, second, and third most important dimensions in each case, based on the frequency of the corresponding topics and programmatic positions.⁶ The assessment of the eight cases yielded the following results.

JAIR BOLSONARO

A prime example of radical right populism is Jair Bolsonaro, who is not only the most radical cultural warrior among current right-wing populists but also the one who most closely resembles the PRR in Europe and the United States (Kestler, 2023). His election in 2018 can be seen as a cultural backlash against social change and progressive reforms under the PT governments of 2003–2016 (Luna, 2023; Rocha; Solano; Medeiros, 2021). His voters came from all sections of the population but predominantly from the more

⁵ In the case of audio-visual sources, automatic transcripts were created.

⁶ Each source was assigned to one or more of the five dimensions. Where possible and/or applicable, a rank order was established based on the frequency of programmatic indicators. Finally, an overall rank order of the three most notable ideological dimensions was produced for each case.

affluent southeastern region of the country. Conservative values did play a role, but another strong motivation was the long-standing rejection of the PT among considerable parts of the electorate (Amaral, 2020). Bolsonaro's election campaign directly built on this anti-PT sentiment, calling former president Lula da Silva the "most corrupt politician in history" (Rivarola, 2022, p. 202). The issue of corruption was, in this case, less indicative of libertarian positions than of a strong anti-left discourse. Another important element of his campaign was religion, as Bolsonaro sought to build strong ties with evangelical voters (Almeida, 2019).

This impression is corroborated by the assessment of Bolsonaro's programmatic profile, although, interestingly, paleoconservatism did not emerge as a dominant trait in the analyzed texts. Instead, classic conservatism ranks first, followed by religious fundamentalism and *mano-dura* populism. Bolsonaro's programmatic statements emphasized national identity, traditional family values, and broader cultural and moral concerns. His government program, *Pelo Bem do Brasil* (2023), identifies "Deus, pátria e família, vida e liberdade" as its core values. In addition, Bolsonaro stressed security, law and order, and citizens' right to carry firearms (see Appendix #1).

JOSÉ ANTONIO KAST

The case of José Antonio Kast looks similar at first sight. Kast's 2021 platform included traditional family values, opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, and a restrictive stance on migration. In a campaign speech, he emphasized family and social order in a "society where authority is restored, along with respect for that authority. This respect and love must first be lived out within the family – that family which some wish to ignore yet which remains

the fundamental core of society for us” (Appendix #6). Moreover, he maintained close ties to conservative Catholic organizations and promoted a strong religious agenda. In 2025, he shifted his focus to fiscal discipline and a reduction of State capacity, thus featuring a more economically liberal profile than Bolsonaro. Yet the analysis of sources from the recent campaign confirms that religion and social conservatism remain his programmatic priorities. Classical conservatism ranks first in his programmatic profile, as reflected in motifs such as family, home, fatherland, traditional values, and national identity. Religious fundamentalism ranks second, as Kast frequently uses religious vocabulary. Third is *mano dura* populism, as Kast places a strong emphasis on security, law enforcement, border protection, and tough measures against crime and immigration.

JOHANNES KAISER

Chain-saw libertarianism is not a priority in Kast’s program, which might be a reason for the rise of Johannes Kaiser, a well-known influencer and congressman who garnered 15.6% of the votes in the first round of presidential elections in 2025 (Martinez, 2025). Formerly a member of Kast’s *Partido Republicano*, Kaiser has emerged as Kast’s rival and founded his own party, the *Partido Nacional Libertario*, in 2004 (Burns, 2025). Kaiser took a much more radical stance in the 2025 campaign, not only on economic matters but also on social policy. “We are not conservative, we are reactionary. We are not statist, we are libertarian. We are not internationalist, we are sovereignist. We are not corporatist, we are market liberal,” he wrote on X (Gamboa, 2024).

An analysis of his program and statements during the 2025 campaign yields the following ranking: libertarianism ranks first,

given Kaiser's strong emphasis on State reduction, inflation control, and the fight against corruption. For example, he proposed reducing the number of ministries from 25 to 9 and cutting 200,000 public jobs ("gradually and humane") (Appendix #10). In second place comes classical conservatism, as Kaiser strongly attacked the left ("Marxists") as enemies of institutions, warned of a "communist subversion" and a threat to democracy: "If the Communist Party wins [...], the Constitution is worthless" (Appendix #13). He fashioned himself as a defender of the Western and Christian inheritance and advocated family priorities such as benefits for mothers and parental control over education. The third rank is occupied by *mano-dura* populism, as Kaiser proposed strengthening the security forces and reinforcing border control. Religious motifs, by contrast, are rare or even absent in Kaiser's programmatic profile, which comes close to what Argentine historian Pablo Stefanoni (2021) refers to as "paleolibertarianism" – a combination of libertarian thought with conservative notions of a natural order beyond State interference. In this respect, for Kaiser to be dubbed "Chile's Milei" is quite fitting, as the Argentine president features a similar profile.

JAVIER MILEI

Javier Milei is currently the most prominent example of radical libertarianism. He not only announced a radical reduction in State size in his 2023 campaign but also put his program into action from the presidential office. Unlike the neoliberalism of the 1990s, Milei's brand of libertarianism (or anarcho-capitalism) stands for disruption in the sense of Silicon Valley libertarians such as Peter Thiel, emphasizing the replacement of State functions with markets, technology, and a voluntary order. Milei's economic policy follows the Austrian school, which rejects state intervention and entrusts

core processes such as price formation to the market. Politically, he draws inspiration from U.S. libertarian theorists, especially Murray Rothbard, who not only rejected the State but also advocated tactical “paleolibertarian” alliances between libertarians and elements of the conservative and nationalist right (Morresi, 2024).

Sources from the 2023 presidential campaign, as well as the 2025 campaign for parliamentary elections, unambiguously confirm Milei’s libertarian streak. Libertarianism clearly ranks first in his programmatic profile. In 2023, he announced to control inflation through dollarization, to liquidate the central bank, and to implement fiscal austerity (Appendix #14, #18). He spoke of a “useless State,” a legacy of State failure, and a corrupt system (Appendix #17, #18). His second programmatic priority is classical conservatism, as evidenced by his attacks on the left and his promise to restore the country to its former glory. His conservative leanings are also recognizable from references to moral or identity politics. The third rank is occupied by *mano-dura* populism because Milei advocated a policy of zero tolerance in matters of security and delinquency (Appendix #14), although less frequently and less radically than his Chilean counterpart, Johannes Kaiser, who otherwise shares the same rank order of programmatic dimensions.

PAYO CUBAS

A significantly different profile can be observed for Payo Cubas, a populist outsider who won 23.6% of the vote in Paraguay’s 2023 presidential election. With his party *Cruzada Nacional* (National Crusade), he campaigned primarily on a *mano-dura* and anti-establishment platform and presented himself as a defender of the Paraguayan nation-state, calling for tighter control of resources and

opposing participation in international organizations (Soler, 2025) – a stance reminiscent of Trump-style U.S. nationalism. An analysis of his positions in the 2023 campaign shows a strong focus on security, with *mano-dura* populism clearly dominating his agenda. He announced a state of exception to fight crime and drug trafficking and to use the Armed Forces to “clean up the country.” He demanded the death penalty for femicide and corrupt politicians and explicitly rejected legal restrictions in restoring order, thus featuring a strong authoritarian bent (Appendix #21, #23).

The second-ranking programmatic focus is libertarianism, as Cubas strongly emphasized the issue of corruption. He also showed an anti-statist orientation, attacking the bureaucracy and the “political caste” as the source of all evil, although this stance was less a reflection of libertarianism than of populist anti-institutionalism. In other respects, his economic positions, such as demands for State control over natural resources, differentiated him from Milei’s chainsaw libertarianism (Appendix #20). Finally, the third ranking dimension, classical conservatism, is even more weakly expressed in this case. Like other right-wing populists, Cubas attacked the left as traitors (“comunistas y vendepatrias”) and stressed “God, fatherland, and family,” but references to small communities or corporatist elements appear rarely in his statements.

RAFAEL LÓPEZ ALIAGA

While religion is almost absent in Cubas’ profile, it is quite visible in the case of Peru’s Rafael López Aliaga, a businessman long active in the right-wing *Solidaridad Nacional* party, renamed *Renovación Popular* in 2020. López Aliaga, whom the press called the “Peruvian Bolsonaro,” gained national prominence in 2020 and ran as a

presidential candidate in 2021 and 2026 (Gómez Vega, 2022). Both times, he came third in the first round, narrowly missing the runoff. His religious orientation became apparent from statements like this: “We have principles of solidarity, but they are rooted in Christ. Christ is the one who will lead us out of this crisis” (Hidalgo Bustamante, 2020). Classical conservatism and religious fundamentalism featured prominently in his electoral campaigns. His programmatic statements focused on issues of family and a natural order rooted in cultural values and national history. He defended a “right to life from conception to death” and viewed the family as a “natural union between man and woman” (Appendix #26). His 2021 campaign combined nationalist and fundamentalist religious positions with calls for a crackdown on corruption, crime, and street protests (Zárate; Budasoff, 2021). He also drew on the anti-communist rhetoric of classical conservatism. In matters of public security, he emphasized the fight against delinquency and announced that he would provide better equipment to security forces. He favored the death penalty for certain crimes and declared his intention to withdraw the country from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Appendix #27). These positions were reiterated in 2026, with security measures ranking at the top of his program (Appendix #25). Yet, while security was clearly a priority in 2026, the frequency of religious elements receded noticeably (Appendix #25). Thus, summarizing his programmatic profile, the classification as Peruvian Bolsonaro is confirmed, but, in light of the 2026 campaign, *mano-dura* populism ranks above religious fundamentalism.

NAYIB BUKELE

Another case to be assessed is Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, who is regarded as the prototype of *mano-dura* populism in the region and viewed as a model of successful crackdown on gang violence

by many right-wing actors. His rule is regarded as authoritarian, yet he nonetheless boasts strong public support, as evidenced by his 2024 re-election with nearly 85% of the vote, despite violating the constitutional re-election ban. His entire campaign revolved around the continuation and extension of the state of exception and the anti-gang program *Plan Control Territorial* (Appendix #29, 30). He took pride in mass incarceration and justified the use of the army and police as the central tool to restore order in the country. Security is presented as an absolute priority, to the detriment of constitutional limits, judicial independence, and international human-rights norms. Therefore, *mano-dura* populism is dominant in that case. In addition, there are references to national history and national sovereignty: “Words like independence, sovereignty, peace, and freedom are easy to say, but very difficult to achieve. After two centuries of paying lip service to them, it is time for us to put them into practice” (Appendix #28). Regarding economic matters, Bukele promised to reduce wasteful State spending and bureaucracy. However, he lacks Milei’s fierce anarcho-capitalist rhetoric. Thus, classical conservatism and libertarianism rank second and third, respectively, but are far less relevant and frequent than the *mano-dura* characteristics.

ABELARDO DE LA ESPRIELLA

The most recent case of right-wing populism in the region is the winner of the 2026 presidential election in Colombia, Abelardo de la Espriella, a flamboyant lawyer and businessman who promotes himself as “Colombian Bukele” (Larco Bravo, 2025). Indeed, *mano-dura* positions feature prominently in his program and his statements. Naming the Roman consul and dictator Lucius Quinctius

Cincinnatus as his role model, he stated to “save and reconstruct the country” and to govern with an “iron hand” (Appendix #33). The fight against drug trafficking and “narcoterrorismo” was named as the primary goal in his campaign (Appendix #32).

Yet, references to migration are rare, despite the large number of Venezuelan refugees located in Colombia. Religion is mentioned mostly in passing and to underscore his personal story of conversion, but is not used as an ideological tool. Instead, de la Espriella lambasts the left and conjures a supposed “communist threat” which he intends to avert. “When the radical left comes to power, it destroys the productive apparatus,” he asserted in an interview (Appendix #34). Another classical conservative motif can be found in references to an idyllic yet lost past: “Back in my day, even in Barranquilla, houses didn’t have bars on the windows. Nowadays, every house has them. I dream of returning to a time when the country was safe, and children could play outside” (Appendix #33). Additionally, de la Espriella advocates libertarian policies, such as reducing the number of ministries by half, and frequently addresses the issue of corruption (Appendices #33 and #34). Therefore, in his programmatic profile, *mano-dura* populism ranks first, followed by classical conservatism and libertarianism.

Table 2 summarizes the findings from the preceding analysis. From this overview, it becomes evident that there are significant overlaps within the new Latin American right, as well as divergent programmatic profiles. In particular, two noticeable patterns emerge from these results.

Table 2: Programmatic profiles of right-wing populists in Latin America

	Bolso-naro	Kast	Kaiser	Milei	Cubas	López Aliaga	Bukele	De la Espriella
1	Classical conserva-tism	Classical conserva-tism	Libertaria-nism	Libertaria-nism	Mano-dura populism	Classical conserva-tism	Mano-dura populism	Mano-dura populism
2	Religious fundament-talism	Religious fundament-talism	Classical conserva-tism	Classical conserva-tism	Libertaria-nism	Mano-dura populism	Classical conserva-tism	Classical conserva-tism
3	Mano-dura populism	Mano-dura populism	Mano-dura populism	Mano-dura populism	Classical conserva-tism	Religious fundamentalism	Libertaria-nism	Libertaria-nism

Source: Qualitative assessment based on the sources listed in the appendix.

Firstly, there are, by and large, three clusters of right-wing actors with broadly similar profiles highlighted by different colors, albeit with slight variations in rank order. One cluster comprises Bolsonaro, Kast, and López Aliaga, who combine traditional conservatism with religious elements and law-and-order positions. The second cluster includes the libertarians Milei and Kaiser, whose primary emphasis is clearly on anti-statist libertarianism, while also maintaining traditionalist and *mano-dura* positions—a profile described as “paleolibertarianism” (Stefanoni, 2021). A third cluster consists of Cubas, Bukele, and de la Espriella, whose focus is on security issues, while classical conservative and libertarian positions are less pronounced, and religious elements are largely absent.

Second, paleoconservatism does not appear in the profiles, presumably because its typical manifestations are subsumed under other currents, particularly classical conservatism, which also rejects “gender ideology” and asserts “traditional values.”⁷ The issue of migration, in turn, is often addressed in the context of public security and, therefore, categorized as *mano-dura* populism.⁸

Moreover, the indicator of corruption proved ambiguous, as it is used by libertarians to attack the bureaucracy and the State, but also in the context of populist anti-elite discourse, as in the cases of Cubas and Bolsonaro. In these cases, programmatic indicators may need to be reconsidered to more clearly distinguish among classical conservatism, libertarianism, and paleoconservatism. Another reason

⁷ For example, in a speech at the UN General Assembly, Bolsonaro stressed that “[...] core values for Brazilian society [...] include the defense of the family, the right to life from the moment of conception, the right to self-defense, and the rejection of gender ideology,” which was classified as classical conservatism, yet also fits the category right-wing radicalism (Appendix #2).

⁸ A typical example is Johannes Kaiser, who referred to the tasks of the Armed Forces as follows: “[...] in the face of the unchecked rise in organized crime, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and other such issues, these measures will be key to supporting law enforcement in eradicating these scourges and, if necessary, through the declaration of a state of emergency and the rational—yet decisive and very brief—use of the armed forces and their resources” (Appendix #10).

for the absence of this latter dimension might be that it is not reflected in the sources used for the analysis. Examining social media sources could yield more evidence of culture-war orientations.

The programmatic profiles derived from programmatic sources highlight ideological divergences and convergences within the current Latin American right, helping assess its degree of unity, its electoral appeal, and its potential for coalition-building. The latter aspect is crucial, as a right-wing majority necessitates collaboration between libertarians and classical conservatives. Although such a collaboration currently exists in Argentina, ideological differences may come to the fore in the future, as tensions within the Republican Party and the MAGA movement in the U.S. indicate. Potential conflicts also derive from diverging conceptions about the role of the State, foreign policy, and protectionism. Thus, while classical conservatism and libertarianism may find temporary common ground at the policy level, ideological differences make a paleolibertarian alliance difficult to sustain. As the Tea Party movement in the United States has shown, integration and mobilization of the right-wing spectrum is possible, but it depends on circumstantial factors and is likely to remain a temporary phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The current wave of right-wing populism in Latin America is often interpreted as the result of regional dynamics, namely as a swing of the pendulum after a phase of left-wing populism in earlier years. However, behind the image of the pendulum lies a heterogeneous phenomenon, resembling the U.S. conservative movement in its composition. In the United States, the conservative movement has always been highly heterogeneous and has only temporarily achieved unified mobilization.

A preliminary analysis of programmatic profiles among the new Latin American right has highlighted areas of ideological convergence within this spectrum, but also noticeable differences, which might limit the potential for the formation of stable majorities. Recent approaches relying on Mudde's typology of PRR fail to capture the diversity of right-wing populism in the region because it tends to omit the varying ideological currents within the Latin American right. While these currents are not as clearly distinguishable as in the United States, they are observable from diverging programmatic priorities, pointing to different ideological roots and potentially causing tensions within the right-wing spectrum. Diverging ideological orientations concern, for example, the rule of law (which is upheld by classical conservatives but disregarded by *mano-dura* populists) or the role of the State. Libertarian positions and *mano-dura* policies are difficult to reconcile, too. Recent advances by right-wing candidates may conceal these potential fault lines, but they could become visible in the future.

When viewed not just through the lens of radical right populism but from a more nuanced perspective, the long-term prospects of the new Latin American right appear rather uncertain. Instead of forming a "wave," which suggests a uniform force, it appears to be a more heterogeneous phenomenon, marked by diverging programmatic orientations and priorities. Cohesion and unity within the right-wing camp, therefore, are probably lower than is often assumed, and they depend strongly on individual leaders and external circumstances. While right-wing populism will likely continue to shape the region's political landscape in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely to become a durable, hegemonic force.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Thomas Kestler is a political scientist at the University of Würzburg, Germany. His research focuses on comparative politics and Latin America, with particular interests in political parties, institutions, democracy, populism, and the role of ideas in political action. His publications combine comparative and historical-institutionalist approaches with research on political change and collective action.

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APPENDIX: SOURCES USED FOR ASSESSING PROGRAMMATIC PROFILES

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Submissão em: 30 nov. 2025

Aceito em: 01 abr. 2026

