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GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

How Democracy Promoters Can Respond to Populist Protests

The Case of Brazil

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STUDY
January 2024

HEINRICH
BÖLL
STIFTUNG

This study was funded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the position of Heinrich Böll Foundation. I'd like to thank Rasmus Randig for constructive and fruitful collaboration on this project.

The research for this report would not have been possible without the generous support and time of many people. Most importantly, I would like to thank the many Brazilian activists and members of protest and civil society groups, researchers, government officials, and international civil society representatives, who kindly offered their time and insights during the interviews that became the foundation of this research. Special thanks go to Camila Rocha and Oliver Stuenkel, who put me in touch with key Brazilian interlocutors and from whose expertise on the Brazilian political situation I massively benefitted. In addition, I would like to greatly thank Giovanna Marquesano Tabanês, who provided valuable research assistance.

I would also like to thank GPPi colleagues Philipp Rotmann, Niklas Balbon, Jakob Hensing, and Abi Watson, who provided me with extensive and valuable feedback on a draft report. I am also grateful to Sarah Bressan and Sophie Ebbecke as well as the whole GPPi peace and security team, with whom I discussed the research design and the study's findings in internal workshops. I am indebted to Marc Shkurovich, Sonya Sugrobova, Katharina Nachbar, and Amanda Pridmore for their excellent editorial and typesetting work, as well as the production of this report and outreach work.

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Executive Summary

What can governments and international organizations promoting democracy abroad do when mass populist protests are directed against liberal democracy, their own partisan political goals – or both? In such contexts, it may seem like the hands of international democracy promoters are tied. Populist protests, after all, involve local civil society actors bringing people to the streets to make political demands, even when those demands are deeply problematic. But this study shows that external actors do have strategic options. It does so by studying the experience of democracy promoters in Brazil, where right-wing populist protest groups played a crucial role in the successful partisan campaign to impeach former President Dilma Rousseff between 2015 and 2016, and contributed to the election of the anti-democratic President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.

To help democracy promoters appropriately respond to populist protest groups, I develop a typology that includes four approaches: *cooperate, converse, ignore,* and *marginalize* (Chapter 3). This typology ranges from engagement to containment. As a rule of thumb, engagement approaches (*cooperate* and *converse*) should be applied to more moderate actors, while containment approaches (*ignore* and *marginalize*) are suitable for more extreme groups. But democracy promoters will still need to assess the trade-offs that each approach entails.

In Brazil, democracy promoters only employed containment approaches toward the key populist protest groups: the Free Brazil Movement, Come to the Streets and Revolted Online. Although all three groups organized protests to impeach Rousseff, neither their broader political goals nor the dangers they posed to liberal democracy were exactly the same. But instead of working toward a nuanced and joint reaction, democracy promoters prioritized supporting their own civil society partners and communicating with their home audiences. This was not only because most democracy promoters lacked well-developed response strategies in the first place, but also because they did not consider themselves – as *external* actors – positioned to approach these groups.

Democracy promoters also faced significant obstacles in the leadup to Rousseff's impeachment over which they had limited control. On the one hand, left-leaning democracy promoters' actions were restricted by their civil society partners, who were reluctant to *cooperate* or *converse* with populist protest groups, and instead sweepingly criticized them all. On the other hand, the populist protest groups were themselves not very open to engagement with new external partners at the time. These findings are based on 38 interviews with democracy promoters, researchers and members of Brazilian populist protest groups.

These interviews also revealed that democracy promoters missed a potential later window of opportunity for engagement with the same populist protest groups. This window opened in 2021, when both left-wing and right-wing actors filed a joint impeachment request against President Bolsonaro and started to organize protests around the same goal – but kept their mobilization efforts separate. Democracy

promoters did not mediate between the two camps, as they were reluctant to interfere in such an overtly political endeavor. Importantly, this development raises the question of whether *ignoring* and *marginalizing* populist protest groups are always the right strategies for promoting democracy. In the case of Brazil, engagement approaches toward populist protest groups could have arguably helped build a counterweight to Bolsonaro and the threat he posed to liberal democracy in the country.

Based on this analysis, three recommendations are presented for democracy promoters:

1. Develop analytical tools to mitigate biases in the assessment of populist protest groups.

To develop more effective approaches toward populist protest groups, an in-depth understanding of the different actors involved is crucial. Democracy promoters should differentiate between and within groups that can be considered more moderate (i.e., "only" radically partisan within the rules of a liberal democracy) and those that are extreme (i.e., fundamentally anti-democratic). They also have to identify which actors are relevant in terms of size and the legitimacy they enjoy within the population. Doing so will require cultivating context-sensitive analytical tools and gathering relevant knowledge from local researchers and staff.

In Brazil, democracy promoters' own political leanings influenced their perception of the three relevant groups. Some conservative and liberal external actors tended to underestimate the inherent challenge to democracy invited even by the more moderate populist protest groups, since their respective political agendas seemed more closely aligned. Meanwhile, some progressive and left-leaning external actors tended to overestimate the threat that moderate populist protest groups themselves posed to democracy, making no distinction between protest actors who called for military intervention and those who rejected such calls.

2. Engage with moderate populist protest groups and contain extreme ones.

Democracy promoters should also develop a differentiated political strategy for reacting to populist protest groups. In general, democracy promoters should engage with more moderate groups and contain extreme groups. But this differentiation need not only apply to populist protest groups as a whole; it is also worth trying to engage with more moderate group members on an individual basis. To do so, democracy promoters can start by reaching out to people who fulfill double roles, working at like-minded organizations and engaging in protest activities in their leisure time.

In Brazil, this double role was played by activists of the Free Brazil Movement who were also part of conservative and liberal think tanks and research institutes. These shared contexts can help secure an essential precondition for engagement approaches: openness to dialogue on the part of both democracy promoters and the respective populist protest groups.

3. Establish a network of politically diverse democracy promoters and prioritize defending democracy.

Democracy promoters should finally increase exchange across a wider variety of institutions to discuss strategic responses to populist groups and learn from past efforts. When liberal democracy is attacked, democracy promoters with different political orientations must be able to prioritize their shared commitments. For this to happen, it is important that democracy promoters share an understanding of the situation and work to develop a common theory of change, further underscoring the need for dialogue that crosses the aisle.

In Brazil, such peer exchange only took place between employees of the same institution – and did not begin until after Bolsonaro's election. This means democracy promoters were unable to investigate which of them was best-positioned to approach specific populist protest groups. When the threat comes from extreme right-wing groups such as Revolted Online, an independent or conservative democracy promoter would likely be the right interlocutor for those groups' moderates. The logic also applies the other way: if left-wing groups threaten to undermine democracy, a left-leaning or independent democracy promoter may be better placed to try engaging with moderates. A politically diverse coalition will thus be indispensable for safeguarding democracy wherever populist protest erupts.

Introduction

There remains uncertainty about what democracy promoters can do if "good" civil society and protest actors do not represent a significant portion of the population.

Governments and international organizations that want to support democracy abroad often seek to do so by strengthening civil society actors. But these actors' ability to enhance inclusive democratic governance has become more precarious in many places, as their room for maneuver is increasingly constrained by repression, harassment and legal restrictions. In this context of shrinking civic space, democracy promoters have predominantly responded by turning to protect "good" civil society partners, including so-called pro-democratic protest movements (i.e., those fighting against authoritarianism). Yet there remains uncertainty about what democracy promoters can do if "good" civil society and protest actors do not represent a significant portion of the population, or if the groups successfully mobilizing masses to the streets are protesting against the values and institutions of liberal democracy – and doing so by deploying populist narratives.

Influential civil society actors in places as diverse as Brazil, Mali and Thailand (in support of authoritarian leadership), India (pro-authoritarian, anti-Muslim), and Niger and Mali (in support of military juntas) are united in their opposition to local actors that do promote liberal democracy. At the same time, some of these movements include a powerful emancipatory element critical of neocolonial interference or unaccountable governments, making demands that still speak to liberal democratic values. In other cases, groups mobilize for a clearly anti-democratic agenda or leader, agitate against a minority group, or use violent tactics.

Brazil is a pertinent example of a country where populist protest has left its mark. There, the past decade saw the emergence of new right-wing groups and movements, which contributed to the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro – a populist, anti-democratic and extreme right-wing figure. These same right-wing protest groups had already shown their impressive mobilization capacities: with the help of a populist narrative, they organized mass protests against former President Dilma Rousseff and her Workers' Party, leading to her impeachment in August 2016. Although they shared common goals, not all these groups were anti-democratic: while some were openly calling for military intervention, others were more concerned with promoting neoliberal economic policies or opposing progressive social values.[1]

After gravely mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro lost moderate supporters among these groups who had initially been attracted by his anti-corruption stance. But his rejection of lockdowns generated support from pro-business voters while his financial support programs drew in some from the poorer sections of the population.[2] Polarization in Brazilian society remained extreme during the 2022 presidential

1 Camila Rocha, Esther Solano and Jonas Medeiros, *The Bolsonaro Paradox. The Public Sphere and Right-Wing Counterpublicity in Contemporary Brazil* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021).

2 International Crisis Group, "Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year," 2022, accessed October 1, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/brazil/brazils-true-believers-bolsonaro-and-risks-election-year.

elections, in which Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party beat Bolsonaro by a very narrow margin.[3] On January 8, 2023, shortly after Lula was inaugurated, radical Bolsonaro supporters stormed the Congress – showing the potential for the country's political situation to turn violent.

The case of Brazil is one where right-wing populist protest groups successfully mobilized mass demonstrations for a partisan political goal – Rousseff's impeachment – but also in part for an anti-democratic agenda. It thus poses a complex challenge for foreign governments and organizations trying to support democracy abroad, especially since little is known about how external democracy promoters have responded to populist groups. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining suitable strategies for democracy promoters in Brazil. It tries to answer: How did they approach right-wing populist protest and civil society actors in the country? What are plausible options for engagement or containment, and what are the benefits and risks of each response? What can democracy promoters around the world learn from the case of Brazil?

What's What? Populism, Liberal Democracy and External Democracy Promoters

For this study, democracy promoters are defined as national governments and international private and governmental organizations that seek to promote liberal democracy abroad. While there are domestic actors that aim to strengthen democracy in Brazil, this analysis focuses on *external* actors who are specifically committed to preserving *liberal* democracy. Examples include foreign embassies and international civil society organizations such as the Open Society Foundations or Democracy Reporting International, as well as the German political foundations. In other words, these democracy promoters want to support a "political regime, which not only respects popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also establishes independent institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and the protection of minorities."[4]

The practical relation between populism and liberal democracy is still unclear and remains the subject of empirical research.

This political project sits in an uneasy relationship to populism. Political theorists have long debated whether populism constitutes a threat or corrective to democracy. On the one hand, some academics argue that populism weakens liberal democratic institutions such as the rule of law and thus endangers democracy.[5] On the other hand are scholars who emphasize populism's potential to draw attention to the concerns of marginalized groups and thereby make liberal democracy more inclusive.[6] Overall, the practical relation between populism and liberal democracy is still unclear and remains the subject of empirical research.[7]

3 Seán Clarke, "Brazil election 2022: live results as Lula beats Bolsonaro to return as president," 2022, The Guardian, accessed September 8, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2022/oct/30/brazil-election-2022-live-results-lula-bolsonaro-runoff.

4 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism. A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

5 Stefan Rummens, "Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Pierre Ostiguy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London/New York: Verso, 2005).

7 For empirical examples and suggested research agendas, see: Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism. A Very*

As this relation remains ambiguous, I do not equate populist groups with anti-democratic groups but rather take a broad understanding of populism: protest and civil society groups are considered populist if they adopt a dichotomous narrative, particularly one that poses a picture of "the people" versus "the elite," or a reductionist discourse that subsumes different challenges into *one* problem. Importantly, groups that use a populist narrative to pursue their goals can be anti-democratic, i.e., seek to undermine democratic institutions; but they can also be pro-democratic, i.e., play by the rules of democracy as they push forward their political agenda.[8] They are also clearly part of civil society.

These groups are not the only ones pursuing their own aims. Beyond supporting democracy, external actors like the German political foundations also pursue partisan goals, in turn supporting progressive, conservative, liberal, or green values and politics. These democracy promoters therefore need to be understood as political players with diverging agendas vis-à-vis populist protest groups.

In this study, I do not aim to give guidance to democracy promoters on how they can eliminate populism as such, since using populist methods does not automatically make a group anti-democratic. Instead, I seek to investigate how democracy promoters can react to populist groups that go against their program (whether in terms of partisan policy goals or an anti-democratic agenda) – for which Brazil serves as a useful case to study democracy promoters' approaches.

While populism has been taken up by left-wing as well as right-wing actors, the 2015–2016 impeachment campaign in Brazil was driven by the latter. The leading populist groups that organized the protests to impeach Rousseff adopted a reductionist and antagonistic discourse by collapsing different grievances into one common enemy: the corruption of the Workers' Party.[9] This right-wing populist mass movement appears to have opened up space in Brazil for the conservative, liberal and right-wing agenda that contributed to the election of far-right Jair Bolsonaro as president in 2018, who then worked to undermine institutions and values of liberal democracy. The groups' mobilization for conservative values, together with their anti-leftist or anti-democratic sentiments and use of populist narratives, is the deciding factor for why I include them in the analysis regardless of whether they subsequently distanced themselves from Bolsonaro.

Method, Structure and Limitations

This analysis is based in part on publicly available sources such as online communications, articles and reports published by democracy promoters and other civil society organizations. The research also built on the rich academic and grey

Short Introduction.

8 Anthoula Malkopoulou and Benjamin Moffitt, "How not to respond to populism," Comparative European Politics (2023), accessed August 8, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-023-00341-9.

9 Tayrine Dias, Marisa von Bülow and Danniel Gobbi, "Populist Framing Mechanisms and the Rise of Right-wing Activism in Brazil," Latin American Politics and Society 63, no. 3, 2021, accessed August 1, 2023, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/latin-american-politics-and-society/article/abs/populist-framing-mechanisms-and-the-rise-of-rightwing-activism-in-brazil/2885D1E59A26D1400B0AD81A620F253B.

literature on protest movements, populism and the rise of conservative and right-wing protest and civil society groups in Brazil. In total, 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted using a snowballing method: 10 with Brazilian and European researchers, 16 with democracy promoters and 12 with Brazilian protest and civil society group members. Over half of the interviews were conducted during a week-long research trip to São Paulo, where many of the right-wing civil society groups are based. The other interviews took place virtually or in Berlin. Most of the interviews were held in English or German; research assistant Giovanna Marquesano Tabanês conducted the remaining interviews in Portuguese. The relevant stakeholders, research interests and methods are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Method

Stakeholder	Research Interest	Source
Right-wing populist protest groups	Motivation, history, goals, and role in protest movement	Literature review; interviews with relevant researchers
Right-wing populist protest groups	Perception of democracy promoters; potential for engagement	Interviews with right-wing populist protest group members Interviews with relevant researchers and other civil society group members close to populist protest groups
Democracy promoters	Perception of populist protest groups and impeachment protests Approaches and strategies toward populist protest groups; lessons learned	Literature review; interviews with representatives of governments and international civil society organizations (staff from headquarters and offices in Brazil)

The scope of the study was delimited by the time and resources available. The diversity of democracy promoters is therefore not reflected by the interview subjects, most of whom were representatives of international civil society organizations. Finding suitable interlocutors from government bodies, particularly those who had been present during the impeachment protests, was mostly not possible in the time allotted. Regarding interviews with members of protest groups, it is important to highlight that these did not include activists of Come to the Streets. This is because this group is no longer active and no contact could be established with former members.

The study continues by providing an overview of the rise of right-wing populist protest groups in Brazil and discussing their role in impeachment protests, with a focus on three key protest groups: the Free Brazil Movement, Come to the Streets and Revolted Online. Then, I will present a typology of approaches democracy promoters can take to respond to populist protest groups, including the benefits and risks of each approach. The next chapter delves into how, and to what effect, democracy promoters have responded to the Brazilian protest groups. Finally, I discuss how democracy promoters could have adopted different approaches to address the respective populist protest groups and explain the factors that limited their efforts.

The Rise of Right-Wing Populist Protest Groups in Brazil

The street mobilization to impeach Rousseff "opened Pandora's box" - not only for explicitly right-wing agendas but also for anti-democratic calls for military intervention.

Jair Bolsonaro's victory in the 2018 presidential election came as a shock for many progressives and leftists, but the seeds for his success had already been planted in the preceding years. In the decades after 1985, when the country transitioned back to democracy, the Brazilian right did not call itself right-wing but centrist, as "the right" was associated with the dark chapter of the military dictatorship in Brazil[10] – a phenomenon that Timothy J. Power and Cesar Zucco Jr. call the "ashamed right."[11] This changed with the onset of large street protests in 2013, which escalated into the huge protest mobilization to impeach then-President Dilma Rousseff between 2014 and 2016. In the words of a democracy promoter, the street mobilization by right-wing groups "opened Pandora's box"[12] – not only for explicitly right-wing agendas but also for anti-democratic calls for military intervention.

Conservative and right-wing forces were able to capitalize on the increasing discontent with Rousseff and the Workers' Party which had started to show in the 2013 protests, the largest Brazil had seen in decades.[13] These demonstrations, which took place across several Brazilian cities, were initially organized by the Free Fare Movement to resist a raise in bus and metro prices and to advocate for free public transportation. Soon, other subjects of public frustration – such as the World Cup and the Olympics, as well as corruption – became the focus of the demonstrations. Overall, protests rejected partisanship and drew participants from across the political spectrum.[14] When police violently repressed protests on June 13, 2013, people found even more reason to take to the streets.[15] Over the course of the month, almost 200 protest events took place; at their height, on June 20, one million people demonstrated in over 100 cities, according to the media outlet *Folha de São Paulo*. The protests calmed down by July, as the fare increase was waived off and the Rousseff administration announced political reforms that included anti-corruption measures.[16] Despite these efforts, Rousseff's approval

10 Rocha et al., *The Bolsonaro Paradox*.

11 Timothy J. Power and Cesar Zucco Jr., "Estimating Ideology of Brazilian Legislative Parties, 1990-2005: A Research Communication," Latin American Research Review 44, no. 1, 2009, accessed August 4, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20488177.

12 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paolo, August 29, 2023.

13 Global Nonviolent Action Database, "Brazilian Free Fare Movement (MPL) mobilizes against fare hikes, 2013," 2013, accessed August 10,2023, https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/brazilian-free-fare-movement-mpl-mobilizes-against-fare-hikes-2013.

14 Angela Alonso and Ann Mische, "Changing Repertoires and Partisan Ambivalence in the New Brazilian Protests," Bulletin of Latin American Research 36, no. 2, 2016, accessed September 1, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12470.

15 Alonso and Mische, "Changing Repertoires and Partisan Ambivalence in the New Brazilian Protests."

16 Brian Winter, "Revisiting Brazil's 2013 Protests: What Did They Really Mean?," Americas Quarterly, 2017, accessed August 10, 2023, https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/revisiting-brazils-2013-protests-what-

rating dropped drastically over the course of the protests: from 57 percent before to 30 percent after.[17]

In early 2014, revelations from Operation Car Wash – the investigation into a corruption scandal that has been called the biggest in history[18] – became public. The large-scale investigation uncovered how Petrobras, the state-owned oil company, and a construction firm called Odebrecht funneled bribes to government officials in exchange for contracts. Operation Car Wash has led to almost 280 convictions. It immediately implicated people close to Rousseff and damaged her public image further.[19] Yet in October 2014, Rousseff won a surprise reelection.

Against this backdrop, three right-wing protest movements emerged who would soon become key leaders in the impeachment campaign: the Free Brazil Movement, Come to the Streets and Revolted Online. The Free Brazil Movement was formed by right-wing and conservative members of the Brazilian branch of Students for Liberty, a libertarian NGO, to house their political activities. While members were already active in 2013, they formalized the Free Brazil Movement as a response to Rousseff's reelection; they wanted not only to oppose the ruling Workers' Party, but above all "to restore the image of liberal ideas and combat the 'mainstream' [and] 'politically correct.'"[20] Come to the Streets was also founded in 2014, by center-right businessmen from São Paulo who were outraged by corruption and the inefficiency of Brazilian government and public services, although activists close to the group had been participating in protests as early as 2006.[21] Revolted Online is the oldest formal group: the former Evangelical minister Marcello Reis created its Facebook account in 2010. By 2014 – when Revolted Online's major protest activities started – the Facebook account had attracted several hundreds of thousands of followers who were dissatisfied with Brazilian politics and corruption.[22] Unlike the Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets, which were more structured, Revolted Online lacked clear, centralized strategies and instead organized spontaneous protests.[23]

Taking advantage of dissatisfaction with the Workers' Party more broadly, as well as an economic recession, right-wing groups started to organize impeachment protests against Rousseff.

Taking advantage of dissatisfaction with the Workers' Party more broadly, as well as an economic recession, right-wing groups started to organize impeachment protests against Rousseff. Notably, left-wing actors had ceased organizing protests against

did-they-really-mean/.

17 Christopher Garman, "Rousseff's Popularity Plummets, but She's Still Not a Weak President," Foreign Policy, 2013, accessed August 11, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/02/rousseffs-popularity-plummets-but-shes-still-not-a-weak-president/.

18 Jonathan Watts, "Operation Car Wash: Is this the biggest corruption scandal in history?," The Guardian, 2017, accessed August 6, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/01/brazil-operation-car-wash-is-this-the-biggest-corruption-scandal-in-history.

19 Amelia Cheatham, "Lava Jato: See How Far Brazil's Corruption Probe Reached," Council on Foreign Relations, 2021, accessed September 5, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/lava-jato-see-how-far-brazils-corruption-probe-reached.

20 Fanny Vrydagh, "Gagner Les Corps, Les Cœurs et Les Esprits. Comprendre l'Engagement Dans le Mouvement Brésilien Pro-Destitution (2014-2016)," Université Libre de Bruxelles, PhD (unpublished), Academic Year 2019-2020.

21 Dias et al., "Populist Framing Mechanisms and the Rise of Right-wing Activism in Brazil"; Vyrdagh, "Gagner Les Corps, Les Cœurs et Les Esprits."

22 According to another founder of the group, the roots of Revolted Online can be traced back to a social media account on Orkut, a right-wing platform. This account was created in 2006 and later merged with Revolted Online's Facebook page. See for more: Vrydagh, "Gagner Les Corps, Les Coeurs et Les Esprits."

23 Dias et al., "Populist Framing Mechanisms and the Rise of Right-wing Activism in Brazil"; Vyrdagh, "Gagner Les Corps, Les Cœurs et Les Esprits."

corruption, allowing right-wing groups to fill a space traditionally occupied by "the left."[24] These groups initially drew smaller numbers compared to the 2013 movement,[25] but their success in these early mobilizations was a sign of what was to come: on March 16, 2015, the Free Brazil Movement, Come to the Streets and Revolted Online sparked massive protests across several cities in Brazil.[26] This was the start of the wave of large-scale street mobilizations that culminated in the president's impeachment. Each of the three groups drove their own supporters to the streets, but their overall levels of acceptance differed significantly. The Brazilian researchers Esther Solano and Pablo Ortellado found that Come to the Streets was trusted by 71 percent of demonstrators – making it the most trusted protest group. The Free Brazil Movement came next, with 53 percent of protestors trusting this group. Revolted Online was the least popular of the three, trusted by only 19 percent.[27]

The groups' popularity seems to have depended on how radical they were perceived to be. Arguably, the Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets were the more moderate protest groups: what clearly distinguished them from the more radical Revolted Online was the anti-democratic measure of calling for military intervention. While Revolted Online, at the beginning of the impeachment protests, was "one of the most vocal supporters of a military intervention as a solution to Brazil's problem,"[28] the other two protest groups condemned these calls. The Free Brazil Movement also deliberately used a more moderate discourse that focused on anti-corruption in order to distance itself from the military interventionists.[29] Moreover, Come to the Streets only publicly demanded Rousseff's impeachment after a government accountability office found inconsistencies in the administration's financial accounting.[30]

Nevertheless, the protest groups all fueled anti-Workers' Party sentiment and almost exclusively focused on calling out its corruption, thereby adopting a populist narrative. Slogans and chants such as "Out with the PT" or "Out with Dilma" were widespread. While opposition to the Workers' Party was the strongest shared element, the demonstrations also rejected other parties on the center and right-wing side of the political spectrum. Given their success in driving turnout, the key protest groups decided to organize another nationwide demonstration a month after the landmark March 2015 protest. They were joined by other right-wing groups, such as Liberal Movement Wake Up Brazil, and other anti-democratic groups like SOS Armed Forces who were demanding a military intervention. The latter groups, however, were only able to gather a marginal group of protestors relative to the three leading protest groups.[31] Even though this April demonstration could only attract half as many people compared

24 Rocha et al., *The Bolsonaro Paradox*.

25 Ibid.

26 Estimates of participants vary from the hundreds of thousands to upwards of a million participants. See: Dias et al., "Populist Framing Mechanisms and the Rise of Right-wing Activism in Brazil"; New York Times, "In Nationwide Protests, Angry Brazilians Call for Ouster of President," 2015, accessed September 11, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/16/world/anger-bubbles-up-against-brazilian-president.html; Deutsche Welle, "More than a million protest Brazil's Rousseff," 2015, accessed September 12, 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/more-than-a-million-rally-against-brazils-president/a-18317702.

27 Rocha et al., *The Bolsonaro Paradox*.

28 Dias et al., "Populist Framing Mechanisms and the Rise of Right-wing Activism in Brazil," p. 17.

29 Vyrdagh, "Gagner Les Corps, Les Cœurs et Les Esprits."

30 Rocha et al., *The Bolsonaro Paradox*.

31 Interview with an activist, São Paulo, August 22, 2023; interview with a researcher, August 25, 2023.

to the first protest, participation numbers were still notable.[32] Further demonstrations took place in August and December 2015, although neither matched the participation numbers from that spring.[33]

Reports range from more than a million to over 3 million people across Brazil demonstrating against the Rousseff administration.

Finally, on March 13, 2016, the protests surpassed the previous record. Reports range from more than a million to over 3 million people across Brazil demonstrating against the Rousseff administration.[34] Generally, this impeachment campaign differed from the 2013 protests in its composition: participants were on average twice as old and were more likely to identify as right-wing. Also notable is that the groups organizing the street mobilization had important differences in their demands and grievances. These ranged from agitating for radically free markets and defending traditional social values (in response to a perceived "progressive shock"),[35] to fighting to reduce prices and calling for military intervention.[36] Yet the protest groups managed to subsume these differences into one common cause: mobilizing against the corruption of the Workers' Party with the goal of impeachment.

Finally, on August 31, 2016, Rousseff was charged with breaking budget laws and ultimately impeached by the Senate. After Rousseff's impeachment, protests continued and paved the way for new conservative and right-wing political parties to enter institutional politics. In 2018, the right-wing and anti-democratic Bolsonaro won the presidential election as part of the Social Liberal Party.[37]

But Bolsonaro did not manage to keep the protest groups' support for long. By 2021, the Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets had turned against Bolsonaro. Not only did Bolsonaro egregiously mishandle the COVID-19 pandemic, but he also became the target of new corruption allegations. Some Free Brazil Movements activists were especially disappointed by Bolsonaro abandoning anti-corruption plans after federal prosecutors accused his eldest son of money laundering. Bolsonaro himself was also implicated in an embezzlement scheme.[38] In the end, the more extreme members of the Free Brazil Movement who remained loyal to the then-president left the group.

On June 30, 2021, a broad coalition of left-leaning parties, including the Workers' Party and the Socialism and Liberty Party, came together with right-wing deputies such as Kim Kataguiri, the Free Brazil Movement's founder and leader, to sign a so-called "super-impeachment" request. This combined 120 individual requests for

32 Rocha et al., *The Bolsonaro Paradox*.

33 The New York Times, "Protests Continue in Brazil Against Dilma Rousseff," 2015, accessed September 13, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/14/world/americas/brazil-protests-dilma-rousseff.html; Bruce Douglas, "Brazilian president under fire as tens of thousands protest in 200 cities," 2015, The Guardian, accessed September 15, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/16/brazil-protests-dilma-rousseff.

34 The media outlet GloboNews reported a participation of 3.6 million protesters, while the polling company Datafolha recorded approximately a million demonstrators. See: Folha De S. Paulo, "More than a Million Protest Against President Rousseff in Brazil's Largest Ever Political Demo," 2016, accessed September 13, 2023, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2016/03/1749676-more-than-a-million-protest-against-president-rousseff-in-brazils-largest-ever-political-demo.shtml; Financial Times, "Brazilian take to the streets in anti-government protests," 2015, accessed September 11, 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/937b777e-e934-11e5-9fca-fb0f946fd1f0.

35 Conservatives considered measures such as abolishing physical violence against children or the recognition of same-sex civil union as a "progressive shock." Rocha et al., The Bolsonaro Paradox, p. 59.

36 Dias et al., "Populist Framing Mechanisms and the Rise of Right-wing Activism in Brazil."

37 Rocha et al., *The Bolsonaro Paradox*.

38 Tom Philipps, "Corruption allegations increase pressure on Bolsonaro," The Guardian, 2021, accessed September 16, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/05/corruption-allegations-increase-pressure-on-bolsonaro.

impeachment with 20 accusations against Bolsonaro, including his grave mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.[39] Notably, traditional right-wing parties like the Brazilian Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party (the party Bolsonaro would soon join) did not support the impeachment request. The former party would later openly oppose Bolsonaro but could not reach a consensus on whether to participate in the impeachment process.[40] The impeachment request ultimately failed, as the congressional leader, a close ally of Bolsonaro and part of the parliamentary group centrão, ultimately denied the request.[41]

Despite the combined impeachment request, right-wing populist protest groups and left-wing actors did not jointly organize protests to gain political support for an impeachment process.

Despite the combined impeachment request, right-wing protest groups and left-wing actors did not jointly organize protests to gain political support for an impeachment process. Mobilizing collectively could have arguably been one way to overcome the coalition backing Bolsonaro, but they kept their protest efforts separate. The Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets cited the pandemic as the reason why they did not join the July 2021 demonstrations organized by the left. In a media interview, the spokesperson of the Free Brazil Movement also explained the group's focus on other forms of pressure, including digital organizing, and emphasized that they talk with everyone, including left-wing movements, fighting for the same goal.[42] By contrast, left-wing parties and groups such as the Workers' Party, the Socialism and Liberty Party and the Black Coalition for Rights did not seem to consider the Free Brazil Movement a legitimate partner. Their position was shaped by the latter group demonstrating against a Queer museum exhibition, among other actions.[43] The Workers' Party also balked at the slogan of a demonstration planned by the Free Brazil Movement in September 2021: "neither Lula nor Bolsonaro."[44]

Overall, in the case of Brazil, right-wing populist protest groups succeeded in mobilizing masses for the impeachment of Rousseff, which also opened the protest space for anti-democratic demands. This presented external democracy promoters with a sensitive and polarized situation in which different approaches to respond to these groups were possible.

39 Danielle Brant and Thiago Resende, "Super-Impeachment Filed against Bolsonaro," Folha de S. Paulo, 2021, accessed October 1, 2023, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2021/07/super-impeachment-filed-against-bolsonaro.shtml.

40 O Globo, "PSDB aprova oposicao Bolsonaro mas adia decisao sobre impeachment," 2021, accessed October 2, 2023, https://oglobo.globo.com/politica/psdb-aprova-oposicao-bolsonaro-mas-adia-decisao-sobre-impeachment-1-25189627.

41 Mariana Llanos and Leiv Marsteintredet, "The Political Limits of Presidential Impeachment: Lessons from Latin America," GIGA Focus Latin America, Number 4, 2021, accessed October 4, 2023, https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/political-limits-presidential-impeachment-lessons-latin-america; UOL, "Bolsonaro se aliou ao centrao para evitar o impeachment, diz Weintraub," 2022, accessed October 3, 2023, https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2022/01/19/weintraub-bolsonaro-impeachment.htm.

42 Letícia Mori, "Protestos contra Bolsonaro: MBL e Vem Pra Rua apoiam impeachment, mas não vão a atos de sábado, BBC, 2021, accessed October 5, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-57703599.

43 Felipe Betim, "Esquerda e direita tentam superar divergências e ensaiam união contra Bolsonaro nas ruas neste domingo," El País, 2021, accessed October 6, 2023, https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2021-09-12/esquerda-e-direita-tentam-superar-divergencias-e-ensaiam-uniao-contra-bolsonaro-nas-ruas-neste-domingo.html; M. Rossi, F. Betim and V. Segalla, "De liberais anticorrupção a guardiães da moral: a metamorfose do MBL," El País, 2017, accessed October 7, 2023, https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/09/26/politica/1506459691_598049.html.

44 Felipe Betim, "Esquerda e direita tentam superar divergências."

Approaches to Populist Protest Groups: Between Engagement and Containment

Debates in policy, media and research circles on how international democracy promoters can and should respond to mass protests have mostly focused on movements with a pro-democratic agenda, such as overthrowing an authoritarian regime (e.g., Sudan 2018–2019, Belarus 2020–2021, Iran 2022–present).[45] But as more and more populist forces successfully use mass protests to pursue their political goals, as in the case of Brazil, international actors who aim to support democracy abroad should think of how to address populist protest groups appropriately.

Deciding on strategic responses to populist protest groups is difficult, as the research has yet to fill two gaps, in particular. First, there is little literature on how to respond to populist protest and civil society groups. Second, the approaches that have been driven by the rise of populist actors in recent years have been tailored to domestic, rather than external, actors. However, approaches toward populist protest groups can build on the existing literature on regime responses to protest mobilization[46] and strategies toward extreme populists[47] as well as illiberal actors.[48] Building upon these works, I have developed a typology of approaches international democracy promoters can take to respond to populist protest groups. As discussed, these groups may each

45 See for example: Jakob Hensing, Melissa Li, Julia Friedrich and Philipp Rotmann, "Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises," GPPi, 2023, https://gppi.net/2023/03/14/supporting-civil-society-in-acute-crises; Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail? (Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021).

46 Dina Bishara, for example, summarizes that (authoritarian) regimes typically respond by either "violent repression, concessions, active encouragement and support, tolerance, [or] counter-mobilization." Dina Bishara, "The Politics of Ignoring: Protest Dynamics in Late Mubarak Egypt," Perspectives on Politics 13, no. 4, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271500225X.

47 Giovanni Capoccia and William M. Downs each detail approaches toward such extremes, which are useful starting points for developing strategies toward populism. See: Giovanni Capoccia, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005); William M. Downs, "How Effective is the Cordon Sanitaire? Lessons From Efforts to Contain the Far Right in Belgium, France, Denmark and Norway," Journal of Conflict and Violence Research 4, no. 1, 2002, accessed October 2, 2023, https://www.biejournals.de/index.php/jkg/article/view/5614. Furthermore, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser developed an analytical framework on the responses toward populism, focusing on approaches of public institutions with populists in government. See: Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism and the Question of How to Respond to it."

48 More recently, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute developed a practice-oriented resource guide for "Defending Democracy against Illiberal Challengers," offering a typology of responses for different types of actors. See: Lührmann et al., "Defending Democracy Against Illiberal Challengers."

pursue multiple goals, much like democracy promoters. Some populist protest groups may want to undermine liberal democracy (making them anti-democratic), while others want to push forward a partisan political agenda within the rules of the democratic game (making them pro-democratic) – others yet might pursue a combination of both. Similarly, democracy promoters seek to support democracy and often pursue partisan political objectives at the same time.

Strategic Dilemma Between Supporting Partisan Policy Goals and Defending Democracy

As responses toward pro-democratic actors are already increasingly being researched, this typology focuses on what democracy promoters can do when faced with (1) pro-democratic populist actors that promote divergent partisan policy goals, and (2) anti-democratic populist groups with convergent or (3) divergent partisan policy goals (see Table 2). The former kind of *anti-democratic* groups pose a threat to democracy that is especially difficult for democracy promoters to navigate: in cases where they pursue similar partisan policy goals as the anti-democratic actors, democracy promoters need to assess whether they hold enough influence through shared goals to push back efforts to undermine democracy – or whether red lines were crossed. This would mean giving up collaboration on common policy objectives to address the threat to democracy.

If democracy promoters oppose the anti-democratic groups' partisan policy goals, the question becomes whether to prioritize defending democracy or to try supporting their own partisan policy goals simultaneously. On the one hand, fighting both battles at the same time could jeopardize cross-partisan collaboration to bolster democracy. On the other hand, prioritizing cross-partisan efforts to defend democracy would potentially hinder their policy agenda.

Table 2: Convergence/Divergence of Populist Protest Groups' and External Democracy Promoters' Goals

Partisan policy goals	Pro-democratic actors	Anti-democratic actors
Convergence with democracy promoters	Traditional partner for democracy promoters.	(2) Democracy promoters need to decide how to react: If democracy promoters have enough influence through shared goals, they could work to push back their efforts to undermine democracy. If the populist groups crossed red lines, they could decide to contain them.
Divergence from democracy promoters	(1) Traditional opponent for democracy promoters.	(3) Democracy promoters need to decide how to react: Prioritizing defending democracy alongside ideologically opposed democracy promoters could hinder their own partisan policy goals. Fighting both battles at the same time could make cross-partisan collaboration difficult.

Focus of the typology

It is important to note that international democracy promoters are external actors and therefore can at best only influence domestic mobilization dynamics indirectly.[49] While they mostly work through supporting their local political and civil society partners, they can also take proactive measures by, for example, issuing public statements, selecting their interlocutors, and connecting different people. Importantly, they also decide between theories of change when they choose which local groups to work with. To help guide democracy promoters in deciding how to react to the three kinds of pro- and anti-democratic populist protest groups highlighted in Table 2, this typology presents four approaches that range from engagement to containment strategies: *cooperate, converse, ignore* and *marginalize*.

Assessing Trade-Offs Between Engagement and Containment Approaches

To select a suitable approach, democracy promoters need to assess the potential benefits and risks of engagement and containment approaches.[50] One important consideration is the extent to which an approach may legitimize populist views that go against democracy promoters' values (whether they be partisan policy goals or an anti-democratic agenda). A second relevant concern is the effect an approach may have on protest mobilization – the means through which populist protest groups seek to achieve their desired political change. As discussed, the effects of different responses on protest dynamics are the subject of current debate and empirical research. In general, engagement strategies (*cooperate* and *converse*) that aim to reduce protest participation risk legitimizing the same populist groups driving the protests. Conversely, containment approaches (*ignore* and *marginalize*) that aim to delegitimize populist groups can backfire by mobilizing protestors to take to the streets. I will further explain these trade-offs in the presentation of the different approaches below.

Cooperate

A *cooperation* approach intends to diminish protest mobilization by addressing selected interests that populist groups and democracy promoters share. This could be a salient strategy against populists making use of "common sense" issues, like corruption or poverty. While democracy promoters – as external actors – often cannot themselves explicitly remedy grievances, they can directly or indirectly support such political change. Take the matter of corruption in Brazil as an example. Democracy promoters cannot change anti-corruption laws. But they could organize a common advocacy effort with populist protest groups and in this way give international visibility to the problem (direct *cooperation*). Or, they could collaborate with civil society partners trying to

49 See also: Chenoweth and Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaign*.

50 Anna Lührmann, Lydia Finzel, Lisa Gastaldi, Sandra Grahn, Sebastian Hellmeier, Dominik Hirndorf and Seraphine F. Maerz, "Defending Democracy Against Illiberal Challengers. A Resource Guide," Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020, accessed October 17, 2023, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/21/resource_guide.pdf.

build common ground with populist protest groups around their shared goal of fighting corruption (indirect *cooperation*).

But populist protest groups need to be open to such engagement for this approach to be workable.[51] This will often only be the case for moderates, as extreme groups have more to lose. If populist protest groups acknowledge that proactive action is being taken to address their concerns, they may not be able to bring as many supporters to their protests; some populist protest groups might even see their more moderate members split off and follow new avenues to pursue change within the system.

As mutual trust is an important precondition, democracy promoters could first focus on less contentious issues and exclude more sensitive topics. Successful cooperation could then open further discussions about difficult topics in the next stage. Such a *cooperation* strategy does risk increasing the legitimacy of populist views that democracy promoters oppose – and thus reinforcing them, so that more people end up marching under their banner. Moreover, it can harm democracy promoters' own credibility in the eyes of their peers, including local civil society partners who do not agree with such an approach.

Converse

A *conversation* approach aims to reduce protest mobilization by accommodating populist protest groups in dialogues and debates. Like the *cooperation* approach, it depends on the openness of these groups and may only be suitable for moderates.[52] It is a common grievance – often part rhetorical, part real – of populist protest groups that their issues are being excluded from mainstream public debate. Offering platforms for debate could reduce the honest part of this grievance and allow these groups to explain their concerns and demands, reducing the need for protests. It would also show the public how difficult issues can be debated and undermine the populists' claim to the contrary.

Democracy promoters can, for instance, mediate and arrange talks between populist protest groups and other stakeholders with varying viewpoints, including those whom the groups are addressing. Besides, democracy promoters can also talk to the groups themselves. Such *conversation* would be the pre-step for a *cooperation* approach by identifying common goals.

Like *cooperation*, this strategy also risks increasing the legitimacy of populist views and thus reenforcing them, as populist groups are being given a public stage to promote their ideas. Conducting *conversation* in a way that allows for constructive communication around populist protest groups' grievances without fanning the flames is a difficult endeavor. This approach may also similarly discredit democracy promoters.

Ignore

An *ignore* approach intends to diminish the popularity of populist protest groups by stripping them of their visibility. In theory, if these groups are excluded from public

51 Lührmann et al., "Defending Democracy Against Illiberal Challengers"; Capoccia, *Defending Democracy*.

52 Ibid.

stages, they cannot spread their views and positions. This would limit the audience they reach and reduce the potential of successful mobilization. As democracy promoters control a particular share of elite stages that come with international legitimacy, they can exclude populist protest groups from panel discussions and refrain from discussing them or their platform publicly. They could also deliberately decide to support civil society partners who exclude these groups from (public) discussions. In this way, democracy promoters can also "keep 'clean hands'," [53] as they fully disengage with these groups.

However, this approach risks fueling protest turnout, as populist protest groups and their supporters are motivated by the desire to make their voices heard. If participants feel their concerns are not being dealt with or even taken seriously, ignoring protests can stoke anger, indignation and frustration.[54] To draw attention to their issues and demands, populist protest groups could use this ignoring strategy to point fingers at the mainstream media for "silencing" their voices. Such discourses could mobilize more people to take to the streets as a means of political participation and to even adopt more radical protest methods.

Marginalize

A *marginalization* approach is aimed at reducing the popularity of populist protest groups by delegitimizing their positions, ideas and methods. If these are then seen as illegitimate, the groups may attract fewer supporters and see lower turnout at their protests. To this end, democracy promoters can support civil society campaigns against the populist protest groups, which could include organizing counterprotests, for example. Moreover, they could publicly dismantle their discourses to weaken their narratives, denigrate them publicly, or build alliances to combine efforts against these groups. Democracy promoters can also convey the illegitimacy of these groups to their international partners.

These measures risk increasing polarization and thus fueling protest mobilization, especially if targeted at more moderate groups.[55] Any populist protest group that is publicly demonized could, for instance, attract more supporters by positioning themselves as victims.[56] This victimization strategy could particularly work for more moderate actors, who could call out democracy promoters for their disproportionately harsh response to their relatively moderate positions. Furthermore, research indicates that counter-demonstrations might increase participation in populist protest groups' protests, as they contribute to "collective identity building, polarization... and 'emotional energy.'"[57] Finally, these kinds of actions against such groups could harm

53 Downs, "How Effective is the Cordon Sanitaire?"

54 James Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research," Annual Review of Sociology 37, 2011, accessed October 7, 2023, https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150015.

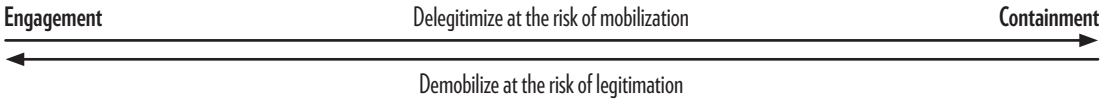
55 Lührmann et al., "Defending Democracy Against Illiberal Challengers."

56 Franz Fallend and Reinhard Heinisch, "Collaboration as successful strategy against right-wing populism? The case of the centre-right coalition in Austria, 2000-2007," Democratization 23, no. 2, 2015, accessed October 1, 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2015.1060223?needAccess=true.

57 Johannes Vüllers and Sebastian Hellmeier, "Does counter-mobilization contain right-wing populist move-

democracy promoters' reputations, as the former can easily accuse the latter of foreign meddling in domestic politics.[58] Due to these risks, democracy promoters should only adopt *marginalization* measures to deal with more extremist or anti-democratic (parts of) groups, namely those calling for violence or to dismantle key democratic institutions or the rule of law.[59]

Figure 1: Typology of Democracy Promoters' Approaches Toward Populist Protest Groups



	COOPERATE	CONVERSE	IGNORE	MARGINALIZE
	Target: Moderate Groups		Target: Extreme Groups	
ACTIVITIES	• Address selected issues of populist groups • Organize events collaboratively • Advocate jointly • Fund activities	• Arrange and mediate between populist groups and other local stakeholders • Converse directly with populist groups	• Exclude from public platforms (e.g., panel discussions) • Exclude from conversations and meetings	• Build alliances • Dismantle discourse • Campaign against populist protest groups (e.g., organizing counterprotests) • Undermine reputation locally and internationally
BENEFITS	Supporting actions to proactively address select populist group demands and concerns reduces the need for mobilization. Cooperation can deepen trust with the populist groups, a prerequisite to eventually discuss more sensitive issues.	Conversing with populist groups makes them feel heard, reducing the potential for mobilization.	Exclusion of populist groups reduces their public visibility and their potential for mobilization. Less supporters participate in protests.	Concerted actions against populist groups delegitimize their positions, ideas, and methods. Supporters turn away from the groups and stop participating in protests.
RISKS	Cooperating with populist groups risks increasing the legitimacy of their views. It also risks harming the credibility and legitimacy of democracy promoters.	Conversing with populist groups risks reenforcing populist views. It similarly risks harming the credibility and legitimacy of democracy promoters.	Exclusion of populist groups risk frustrating supporters, as their concerns are not being dealt with. They could view protests as the only way for political participating, fueling protest mobilization.	Concerted actions against populist groups risk strengthening cohesion among supporters, increasing participation in protest mobilization.

ments? Evidence from Germany," European Journal of Political Research 61, 2022, https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1475-6765.12439, p. 40.

58 This was the case in Lebanon in 2019, where Hezbollah accused external actors of this sort of interference to influence the protest movement. See: Hensing et al., "Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises."

59 Lührmann et al., "Defending Democracy Against Illiberal Challengers"; Capoccia, *Defending Democracy*.

Democracy Promoters' Responses to Populist Protest Groups in Brazil

The Political Colors of Democracy Promoters Influenced Their Assessments of the Populist Protests

The massive impeachment protests in Brazil from 2015 to 2016 showed the mobilization capacities of new right-wing and conservative civil society groups that use populist narratives. It is no surprise that international democracy promoters assessed the political developments differently. They are not a homogenous group but rather pursue different (partisan) agendas and priorities. Accordingly, democracy promoters' political colors significantly influenced their threat assessment of populist protest groups.

Democracy promoters' political colors significantly influenced their threat assessment of populist protest groups.

This also meant that democracy promoters did not have a common strategy in dealing with the dynamic situation that was the impeachment movement against Rousseff.[60] Left-leaning democracy promoters, quickly feeling the need to "prevent a slide into right-wing populism,"[61] sought to defend democracy as much as the Rousseff government's progressive agenda. On the one hand, they supported large-scale corruption investigations, since the evidence of criminal wrongdoing was compelling and Operation Car Wash was proving that even powerful politicians could be prosecuted. On the other hand, these democracy promoters saw the impeachment campaign against Rousseff as a politically motivated process.[62] In their view, the allegations of misconduct connected to the federal budget were not a justified reason for impeachment. Moreover, it was Eduardo Cunha, then-president of the Chamber of Deputies, who initiated the proceedings – only shortly after the Workers' Party had moved to impeach Cunha himself over corruption allegations.[63] On top of that, right-wing media had been accused of organizing a media campaign against Rousseff and the Workers' Party.[64]

60 Interviews with two democracy promoters, Berlin, August 17, 2023, and August 14, 2023.

61 Interview with a democracy promoter, Berlin, October 2, 2023.

62 Thomas Manz, "Moralischer Verschleiß der Politik," 2016, Journal für Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft, accessed October 8, 2023, https://www.ipg-journal.de/interviews/artikel/moralischer-verschleiss-der-politik-1237/.

63 Jonathan Watts, "Brazil opens impeachment proceedings against president Dilma Rousseff," 2015, The Guardian, 2015, accessed October 9, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/02/brazil-dilma-rousseff-impeachment-proceedings.

64 Teun A van Dijk, "How Globo media manipulated the impeachment of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff,"

Other democracy promoters were either supportive or less critical of the impeachment proceedings, and were also less concerned with the emerging new right – including Bolsonaro – at this point in time.[65] Notably, one such representative described the leading protest groups as "center-right," while left-leaning democracy promoters tended to call them "right-wing" or "extreme-right."[66] Another interlocutor admitted that it was only after the protests that they realized they had been "manipulated" by right-wing groups; at the time, they considered these groups a "spontaneous moment."[67] According to one representative of an institution critical of the impeachment campaign, those who were slow to alarm wanted to not "prejudge anyone," but rather to wait and see how the situation would develop.[68]

Focus on Civil Society Partners and Home Audiences

Most democracy promoters ended up adopting a mix of ignore and marginalize approaches.

No matter their political leanings, most democracy promoters ended up adopting a mix of *ignore* and *marginalize* approaches. It is important to emphasize, however, that the *ignore* approach was often not a deliberate decision but rather a result of other priorities. Democracy promoters chose to focus on their own civil society partners and communicating to their home audiences (e.g., headquarters, diplomats, academics). During the time of the mass protests, all democracy promoters interviewed for this study continued to support their established civil society and political partners. For left-leaning democracy promoters, this was because their civil society partners – who were facing verbal attacks and being stripped of financial resources – were in particular need of support and protection.[69]

Left-leaning democracy promoters with offices in Brazil were also occupied with providing analyses of the escalating situation to their home audiences. A few interviewees emphasized that, in light of conflicting assessments, this was a priority rooted in their desire to stress the danger that right-wing populist protests posed to democracy. In the end, these efforts paid off, as home audiences started to view these developments (including the election of Bolsonaro) as a concern for democracy.

Limited Capacities and Uncertainty About Effective Strategies Toward Populist Protest Groups

The activities described above consumed already limited capacities, especially at smaller institutions, which arguably prevented the development of concrete strategies

Discourse and Communication 11, no. 2, 2017, accessed October 19, 2023, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1750481317691838; Thomas Manz, "Eine regelrechte Hasskampagne," 2016, Journal für Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft, accessed October 2, 2023, https://www.ipg-journal.de/interviews/artikel/eine-regelrechte-hasskampagne-1323/.

65 Jan Woischnik and Alexandra Steinmeyer, "Mass Protests and Political Gridlock," 2016, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, accessed October 1, 2023, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_44569_2.pdf/1e49f6f5-5b1c-41e0-8507-d8cb12a37b1b?version=1.0&t=1539658276722.

66 Interviews with three democracy promoters, São Paulo, August, 30, 2023, and Berlin, November 9, 2023.

67 Interview with a democracy promoter, online, October 25, 2023.

68 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paulo, August, 25, 2023.

69 Interviews with two democracy promoters, São Paulo, August, 25, 2023, and August, 30, 2023.

on how to address the populist protests.[70] In fact, two representatives admitted that their organizations did not have "proper strategies" in place during the mass protests.[71] Others also mentioned that they lacked knowledge about sensible strategies toward right-wing populist groups.[72] This is why a few democracy promoters have since started a peer exchange within their international organizations, gathering insights from offices in other countries on how to respond to populist protest groups.[73]

Attempts at Marginalizing Populist Protest Groups and Moderating Progressive Partners

Some democracy promoters discussed *marginalization* strategies to counter populist protest groups with their civil society partners. However, nearly all of them emphasized that they only supported their partners and, as external actors, generally do not directly intervene in domestic affairs. It is up to their partners to act, according to these democracy promoters. Yet they do support work that is quite political, and, in this way, try to impact the political situation in favor of supporting democracy and their partisan political agenda. One democracy promoter hoped to "build resistance" by helping its partners' campaign against the right wing. This led to them "denouncing [right-wing forces] on multiple levels, also on the international level, to give this more visibility."[74]

Nearly all democracy promoters supported the efforts of progressive and pro-democratic civil society groups to build alliances, such as the "Pact for Democracy," a Brazilian civil society coalition to defend democracy and "contain the extreme right."[75] Notably, the initiative was only launched a few months before Bolsonaro was elected president in 2018 – and can therefore be seen as a response to the rise of populist, right-wing groups rather than as a reaction to ongoing mass protests. One democracy promoter supported the initiative by, for example, co-organizing dialogue events, as they had a "laudable"[76] agenda to renew Brazilian politics by getting new and young people on electoral lists. However, another representative of this external actor claimed that this initiative "misses the core problem, [as] the strong polarization did not leave room" for the ambitious renewal efforts. In contrast, a member of Pact for Democracy highlighted that they had successfully lobbied Congressmen, foreign embassies and companies to quickly validate the 2022 election results, to reduce the opportunity for Bolsonaro supporters to dismiss the results. Besides supporting Brazilian alliances, a few democracy promoters also tried to mediate between different political groups to build a "progressive bloc."[77]

Another organization invested in detailed analyses of the right-wing groups' discourse to share with their partners, who could have used it to combat the discourse

70 Interview with a democracy promoter, Berlin, August 14, 2023.

71 Interviews with two democracy promoters, Berlin, August 17, 2023, and August 14, 2023.

72 Interviews with two democracy promoters, Berlin, August 14, 2023, and São Paulo, August 25, 2023.

73 Interviews with two democracy promoters, São Paulo, August 25, 2023, and, online, October 10, 2023.

74 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paulo, August, 30, 2023.

75 Interview with a member of the "Pact of Democracy", São Paulo, August 28, 2023; for more information, see: https://www.pactopelademocracia.org.br/o-pacto.

76 Interview with a democracy promoter, Berlin, October 2, 2023.

77 Ibid.

through counterarguments. The goal was to "contain the domination of right-wing forces in the protest movement."[78] However, this only happened "very tediously,"[79] as their progressive partners sweepingly condemned the right wing and did not respond to the content of the discourse.

Democracy promoters tried to convince their own partners to take a more differentiated view of conservative and right-wing groups.

An additional interlocutor pointed out a similar challenge: when, for example, some of their progressive civil society partners demonized Evangelicals as deeply conservative, this made conversation impossible in their view. But by actively stressing that engaging with these groups is needed to depolarize society, the democracy promoter managed to gain the understanding of their partners.[80] One representative from a similar organization also stated that some of the progressive partners' methods – such as "offensive exhibitionism [or the] partially aggressive tone of feminist organizations"[81] – were not constructive, as this prevented a discussion with more conservative groups who were supposedly open to supporting women. In these cases, democracy promoters themselves tried to convince their own partners to take a more differentiated view toward conservative and right-wing groups. They found limited success.

No Conversation and Cooperation with Key Protest Groups

None of the democracy promoters interviewed for this study pursued a *cooperation* or *conversation* approach with the key protest groups: the Free Brazil Movement, Come to the Streets and Revolted Online.[82] Some democracy promoters did not see themselves in a position, or otherwise feel the need, to respond to the protest movement. One interlocutor, for example, outlined that "protest movements are not appropriate partners for us,"[83] because in their view political participation happens through political parties. So, they kept their focus on strengthening parties, their long-term goal. Another representative repeated that their role is not to intervene in domestic politics, so they sought to work with "*legitimate* formalized civil society organizations on thematic areas" instead of on political issues.[84] Furthermore, the same person explained that populist groups "are often not representative of... a Brazilian population."[85] Interestingly, this assessment stands in contrast to the masses that the protest groups were able to mobilize to call for Rousseff's impeachment.

Left-leaning democracy promoters stated that there was barely even a basis for speaking with the right-wing populist protest groups. One interlocutor argued that since they did not see a justification for the impeachment process against Rousseff, it would not be sensible for them to engage with the groups mobilizing for it. Another representative emphasized that their organization "would never invite" the Free Brazil Movement despite following a pluralistic approach and advocating for dialogue between

78 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paulo, August 25, 2023.

79 Ibid.

80 Interview with a democracy promoter, online, October 10, 2023.

81 Interview with a democracy promoter, Berlin, October 2, 2023.

82 This was also confirmed by three Free Brazil Movement activists and two people close to this protest group.

83 Interview with a democracy promoter, Berlin, November 9, 2023.

84 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paulo, August 28, 2023.

85 Ibid.

people with different perspectives, as they are "anti-democratic" and "extreme right in the economic and also social sense."[86]

Interestingly, the same person claimed that the Free Brazil Movement was calling for a military intervention even though they had rejected such demands.[87] Yet another interlocutor emphasized that the Free Brazil Movement supposedly campaigned for Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections, even though this was false, too.[88] In fact, the Free Brazil Movement, together with Come to the Streets, tried to mobilize for an impeachment process against Bolsonaro.[89] In these cases, democracy promoters' incorrect assessments of the protest groups raises questions about their capabilities to properly examine them. A representative of a democracy promoter admitted that, in hindsight, a more detailed analysis and differentiated view would have helped inform a strategic response.

Efforts to Converse with Like-Minded Politicians and People

Some democracy promoters have pursued a *conversation* approach – and thus a more tolerant response – but not with the key populist protest groups themselves. Rather, this work targeted like-minded elected politicians and people. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation, for example, has supported the Political Action Network for Sustainability (RAPS), a Brazilian NGO that deliberately adopts a non-partisan approach. The organization seeks to promote sustainability and democracy "through the support, connection and development of political leaders, from different political parties, origins and ideologies, capable of putting differences aside to dialogue and act together."[90] In practice, RAPS invites politicians from the whole political spectrum, including members of the Workers' Party and even the Liberal Party – Bolsonaro's party since 2021 – to discussions. The idea is to act as an intermediary and create a space for balanced dialogue on mainstream topics such as sustainability.[91] In this way, they aim to reduce prejudices and "reach people who are [not] already converted to the cause."[92] To this end, since 2012 they have built a network of over 500 members with different political affiliations. During the impeachment protests, according to a representative, RAPS was able to organize discrete and low-key meetings where participants could speak openly to each other – thanks to their existing connections.[93] However, it remains unclear whether they had invited members of the key protest groups.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation has also adopted a *conversation* approach, although they have focused not on members or leaders of the protest groups but on the Evangelical

86 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paulo, August 30, 2023.

87 See Chapter 2 for more on the Free Brazil Movement distancing itself from calls for military intervention.

88 Interview with a democracy promoter, online, August 16, 2023.

89 Mori, "Protestos contra Bolsonaro"; Folha de S. Paulo, "MBL e Vem Pra Rua convocam ato pelo impeachment para 12 de setembro e abrem divisão das ruas com a esquerda," 2021, accessed November 1, 2023, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/07/mbl-e-vem-pra-rua-convocam-ato-pelo-impeachment-para-12-de-setembro-e-abrem-divisao-das-ruas-com-a-esquerda.shtml; interviews with two researchers.

90 See: https://www.raps.org.br/.

91 Interviews with representatives of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and RAPS, online, August 16, 2023, and São Paulo, August 28, 2023.

92 Interview with a representative of RAPS, São Paulo, August 28, 2023.

93 Ibid.

groups who supported the impeachment campaign.[94] As part of this aim, the democracy promoter supports the Brazilian NGO Instituto de Estudos da Religião. Notably, this work had already started in 2013, before the impeachment protests began. While the progressive portion of the Evangelical population has not necessarily grown, they have become more visible as a consequence of having developed a common strategy.[95]

94 Jonathan Watts, "With Rousseff on the ropes, Brazil's far right sees an opening," The Guardian, 2016, accessed November 8, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/05/brazil-far-right-dilma-rousseff-impeachment.

95 Interview with a representative of Heinrich Böll Foundation, online, October 10, 2023."

Potential for Alternative Approaches by Democracy Promoters

As presented above, democracy promoters pursued a mix of *ignore* and *marginalization* approaches and therefore aimed at containing rather than engaging with the populist protest groups in Brazil. *Conversation* strategies were only used to address conservative and right-wing politicians and like-minded people – but not the members or leaders of the key protest groups. Some of these measures were also only implemented after the protests to impeach Rousseff.

Could democracy promoters have potentially pursued *conversation* or *cooperation* strategies with the protest groups? Arguably, for international organizations that seek to promote democracy, it would not be sensible to *converse* or *cooperate* with groups that clearly pursue anti-democratic goals, as this risks providing legitimacy to these groups and severely damaging the democracy promoter's own credibility – and ultimately, threatens to undermine democracy. In contrast, engaging with more moderate populist protest groups that have different political demands, goals and priorities, but do not question liberal democracy itself, could be conducive to decreasing mobilization efforts and strengthening democratic debate.[96]

Potential for Engagement Approaches During Protest Campaign?

In the case of Brazil, this means that an engagement approach toward groups calling for military intervention such as Revolted Online or SOS Armed Forces would not have been plausible. *Conversation* or *cooperation* with these groups would have seriously risked giving them disproportionate visibility and legitimacy – given that they only gathered a relatively small number of protestors – and in the worst-case scenario could have pressured the military to intervene. Notably, the other two leading protest groups – the Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets – rejected the call for military intervention but focused on pressuring senators to vote for the impeachment of Rousseff.

96 See for example: Lührmann et al., "Defending Democracy Against Illiberal Challengers." The authors argue for a critical engagement approach: militant response strategies toward radicals and tolerant response strategies toward more moderate groups.

During the protest campaign, democracy promoters had no opportunity to engage with these groups.

It is important to highlight that the impeachment was itself highly controversial. Rousseff and her supporters called the impeachment a parliamentary coup, as the charges of manipulating budget figures to cover up a deficit was a common practice of former presidents, and because she was not directly implicated in corruption scandals.[97] According to Rousseff's camp, the impeachment endangered "the sovereignty of the Brazilian people and the constitution"[98] – and thus could undermine democracy. Others argue that, from a technical point of view, the impeachment followed a legal process in which the Brazilian Congress voted for her impeachment.[99] While the study at hand is not positioned to conclude this controversy, neither the Free Brazil Movement nor Come to the Streets pushed forward any clearly anti-democratic goals. This made them a potential target group for *conversation* and *cooperation* strategies. However, during the protest campaign, democracy promoters had no opportunity to engage with these groups due to two main factors.

Factor 1: No Openness for Engagement With External Democracy Promoters During Protest Peak

First, the situation, especially during the protest peak, was very polarized: neither side was open for engagement. On the one hand, as discussed above, left-leaning democracy promoters often did not see enough common ground to *converse* or *cooperate* with groups they perceived as extreme-right and anti-democratic. On the other hand, populist protest groups also appeared to be hesitant to engage with outsiders, especially those with whom they had not already been in contact before the protests. These groups were also vetting the political orientation of potential interlocutors: as one researcher stated, these groups were "analyzing different powers [such as the European Union] to investigate if they are aligning with their values and demand for neoliberal economics and less state [involvement]."[100] If a person approaching them had an international connection, "they may have thought [they were] a spy."[101] During the critical moment of the mass protests, through which they exerted considerable pressure on the Brazilian Senate to impeach the sitting president, these groups seemed to take particular care that no one could undermine their efforts.

Factor 2: Populist Protest Groups' Connections to Conservative and Liberal External Actors

Second, populist protest groups had arguably limited incentive to be more open to left-wing, progressive international actors. This is not only due to their little common

97 Institute for International Economic Policy, "Brazil's Dilma Vana Rousseff: Impeachment or 'Coup D'Etat'?" 2022, accessed November 10, 2023, https://iiep.gwu.edu/2022/04/04/brazils-dilma-vana-rousseff-impeachment-or-coup-detat/.

98 Bruce Konviser, "Rousseff says she's victim of 'a coup'," Deutsche Welle, 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/brazils-rousseff-maintains-innocence-calls-impeachment-effort-a-coup/a-19252775.

99 The New York Times, "All Impeachments Are Political. But Was Brazil's Something More Sinister?", 2016, accessed November 2, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/americas/brazil-impeachment-coup.html.

100 Interview with a researcher, online, September 1, 2023.

101 Ibid.

ground or even opposing goals, but also because some group members already had established partnerships with neoliberal, conservative and right-wing international actors prior to the protests. For example, through the Brazilian organizations where they worked, some Free Brazil Movement activists reportedly had connections to the United States' Atlas Network and Mises Institute and the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation.[102] While these were not institutional ties to the protest groups as such, a Brazilian researcher found that activists did receive logistical and intellectual support from these external actors. They, for example, helped advertise events like the Freedom Forums in Porto Alegre and facilitated bringing Ron Paul, the US Republican, to São Paulo for a lecture in September 2014.[103]

Democracy promoters can still inadvertently embolden activists who will later radicalize and promote far-right and anti-democratic ideas.

Yet this was not the massive international funding that Brazilian left-wing actors perceived to be at play. Free Brazil Movement activists emphasized that they only collaborated on matters like research and organizing events.[104] One researcher who identifies as left-wing argued that the mistaken allegations from their camp "started to sow more distrust" between the left and right. This distrust soon led to harder ruptures. Two members of Bolsonaro's far-right Liberal Party, who had formerly been extreme Free Brazil Movement activists before leaving the group, outlined how they had connected Brazilian far-right politicians and activists with similar actors in other countries like Chile, Germany, Argentina, and the United States.[105] Each year, the Brazilian far right continues to participate in the Conservative Political Action Conference, which brings together right-wing politicians and activists.[106]

While conservative and liberal external actors may want to work with populist protest groups to pursue partisan policy goals, such as free markets, the case of Brazil is a cautionary tale: democracy promoters can still inadvertently embolden activists who will late radicalize and promote far-right and anti-democratic ideas.

Potential Window of Opportunity for Democracy Promoters: Building a Counterweight to Bolsonaro

After Rousseff was impeached and Bolsonaro began to threaten liberal democracy in Brazil, democracy promoters may have had the chance to contribute to building bridges between right-wing protest groups and left-wing political actors in the form of a broad counterweight to Bolsonaro's attacks against minorities, the rule of law and democratic institutions.[107] Eventually, the super-impeachment request against Bolsonaro in 2021 reflected the common ground between left-wing political actors like the Workers' Party and members of the Free Brazil Movement. In a media interview,

102 Interviews with two Free Brazil Movement activists, São Paulo, August 22 and August 24, 2023.

103 Camila Rocha, "Passando o bastão : A nova geração de liberais brasileiros," 2017, accessed November 11, 2023, https://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/71327; Camila Rocha, "Imposto é Roubo! A Formação de um Contrapúblico Ultraliberal e os Protestos Pró- Impeachment de Dilma Rousseff," Dados 62, no. 3, https://doi.org/10.1590/001152582019189.

104 Interviews with two Free Brazil Movement activists, São Paulo, August 22 and August 24, 2023.

105 Interviews with two members of the Liberal Party, São Paulo, August 23 and August 28, 2023.

106 See: https://www.digital.cpac.org/.

107 Human Rights Watch, "Brazil: Bolsonaro Threatens Democratic Rule," 2021, accessed November 20, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/15/brazil-bolsonaro-threatens-democratic-rule.

the Free Brazil Movement's leader Kim Kataguiri emphasized that the threat posed by the then-president was more important than political differences: "Electorally, we'll be in different camps. But it's something bigger that exists here, it's something bigger that is being filed against the criminal, corrupt president, Jair Bolsonaro, and that's why it's a non-partisan cause. It's a question of values, it's a question of morals."[108]

This was a potential window of opportunity that democracy promoters could have arguably leveraged to protect democracy in Brazil. Importantly, the situation was already favorable for collaboration between Brazilian political opponents, who had acted together in their impeachment request. Despite this joint effort in the Congress, protest mobilization efforts for the impeachment were kept separate, with the Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets on the one hand, and left-wing actors on the other hand. In the end, they cumulatively failed to generate enough political pressure on the leader of the Chamber of Deputies, who holds the power to open an impeachment process, but received enough political support from the traditional right-wing parties to avoid doing so.

The impeachment movement against Rousseff had shown the power of protest mobilization. If left-wing and right-wing actors had combined their protest efforts, there theoretically may have been a different outcome for Bolsonaro in Congress. Democracy promoters could have arguably tried to support a rapprochement in mobilization efforts by leveraging their strong ties with relevant political groups, such as the Workers' Party or the Brazilian Social Democracy Party, to convince them to join efforts with the other side. Moreover, they could have created dialogue spaces for established political partners and protest groups to discuss mobilization strategies, and tried to mediate between both sides. For this to have succeeded, both democracy promoters' political partners and the protest groups would have needed to be open for such engagement approaches.

Openness for Engagement After Protests to Impeach Rousseff

In fact, after the impeachment campaign against Rousseff, more moderate members of the populist protest groups may have been open to *converse* and potentially *cooperate* with democracy promoters. A left-wing interlocutor with contacts in the groups also emphasized that this was the case not only for Free Brazil Movement activists but also for Come to the Streets members, who would have been willing to talk because "they are not so radical." Yet "international actors do not even try to speak to them."[109] Two Free Brazil Movement activists interviewed for this study indicated that they would be open to talk to people regardless of their political orientation. However, one of them also expressed that "it is difficult to have a conversation with dictators and central planners. It is not just us, but it would also be very uneasy for them to talk to us; it is a two-way street."[110] By using the term "dictator" to refer to left-wing international organizations, this interlocutor makes clear that there would remain barriers to a

108 Mori, "Protestos contra Bolsonaro."

109 Interview with a researcher, São Paulo, August 25, 2023.

110 Interviews with two Free Brazil Movement activists, São Paulo, August 22 and August 24, 2023.

constructive conversation. All the same, the interviewee did express a clear openness to speaking to democracy promoters without a clear partisan ideology, such as the EU, or organizations with a conservative or liberal agenda. This shows that it does matter who the democracy promoter is. Therefore, democracy promoters would have also needed to work together to protect democracy.

Had they done so, there are still two major obstacles that external democracy promoters would have had to overcome to take advantage of this potential window of opportunity to build a counterweight to Bolsonaro alongside populist protest groups.

Factor 1: Progressive Civil Society Partners' Reluctance to Engagement Approaches

Democracy promoters had to contend with their progressive civil society partners' positions, which hindered their efforts to push for a more pragmatic approach.

First, democracy promoters had to contend with their progressive civil society partners' positions, which hindered their efforts to push for a more pragmatic approach that could have included *conversation* or *cooperation* efforts. As discussed, left-leaning democracy promoters felt the need to protect their own civil society partners and to listen to their priorities – which did not include engaging with the populist protest groups. According to two democracy promoter representatives, they were already trying to convince their partners to take a more differentiated view of conservative and right-wing groups during and after the impeachment protests against Rousseff. In the context of the joint impeachment efforts against Bolsonaro, democracy promoters would have still needed to argue that combining mobilization efforts with the populist protest groups was appropriate.

Factor 2: Democracy Promoters' Reluctance to Intervene in Domestic Politics

Second, almost all democracy promoters were wary of interfering in domestic politics. One representative also emphasized that they did not want to "come across as patronizing."[111] Another interlocutor signaled interest in taking a more mediating role but felt that they would not be able to achieve this "without a major interference. It is a balancing act."[112] This worry is understandable, as external actors rely on the permission of the ruling government to operate in a given country. At the same time, it seems that democracy promoters are quick to invoke this balancing act even though some are arguably already investing in political activities – without significant pushback. This is the case for democracy promoters elsewhere, too. For example, in Sudan, some managed to train local activists in non-violent methods that would later contribute to the mass mobilization against long-standing dictator Omar al-Bashir.[113] For other democracy promoters, this concern seems to prevent them from developing a *political* strategy that could make their efforts more likely to benefit liberal democracy – the key goal of their activities.

111 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paulo, August 30, 2023.

112 Interview with a democracy promoter, São Paulo, August 29, 2023.

113 Hensing et al., "Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises."

Overall, during the protests to impeach Rousseff, democracy promoters did not have an opportunity to engage with the leading groups, as neither the populist protest groups nor the democracy promoters were open to such efforts. Moreover, the populist protest groups connected to conservative and liberal international actors did not appear to see the need to engage with progressive external actors. However, the situation changed after Rousseff was impeached, at which point more moderate members of the populist protest groups may have been open to engaging with democracy promoters. Then, the joint efforts of left- and right-wing groups to impeach Bolsonaro – who had shown himself to be a corrupt, anti-democratic and irresponsible president – reflected a window of opportunity for democracy promoters to help build a broad counterweight to Bolsonaro by mediating between both camps. Still, democracy promoters did not take advantage of this possibility because their progressive civil society partners were reluctant to engage with the protest groups, and because democracy promoters were themselves wary of intervening in such a sensitive and political endeavor.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Democracy promoters have different approaches at their disposal to respond to populist protest and civil society groups. The presented typology includes four approaches ranging from engagement to containment: *cooperate*, *converse*, *ignore*, and *marginalize*. However, according to anecdotal evidence, the case of Brazil is not the only one where democracy promoters have reverted to supporting and defending their established partners while *ignoring* and trying to *marginalize* "difficult" civil society groups.

In Brazil, these were the right-wing populist protest groups that successfully mobilized over a million people to demand the impeachment of Rousseff in 2016 and arguably paved the way for Bolsonaro's election in 2018. In this case, protest mobilization served as a way for populist and anti-democratic groups to exert pressure and achieve their desired political change. This stands in contrast to many democracy promoters' perception that civil society groups – which include protest organizers – are always the "good" actors, to be supported as part of their mission to uphold inclusive democratic governance.

The Brazilian example raises the question of whether focusing on ignoring and marginalizing populist protest groups is most conducive to achieving the objective of democracy promoters.

The Brazilian example raises the question of whether focusing on the relatively easy and less politically controversial approaches of ignoring and marginalizing such groups is most conducive to achieving the objective of democracy promoters. While there was no potential for democracy promoters to adopt engagement approaches during the Rousseff impeachment protest campaign, a possible window of opportunity did emerge during Bolsonaro's presidency: when left- as well as right-wing Brazilian groups, including the Free Brazil Movement and Come to the Streets, mobilized for his impeachment. Despite this common goal, they never combined protests and thus did not exert the potentially higher degree of pressure that may have come from collective mobilization. Even though democracy promoters could have plausibly tried to contribute to bridging gaps between the two camps, they refrained from such efforts due to two main reasons: their own progressive civil society and political partners were skeptical of more tolerant approaches; and democracy promoters were reluctant to intervene more actively in domestic politics.

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, I present three recommendations for democracy promoters:

1. Develop analytical tools to mitigate biases in the assessment of populist protest and civil society groups.

To develop strategic approaches toward populist protest groups, it is important to start from an in-depth understanding of the different actors involved. It is key to differentiate

who can be considered more moderate (i.e., "only" radically partisan within the rules of a liberal democracy) as well as extreme (i.e., clearly anti-democratic). Democracy promoters also need to identify relevant actors in terms of size and popular legitimacy.

In the case of Brazil, democracy promoters were unable to perceive the relevant groups neutrally, as some themselves later recognized. On the one hand, conservative and liberal external actors – whose political agendas seemed to be aligned with those of the more moderate populist protest actors – tended to underestimate the challenge to democracy inherent in protests that opened space for calls for a military intervention. On the other hand, some progressive and left-leaning external actors overestimated the threat that the moderate groups posed to democracy, and failed to distinguish between protest actors who called for military intervention versus those who rejected such calls. To mitigate such biases, democracy promoters should sharpen their analytical tools and gather relevant knowledge from local researchers and staff on the ground.

2. Engage with moderate populist protest groups and contain extreme ones.

Democracy promoters should develop a differentiated political strategy on how to respond to populist groups. As a rule of thumb, democracy promoters should engage with more moderate protest groups and contain anti-democratic groups. This differentiation should not only apply to protest groups as a whole but also to their individual members; it is worth trying to engage with the groups' more moderate constituency directly. To this end, democracy promoters could start contacting people and institutions that are close to the protest groups or fulfill double roles, like those who work at like-minded organizations and engage in protest activities in their leisure time. In Brazil, such individuals included activists of the Free Brazil Movement who were part of conservative and liberal think tanks and research institutes.

For such an engagement approach to work, it is important that democracy promoters as well as the respective protest groups be open to engage with each other. Incentives are needed to ensure that this happens. Clarifying the threat to liberal democracy inherent in certain polarized political situations would make for a strong incentive. Although there was the potential to do so during Bolsonaro's presidency, democracy promoters ultimately missed this opportunity.

3. Establish a network of politically diverse democracy promoters and prioritize defending democracy.

Democracy promoters should promote more exchange across different institutions in order to learn from past efforts and discuss strategies on how to respond to populist protest groups. In the case of Brazil, such peer exchange began after Bolsonaro was elected in 2018, and only involved people working for the same institution.

If liberal democracy comes under fire, democracy promoters with different political orientations should combine their efforts to put out the flames. In such a scenario, democracy promoters should prioritize protecting democracy over their partisan political agendas. Doing so depends on having a shared understanding of the situation and developing a common theory of change.

Finally, democracy promoters should ascertain which of them is best positioned to approach a specific protest group. If the threat comes from right-wing groups like Revolted Online, an independent or conservative democracy promoter may be better positioned than a left-leaning one to reach out to that group's moderates. The reverse may also be true, making a politically diverse coalition indispensable for defending democracy from the threat of anti-democratic populist protests.

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