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AGRICULTURAL POPULISM ON THE PAMPA: FARMERS, GLOBALIZATION, AND POLITICS IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL

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Abstract: The election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018 drew on an electoral coalition linking affluent urban neighborhoods, poorer urban peripheries, and agricultural districts, while failing to win the poorest rural regions. Analysis has tended to focus on the urban dimensions of this electoral geography. This paper addresses this omission by examining the case of a farming town in Rio Grande do Sul. Using qualitative data to explore how social and economic changes and challenges were understood and narrating, it argues a combination of historical and contemporary factors created conditions in which local citizens narrowly voted for Bolsonaro.
Keywords: Populism, Electoral Geography, Rural, Agribusiness.

POPULISMO AGRÍCOLA NO PAMPA: AGRICULTORES, GLOBALIZAÇÃO E POLÍTICA NO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

Resumo: A eleição de Jair Bolsonaro no Brasil em 2018 baseou-se numa coligação eleitoral que ligava bairros urbanos ricos, periferias urbanas mais pobres e distritos agrícolas, mas não conseguiu conquistar as regiões rurais mais pobres. A análise tendeu a centrar-se nas dimensões urbanas desta geografia eleitoral. Este artigo aborda essa omissão examinando o caso de uma cidade agrícola no Rio Grande do Sul. Utilizando dados qualitativos para explorar como as mudanças e desafios sociais e económicos foram compreendidos e narrados, argumenta que uma combinação de factores históricos e contemporâneos criou condições nas quais os cidadãos locais votaram por pouco em Bolsonaro.
Palavras-chave: Populismo, Geografia Eleitoral, Rural, Agronegócio.

LE POPULISME AGRICOLE SUR LA PAMPA : AGRICULTEURS, GLOBALISATION ET POLITIQUE A RIO GRANDE DO SUL

Resumé: L'élection de Jair Bolsonaro au Brésil en 2018 s'est appuyée sur une coalition électorale reliant les quartiers urbains aisés, les périphéries urbaines plus pauvres et les districts agricoles, mais n'a pas réussi à conquérir les régions rurales les plus défavorisées. L'analyse s'est généralement concentrée sur les dimensions urbaines de cette géographie électorale. Cet article comble cette lacune en examinant le cas d'une ville agricole du Rio Grande do Sul. En utilisant des données qualitatives pour explorer la manière dont les changements et défis sociaux et économiques ont été compris et racontés, il soutient qu'une combinaison de facteurs historiques et contemporains a créé des conditions dans lesquelles les citoyens locaux ont voté de justesse pour Bolsonaro.
Mots-clés : Populisme, Géographie électorale, Rural, Agro-industrie.

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Introduction

It is a sultry Friday evening in March 2018. In the small town of Dom Pedrito in southern Brazil, hard against the Uruguay border, pick-ups and SUVs pull-up at the rodeo, disgorging farmers who greet each other cheerfully. Inside, the walls are lined with images and icons of *gaucho* culture. A man in traditional costume hovers spectrally at the back, beside the churrascaria. For now, though, attention is focused on the front of the hall, where the farmers sit at long tables, listening intently to the speaker, a federal deputy from the state who is describing the crisis facing agriculture. When the meeting opens for discussion, the conviviality fades into anger and frustration as farmers share their struggles with extreme weather, fluctuating prices and costs, threats of regulation, and competition from imports. Taking aim at the Mercosul trade agreement, one phrase is repeated by the gathered rice producers as they advocate protectionism: "Trump is right". Seven months later the residents of Dom Pedrito, like those in many small towns across Brazil, voted to elect Jair Bolsonaro as President of the Republic.

The election of Bolsonaro is frequently bracketed with Donald Trump's election in the United States, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and surges in support for populist and radical right parties in Europe as one of several disruptive political events that have marked a right-ward turn in liberal democracies over the last decade. There are similarities in style and rhetoric between Bolsonaro, Trump and European leaders such as Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orban, but there are also notable differences, including an unwavering adherence to neoliberalism that contrasted with tendencies towards interventionism and protectionism in some populist platforms (and noted by Dom Pedrito farmers). Bolsonaro's position has been variously characterized as incompletely populist (FERES-JUNIOR ET AL., 2023; TAMAKI AND FUKS, 2020), more populist than nationalist (RICCI AND VENTURELLI, 2023), primarily authoritarian (TANSCHEIT, 2023), and lacking the nativism found in European and North American right-wing populism (RICCI AND VENTURELLI, 2023).

The electoral geography of Bolsonaro's win also diverges from typical spatial patterns of populist voting elsewhere. In Europe and the United States, support for populist and radical right parties and candidates has been associated with 'left-behind' regions that are perceived as marginalized in the global economy, often, though not exclusively, peripheral rural districts (ESSLETZBICHLER ET AL. 2018; MONNANT AND BROWN, 2017; RODRIGUEZ-POSE, 2018; WUTHNOW, 2018). Populist discourse has refashioned and weaponized long-standing awareness of rural-urban disparities to pit nationally-authentic rural people against globalized metropolitan elites. As such, right-wing populism has been identified as contributing to growing rural-urban polarization. Yet, in the 2018 Brazilian presidential election, the poorest, 'left-behind', states of substantially rural north east Brazil voted definitively for Bolsonaro's leftist opponent, Fernando Haddad, while Bolsonaro won in prosperous regions in the country's south and center. More accurately, Bolsonaro mobilized a coalition that encompassed affluent urban middle class voters in cities including Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo; peripheral lower-income residents in these cities; and rural voters connected with Brazil's booming agribusiness sector (BAYARRI TOSCANO, 2022; LAYTON ET AL., 2021; RICHMOND, 2020; RICHMOND AND McKENNA, 2024; SILVA ET AL., 2021).

Thus, rather than reflecting a rural-urban divide, the electoral geography of Bolsonaro's vote reveals the differentiation of the Brazilian countryside and two contrasting trajectories of rural economies: the rural Brazil of agribusiness, international investment, and export-oriented production of soy and cattle; and the rural Brazil of landless agricultural workers, small-scale peasant farming, and indigenous communities. These two rural Brazils have competed with each other in the policy

apparatus of the Brazilian state and have been championed by politicians on the right and left respectively. The influence of agribusiness elites on conservative politics is well-established (LAPPER, 2021; POMPEIA, 2024), but it does not in itself explain the pivoting of rural voters in 2018 from the mainstream center-right to the previously peripheral figure of Jair Bolsonaro.

This paper argues that Bolsonaro's capacity to mobilize a socially and geographically diverse coalition of voters was made possible by the aggregation of small-scale, everyday and place-based experiences that led individual voters to become amenable to Bolsonaro's appeal. The approach is informed by THRIFT'S (1986) account of the landmark 1945 general election in Britain, in which he demonstrates how changes in the everyday lives of people during the Second World War and the folk models through which their home localities were understood led to a sharp left-ward shift in voting behaviour. The case made in this paper is that the right-ward shift in politics in the 2010s and 2020s in Brazil and elsewhere can similarly be understood by exploring the evolving everyday experiences of people and how these get filtered through the context of place to connect with large-scale political issues and debate. To illustrate this thesis, the paper investigates a case study of Dom Pedrito, an agricultural town of soy- and rice-cultivation and cattle ranching in the pampa biome in Rio Grande do Sul, which in the second round of the 2018 election narrowly voted for Jair Bolsonaro by 51.46 per cent to 48.54 per cent.

The Return of Rural Populism

The widespread perception that rising support for populist and radical right parties and candidates represents a revolt of rural populations against perceived urban elites may be attributed in large part to the out-size prominence afforded to American politics in the global media and in scholarly analysis. Donald Trump's brand of populism has been carefully calibrated to tap into deep-rooted rural grievances at perceived economic and cultural marginalization and distrust towards urban-centerd government, as documented by series of ethnographic studies (ASHWOOD, 2018; CRAMER, 2016; HOCHSCHILD, 2016; WUTHNOW, 2018). In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Trump obtained 63.25 per cent of the vote in micropolitan and non-core counties (the two most rural categories in the U.S. rural-urban classification), compared with 46.09 per cent nationally. In 2020, he increased his share of the vote in micropolitan and non-core counties to 65.09 per cent, despite losing the election overall.

Similar tendencies can be observed in some, but not all European countries. In France, the far-right Rassemblement National party polled 41.25 per cent in communes with fewer than 2,500 electors in the first round of parliamentary elections in June 2024, well above its vote of 34.12 per cent nationally. In the Netherlands, the entry into government of Geert Wilders's Partij voor de Vrijheld (PVV) after elections in November 2023 was aided both by a significant growth in its votes in rural municipalities and by increased support for the agrarian populist Boer Burger Beweging (BBB), which became a coalition partner. Rural areas have also been linked to support for populist and radical right parties in Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland. Beyond Europe, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and One Nation in Australia developed out of rural or periurban bases.

However, it is less easy to discern consistent common structural factors that explain the propensity of rural voters to support populist and radical right parties across these countries. Even in the United States, MONNAT AND BROWN (2017) concluded that Trump's election in 2016 could not be attributed to "a new 'rural revolt'" (p 234), but reflected more variegated 'place-level despair' defined

by several economic, social and health indicators. More broadly, studies have variously explained rural support for populism in relation to a demographically older population, deindustiralization, agricultural restructuring, the hollowing-out of small towns, anti-immigration sentiments, ethnic voting, religious voting, nostalgia, perceived threats to rural culture, libertarian and anti-statist tendencies, and perceived political marginalization (for example, BERLET AND SUNSHINE, 2019; ESSLETZBICHLER ET AL., 2018; HOCHSCHILD, 2016; MAMONOVA AND FRANQUESA, 2019; RODRIGUEZ-POSE, 2018; SHEA AND JACOBS, 2023). The most common connection is the framing of these disparate concerns through populist rhetoric that venerates rural cultures as embodying 'true' national values, seeds notions of injustice, and encourages rural resentment towards metropolitan elites.

In Europe and North America, the twenty-first century rise of populism is presented as a novelty that has historic echoes with an earlier (and more progressive) form of rural populism in early twentieth century, but which primarily breaks with the long dominance of technocratic liberalism. By contrast, populism has been a persistent and powerful political force in South America for much of the last hundred years, following its own distinct dynamics (GRIGERA, 2017; MUDDE AND KALTWASSER, 2012). The mid-twentieth century populism of Juan Peron in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil was ideologically ambiguous, allowing support to be drawn from both rural and urban areas. As these movements fractured into antagonistic strands of left- and right-wing populism, the fear of leftist populism help to prompt coups that left much of the continent under military government. Following the return of democracy, leftist populist leaders have had the greatest impact, notably Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Nestor Kitchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina; but populism has also been embraced by right-wing politicians, often combined with neoliberalism and with a nostalgic authoritarian nationalism that recalls the order of military regimes (HUNTER AND VEGA, 2022).

RICCI ET AL. (2021) argue that there have been three populist presidents of Brazil since 1985, each occupying a different ideological position: center-right Fernando Collor, left-wing Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), and far-right Jair Bolsonaro. The contrasting politics is reflected in differing articulations of populist logic, MANDACHE (2024) suggesting that Lula's left populism distinguished the people and the elite in economic terms, while Bolsonaro's populism is founded on moral and cultural distinctions. However, Lula's populism was also cut with a pragmatism in which, as ANDRADE (2020) notes, a campaigning persona that claimed to represent the interests of marginalized groups 'from below' was combined with a political project that nurtured and protected interests of privileged actors 'from above'. This 'populist ambiguity' allowed Lula to form alliances with businesses that fuelled Brazil's economic growth and to build an electoral coalition that transcended urban and rural and prosperous and struggling regions. Yet, Andrade argues that it also paved the way for subsequent economic and political regression, including through the fall-out from corruption scandals that mired the governments of both Lula and his successor, Dilma Rouseff, leading to the latter's impeachment in 2015.

As BAYARRI TOSCANO (2020) observes, the corruption scandals and Rouseff's impeachment, along with anti-Workers' Party protests in 2013, were important episodes in constructing the far-right identity that became *Bolsonarismo*, but shifts in electoral geography had already commenced. In Lula's landslide election victory in 2002 he had won every state bar one, but in 2006 his electoral base moved from the more developed regions of southern Brazil to the poorer north east (ZUCCO, 2008). The north east had conventionally voted for conservative candidates prior to 2002, but became a bastion of the Workers' Party (PT), in part in recognition of the impact of Lula's social programs in reducing extreme rural poverty in the region, but also reflecting the reframing of the region in Lula's

populism to "symbolise a certain class identity and visibility for a population that was the victim of colonialism's uneven development and constant marginalisation by the Brazilian elite" (MANDACHE, 2024, p 1894). Accordingly, left populism rather than right populism succeeded in channelling the injustices of Brazil's left-behind regions, including in the 2018 election. At the same time, more prosperous regions moved right-ward. RICHMOND AND McKENNA (2023) link this trajectory in peripheral neighborhoods of Rio da Janeiro and São Paulo to factors including rising violent crime, the influence of evangelical churches, falling absolute poverty, labor precarity, and weakened social organizations, but note that these factors combined in different constellations in different neighborhoods. Similarly differentiated dynamics are likely to explain the transition of rural localities towards voting for Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro's Electoral Geography and *Agri-bolsonarism*

The electoral geography of the 2018 Brazilian presidential election reflected the achievement of Jair Bolsonaro in reconfiguring traditional electoral cleavages into a new coalition. Bolsonaro's brand of populism, or *Bolsonarismo* (BAYARRI TOSCANO, 2020) was constructed on cultural and moral rather than economic lines, producing new divides around gender, race, and religion, but also building an alliance of support that reached across classes and types of geographical area (LAYTON ET AL., 2021; RENNÓ, 2020). Bolsonaro's rhetoric tapped into a public discourse of far right sentiments that had been growing over the previous decade in response to a series of events including corruption scandals, anti-PT protests, and the impeachment of Rousseff, and which advocated hardline positions against corruption and violent crime (BAYARRI TOSCANO, 2020). Analysis of the 2018 Brazilian Election Study indicates that attitudes on corruption and crime are the most important factors explaining support for Bolsonaro (RHODES-PURDY ET AL., 2023). Significantly, Bayarri Toscano argues that the far right identity emerged from the bottom-up, through people's everyday experiences and interactions within the urban society of cities such as Rio de Janeiro. In this paper, I suggest that a parallel process can be observed in rural small towns, but with distinctive contributing factors.

Indeed, Bolsonaro's coalition of support engaged with each of the three blocs that had come to underpin conservative politics in Brazil, colloquially referred to as 'Beef, Bible and Bullets' (LAPPER, 2021). 'Bullets' here refers to pro-gun and pro-police advocates who Bolsonaro appealed to with strong anti-crime rhetoric that resonated in both high- and low-income districts of southern cities (RICHMOND AND McKENNA, 2024). 'Bible' refers to the influence of evangelical churches, especially in urban peripheries, who Bolsonaro courted with socially conservative positions, including anti-LGBT rhetoric (DE ALMEIDA, 2020; LAPPER, 2021). 'Beef' meanwhile refers to the agribusiness lobby and their advocacy for a particular vision of rural Brazil.

The agribusiness lobby, or *ruralistas*, had grown in influence with the globalization-led boom of Brazil's farming sector. Its parliamentary arm, the *Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária* (FPA) caucus, or *bancada do boi* ('ox bench'), expanded from 192 deputies and 11 senators in 2010 to 243 deputies and 37 senators in 2018 (LAPPER, 2021). The cattle farmers that it represents, and large-scale soybean and cereal farmers who share similar outlooks, are found primarily in the south and center of Brazil. The rural economy of these regions contrasts with that of the leftist stronghold of the rural north east. Whereas the latter is characterized by under-development shaped by the legacy of colonial plantations that extracted wealth with little infrastructural investment and by the continuing presence of labor-intensive fruit production (MANDACHE, 2024); in southern Brazil the rural economy was organized around medium- and large-scale settler farmers.

This model has been extended to the center-west in a quasi-colonial programme initiated under the military regime and continued by subsequent governments, including the Lula and Rousseff administrations. With farmers from the south and laborers from the north-east, millions of hectares of *cerrado* and forest have been transformed into cattle pastures and fields of wheat, maize and soybeans. New towns and cities have been established (IORIS, 2018), which have adopted a new urban form, that of the 'agribusiness city' (*cidade do agronegócio*), in which the economy is oriented towards servicing the rural hinterland (PEQUENO AND ELIAS, 2015). At the same time, traditional agricultural towns in the south have also transitioned into agribusiness cities as the corporate presence in farming has grown (WOODS, 2022).

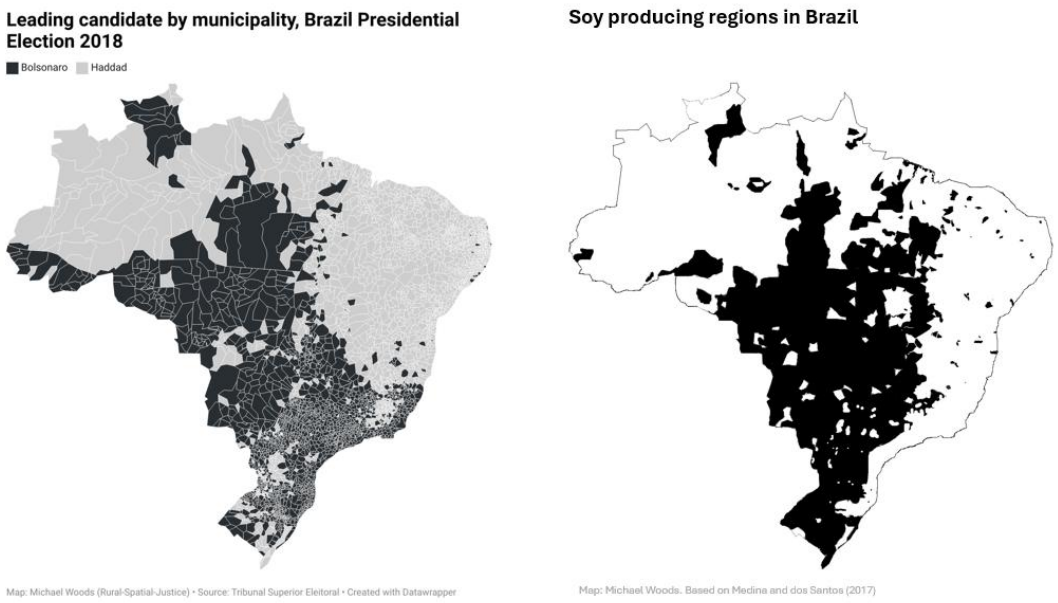
The expansion of Brazilian agribusiness has been fuelled by demand from global markets and driven in part by investment of international capital, including from China (OLIVEIRA, 2018). Although cattle farming is the politically most iconic sector, the prime commodity in the last quarter-century has been soybeans, in which Brazil has become the world's largest exporter, accounting for over a third of global production. The area of soybean cultivation has increased from 13.6 million hectares in 2000 to 37.2 million hectares in 2020, achieved through expansion into Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Pará, Rondônia and Tocatins, as well as intensification in conventional soy-growing areas in the south-east (MEDINA AND DOS SANTOS, 2017).

The electoral geography of Bolsonaro's support interestingly closely traces the contours of soy production, at least away from the urbanized coastal strip of the south-east. Municipalities won by Bolsonaro in the second round in 2018 extend from the conventional soy-growing districts in Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Paraná and São Paulo, to areas of more recent expansion in Mato Grosso, Rondônia and Tocatins, and punch into Pará largely along a central soy-growing corridor (Figure 1). Individual municipalities won by Bolsonaro further north, in Acre, Amapá and Roraima also tend to correspond with pockets of soy production, while there is very little soy grown in Amazonas, eastern Bahia, northern Pará and the north-eastern states won by Haddad. Bolsonaro also performed strongly in agribusiness cities, recording over 70 per cent of the vote in several agribusiness cities in Mato Grosso and São Paulo (Table 1). Indeed, in 2018, Bolsonaro won 87 of the 100 municipalities with the largest agribusiness GDPs. While this support reflected perceptions of Bolsonaro's pro-business and pro-development positions, it also mixed in nationalist concerns with foreign influence in Brazilian agriculture, with URDINEZ (2023) identifying increased votes for Bolsonaro in districts with high levels of Chinese investment.

Table 1: Votes for Jair Bolsonaro in selected agribusiness cities in the 2018 presidential election (list of agribusiness cities from Elias (2022))

City	State	1st round vote share (%)	2nd round vote share (%)
Sinop	MT	70.72	77.38
Nova Motum	MT	71.32	76.89
Lucas do Rio Verde	MT	70.56	75.56
Sorriso	MT	71.23	75.48
Ribeirão Preto	SP	58.32	72.27
Dourados	MS	57.61	68.18
Rio Verde	GO	60.08	67.14
Chapecó	SC	56.16	64.47
Passo Fundo	RS	54.79	64.29
Uberlandia	MG	53.49	63.03
Luis Eduardo Magalhães	BA	54.55	58.80
Balsas	MA	40.12	44.88
Petrolina	PE	30.23	31.97
Uruçuí	PI	23.72	29.60

Figure 1 - Comparison of municipalities won by Bolsonaro and Haddad in the second round of the 2018 Presidential election (left) and areas of soy production in Brazil (right)



The countryside was not a natural constituency for Bolsonaro, whose electoral base as a federal deputy had been in affluent suburbs of Rio de Janeiro (SILVA ET AL., 2022). He was however able to connect with a strengthening militancy among certain farmer groups that intersected with elements of far-right identity. As POMPEIA (2024) documents, militant farmer groups including the *Frente Produtiva do Brasil* (FPB) and the *Unido Democrática Ruralista* (UDR) had mobilized in the 2010s, challenging the primacy of the established agricultural confederation, the *Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil* (CNA). The militant groups were motivated by falling beef prices, disputes with meatpacking companies, and opposition to land occupations by indigenous groups and agrarian social movements, but crucially they also embraced an overt nationalism and attacked government corruption. Traditionally, the farmers they represented had aligned with the center-right Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), but supported had fractured as the PSDB was drawn into corruption allegations after 2014.

Bolsonaro sought to exploit farmer dissatisfaction with the PSDB, attending farmer events and building connections with activists, including notably the UDR leader Nabhan Garcia. Through these interactions, Bolsonaro forged a political-economic movement labelled by Pompeia as '*agri-bolsonarism*':

> Realising that cleavages among agribusiness actors could be leveraged in his favour, Bolsonaro's campaign speeches highlighted issues that particularly (though not exclusively) appealed to politically and economically subordinated groups of agricultural employers. He pledged to cancel the Funrural debts, lower taxes on agriculture and weaken environmental regulatory enforcement … His speeches also contained extremist anti-left stances … and vows to defend the family and other conservative values. This was exactly what many of the farmers wanted to hear. (POMPEIA, 2024, p 6).

In government, Bolsonaro pursued policies had been championed by his farmer allies, notably weakening environmental regulations and controls, which prompted a surge in deforestation, land clearances and displacement of indigenous and peasant communities (VELTMEYER, 2023), accompanied by a strident defence of agribusiness interests that frequently evoked authoritarian and

nationalist rhetoric (MENDES MOTTA AND HAUBER, 2023). Further, Bolsonaro's government worked to advance the agribusiness lobby's vision of rural Brazil and clear space for its enactment by dismantling policies and programmes for participatory rural development, alternative agri-food systems, and support for peasant farmers, landless workers and indigenous and Quilombo communities (BORSATTO ET AL., 2022).

While geographical analysis of the 2018 election has tended to focus on urban areas, farming districts in south and central Brazil were also an important part of Bolsonaro's electoral coalition. Papers such as POMPEIA (2024) have started to explore the dynamics of farmer support for Bolsonaro, however, although they document links to militant *ruralista* activists and record Bolsonaro's engagement with controversial issues in the agricultural frontier, they fall short of persuasively explaining his appeal to mainstream rural voters in established agricultural districts in the south-east. This is the relationship that is explored in the remainder of this paper.

Methodology

The field of electoral geography is notoriously wedded to quantitative techniques and resistant to attempts to introduce more qualitative perspectives. Quantitative analysis has hence dominated electoral geography's engagement with disruptive politics over the past decade, with research investigating relationships between voting behavior and various socio-economic indicators, often proxies for being 'left-behind'. However, such analysis has frequently struggled to demonstrate clear correlations between ruralness and support for disruptive parties and candidates, in part due to lack of data at appropriate scales and in part due to the irreducibility of 'rurality' to a statistical definition. Consequently, electoral geography analyses have sometimes downplayed the significance of rural areas as sources of populist or radical right support.

At the same time, ethnographic studies by anthropologists and sociologists have shown that political opinions are fashioned through people's everyday experiences and social interactions in place, and that rural identity is important influence on how people interpret changes around them and how this is translated into support for populist and radical right candidates (ASHWOOD, 2018; CRAMER, 2016; HOCHSCHILD, 2016; WUTHNOW, 2018). The paradox exposed here is rooted in a long-standing debate in human geography over the relative explanatory significance of structure and agency. Among other literature, this debate was addressed in essays by Nigel Thrift, one of which examined the 1945 general election in Britain to explore how people as agents construct themselves and their behavior through interaction with others (THRIFT, 1986). Thrift proposed that people make sense of structural changes through storytelling and that the act of storytelling (and listening) in specific contexts influences others and leads to collective outcomes. He applied this thesis to the landmark 1945 British election, in which the wartime leader Winston Churchill was unexpectedly defeated and replaced by the first majority Labour government, which proceeded to consolidate the British welfare state, establish the National Health Service, and nationalize key industries. Through reference to contemporary accounts, Thrift argues that the left-ward shift was enabled by the ways in which people interpreted and narrated social changes that they have encountered during wartime, not just the war itself, but full employment, wage rises, state intervention, and new roles for women. Storytelling about these changes led people to reassess how they constructed themselves, their folk models of the world, their expectations of the state, and consequently political outlook.

In this paper, I suggest that the disruptive politics of the twenty-first century represent a similar seismic political shift that stems from people's reflections on a range of social changes including globalization, economic restructuring, immigration, technological innovations, new cultural norms,

evolving gender identities, and so on. People encounter and make sense of such changes in place-based contexts, translating individual experiences into collective stories by drawing on identities such as ruralness and making comparisons with other places. In so doing, people may re-evaluate their value, priorities and conventional political allegiances, and look to connect to politicians whose narrative of change resonates with their own.

As a historical study, Thrift drew on archival sources. In seeking to apply this approach to a contemporary case study, this paper uses data collected through interviews and ethnographic observation. The case study, of Dom Pedrito in Rio Grande do Sul, and data collection methods were not specifically designed to study Bolsonaro's election, but were part of an earlier project on globalization and rural places. Dom Pedrito had been selected as case study to investigate the impact of transnational agribusiness and enrolment in global commodity chains. Data was collected through intensive fieldwork over a week in March 2018, during which time 18 interviews were conducted with farmers, local politicians, agricultural advisors, agribusiness managers, union leaders, professors at the town's university campus, a local historian and a journalist. The research team comprised the author with a UK-based post-doctoral researcher and two graduate research assistants from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul who were local to the region. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese, recorded, transcribed and translated for analysis, which involved manual coding with pre-determined etic codes and emic codes emerging from the transcripts. The interviews were supplemented by ethnographic observation, field mapping, information-gathering at the town museum, and subsequent collation of additional data from online sources, including newspaper archives and statistical databases.

Politics was not part of the original interview schedule or coding framework, but was adopted as an emic code as interviewees frequently volunteered political opinions and reflections, and as the political dimensions of farming in Dom Pedrito became apparent to us from our observation at the farmers' meeting. Accordingly, the interview transcripts have been revisited for a new research project, on rural discontent, spatial justice and support for disruptive politics, and additional data sourced from newspaper archives and the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral archive of election results. To provide context, electoral data sourced from the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral has been analysed for rural regions nationally, including results for agribusiness cities presented in the previous section.

Case Study: Dom Pedrito, Rio Grande do Sul

The municipality of Dom Pedrito occupies a territory of 5192km^2 in southern Rio Grade do Sul, adjacent to the Uruguay border, with a population of 38,339 people in 2020. The undulating natural landscape of native grassland forms part of the pampa biome, but has been modified by arable and livestock farming. The district was settled in the early 19th century with large tracts awarded to military veterans as a defensive strategy. Cattle and sheep ranching produced meat and wool, with exports of the latter to Europe providing significant income to landowners. The town of Dom Pedrito evolved as a service center for the agricultural hinterland and its prosperity in the early and mid 20th century is marked by its collection of art deco buildings, including the *Casa Rural* on the main square adorned by bronze reliefs of cattle. During this period, Dom Pedrito was part of the Rio Grande do Sul political base of Getúilo Vargas, president of Brazil from 1930 to 1945 and 1951 to 1954, whose paternalistic populism combined rural modernization with a strategic accommodation with large rural landowners (WELCH, 2016). Vargas is commemorated in Dom Pedrito by a monument in the main square and both a *barrio* and a school are named after him.

The economic fortunes of the district dipped as the global wool market collapsed in the 1970s under pressure from synthetic fibers. Most ranches remained the property of large landowners, but were sub-divided and let to tenant farmers, typically of Italian or German heritage, who moved in from central Rio Grande do Sul. The new tenant farmers introduced arable agriculture, planting rice and soy. These crops are commonly planted in rotation, the nitrogen-fixing properties of soy used to prepare the soil for rice, but since the start of the century soy has become the most prized commodity, its value inflated by demand from China, and is increasingly cultivated on its own. The area of land planted with soy in the municipality expanded from 20.000 hectares in 2002-3 to 100.000 hectares in 2017-18, mostly at the expense of grazing land for cattle and sheep, which decreased from 117.000 hectares to 55.000 hectares over the same period (figures provided by EMATER).

The development of rice and soybean cultivation supported the transformation of Dom Pedrito into an agribusiness city, with a plethora of enterprises on the town's fringe selling seeds and equipment and providing agricultural services:

> So, now from March to mid-May, the town's economy moves on the basis of harvesting, increases the movement in gas stations, rubber shops, jobs in the countryside, producers take employees to harvest, at that time. The industries take more people to select, to clean the product to store, to help. Then there's a company there that hires a hundred employees now at this time to work outsourced within the industry. (Journalist, interview DP6)

The estimated GDP per head for the municipality, adjusted for inflation, increased by 192 per cent between 2000 and 2015 (compared with a 52 per cent increase in inflation-adjusted GDP per capita nationally) (DEEP ASK, 2015), and Dom Pedrito was one of the top 100 municipalities by agribusiness GDP in 2023, at 1.336.694 Reais (EXAME, 2023). The town acquired a campus of the Universidade de Pampa, specializing in agribusiness courses, and for many residents its growing affluence was symbolized by the arrival of a Walmart supermarket in 2018.

However, the benefits of agribusiness development have not been evenly distributed. Rice and soybeans, for instance, are part of very different commodity chains. Rice is processed locally in the town and sold to Brazilian domestic markets. Soybeans, in contrast, are transported raw from farms to the port at Rio Grande and exported to China unprocessed, adding little value to the local economy beyond the earnings of agribusiness service providers:

The product after harvesting generates income for someone else, who is the trucker that carries it, because there is not processing [here]. The production itself generates some work, but not much. (Farm advisor, interview DP1b)

The transition from livestock to arable farming and the adoption of new technologies have also substantially reduced the labor force working and living on farms, prompting local urbanization that has seen the town expand to constitute over 90 per cent of the municipality's population. The depopulation of outer zones has in turn undermined the viability of services, with a controversial program of rural school closures underway in 2018. Some ex-farm workers have found employment in the rice-processing plants or with agricultural contractors, but many have not and unemployment is high. The contraction of livestock farming has further had implications down the supply chain, with the town's abattoir closing in 2015, with 70 job losses. A third of the population live on a monthly income that is less than half the rate of the minimum wage (TROJAHN, 2020).

The social stratification is reflected in Dom Pedrito's politics, with reservoirs of both right- and left-wing support. The municipality has oscillated in voting in presidential elections, backing center-right candidates in 1994, 1998 and 2006, but Lula in 2002 and Rousseff in 2010 and 2014 (Figure 1). Yet, the Workers' Party has had limited presence in local politics in Dom Pedrito, which since 2000 have been dominated by the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) and the Progressive Party (PP) (Figure 2). A small right-wing party, the PP is not 'progressive' in the sense used by North American leftists, but rather references an older concept of 'progress' associated with modernization, civilization, and the conquest of the wilderness. This sense of 'progress' is core to the settler colonial worldview, validating the occupation and 'improvement' of land through agriculture (a village in Dom Pedrito municipality is called 'Progresso'). In Dom Pedrito, the Progressive Party is closely allied with the farming sector, with one prominent farmer and agribusiness owner for example pursuing activism in both the PP nationally and national farming associations before becoming disillusioned by political corruption:

> I got into politics, party politics. I was a candidate for mayor, lost. I was deputy mayor and I entered [farming] sector politics. I was president of the Rural Union, I was president of the National Association of Breeders, I was president of the Brazilian Association of Corredale, I was president of the Brazilian Association of Animal Breeders. I was president of the Angus [cattle association], I still am. I made a parallel life in sector politics and in party politics. I was very fond of party politics [but] I had only thieves, I am not a thief. So, since I can't live with this corruption, I've moved away from party politics and continued only in sectoral policy (Farmer and politician, interview DP15).

Figure 1 - Votes in Dom Pedrito municipality for parties in first rounds of presidential elections, 1994-2018. Data from: www.tre-rs.jus.br/eleicoes/resultados-das-eleicoes

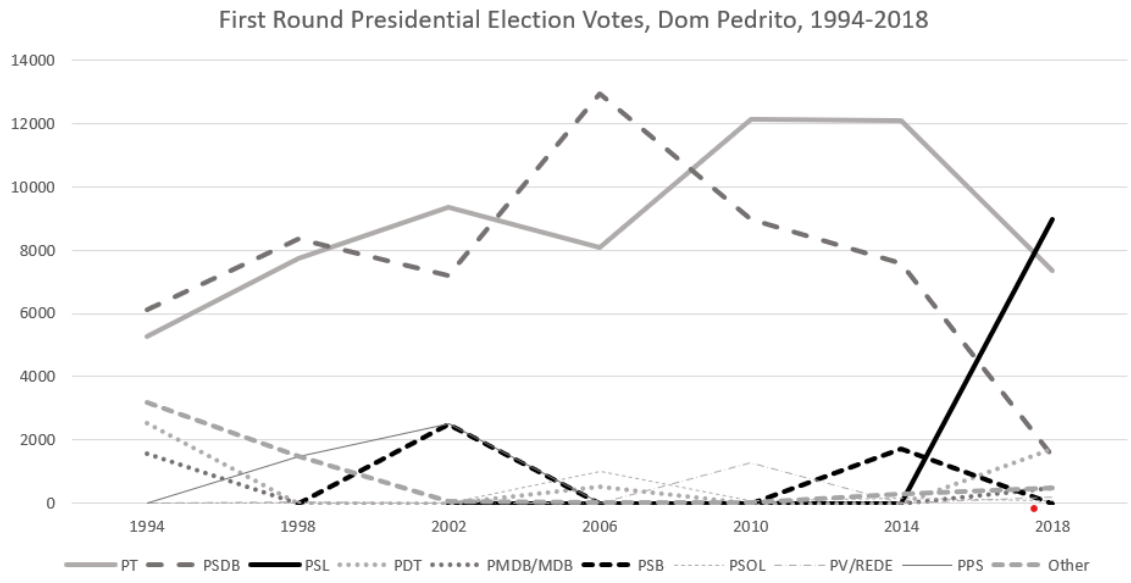
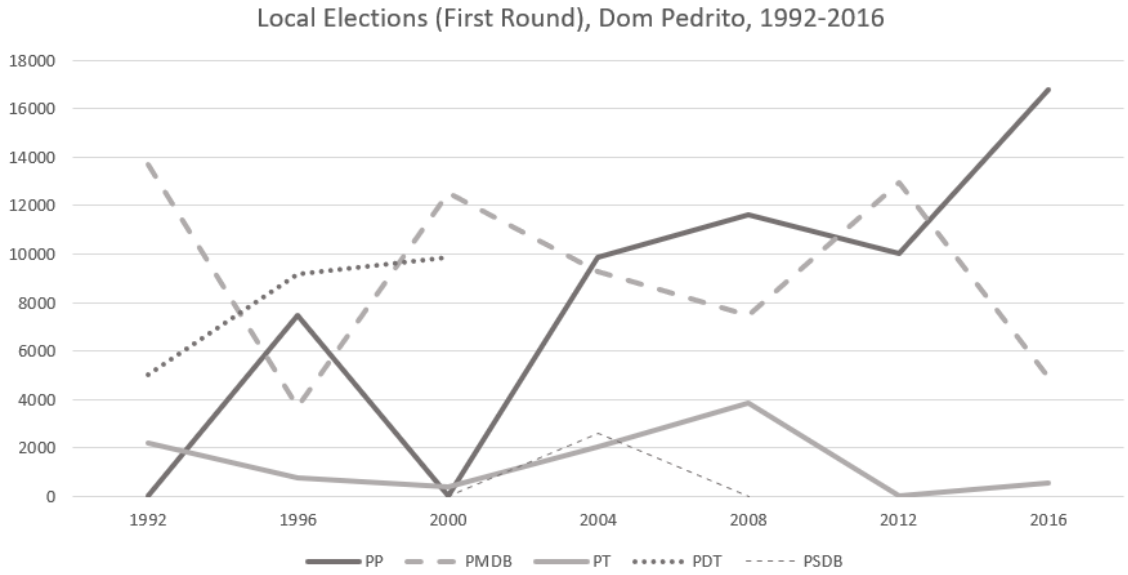


Figure 2 - Votes for parties in local elections in Dom Pedrito municipality, 1992-2016.
Data from: www.tre-rs.jus.br/eleicoes/resultados-das-eleicoes



Nationally, the PP supported the Lula and Rousseff governments before defecting and backing the impeachment of Rousseff, but its leaders were heavily implicated in the Petrobas scandal, causing a schism between the national party and the party in Rio Grande do Sul. It was also the party that Jair Bolsonaro represented in the Chamber of Deputies from 1993 to 2003 and from 2005 to 2014.

In Dom Pedrito, the PP held the mayoralty from 2004 to 2012 and regained it in 2016 with a 25 year-old candidate. Its policies and stances in local government tended to support the interests of agribusiness and the farming community. In contrast, the MDB-led administration between 2012 and 2016 adopted a more critical position towards agribusiness. The municipal secretary for agriculture, a trade union official, in particular used the office to further his career-long campaign against agrichemicals, highlighting water pollution from chemical runoff, and blaming aerial spraying of agrichemicals for the high incidence of cancer locally. They also introduced actions to support peasant smallholders, *pecúarista familar*, who were being squeezed off the land by agribusiness, including establishing a weekly farmers' market.

The political and economic history of Dom Pedrito therefore contains several features that helped to create a culture amenable to voting for a far-right populist like Jair Bolsonaro: the centrality of farming and a growing agribusiness sector, relative middle class prosperity, the everyday veneration of an authoritarian populist, local politics contested around agri-environmental regulations, and familiarity with voting for a small right-wing party. However, the actual shift of residents to voting for Bolsonaro was conditioned by challenges faced by the farming sector in 2018 and how these were interpreted and narrated within the community.

Three main concerns exercised Dom Pedrito farmers in early 2018. First, weather patterns had changed. Soil conditions around Dom Pedrito are marginal for growing soy, but the rapid expansion

of soy cultivation had been assisted by a run of unusually wet years from 2008. Now, drought had returned, reducing yields, and as many farmers had credit deals with agribusiness companies that were repaid with a share of the harvest, lower yields meant lower incomes and potentially increased indebtedness. Second, prices for both rice and soybeans were volatile. Farmers recognized the geopolitical vulnerability of soybean exports and that the market in China, which took 88 per cent of Dom Pedrito's soybean crop in 2018 (TRASE, 2020), could be reaching saturation. Conventionally, volatility in soybean export markets would be offset by the stability of the domestic market in rice in Brazil. However, under Brazil's membership of Mercosul, the market had been opened to imports from other member states. Rice farmers identified imports of rice from Paraguay as undercutting domestic rice and forcing down prices. Several farmers were investing in silos to store rice on farm until prices improved. Third, farmers were frustrated by environmental regulations, including requirements under the Rural Environmental Register to set aside 20 per cent of land for nature, which they regarded as intrusive and compromising productivity:

> [The land] here has never had trees, has never had bush, [but] now I'm going to take 20% here from my farm to plant bush? How am I going to do that? If it's never been here? … This is a very serious problem, food will be lacking (Farmer, interview DP11).
>
> Environmental legislation creates a lot of insecurity, a lot of insecurity, and something else […] What I have out there, I suffer surveillance. I cannot have bucket of oil here, I have to store the filters of the tractors, and I think that is right. At this place around the corner the guy does not. He washes his car, oil goes with water, goes all the way to the river. And […] I have to do the right thing (Farmer, interview DP13).

In the week of our fieldwork in March 2018, a local newspaper, *Folha da Cidade*, ran a photo cover declaring that 'Financial crisis and climate compromise agricultural production'. A full-page article inside, written by the president of the Dom Perdito Agricultural Association, rehearsed these same concerns with price vulnerability, rising costs, farm indebtedness, and drought combining to generate a crisis for the farming sector. The feature was timed to coincide with a meeting also organized by the Agricultural Association, which represented arable farmers and whose work had become more politicized due to "the moment of agribusiness, a time of increased debts, taxation – so they're trying to work to lessen that, it's more a political than a technical thing" (Farmer, interview DP 12a).

The guest speaker at the meeting was Jerônimo Goergen, a Progressive Party federal deputy for Rio Grande do Sul and a prominent member of the *ruralista* caucus. Goergen would later be instrumental in the Rio Grande do Sul Progressive Party defecting from the mainstream conservative alliance to back Bolsonaro in the second round of the 2018 presidential election and was subsequently rumoured to be a possible candidate for Agriculture Minister in Bolsonaro's government. His presentation at the meeting spoke about his self-declared 'External Commission on Debt in the Agricultural Sector' and while not speaking for Bolsonaro that evening, his remarks reflected the rhetoric of *agri-bolosonarism* identified by POMPEIA (2024), attacking the Brazilian government for failing to support farmers in a time of drought, criticising environmental regulations and trade deals, and calling for relief for farm debts. This stance, a mix of agricultural exceptionalism and Brazilian nationalism, was echoed by the questions and comments from the audience.

Equally importantly, Dom Pedrito farmers positioned their own sectoral crisis within a broader perceived malaise of the Brazilian polity. They shared the weary frustration of many Brazilian citizens with corruption and disillusionment with the traditional political class, but they also more specifically channelled this discontent into complaints that the Brazilian government was doing nothing to help their plight:

> Because the government is not interested in subsidizing anything, it is mostly imported. The fungicides and insecticides are all imported, the large part of the fertilizer is imported [...] So the cost is expensive (Farmer, interview DP11).
> [I'm] sure that we will overcome the difficulties, even because I think that we outweigh the difficulty working and changing. If we wait for the government we will die in a museum (Farmer and politician, interview DP15).
> I would say that the challenge of the farmer is a national challenge, it is not only of Don Pedrito, right? It's surviving in a country that doesn't value agriculture. We are literally abandoned in the field and being exploited by this government that does not value anything that we really represent, that is a vocation to produce food and sustain our country and generate currency, credit for export and generate wealth in the country (Agricultural Association lead, interview DP16).

Such sentiments contributed to a pervasive sense of the need for change, occasionally reinforced by optimism that new political leaders could bring about improvements to their situation:

> To crown all of that we have a corrupt government. We take down a president and put a worse one in their place, I think […] It's the same, it's very serious, it's a lot of people stealing […] And then our people [are] agreeable, peaceful, accepting. When they complain, it is only [that the government is] making a mess, [they do] not have a more consistent complaint and we go to each election reelecting the same, without realizing that if we continue doing the same thing that does that today, we will reap the same results tomorrow. It has to change, I cannot vote for anyone for re-election, nobody, changes anything. Then when you see who the presidential candidates are, it scares me the most, you can't understand (Farmer and politician, interview DP15).
> I am an optimist, I think things will improve and that we will overcome these difficulties and if God wants we will elect a new Congress. New Congress, all new, President of the Republic. I do not know whether to tell you, but if we choose a new Congress the President's going to have to get in line. If it's a serious Congress he's not going to buy anybody, that's our hope (Farmer and politician, interview DP15).

No one mentioned Bolsonaro in the interviews conducted in Dom Pedrito in March 2018. At the time, he was still an outsider in the presidential race. Yet, the stories that farmers and others in Dom Pedrito told about the challenges faced by the farming sector, about their fears for the future, and their disillusionment with government, were already leading them to re-evaluate their political allegiances and to look for something different. Moreover, as the meeting with Jerônimo Goergen made evident, the narratives of the farmers apparently resonated with the narratives being recounted by figures on the populist right in what would coalesce as *agri-bolonsarism*, just as Bolsonaro's nationalist, anti-crime and anti-corruption rhetoric resonated with bottom-up discourses in cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In the first round of the presidential election, on 7 October 2018, 8983 residents of Dom Pedrito voted for Bolsonaro, giving him 43,2 per cent of the vote, a little below the national average. In the second round, he obtained 10.132 votes, or 51,5 per cent, a narrow lead.

In elections, narrow local leads accrete into national victories, but the slender margin indicates that Dom Pedrito was not a Bolsonaro heartland. The militant anti-environmentalist and pro-development positions that helped Bolsonaro accumulate votes in agribusiness towns and on the agricultural frontier did not have the same salience in Dom Pedrito. The interests of farmers in Dom Pedrito were not entirely the same as those in the center-west wanting to pursue forest clearance or in conflict with indigenous groups or agrarian social movements. Perhaps rice farmers were disappointed by Bolsonaro's adherence to neoliberalism and failure to follow Trump in adopting protectionist policies; or perhaps economic instability swung the pendulum of influence in the municipality back towards more leftist politics. Either way, in the 2022 presidential election, Bolsonaro

lost votes in Dom Pedrito, polling 8323 in the first round (38.8 per cent) and 9878 in the second round (46,6 per cent), finishing behind Lula in both.

Conclusion

The election of Jair Bolsonaro does not fully fit with the patterns of electoral geography observed for similarly disruptive elections in Europe and North America. Whereas the election of Donald Trump in the United States and strong showings for populist and radical right parties in Europe have been associated, at least in part, with support from 'left behind' rural areas, Bolsonaro conversely failed to win in the poorest rural regions of Brazil and drew support from affluent urban voters in the country's major metropolises. However, Bolsonaro also won across many rural areas in southern and central Brazil, polling especially strongly in agribusiness cities and frontier districts for the expansion of agriculture into the *cerrado* and Amazon forest.

Geographical analyses of the 2018 Brazilian election have tended to focus on the urban dimensions of Bolsonaro's vote and have paid less attention to the significance of rural districts and rural voters in Bolsonaro's electoral coalition. Exceptions include URDINEZ's (2023) identification of correlation between strong support for Bolsonaro and high levels of Chinese investment in rural districts, and POMPEIA's (2024) detailed account of alliance-building between Bolsonaro's campaign and militant farmer groups, forging what they refer to as *agri-bolonsarism*. Resonances between the concerns of these farmer groups (with falling prices, controls on farmland expansion, and opposition to the land claims of indigenous communities and agrarian social movements) and Bolsonaro's authoritarian, nationalist, anti-environmental rhetoric help to explain support in the interior of the center-west, but are less satisfactory in explaining votes for Bolsonaro in more established farming districts in the south-east, such as the case study of Dom Pedrito.

Inspired by THRIFT's (1986) discussion of the 1945 British general election, this paper has sought to understand support for Bolsonaro in Dom Pedrito by examining the ways in which residents interpreted and narrated the socio-economic changes and challenges that they were experiencing in the months preceding the 2018 election. It found that the conditions in which Bolsonaro was able to secure a slim majority of votes in Dom Pedrito were created by three sets of circumstances. First, the political and economic history of the municipality included elements of socialisation that made citizens potentially amenable to voting for a right-wing populist such as Bolsonaro, notably the centrality of farming to local life, recent relative prosperity generated by agribusiness, the implicit veneration of authoritarian populist Getúlio Vargas in the townscape of Dom Pedrito, and a familiarity with voting for a small right-wing party. Second, a growing sense of crisis in the local farming sector - prompted by price volatility, increasing costs and debts, changing weather patterns, and new environmental regulations – that added urgency and was cultivated by local agrarian leaders with links to right-wing political figures. Third, a pervasive sentiment of discontent with political corruption and perception that the government were not interested in helping farmers that led voter to reassess their political allegiances and to embrace the idea of change in leadership.

In revealing these factors, the case study demonstrates the value of adding a qualitative dimension to electoral geography research and establishes a model that has potentially wider application. The global wave of disruptive elections bringing populist and radical right candidates and parties to power is a seismic change that unsettles conventional understanding of electoral cleavages and geographies. Quantitative analysis has helpfully uncovered structural spatial patterns in voting behavior, but it has also been shown to have limitations, not least because it is people not places that

vote. Electoral geography has consequently struggled to fully demonstrate how and why people in a particular place have swung behind a disruptive candidate or party, and have struggled to take into account the role of local culture and social identities such as ruralness.

Following the more qualitative approach employed in this paper, and drawing on THRIFT's (1986) conceptualization of social action, can help to bridge this gap by providing insights into how structural changes and patterns are translated into voting behavior through the ways in which individuals interpret and narrate changes and experiences, share theses stories and construct collective outlooks, and attach themselves to politicians whose narratives of change resonate with their own. As such, bringing qualitative dimensions into electoral geography can enrich understanding of the electoral dynamics observed in recent years and provide indications into whether the moves towards populist and radical right politics are likely to prove durable or not.

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