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Sacramento Moreira, Vitoria

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The globalized resistance against gender: anti-gender mobilization and transgender
rights in the populist moment

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Global Studies

by

Vitória Sacramento Moreira

Committee in charge:

Professor Alison Brysk, Chair

Professor Kai Thaler

Professor Kathleen Bruhn

June 2026

The dissertation of Vitória Sacramento Moreira is approved.

Kathleen Bruhn

Kai Thaler

Alison Brysk, Committee Chair

June 2026

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rights in the populist moment

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by

Vitória Sacramento Moreira

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This work is the product of a collective effort. I am deeply grateful to all who believed in me and who supported me over the last seven years.

Thank you to my family, who have always stood by my side and provided me with love, affection, and support throughout this journey. I love you more than words could ever describe; I am the luckiest person in the universe for having you by my side.

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VITA OF VITÓRIA SACRAMENTO MOREIRA

EDUCATION

2019-2026: Doctor of Philosophy in Global Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

2017-2019: Master of Arts in International Relations, Federal University of Bahia, Brazil

2011-2015: Bachelor of Arts in International Relations, University of Brasilia, Brazil

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

02/2024 - 06/2024 and 09/2025 - 05/2026: Student Assistant, Global Studies Colloquium Series, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States

09/2020 – 06/2025: Teaching Assistant, Global Studies Department, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States

06/2021 – 08/2025: Teaching Associate, Global Studies Department, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States

05/2020 – 09/2021 (Summers): Graduate Student Researcher, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States

01/2019 – 05/2019: Research Intern, Program of Governance and Local Development (GLD), University of Gothenburg, Sweden

04/2015 – 08/2015: Intern, United Nations Joint Program for HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Brasilia, Brazil

09/2014 – 12/2014: Intern, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Americas Program, Washington, DC, United States

06/2013 – 12/2013: Intern, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, Brasilia, Brazil

PUBLICATIONS

“Genderphobic binarism: The War against Gender as a Political Weapon” (2024)
Chapter in the volume "Rio As Method", edited by Paul Amar
Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478060123>

“Gendering populism: the rise of right-wing populism and anti-gender politics in Brazil” (2023)

Chapter in the volume "Populism and the Politics of Human Rights", edited by Alison Brysk
Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802209549.00012>

“Femicide and the Global Political Economy” (2023)
Chapter in “The Routledge International Handbook of Femicide/Feminicide”
Co-author: Alison Brysk
Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003202332>

“Migrações Femininas e a Nova Lei de Migrações: uma análise sobre a ausência da
perspectiva de gênero na nova lei” (2019)
Cadernos de Gênero e Diversidade, v. 4, n. 4, p. 50-67.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.9771/cgd.v4i4.28127>

“O feminismo das guerrilheiras curdas de Rojava” (2018)
Chapter in the volume "Gênero, Direito e Relações Internacionais", edited by Renata
Nagamine and Denise Vitale
Edufba. <https://doi.org/10.7476/9788523218638>

“Estudos de Gênero nas Engenharias: uma etnografia da primeira disciplina de ‘Introdução
aos Estudos de Gênero’ ofertada na Escola Politécnica da Universidade Federal da Bahia”
(2018)
Co-authors: Jaqueline Santana, Caio Santos
Cadernos de Gênero e Diversidade, v. 3, n.4, p. 58-71.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.9771/cgd.v4i3.27638>

AWARDS

Graduate Dissertation Fellowship (09/2025)
University of California, Santa Barbara

APSA Diversity Grant (09/2023)
American Political Science Association

2021 Teaching Assistant Service Award (04/2021)
Department of Global Studies, UC Santa Barbara

Chiota Payne Award (04/2021)
University of California, Santa Barbara

Spanish Language and Culture Summer School Scholarship (08/2018)
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela (Spain)

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) International Summer School Scholarship (06/2018 -
08/2018)
University of Oslo, Norway

Global Citizens Program Scholarship (08/2014 - 12/2014)
Prudential Foundation & The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars

Institute for Leadership in the Americas Scholarship (01/2014 - 01/2014)
The Fund for American Studies & Universidad de los Andes (Chile)

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Global Studies

Specialization: Global governance, ideology, and culture

Studies in Populism Research with Professor Kathleen Bruhn

ABSTRACT

The globalized resistance against gender: anti-gender mobilization and transgender rights in
the populist moment

By Vitória Sacramento Moreira

Under what conditions do anti-gender campaigns succeed in undermining transgender rights? This dissertation addresses this question by investigating how structural country-level conditions and advocacy strategies shape the outcomes of anti-transgender mobilization across countries. I argue that two structural conditions, the level of liberal democracy and the institutionalization of organized religion, are central to determining whether anti-gender campaigns succeed in reversing or constraining transgender rights, and I identify five strategies through which anti-gender actors pursue this goal: transnational coalition building, diplomacy, contestation of liberal human rights, alliances with right-wing populism, and scapegoating of sexual and gender minorities.

I use mixed methods to test these arguments in two parts. First, I conduct a cross-national panel analysis covering 162 countries across three four-year periods between 2011 and 2022, estimating pooled OLS models with period fixed effects, standard errors clustered by country, and lagged independent variables. This analysis tests three hypotheses concerning the effects of liberal democracy, religious institutionalization, and the interaction between right-wing populist leadership and participation in transnational anti-gender networks, operationalized through the World Congress of Families dataset. Second, I conduct a qualitative case study of Brazil drawing on secondary bibliographic sources and eight semi-structured interviews with scholars, congressional staff, transgender rights activists, and the

National Secretary for LGBTQ Affairs, Symmy Larat. This case study traces how the structural conditions identified in the first part of the dissertation have shaped anti-gender campaign strategies in Brazil since 2003.

The cross-national analysis shows that, of the three hypothesized factors, only liberal democracy bears a statistically significant relationship with change in transgender rights, and this relationship is positive across all models. Neither the interaction between right-wing populist leadership and anti-gender network participation nor religious institutionalization reach conventional levels of statistical significance in this part of the investigation. The Brazil case study, however, reveals that religious institutionalization, advanced through the political mobilization of Evangelical representatives in Congress, played a significant role in obstructing transgender rights protections, even as liberal democratic institutions, particularly the judiciary, served as a countermajoritarian check that advanced these same rights against a hostile legislature. The case study further shows that three of the five anti-gender strategies, scapegoating, alliances with right-wing populism, and transnational coalition building, were most consequential in Brazil, and that anti-gender campaigns drew on anticommunist frames inherited from the country's authoritarian past to mainstream their discourse and to help propel the rise of Jair Bolsonaro.

Taken together, these findings show that liberal democratic institutions, and particularly their countermajoritarian elements, constitute the most consistent obstacle to the success of anti-gender campaigns, while the effects of religious institutionalization and right-wing populism are more context-dependent than the cross-national evidence alone suggests. This dissertation contributes to the interdisciplinary field of Global Studies by connecting the transnational architecture of the anti-gender movement to its concrete, local effects on

transgender people, and by examining how anti-gender mobilization intersects with the ideational, performative, and strategic dimensions of right-wing populism.

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Introduction: Mobilizing against “gender”

On a winter Monday in February of 2017, a bright orange tour bus roamed the streets of Madrid, in Spain, attracting curious glances from passersby. Emblazoned on its side was a slogan that read: “Boys have penises, girls have vulvas. Do not be fooled. If you’re born a man, you’re a man. If you’re a woman, you will continue to be so.” The bus, part of a campaign organized by the Catholic non-profit Hazte Oír, was a reaction against a pro-trans rights awareness campaign from earlier that year (Santos 2017). Following widespread criticism and protest from political parties, labor unions and civic organizations, the vehicle was impounded shortly after its first appearance and later banned from the city due to its transphobic message (Costantini and Gálvez 2017). Nevertheless, in the following months the orange bus would be seen again on the streets, not only in Madrid but also in faraway cities in the United States, Mexico, Colombia, and Chile (Corrêa 2020).

The orange bus, also known as the “free speech bus”, was one of many campaigns against transgender rights coordinated by members of the anti-gender movement, a transnational advocacy network that mobilizes against women’s and SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) rights around the world. More than a set of coordinated campaigns against advances in SOGI rights, the transnational movement against “gender” seeks to undermine the global hegemony of liberal norms and to restore traditional hierarchies in different societies. This dissertation is concerned with examining this phenomenon and investigating its effects on the rights of transgender people around the world.

In this dissertation I use mixed methods to answer the question: “when do anti-gender campaigns succeed in undermining transgender rights?” In other words, I investigate how

different structural conditions and advocacy strategies enable or prevent the success of anti-transgender campaigns across countries. This introductory chapter will be dedicated to further explain the nature and logic of anti-gender campaigns, and to contextualize them historically. Future chapters will focus on identifying structural conditions and mechanisms used by anti-gender activists and to assess their impacts quantitatively (in Chapter 2) and qualitatively (in Chapter 3).

By examining the factors that shape the success of anti-transgender campaigns, as well as the mechanisms through which these campaigns operate in practice, this dissertation contributes to scholarly inquiries on minority persecution, human rights contestation, as well as on the ideological conflicts that underline contemporary globalization, marked by the expansion of right-wing populism and challenges to liberal human rights. In addition to being a systematic form of human rights violation, the persecution of transgender minorities goes against the principles of equality, human dignity, and political pluralism, which are intrinsic to the human rights and liberal democracy projects. Therefore, understanding the drivers of success of minority persecution in today's democracies is of interest to the scholarship on human rights and liberal democracy, but also to anyone interested in preventing extremism, combating systematic rights violations, and promoting the inalienable right to human dignity.

A. The transnational movement against “gender”

Anti-gender campaigns are enterprises sponsored by a transnational constellation of ultra-conservative actors brought together by their shared opposition to the idea of gender as a social construct. Together, these campaigns compose a globalized crusade against gender

equality, women's and SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) rights that is coordinated by a transnational advocacy network (Keck and Sikkink 1998), often in alliance with states and international organizations such as the Catholic and Orthodox Churches (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). For these actors, the gender menace – also framed as “gender ideology”, “gender theory”, or “genderism” – functions as a “symbolic glue” (Kováts 2017; Kováts, and Põim 2015) uniting the interests and demands of diverse conservative actors.

Mobilizations against “gender” draw on earlier campaigns of discrimination against LGBTQ people, but they distinguish themselves by two important features. First, these campaigns are conducted by actors guided by the contestation of the idea of “gender” itself. This focus, while undeniably very useful for the movement's framing strategies and alliance building, cannot be reduced to a mere political strategy. Rather, anti-gender actors are motivated and brought together by a shared worldview born out of Catholic doctrine that is nested in the rejection of social constructionism. According to Graff & Korolczuk (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 17–18), there are three core elements to the anti-gender ideology: (1) a set of theological-informed convictions about the nature of man, “natural law” and human dignity – often wrapped in scientific language; (2) a pessimistic and anti-modernist account of Western intellectual, cultural and social history; and (3) an alarmist and conspiratorial vision of the current global distribution of power, founded on the opposition to international liberal norms.

The second distinctive element of anti-gender mobilizations is the global scope and ambitions of the actors that coordinate them. Despite their anti-globalist rhetoric, anti-gender actors connect via globalized networks of organizations that enable them to coordinate campaigns, share funding, and adapt discursive frames to different local contexts through the

use of a highly-plastic “transnational kit” of campaigns (Paternotte 2023). Moreover, anti-gender organizations actively participate in international organizations, where they mobilize to challenge the hegemony of liberal norms and to advance an alternative form of globalization rooted in their own ideology.

B. Anti-gender campaigns and transgender rights

While the opposition to SOGI rights is a core and consistent element of the broader anti-gender project, the targeting specifically of transgender rights is not always a salient element of anti-gender campaigns. Nevertheless, the view of gender as a nefarious ideology that aims to subvert the natural human order is fundamentally at odds with the recognition of the dignity of gender non-conforming people, whose political identity in most parts of the world rests on the differentiation between sex and gender. Although the experiences of gender non-conforming people vary considerably across time and space, the defense of their human dignity is nowadays most commonly rooted in the idea of gender and embedded within the framework of universal human rights. Accordingly, transgender people are key targets of the scapegoating narratives promoted by anti-gender campaigns.

Although there is no single unifying category of transgender experience at the global level (Edelman 2020, 63), discrimination against transgender people is pervasive and globally widespread. In many countries, transgender people are treated as second-class citizens; marginalized politically, socially, and economically; and unable to avail themselves of the same human rights protections granted to their cisgender compatriots (Dicklitch-Nelson and Rahman 2022, 526). Several countries have laws that criminalize trans people, often through

prohibitions on so-called “cross-dressing,” “female impersonation” and, in some cases, “male impersonation,” but in societies where the ideas of sex and gender are confused or conflated, trans people may also be targeted by laws outlawing same-sex relations (Howe et al. 2017, 9). According to ILGA World (2026), legal gender recognition based on self-identification is available in only 24 of the 193 UN member states, and constitutional protections against discrimination based on gender identity are only available in five of them.

Depending on where they take place, anti-(trans)gender campaigns can work to maintain or deepen a preexisting scenario of discrimination and exclusion, or they can work towards reversing rights gained in recent decades. Globally, these campaigns reflect the ideologically diverse and conflict-oriented nature of global civil society; locally, they often have a grassroots character and build on context-specific concerns, although some key themes are commonly used by activists around the globe (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 55–56).

Although the first anti-gender mobilizations date back to the 1990s, spearheaded by the Vatican-led coordination against the inclusion of “gender” in United Nations conferences in the 1990s, anti-gender actors have found powerful allies among the right-wing populists that rose in the 2010s as a consequence of the shortcomings of neoliberal globalization. Brought together by a shared rejection of liberal globalism, anti-gender actors and right-wing populists form an alliance of convenience best understood as an “opportunistic synergy” (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 2025; Korolczuk 2023). Such opportunistic synergy, while context-specific, often relies on the demonization of transgender people, a political minority that unlike sexual minorities, is not embraced by any right-wing populist movement.

C. Globalized networks against liberal globalism

The diverse constellation of actors that make up the transnational anti-gender network includes civil society organizations, political parties, think tanks, media organizations, entrepreneurs, members of the European aristocracy, representatives of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and supportive states such as Russia. Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024, 98), identify five nodal organizations within this network of networks: the World Congress of Families (WCF, since 2016 also known as the International Organization for the Family); CitizenGo, the successor organization of the Spanish group Hazte Oír; Global Home Education Exchange (GHEX); Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADF); and the Political Network for Values. Each of these organizations has a main function within the network:

“[...] the WCF acts as a convenor [...]; CitizenGo communicates and creates a shared agenda across different linguistic and cultural contexts; the GHEX provides the educational function of spreading and perpetuating PMC [politicized moral conservative] ideas; the ADF practices legal advocacy and strategic litigation; and the PNV represents a political function in which politicians from different national backgrounds are trained in a shared [...] agenda” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 98).

This complex transnational network includes actors of different religious denominations – most of them Christian, with some Jewish and Muslim members¹ –, a characteristic that creates opportunities not only for uniting forces and drafting joint strategies,

¹ Over time, the international alliance with between Christian and Muslim organizations against gender has been “largely dissolved” due to the approximation between Christian churches and the anti-Muslim populist-right. However, some conservative Muslims and Christians continue to collaborate locally and at the United Nations (Graff and Koroleczuk 2025, 5).

but also for securing diversified sources of support (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). For example, 2021 WikiLeaks documents revealed that, amid a changing political order in the Vatican with the nomination of Pope Frances in 2013, ultraconservative circles became less reliable sources of support for Catholic anti-gender organizations. This in turn led CitizenGo, an originally Catholic-only anti-gender organization, to resort to a Russian Orthodox benefactor for an alternate source of financing (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 120). Over time, the Russian Orthodox Church, which has collaborated with groups from the U.S. Christian Right since the early 1990s (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 153) has been an increasingly important source of funding for anti-gender actor (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 153; Datta 2025).

The diverse group of actors that compose the transnational anti-gender movement are invested in anti-gender campaigns for different purposes and to different degrees. These “ideologically incongruent and geographically scattered actors” build on an older history of politicized moral conservative ideas and institutional infrastructure and unite forces against perceived threats – such as communism, demographic decline, nativist panic and secularism – that are “almost always intertwined with a panic around the destabilization of masculinity and femininity [...]” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 5). Therefore, not all actors that sponsor or support anti-gender campaigns are primarily motivated by the threat of “gender”. For example, “gender” is a direct contradiction to the Catholic Church’s dogma, for right-wing populists, it is mostly used as a political strategy.

Due to the diversity and the large scope of anti-gender actors, the transnational articulation among them requires the difficult task of balancing selective retrieval across different political, cultural, and religious traditions while at the same time carrying a common message against change in traditional social hierarchies. Accordingly, anti-gender campaigns

must be flexible enough to adapt their rhetoric to different contexts, but to create common frames that allow them to grant transnational public support. This need for adaptability, coupled with a populist defense of the local against globalist elites and institutions, creates a paradox for the anti-gender movement, that must appeal to local resistances at the same time it is a transnational phenomenon. As argued by Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024, 7), the anti-gender movement “relies on claims of resistance that are rooted in specific contexts around a language of national sovereignty, but it simultaneously deploys globally via transnational cooperation.”

D. The Catholic origins of the crusade against gender

In the 1990s, several United Nations conferences marked the recognition of women’s rights demands as issues of international human rights. It was in these international spaces that feminist movements from around the world exchanged ideas, experiences, and collaborated to strategically define demands for the inclusion of gender-based rights in the international human rights regime. Nevertheless, UN conferences were also a space of collaboration for conservative actors, especially those affiliated with or connected to the Vatican, which was responsible for spearheading the transnational mobilization against “gender”. More specifically, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing were important milestones for the development of the Catholic Church’s agenda against SOGI rights (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 157). During these conferences, debates around the concept of “gender”, already popular among feminist scholars and movements across the world, entered the radar of the Holy See as an imminent threat.

The Vatican was the actor that inaugurated the transnational mobilization against “gender” in the 1990s and that established, in cooperation with ultraconservative activists, the main discursive elements of today’s anti-gender campaigns. It remains, until this day, a key node in the transnational anti-gender network, largely through its condemnation of “gender ideology”. Drawing on theologies of sexual difference and complementarity from John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and in alliance with ultraconservative activists and religious countries’ delegations, the Holy See “actively fought against the notion of gender” at the Cairo and Beijing conferences (Kuhar and Patternote 2018, 9). Since then, the Catholic Church has remained a central figure in anti-gender mobilizations. Its commitment to fighting “gender ideology” remained even during the tenure of Pope Francis, who in spite of being criticized as a “pro-gay” pope by the conservative right-wing of the Church, did not promote any official changes to Catholic doctrine on this matter (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 162–63; Case 2019). Even before the Catholic Church became the “main motor” of anti-gender campaigns (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 157), its authorities were already concerned with advances in women’s and SOGI rights. The anxiety about SOGI issues, specifically, was expressed by the publication of longer and more detailed statements on homosexuality by the Congregation of Faith, the Catholic Church’s highest authority in terms of doctrine and teaching, since the 1970s (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 158). Moreover, the ideational elements of what would eventually become the conservative opposition to “gender ideology” were already present in the *Ratzinger Report*, a collection of interviews with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, published in 1985 (Case 2019, 645; Benedict XVI and Messori 1985).

According to Case (2019, 647), issues of gender fluidity and the legal recognition of transgender identity – which Ratzinger witnessed first-hand in Germany in 1978 – concerned

the future pope since as early as 1984. For Ratzinger, attempts of “escaping from the 'slavery of nature', demanding the right to be male or female at one's will or pleasure, for example, through surgery, and demanding that the State record this autonomous will of the individual in its registry offices” is “among the battles of 'liberation' of our time” (Benedict XVI and Messori 1985, 95).

At the time Ratzinger expressed such concern, the feminist idea of gender as a social construct – therefore distinct from sex – was being popularized by the works of feminist scholars in Germany and elsewhere (Case 2019, 647). For Catholics such as himself, this “emphasis on the cultural production of sex and gender roles was directly counter to the theological anthropology of sexual complementarity” promoted by John Paul II and to which Ratzinger subscribed (Case 2019, 648). However, in contrast with his predecessor, who defended complementarity affirmatively and praised the dignity of women, Benedict XVI was focused on secular law and saw feminism as the root of the problem of “gender ideology” (Case 2019, 648–49).

Ratzinger’s worries about secularism and feminism were symptoms of a broader Catholic anxiety about the growth of secularization around the world. For Kuhar and Paternotte (2018), the Vatican’s “gender ideology” discourse cannot be understood without paying attention to some of the Church’s other related projects, such as New Evangelization, which the authors describe as an attempt “to regain its influence in secularizing parts of the world [...] and to reaffirm the faith of its followers” (Kuhar and Paternotte 2018, 13). In insisting on the public role of religion and by emphasizing the “evangelizing role of the family”, which must be defended by political authorities (Kuhar and Paternotte 2018, 13), such projects align with the Church’s opposition to “gender ideology”. In a similar vein,

Corrêa (2018, 14) argues that the Vatican's initiative against "gender" was a response to the increasing independence of Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, in relation to the Vatican and its views on issues of family reproduction, and sexuality.

Even though the Catholic Church was the protagonist in the construction of "gender ideology, anti-gender campaigns have been transnational since their early days in the 1990s. This is both due to the transnational nature of the Vatican as an institution, as well as the coordination efforts by conservative states, civil society groups, and religious institutions at the UN (Murray 2022, 3245). For example, the Vatican-led campaign against "gender" was, at its inception, directly influenced by American activists such as Harvard Law professor Mary Ann Glendon, and Catholic journalist and activist Dale O'Leary (Case 2019, 643). The latter is considered a key contributor to the intellectual history of anti-genderism due to her activism during the 1995 UN conference in Beijing, where she had the opportunity to present her pamphlet "Gender: the Deconstruction of Women" later developed into *The Gender Agenda* directly to Ratzinger (Case 2019, 645; Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 39).

In the early days of anti-gender mobilization, in the 1990s, diplomatic communication and coordination at UN human rights conferences and during preparatory meetings provided the confluence of ideas that would later be consolidated into a Vatican-led initiative against “gender”. Since then, globalized networks of communication have connected church-affiliated as well as civil society organizations through a series of events and umbrella institutions – such as the World Congress of Families – that enable the diffusion of shared discursive frameworks and the coordination of campaigns. Therefore, despite their anti-globalist rhetoric, anti-gender movements are products of the compression of the world promoted by processes of globalization, and their ambitions are likewise global.

E. Plan of the book

In this dissertation, I use mixed methods to investigate how different structural conditions and mobilization strategies make anti-gender campaigns more likely to undermine transgender rights. In Chapter 1, I draw from human rights, democracy, populism, and SOGI rights literature to identify two key country-level, structural conditions that shape the effects of anti-gender campaigns in a society, which I propose are the levels of liberal democracy and of institutionalization of organized religion. Additionally, I consider how socioeconomic inequalities and right-wing populism, fueled by the effects of neoliberal globalization, work as de-democratizing forces within and across countries and create opportunities for anti-gender mobilizations.

In Chapter 1 I also propose that anti-gender organizations rely on five key strategies to advance their cause and undermine SOGI rights. The first strategy, transnational coalition

building, functions to link anti-gender organizations and supportive states via globalized networks of communication that enables strategic communication, fundraising, and the sharing of experiences. The second strategy, concerted diplomacy, disputes the meanings of human rights in international organizations such as the UN. The third strategy, which intersects with such diplomatic efforts, consists of intellectual efforts to advance non-liberal interpretations of human rights, based on a “zero-sum” logic. The fourth strategy consists of political alliances with right-wing populists, which increases the opportunities for anti-gender organizations to infiltrate state structures. Finally, anti-gender actors create campaigns that scapegoat LGBTQ people and that seek to translate social and economic anxieties in moral terms.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the structural conditions identified previously and hypothesize that anti-gender campaigns are *less* likely to succeed in undermining transgender rights in countries that have higher levels of liberal democracy, and *more* likely to do so in countries governed by right-wing populists, or characterized by higher levels of religious institutionalization – that is, greater connection between religion and the state. I then test these hypotheses empirically through a cross-national panel analysis covering 162 countries across three four-year periods between 2011 and 2022. I find that, out of the three hypothesized factors, only liberal democracy bears a statistically significant relationship with change in transgender rights. As hypothesized, this relationship is positive, which is consistent with previous research on democracy and SOGI rights.

Finally, in Chapter 3 I conduct a qualitative analysis of the two structural conditions and the five strategies through a case study of Brazil. I apply the logic of process tracing to analyze qualitative data from secondary sources and eight semi-structured interviews with the

goal of understanding how the different conditions identified in Chapter 1 and measured in Chapter 2 shape and intersect with anti-gender campaign strategies. Specifically, I trace when, why, and how each of the structural factors enabled or constrained anti-gender campaign strategies since 2003, date of the first mention to “gender ideology” in the official record of the Brazilian National Congress.

The Brazil case study reveals important lessons about the mechanisms of anti-gender mobilization. As expected, democratic institutions were vital for the expansion of SOGI rights protections in the country, but this trend was led by some institutions – the Supreme Court, the presidency, and ministries – while resisted by others – namely, the Congress. Ultimately, this tension shows that the protection of SOGI rights depends on the capacity of countermajoritarian institutions to protect individual rights when the majoritarian institutions are unwilling to do so, a finding consistent with previous research and that further highlights the importance of the liberal element of democracy.

The case study further shows that the democratic institutions of the present are shaped by the experiences of the past. That is, a country’s history of authoritarianism can produce long-term effects on the prevailing ideologies and patterns of political alliances, potentially limiting advances in SOGI rights. In Brazil, campaigns against “gender ideology” appropriated old anticomunist frames to increase the resonance of anti-gender discourse, which offered a boost to right-wing populism and paved the way for the victory of Jair Bolsonaro.

Finally, Brazil shows that anti-gender mobilizations and religious institutionalization are mutually reinforcing phenomena and compatible with democracy and pluralism. Anti-gender discourse helped an ascendant Christian Right to mobilize public opinion and to have

several of its leaders elected as representatives. As they became more empowered, religious actors and their affiliated organizations further contributed to the resistance against SOGI rights in Congress and in civil society. This complex dynamic, not entirely captured by measures of religious institutionalization employed in Chapter 2, shows how democratic pluralism can offer pathways for organized religion to resist SOGI rights.

I. The globalized resistance against “gender”

The anti-gender movement is a transnational advocacy network (Keck and Sikkink 1998) rooted in a moral conservative (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024) form of globalism that seeks to dismantle the hegemony of liberalism in global institutions and to defend traditional hierarchies across societies. This well-funded and well-connected “loose network of national and transnational organizations, political parties, and religious authorities” (Graff and Korolczuk 2025, 744) is anti-liberal at its core, and increasingly open about it (Datta 2025, 146). Globally, it contests the liberal international order and its norms (Graff and Korolczuk 2025; Kalm and Meeuwisse 2023) and brands itself as against political, cultural, and (sometimes) even economic liberalism (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 20). Despite the diversity of claims and actors that compose the transnational anti-gender movement, they converge around their opposition to “gender” that casts gender-nonconformity as a threat to human nature and to social orders.

In this dissertation, I investigate how different contextual and advocacy factors enable or prevent the success of anti-gender campaigns in undermining transgender rights across countries. This chapter contributes to this investigation by identifying two types of factors: structural conditions and advocacy strategies. The structural conditions are country-level elements that determine the institutional environment within which anti-gender activism takes place. These are: the level of liberal democracy – which by its turn is constrained by existing gender-based and socioeconomic systems of inequality –, and the level of institutionalization of organized religion. The second type of factor are the strategies employed by anti-gender groups within and across countries, which are: transnational coalition-building, diplomacy,

contestation of liberal human rights, alliances with nationalist and populist movements, and scapegoating. While the first three strategies are mainly international or transnational – with localized impacts –, the last two are more focused on local contexts.

A. Structural conditions

The structural conditions that shape anti-gender campaigns are the two country-level factors that influence their ability to succeed in undermining SOGI rights: the level of liberal democracy, and the level of institutionalization of organized religion. First, anti-gender campaigns are less likely to succeed in liberal democracies because of the protection of minority rights that is derived from the liberal principles of pluralism and of individual liberty and dignity. In theory, political regimes that are closer to the liberal democratic ideal are, by the nature of their laws, institutions, and society, more likely to extend protections to SOGI minorities and allow for the full exercise of citizenship rights for LGBTQ people. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the literature on democracy and SOGI rights indicates that liberal democratic regimes are more likely to protect these rights as part of processes of democratization, and that liberal democratic principles allow for higher acceptance of LGBTQ identities (Encarnación 2020; Flores et al. 2023).

In practice, not all rights are equally protected in democratic regimes, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities and grievances hinder the recognition and promotion of SOGI rights even in developed liberal democracies. Within and across countries, these social cleavages work as de-democratizing forces. Whether provoked by neoliberal policies at the national level or fueled by transnational financial and economic crises – connected by their

turn to the neoliberal model of globalization —, growing socioeconomic inequalities fuel resentment and reactionary ideologies among the population. This creates a window of opportunity for anti-gender actors to co-opt popular feelings of anxiety and loss of status and scapegoat minorities, framing the expansion of their rights as a threat to the majority's well-being.

Lastly, the second structural condition is the institutionalization of organized religion, which helps to advance patriarchal laws and policies through its direct connection to state structures, and that infuses anti-SOGI norms in civil society and public opinion, particularly in highly religious societies. Furthermore, institutionalized religion can also help to undermine SOGI rights through religious fundamentalism, which arises as a reaction against the modernization of gender relations and which is exacerbated by economic instability.

1. Liberal democracy and its limits

Empirical research on human rights violations has revealed that political democracy and economic development are the only two variables that are consistently associated with human rights violations, and that the influence of democracy has been far greater than that of economic development (Davenport 2023, 244). However, the complex causal mechanisms and the contextual variations of this relationship have not yet been fully understood (Davenport 2023, 244). Scholars, activists, advocates and policymakers around the world have traditionally understood the relationship between political democracy and state-sponsored human rights violations through a rationalist framework: democratic institutions are believed

to increase the cost of repression; decrease repression through the socialization of leaders and citizens towards tolerance; and provide an alternative mechanism of control through participation and contestation (Davenport 2023, 245–46). Yet, as Davenport (2023, 249) argues, “different aspects of democracy matter – and matter differently – with respect to their influence on levels of repression.”

As with other types of human rights, the recognition and respect of SOGI rights is, in general, positively associated with democratic regimes, but it is the *liberal* element of democracy that logically underpins the protection of the human rights of minorities by the state. Philosophically, this is a function of the fact that both contemporary liberal democracy and individual human rights are “derived from and express the assumptions of liberalism” (Langlois 2003, 1010). In theory, while “the *electoral* principle of democracy seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens,” it is the *liberal* principle of democracy that “emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority” (Coppedge et al. 2025, 47, emphasis mine). In practice, the separation between the electoral and the liberal dimensions of democracy is not straightforward, and regimes in which free and fair elections are held regularly but minorities face systematic rights violations fall within categories of partial or electoral democracies.

While the protection of human rights may be a necessary requirement of liberal democracy, only first-generation civil and political rights – such as freedom of speech, association, movement, and religion – are commonly understood to be essential to the proper working of a democracy (Langlois 2003, 1013). Historically, the prioritization of civil and political rights over economic and social rights is associated with a shift away from economic

equality that emerged following the triumph of market fundamentalism in the 1970s (Moyn 2018). This turn shifted the understanding of rights away from the imperative of equality and towards the emphasis on sufficiency, which was more compatible with material hierarchies and the neoliberal project (Moyn 2018).

In the 21st century, disputes around minority rights in democratic countries are facilitated by the rise of illiberalism as a backlash against neoliberal globalization, discussed later in this chapter. As an ideology, illiberalism favors the electoral principle of democracy – the popular sovereignty ideal – yet it relies on a normative appeal to stretch it to the extreme, ultimately threatening democratic principles and governance (Smilova 2021, 178). Unlike historic authoritarianism, however, illiberal democracies “generally retain some mechanisms of majority rule and popular participation but decouple minority rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law” (Brysk 2018, 67). Rising in opposition to the corrosive effects of neoliberal globalization and in defiance of liberal democratic values, illiberalism advances a project of society that is a direct threat to transgender rights.

The translation of the liberal principle of pluralism into concrete laws, policies, and norms that protect LGBTQ people requires a plural civil society, which is in turn made possible by speech, association, and assembly protections (Velasco and Swindle 2024, 133). Democratic civic engagement, however, can also be detrimental to minorities. This is because civil society reinforces contextual conditions, with existing and institutional and social patterns influencing civil participation (Armony 2004, 63). In democratic but exclusionary societies, civic engagement can reinforce racism, intolerance, and violent action as social groups resist unwanted changes in their communities (Armony 2004, 61). In deeply divided societies – such as in the historical cases of the Weimar Republic and of the United States

after school desegregation, for example – civil society reflects and reinforces divides, and democratic stability is likely to suffer (Berman 2021). Therefore, civic engagement can be “inimical to democracy when it is oriented to preventing the full realization of citizenship rights for certain sectors of the population” (Armony 2004, 63). It is precisely this sort of civic engagement that is fostered by anti-gender campaigns.

In sum, as democratic freedoms empower not only human rights defenders but also their political opponents, they can paradoxically limit the benefits democracy provides to minority rights activism (Williamson 2023, 12). Thus, the realization of the liberal democratic ideal is, in practice, dependent on the systems of inequality of a society. As argued by Lombardo (2024), democracy is an unfinished project that involves constant democratization of politics – through institutions that promote participation – and society. Democratic deepening, in this sense, requires political participation but also overcoming challenges such as exclusionary boundaries defined by citizenship, informal rules based on power and privileges, and various forms of inequality, such as those based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Lombardo 2024, 470).

2. Neoliberal threats to democratization

The development of contemporary anti-gender campaigns has been shaped by the globalization of neoliberalism and the opportunities it has created for anti-gender actors within countries through increased inequality, de-democratization of state institutions, and strengthening of traditional morality (Walby 2018; Brown 2019). At the level of the nation-state, neoliberalism increases violence because it generates increased inequalities, and

because, contrary to its purported claim to reduce the state, the neoliberal state is a large and coercive one (Walby 2018, 69). Racial and sexual divisions of labor are easily accommodated within neoliberal projects of society, at the same time “deregulated markets tend to reproduce rather than ameliorate historically produced social powers and stratification” (Brown 2019, 13).

According to Brown (2019), neoliberal policies act to undermine social welfare provision and projects of societal democratization at the same time. This is because under neoliberalism, social regulation and redistribution are rejected as inappropriate interference in markets or as assaults on freedom, which generates at the same time an *antidemocratic culture from below* and *antidemocratic forms of state power from above*, two forces that act in synergy (Brown 2019, 28). In this context, neoliberal antidemocratic culture, expressed through hyper-individualized, neoliberal conceptions of freedom, animate and legitimate far-right ideology and actors (Brown 2019, 10). More specifically, by “reducing freedom to unregulated personal license”, the ideology of neoliberalism “anoints as free expression every historically and politically generated sentiment of (lost) entitlement based in whiteness, maleness, or nativism while denying these to be socially produced [...]” (Brown 2019, 45). As a result, this sentiment of lost entitlement is converted into “righteous rage against the social inclusion and political equality of the historically excluded” (Brown 2019, 45).

At the same time neoliberal ideas of freedom provide popular support for anti-gender campaigns of exclusion by generating an antidemocratic culture from below, the privatization of welfare creates opportunities for anti-gender actors from above. As argued by Brown (2019, 108–9), by dismantling public provision while simultaneously seeking to extend private sphere norms, neoliberal policies undermine democratic principles of equality, secularism,

pluralism, and inclusion, therefore replacing democratic rule with deregulated markets and traditional morality. This in turn creates space for alternative polities – such as organized religions – to increase their power and influence by supplanting the state as a welfare provider and by disputing the meaning of rights and values such as religious freedom and individual liberties, for example.

The de-democratizing force of neoliberalism takes place not only at the national level but also transnationally through neoliberal globalization and the backlash to it, the contemporary backlash against the effects of neoliberal globalization, which rose in the 2010s, is commonly explained by two interrelated narratives. Centered on the Western experience, the first one stresses economic grievances, particularly those of lower-skilled citizens, and the role of globalization in fueling resentment and creating a feeling of deprivation (Schäfer 2022, 3). This is the narrative of the “losers of globalization” (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 132), which posits that, with intensified global economic competition, disadvantaged local communities become more vulnerable and experience a feeling of relative deprivation, fueling resentment and reactionary behavior and ideologies (Schäfer 2022).

This narrative stresses that the late 20th-century advance in the globalization of labor, finance, investment, trade and goods has been accompanied by economic liberalization and deregulation, resulting in deteriorating job security for unskilled workers, loss of manufacturing industries, and growing economic inequality in the West. Such a combination is thought to have generated a poorly educated, under-class in Western societies that is especially vulnerable to illiberal and authoritarian appeals (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 135). By contrast, the “winners” of globalization – the people who benefit from new opportunities resulting from globalization, and whose life chances are enhanced – constitute cosmopolitan,

secular, and mobile middle classes that are less rooted in loyalty to particular groups and local communities than those who are “left behind” (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 136).

The second interpretation of the anti-globalization backlash departs from the understanding that there has been a relatively recent surge in support for authoritarian-populist parties in elections around the world, and attributes this decline in liberal democracy to a “cultural backlash” (Norris and Inglehart 2018). According to Norris and Inglehart’s (2018) prominent cultural backlash thesis, the global and intergenerational spread of socially liberal values – such as increasing tolerance of homosexuality, abortion, and equal rights for women, as well as growing secularization and the decline of religiosity in high-income societies, for example – have accumulated over time, resulting in a “silent revolution” that threaten traditionalists (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 87–88). This backlash, which is accelerated by medium-term economic and rapid growth in social diversity, is thought to lead to increasing support for authoritarian-populist parties and leaders and a subsequent erosion of democratic rule (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 14). Through the mobilization of fear, authoritarian populists favor policies where the state intervenes to restrict non-traditional lifestyles, such as those advanced by feminist and LGBTQ+ rights advocates (Norris and Inglehart 2018, 8).

The idea that economic grievances drive popular support for right-wing authoritarianism is supported by empirical evidence that shows, for example, that rising income inequality positively affects support for Radical Right parties in OECD countries (Engler and Weisstanner 2021), and that economic inequality generates selective solidarity and nativism in European countries (Magni 2021). However, popular support for right-wing authoritarianism is not necessarily associated with popular support for anti-(trans)gender discourse, given the opportunistic character between anti-genderists and right-wing populists

which will be explained below. Furthermore, subsequent research into the cultural backlash thesis has found that, contrary to the intergenerational conflict thesis, populist attitudes do not seem to be more prevalent among older cohorts, and there is no strong evidence of polarization among old and young cohorts (Schäfer 2022, 15). That is, the idea that authoritarian populism results from a countermovement of older generations against the spread of culturally liberal values finds little support in empirical evidence (Schäfer 2022, 15).

As argued by Mudde (2019, 101), economic anxiety and cultural backlash arguments “are much more complementary than opposite.” According to the author, “it is the socio-cultural translation of economic concerns that explains most support for far-right politics” (Mudde 2019, 101). In Europe, for example, the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent austerity measures dismantled welfare provisions in many states, which mobilized many citizens to demand better social policies and in turn enabled ultraconservatives to co-opt these efforts by redefining these collective experiences in moral terms (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 43). Although austerity politics also enabled the rise of left-wing populism in some cases, the cooptation of popular energy by the far-right was aided by other elements at the time, more specifically, the crisis of the left and the rise of right-wing populism – in the context of the so-called “refugee crisis”, and technological advances – such as social media and online petition platforms (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 43). In Spain, for example, the austerity policies initiated in 2010 undermined the ongoing trajectory of equality policies and helped paving the way for ultranationalist party Vox to enter the electoral sphere by intertwining anti-gender language with ultra-nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Campillo et al. 2025, 112–13).

Finally, it is worth calling attention to the fact that, although the 2008 financial crisis and the economic crisis it generated created valuable opportunities for anti-gender and other illiberal actors in Europe, not all crises lead to illiberalism. Rather, scholars such as Snegovaya (2024, 442), argue that financial crises are better understood as “catalysts in contexts where preexisting accumulated frustration had already created fertile ground for the illiberal swing.” After all, in countries such as Brazil and Turkey, for example, illiberal actors came to power in the *aftermath* of economic crises, while in countries severely hit by the 2008 financial crisis, such as Ireland and Portugal, no illiberal parties rose to power (Snegovaya 2024, 442). Therefore, the rise of illiberal anti-globalization movements, such as the anti-gender movement, is not inevitable but rather dependent on the vulnerability of each society to the de-democratization forces of neoliberalism, and on how domestic conservative actors exploit these vulnerabilities according to their own agendas.

3. Anti-globalism and right-wing populism

Despite its origins preceding the backlash against globalization of the 2010s, the anti-gender movement found in antiglobalist populism a valuable ally. The rise of an anti-globalist right-wing populism, associated with the anxieties of the moment, strengthened the position of radical right parties around the world. These actors, on their turn, were willing to cooperate with ultraconservative groups and take on their ideological agenda as their own, merging fear toward “gender ideology” with their own issues, such as nativism and Islamophobia (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 43).

Anti-gender campaigns are not always nationalistic, but their anti-globalism creates common ground with the nationalist and populist worldviews, which in turn opens up opportunities for anti-gender actors to forge alliances with right-wing populists. The populist construction of “the people” bears similarities to nationalist one, but the two phenomena are distinct and need to be disentangled. Like nationalism, most populist politics operate within a national context and therefore tend to define “the people” on a national level, even when nationalism is not central to their political projects (De Cleen 2017, 347). Moreover, both nationalist and populist actors are usually organized on the level of the nation-state, which is especially true for populist parties and leaders that take up public functions that represent the nation and the nation-state (De Cleen 2017, 348).

Populist and nationalist projects often share demands which allow for the alliance between the two. Nevertheless, populism and nationalism differ in the nature of their main distinction. The main distinction of populism is that between the (powerless, pure) “people” and the (powerful, corrupt) “elite”, while nationalism is based on the in/out distinction between the nation/ people and its outsides (De Cleen 2017, 351). That is, although the nationalist in/out distinction can have “a vertical dimension in terms of racial, national, or cultural superiority”, this dimension is always “subordinate to the in/out distinction, and of a different nature than the populist distinction between powerless and powerful” (De Cleen 2017, 351).

1.1. Populism as a threat to liberal democracy

Scholarly understandings of populism can be divided into three main approaches: (1) the ideational approach, according to which populism is an ideology, or a worldview; (2) the sociocultural or performative approach, which views it as a performance or style; and (3) the political-strategic approach, which defines populism as an electoral strategy to win popular support. Despite presenting divergent views, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and several scholars understand populism as a multidimensional concept (Olivas Osuna 2021). Here I consider each of the approaches as a dimension of how populism manifests in the real world but emphasize the ideational elements inasmuch as they are fundamental for the worldview of anti-gender actors.

The ideational approach to populism defines it as a set of ideas based on three key concepts: “the people,” “the elite,” and the *vonlonté generale*, or “the general will.” According to the populist logic, “the people” – understood as homogeneous and pure – is opposed by the corrupt “elite,” and it is up to the populist(s) actor(s) to defend popular sovereignty by promoting the “general will.” The most popular expression of the ideational approach is the one theorized by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), who define populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that distinguishes between the morally pure “people” and the corrupt “elite,” and that seeks to enable the “general will”, a notion based on the Rousseauian idea of *volonté general* – a unified common good that expresses “the” interest of a political community. As a thin-centered ideology, populism exists in combination with host ideologies that shape its variations. In this sense, populism “hardly ever emerges in a pure form” and it “is almost always attached to certain other ideological features that are related to particular grievances existing in different regional contexts” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, 168).

The sociocultural approach to populism sees it as a performance or style and focuses on the political appeal of populist claims. This approach to populism may use different terms to characterize this phenomenon, such as political style, communication style, or discourse, among others, but “are united by the view that populism is something that is done, embodied, and enacted” (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021, 49). It understands populism not as a “top-down” mode of political communication, but rather as a relational phenomenon that operates as a two-way street between populist leaders and representatives making claims on behalf of “the people,” and “the people” rejecting, accepting or modifying such claims and shaping the resulting political identity itself (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021, 52).

Finally, in addition to the ideational and performative views, some scholars focus on what they see as the pragmatic dimensions of populism and define it as an opportunistic political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers (Weyland 2017, 50). This approach thus focuses not on what populists say, but on what they do, especially in relation to how they pursue and sustain political power (Weyland 2017, 50). The strategic approach argues that populist politics revolve around top-down leadership and therefore hover in the hybrid zone between democracy and competitive authoritarianism (Weyland 2017). In this sense, “it is the very essence of populism that the rhetorically empowered people necessarily follow a leader who claims to act on their behalf” (Weyland 2017, 54).

One of the major concerns of the literature on populism is to understand how it is related to democratic principles and institutions, and whether or not populism is compatible with liberal democracy. For Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, 82), populism “exploits the tensions that are inherent to liberal democracy, which tries to find a harmonious equilibrium

between majority rule and minority rights.” Thus, populism can, in theory, act as a democratic force when it extends political participation through the defense of majority rule, but as it “tends to distrust any unelected institution that limits the power of the *demos*”, it can develop into a form of illiberal democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 82). This is because, when in power, populist politics (self-)attribute the task of identifying what the general will is, and strategically promoting institutions that enable its realization (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 16–17). In doing so, they tend to criticize the rule of law and rights-protecting institutions, which, according to them, “not only limit the capacity of the people to exercise their rightful power, but also give rise to growing discontent with the political system” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 95). Therefore, by opposing pluralism and promoting a monist and moral distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 16), the populist worldview is incompatible with liberal democracy.

As argued by Rummens (2017), although populism and liberal democracy are both committed to the idea of popular sovereignty, they conceptualize the *demos* in different ways, which makes the two traditions antagonistic and irreconcilable (Rummens 2017, 554). While populism understands “the people” as a homogenous community with a shared collective identity, liberal democracy understands it as an “irreducible plurality, consisting of free and equal citizens” (Rummens 2017, 554). Importantly, this incompatibility also means that populism is a threat to liberal democracy: because populism conceives “the people” as a homogenous unity, “it considers all those individuals not conforming to its idea of the collective identity as outsiders with fewer entitlements” (Rummens 2017, 561). As such,

populism “fosters the marginalization of specific groups of society and tends to undermine minority rights” (Rummens 2017, 561).

4. Institutionalization of organized religion

The institutionalization of organized religion influences the status of SOGI minorities both directly – through its influence on law and policy – and indirectly – through its influence on civil society and public opinion. In their examination of the state-religion relationship and its effects on family law, Htun & Weldon (2018) argue that the institutionalization of religion gives greater authority to patriarchal interpretations of family law, shielding them from contestation and external influences (Htun and Weldon 2018, 122). Furthermore, as patriarchal religious traditions become institutionalized and therefore “more closely linked to the public status of religion,” challenges to their versions of family law “are seen as challenges to the entire church–state relationship” (Htun and Weldon 2018, 122). This creates an incentive for backlash (Mansbridge and Shames 2008, 625), as religious authorities that are entrenched within the state may resist changes in the status quo. As I argue in this section, anti-gender campaigns are a means for religious authorities to counter secularization and (re)claim influence in state laws and policies, as well as in the international human rights regime.

When institutionalized, religious organizations such as the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and the myriad of Christian organizations that compose the U.S. Christian Right can shape the status of SOGI rights directly – through its influence on law and policy – indirectly – through its influence on civil society and public opinion. This

influence is heightened in more religious societies, and during times of disruptive change, which create opportunities for religious fundamentalist interpretations of the world. Across countries and regions, powerful religious organizations such as the Catholic Church advance the international resistance against “gender” through diplomacy and theological innovation. As I discuss in Section B, such religious organizations contribute to anti-gender campaigns globally through their direct participation in anti-gender venues and by providing funding and material resources for campaigns. In turn, they expand their political influence within states – most notably in the case of the ROC – and in international organizations – in the cases of the Vatican and of the U.S. Christian Right.

The importance of the institutionalization of religion for transgender rights, specifically, has been verified by empirical cross-national research conducted by Williamson (2025), who proposed two main ways through which religion affected transgender rights in a given country. The first one is based on the nature of the religion-state relationship – that is, how religion is institutionalized –, while the second one depends on the role of religion in society. His findings suggest that “religion plays an important role in explaining variation in transgender rights” through a negative relationship between the prevalence of religious influences and transgender rights (Williamson 2025, 21). More specifically, religious legislation was shown to have a negative and statistically significant relationship with transgender rights, suggesting that “countries with more laws supporting or privileging religion tend to have fewer rights in place for transgender people” (Williamson 2025, 14). Nevertheless, the presence of an official religion did not appear to impact a country's trans rights, which provided mixed support for his hypothesis that transgender rights would be lower in countries with higher formal political institutionalization of religion (Williamson

2025, 16). In sum, cross-country variation in transgender rights was associated not with the presence of an official religion, but rather with religious institutionalization through laws and policies.

Besides influencing state laws and policies, institutionalized religion impacts the level of discrimination of gender minorities in civil society by shaping social norms related to gender and sexuality. Some political actors and movements, such as the Catholic Church and fundamentalist projects, for example, attempt to block changes that threaten their own project of gender relations (Walby 2009, 248). Given that “secular polities are more open to democratic governance of intimacy than religious ones,” counter-mobilizations by patriarchal organized religions tend to delay the modernization of a society’s gender relations (Walby 2009, 248). This is, of course, not the case of all religions, since doctrinal interpretations of gender-related rights vary within faiths and over time as religious doctrine is by itself a site of struggle (Htun and Weldon 2018, 122). However, religious doctrine has *historically* been patriarchal, and the timing and pace of doctrinal change has been shaped by its relationship to the state, which can, for example, enhance the authority of certain religious interpretations (Htun and Weldon 2018, 134).

The importance of religiosity in the effects of religious institutionalization is corroborated by findings from Htun and Weldon (2018) and Williamson (2025). Htun and Weldon (2018, 154) note that “the negative relationship between the political institutionalization of religious authority and family law becomes sharper in a context of high religiosity.” Similarly, Williamson’s (2025) research indicates that, while formal and informal connection between religion and the state seem to be relevant for transgender rights, it is the level of religiosity within a country’s society that appears to have a more substantial and

consistent impact on transgender rights protections (Williamson 2025, 21). As a result, his findings “support the idea that religion’s effect on political outcomes depends on how and where those religious influences manifest within a country” (Williamson 2025, 21).

Religious fundamentalism can be an effective means through which organized religion can influence civil society and public opinion, and one that tends to be particularly powerful in highly religious societies. As a “set of rhetorical strategies that characterize a family of movements” (Ammerman 2003, 96), religious fundamentalism is mainly concerned with changes brought about by modernization of societies. In face of such challenges, religious fundamentalists engage in a rhetoric of tradition, claiming as their goal the restoration of some former state of purity or orthodoxy that is selectively retrieved from formerly dominant traditions and ideological innovations based on that tradition (Ammerman 2003, 96). However, fundamentalist claims about “tradition” must retain enough of the elements in their culture’s telling of its history to be plausible, but also link the past to the future in order to claim the power of this future/past in the present (Ammerman 2003, 98). In this sense, religious fundamentalist projects of collective transformation are often shaped by nationalism as the defining element of a people. However, this is not always the case for those who participate in today’s transnational anti-gender movement, since anti-gender campaigns must be flexible enough to create common frames that allow them to grant transnational public support.

Historically, fundamentalisms are a response to the disruption of traditional life caused by modernization (Ammerman 2003, 94), often countered through the creation of moral panics such as “gender ideology”. Originating and thrive in times and places of basic cultural change – especially those related to processes modernization such as urbanization, economic

growth, and colonialism —, these rhetorical strategies identify changes in how people think about the world as challenges to the presuppositions of their faith, which they feel compelled to justify and defend against the threats of secularism and religious pluralism (Ammerman 2003, 94). Thus, in face of disruptive change, religious fundamentalists seek a restoration of a godly center for their societies through both individual and collective transformation (Ammerman 2003, 97).

Historical forms of modernization motivated the three main types of religious fundamentalist actors that eventually converged around anti-genderism. The U.S. Christian Right and its “family values” frame emerged in the 1970s as a response to the upheaval and norm change in US society that had been taking place since the 1960s (Ammerman 2003, 93). Later, starting around 1994, it began to establish a more permanent presence at the UN as it started to dispute space in the international arena with feminist and SOGI rights movements (Buss and Herman 2003). The success of women’s and SOGI human rights movements at the UN, by its turn, also alarmed the Vatican, leading to the creation of a movement against “gender ideology.” Finally, the Russian Orthodox Church, which experienced a revival during its early post-Soviet years, found itself at the time “poorly prepared to address modern life challenges” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 151). Nevertheless, the church’s contacts with the U.S. Christian Right as its organizations from the early 1990s ignited “a learning process in which Orthodox religious actors came to see themselves as part of a global resistance to SOGI rights” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 154).

B. Strategies

Anti-gender actors rely on five key strategies to advance their cause and undermine SOGI rights. First, they connect to one another across borders through new and existing networks of moral conservative organizations connected to various political, economic, religious, and cultural elites. These globalized networks of communication allow them to coordinate actions, share funding, and adapt ideological frames to different local contexts through the use of a highly-plastic “transnational kit” of campaigns (Paternotte 2023).

The second strategy is a concerted diplomatic effort through which anti-gender actors and their allies – such as the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church – seek to dispute the meanings of human rights in international organizations such as the UN. These actors, who are high-level insiders of international politics, utilize a collection of tactics to conceal their hierarchical worldview and agenda, and to eclipse their connections to different sources of power and wealth, portraying themselves instead as local victims of a global elite.

Closely connected to their diplomatic efforts – but not limited to them –, the third strategy is the contestation of liberal human rights, whether explicitly or not. This strategy consists in challenging the philosophical foundation of human rights, and in advancing the defense of traditional hierarchies over individual liberties, and of the collective over the individual. By employing a “zero-sum” framework, anti-gender actors argue that the expansion of rights for SOGI minorities naturally results in the reduction of rights for others.

The fourth strategy consists of the creation of alliances between anti-gender actors and right-wing populists. Brought together by an ideological affinity, discussed in Section 1, anti-gender actors and right-wing populists have become powerful allies, even if the nature of this alliance is largely opportunistic (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Korolczuk 2023). By uniting

forces, anti-gender actors and right-wing populists increase their chances of infiltrating state structures and replacing liberal elites.

Finally, anti-gender actors strongly rely on scapegoating to target SOGI rights in different countries. This strategy, powered by alliances with right-wing populists and religious fundamentalists, translates social and economic anxieties into moral terms, portraying minorities as existential threats to children, women, and the “natural” family. As with other minorities, the scapegoating of transgender people tends to be more effective in societies marked by increased social inequalities or those suffering from the precarization effects of neoliberal policies. It is also more likely to resonate in contexts where these minorities are more distant from state power due to incipient social movements or heavily institutionalized patriarchal religions.

1. Transnational coalition building

Embeddedness within wide-reaching, well-funded transnational networks of conservative actors is crucial for the success of anti-gender campaigns. As a transnational advocacy network (TAN) (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024), the anti-gender movement is strengthened by the communication between various clusters of moral conservative organizations, which facilitates coordinated actions, the sharing of experiences, and expands funding possibilities. These globalized connections also inform anti-gender organizations on how to adapt anti-gender frames to different societies and link them to potential allies within countries and international organizations.

The paradigmatic case of the Latin American campaign *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* illustrates how globalized communication was central to mass mobilization by anti-gender actors. Launched in Peru in 2016 against comprehensive sexual education, the campaign was sponsored by the Spanish far-right online platform CitizenGo and later replicated in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Mexico and Uruguay, reaching even the United States and Spain (Corrêa 2020, 179; Nevache 2025, 140). The 2016 Peruvian campaign was, on its turn, inspired in the hashtag #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas, born in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela in 2009 as opposition to the alleged leftist tendencies of public education in this country. At the time of its creation, the hashtag #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas was unrelated to the idea of “gender ideology”, but it later became connected to it as the online mobilization reached new territories and took on new functions such as opposing not only sex education policies but also abortion and SOGI rights (Nevache 2025).

The concerted anti-gender opposition to SOGI human rights is sponsored by a collection of members of national and international elites whose commitment to the anti-gender agenda is often linked to their other political, economic, and geopolitical interests. One illustrative example of the intertwining between material and ideological interest in anti-gender campaigns is that of Russian oligarchs such as Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev, who have established a series of foundations, think-tanks and media outlets which act as “influence factories” (Datta 2021, 22). The two magnates, who have contributed to anti-gender funding with the combined amount of 83.4 million between 2019 and 2023 (Datta 2025), are closely associated to the Kremlin, to the Russian Orthodox Church – through the Patriarchal Commission for the Family, the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood – and to international anti-gender actors through the World Congress of Families (Datta 2021, 22).

Together, these magnates, their international allies, and the Moscow Patriarchate, have crafted a moral conservative agenda that is attractive to the Kremlin and serves to restrict liberal freedoms in Russia and to gather sympathizers for Russia's foreign policy ambitions (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 143).

In different countries, the resistance against "gender" often functions as a symbolic glue (Kováts 2017; Kováts, and Pöim 2015) that brings different actors together by providing discursive cohesion and empty signifiers (Mayer and Sauer 2018) such as "gender ideology." However, as Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024, 21) argue, at the *global* level the resistance to "gender" is better understood as a universalistic frame (Snow and Benford 1992) from which domestic movements can draw. As a master frame, "gender" travels across borders and defines potential adherents of anti-gender ideology as "a single coherent group: the group of those who 'resist'" (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 22). According to Paternotte (2023, 3) anti-gender campaigns form "a transnational kit that is highly adaptable to local circumstances." This highly adaptable and plastic kit contains various elements that "can be used, assembled and amended differently by actors pursuing distinct and sometimes even contradictory objectives" (Paternotte 2023, 16).

Anti-gender organizations frame their claims as representative of local – and presumably socially conservative – peoples against powerful global elites, but they are insiders with "advisor status and substantial influence" at important international human rights venues (Graff and Korolczuk 2025, 755). The United Nations, for example, has been a central venue for their activism since the movement's beginnings in the 1990s (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 206). At the UN Human Rights Council, anti-gender organizations participate in gatherings or seminars where "NGOs and experts exchange drafts, amendments, and working papers and issue recommendations and opinions" (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 207). Moreover,

several organizations, such as CitizenGO, Ordo Iuris, and the World Youth Alliance (WYA) have consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which allows them “to influence key bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), in charge of ensuring follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Commission on Population and Development (CPD), monitoring implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action” (Datta 2025, 123).

Through transnational coalition building, anti-gender organizations and venues have facilitated an ideological alliance between European nationalists, right-wing populists and autocrats, the U.S. Christian Right and the Russian Orthodox Church (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 47). In Hungary, for example, the descendants of the royal Habsburg-Lorraine family are active organizers and defenders of Orbán’s illiberalism and of anti-gender campaigns. In addition to serving as brand ambassadors for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s inspired authoritarianism, they also serve as “facilitators among Europe’s aristocratic elites, and as financiers through Catholic-aligned investment networks” (Datta 2025, 39). Correspondingly, Orbán has strategically incorporated Habsburg descendants into his political network as diplomats and deepened their ideological alignment through the establishment of the Otto von Habsburg Foundation under the state-controlled Bethlen Gábor Foundation, in 2017 (Datta 2025, 39). In Germany, billionaire Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis, “rests at the center of a vast international network of far-right political actors” that include U.S.-based ones such as ADF (Alliance Defending Freedom), Steve Bannon, US Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, and Lenoard Leo (Datta 2025; Vanderhoof 2024; Pengelly 2024).

The presence of Catholic aristocratic circles and activist families within transnational, multireligious anti-gender organizations plays an important role in legitimizing these

organizations in the eyes of conservative European Catholics (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 121). For example, Catholic aristocrats such as the Hungarian ambassador to the Holy See, Archduke Eduard from Habsburg, and the German Princess Gloria of Thurn und Taxis have attended World Congress of Families events in the past (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 121). Importantly, since European aristocrats remain some of the continent's wealthiest families, they contribute to anti-gender networks not only through their prestige but also through their wealth and long-standing transnational connections (Datta 2025, 39). In addition to aristocrats, Catholic activist families – such as the Vollmers, from Venezuela; the Komovs, from Russia; and the Kubys, from Germany – form personal networks that connect institutions and countries through multi-generational clientelistic relationships (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 122–23). For Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024, 123), the cultivation of close personal ties and large familial issue networks is considered an asset by a conservative complex that aims to “create a counterpublic to a perceived liberal hegemony.” As a result, “it is common to meet several generations of activists” at conservative conferences, which is an important distinction from SOGI activists, “who often have different sexual and gender identities from their parents” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 123).

The personalistic character of relationships within religious anti-gender networks, differently from that of SOGI rights defendant groups, can provide significant advantages to anti-gender campaigns. These aristocratic and familiar ties offer a multi-generational and powerful contingent of activists, which in turn provides an “innovative potential inside the conservative complex, which continues to grow and exploit new topics and strategies as younger generations follow in the footsteps of their parents” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 123–24). Furthermore, these powerful moral entrepreneurs have extensive business connections

(Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 127) that can provide them with the necessary financial means to conduct their campaigns at the programmatic level.

2. Diplomacy

Anti-gender campaigns are designed and sponsored by a transnational network of powerful organizations invested in the defense of various political, economic, social, and cultural hierarchies that are linked to gender to different degrees. Previous research has shown that key anti-gender organizations and networks are powerful, well-funded and well-connected – personally, organizationally and financially – across countries and continents (Korolczuk 2023, 348). These organizations draw on conservative networks of politicians, business elites, oligarchs and aristocrats to form a well-funded, plural movement held together by their desire to undermine liberal principles and institutions. Thus, although not all actors that sponsor or support anti-gender campaigns are *primarily* motivated by the threat of “gender”, the perceived threats that unite these “ideological incongruent and geographically scattered actors” is “almost always intertwined with a panic around the destabilization of masculinity and femininity [...]” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 5).

Through concerted diplomacy, anti-gender actors dispute the meanings of human rights, a strategy that is crucial to obscure their status as members of national and international elites. In other words, anti-gender actors invoke selected human rights language and principles to advance a non-egalitarian and anti-pluralist understanding of it. Following a logic of zero-sum, competing rights (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024) they mobilize frames such as “religious freedom”, “family values”, “pro-life”, and fight against “gender ideology” as a parrying tactic

(Bob 2019) through which they raise their own rival rights to offset those of their opponents. By stoking zero-sum fears, the parrying tactic works to “galvanize constituents and like-minded third parties worried about the unpredictable effects of change” (Bob 2019, 54). Moreover, they deploy anti-colonial and anti-globalist rhetoric as a camouflage tactic (Bob 2019) that frames their opposition to “gender” as a defense of women and of the “natural” family. In activating these two types of human rights contention, anti-gender movements dispute the meanings of human rights while seeking to advance a hierarchical and antidemocratic project of society.

Human rights claims raised by anti-gender actors are often based on the appropriation of anti-colonial language to portray SOGI rights claims as a new form of “civilizing mission.” This strategic framing enables anti-gender actors to mask their more mundane motives – such as increasing the presence of religious-affiliated organizations within state structures – and divert audiences from more contentious goals – such as legal discrimination against transgender people. According to Graff and Korolczuk (2025) anti-gender actors rely on employing *chameleon tactics*, a top-down strategy of simulating grassroots mobilization (also called astroturfing) to moralize the binary opposition between local and global and portray themselves as protectors of local populations vis-à-vis transnational progressive actors. This strategy, based on a “deliberate blurring of boundaries between global and local levels of activism, [...] enables global actors to present themselves as defenders of local values” (Graff and Korolczuk 2025, 745). Thus, the authors conclude, “what is actually at stake is hegemony at the transnational level, but the strategy of legitimization is to obfuscate this political reality and make opposition to gender appear as locally rooted” (Graff and Korolczuk 2025, 749).

In sum, despite their populist, anti-globalist rhetoric, anti-gender organizations and campaigns are anti-liberal enterprises of political, economic, and traditional elites. To eclipse this fact, anti-gender actors deploy human rights language selectively and strategically through the use of parrying and camouflage tactics. In this sense, anti-gender campaigns are more likely to be successful at undermining transgender rights when they frame their demands as human rights claims. This frame allows anti-gender claims to resonate in public opinion and facilitates its introduction into the political agendas of state institutions and international organizations. This is not only because human rights language is incredibly powerful and far-reaching, but because anti-gender actors deploy human rights language strategically to camouflage their hierarchical worldview and connections to economic, social, and political elites in various countries.

3. Contestation of liberal human rights

Disputes around SOGI rights are largely a matter of defining which parts of a population are entitled to protection, security and community, which are social prerequisites to human development (Brysk 2005, 23). As such, they are about human rights as “a set of principles, values, and institutions seeking to assure the life, dignity, freedom, and equality of all people” (Brysk 2018). International human rights norms, now considered a fundamental characteristic of the world order (Brysk 2005, 23) are partly based on the natural rights tradition, and evolved from the idea, present since at least the Middle Ages, that certain rights are “natural” or “human” (Bob 2019, 33). Ultimately, human rights claims are about defining what it means to be human and which aspects of humanness are (universally) entitled to

protection. Accordingly, they hardly arise uncontested, which is especially true for claims that derive from evolving social constructions that originate in response to oppression (Brysk 2005, 23).

Human rights projects are inherently political and contested because they are underpinned by normative beliefs and because they concern issues of power and privilege. Likewise, SOGI rights are not propositions about moral truth but rather inherently *political* demands for an end to domination and oppression. Human rights reflect the ideological conviction “that all people should be treated as moral equals entitled to certain essential freedoms”, and, as such, they necessarily concern issues of power, privilege, domination and oppression (Goodhart 2013, 33). More specifically, human rights claims challenge hierarchical orders, even – and perhaps especially – those that are justified as “natural”, as it is the case of those based on gender and sexuality. Therefore, they “take a particular side and reflect a particular perspective – that of the weak, the abused, the marginalized, the downtrodden” (Goodhart 2013, 33). In this sense, anti-gender campaigns are opposed to human rights claims that challenge SOGI-based hierarchies, which these actors view as natural and virtuous.

Anti-gender campaigns against SOGI rights take part in two forms of human rights contention: one that prioritizes traditional hierarchies over individual liberties, and another that disputes the meanings of human rights by offering alternative interpretations. Philosophically, the anti-gender opposition to SOGI rights stems from its theological, conservative worldview. The anti-gender perspective on human nature and on natural law is consistent with Christian dogma – although no longer confined to it – and “radically antithetical to social constructionism” (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 17). As moral

conservatives, anti-gender actors privilege “[...] patriarchy over equality, and hierarchy over democracy, the collective over the individual, religion over the secular, and duties over liberties” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 12). As such, they interpret SOGI rights claims according to a zero-sum, competing rights framework according to which “the expansion of rights in one sphere naturally leads to the reduction of rights in another” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 74).

Over time, the interpretation of human rights advanced by anti-gender actors at international organizations such as the UN, although always critical of liberal individualism, has adapted in response to the interactions with SOGI rights defendants (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). In around 2012 to 2014, the anti-gender argumentative strategy about human rights has shifted from a contextualist, cultural-relativist to one that claims universalism for itself (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 214). With this change, the anti-gender agenda against SOGI “presents itself as just as universal as the liberal position that Western states and, indeed, the UN bureaucracy itself promotes” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 214).

4. Alliances with right-wing populists

The ideational components of populism and those that underline the anti-gender movement share three important characteristics that provide logical convergence between populists and the anti-gender cause. First, like anti-genderism, populism is antithetical to liberal democracy and SOGI rights. In holding that “nothing should constrain the ‘the will of the (pure) people’”, populism “fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights” as well as their institutional guarantees (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 81). Since SOGI rights are advocated for as a form of minority rights in democratic societies,

they are fundamentally at odds with the populist view of “the people” as a homogenous entity. Second, the populist appeal to a “common sense” is consistent with the anti-transgender discourse that casts the sex binary as the natural order of societies, and that is associated with the historical medicalization of gender nonconforming identities. Finally, the logic of much of the anti-gender opposition to globalization – based around a Manichean view of the relationship between the local, conservative “people” and the corrupt, global “elite” – is a populist one (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 2025).

While shared ideas approximate the anti-gender and populist worldviews, much of the convergence between anti-(trans)gender campaigns and right-wing populists is explained not by the thin-centered ideology of populism itself but by the wider tent of radical right ideology². According to Mudde (2019, 8), right-wing populism is the predominant form of manifestation of radical right ideology in the 21st century. Guided by their nativism,³ right-wing populists – also referred to in the literature as radical right populists, or the populist radical right (PRR) – attempt to reduce social and economic structures in their complexity and propose simple explanations, often through the use of scapegoating (Wodak 2021, 5). Seeking to obscure or externalize the origins of social conflict, right-wing populists routinely oppose the “the true people” and “the corrupt elite” by drawing “on well-known and established stereotypes of ‘the Other’ and ‘the Stranger’, whose discursive and social-political exclusion is supposed to

² Mudde (2019) defines the far-right as a form of right-wing ideology that is “hostile to liberal democracy” and that is itself divided into two subgroups: the extreme right, which rejects the essence of democracy, and the radical right, which accepts popular sovereignty and majority rule but “opposes fundamental elements of *liberal* democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers” (Mudde 2019, 7).

³ Nativism is the ideology according to which “states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native (or ‘alien’) elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde 2019, 27).

create a sense of community and belonging within the allegedly homogenous ‘people’ or ‘Volk’ (ethnos)” (Wodak 2021, 5).

Gender and sexuality are not the most pressing concerns for the radical right, but traditional gender identities and relations are interwoven with their nationalist ideology. As a discursive practice, nationalism constructs the nation in ways that tend to institutionalize the sex binary by assigning sex-based social functions to members of the nation. This is because gender roles informed by the binary sex/gender system are important for the biological reproduction of the nation, the cultural reproduction of gender relations, the regulation of citizenship, and the definition of duties in militaries and in wars (Yuval-Davis 1997). Thus, gender is a crucial discursive element that produces familiarity among national strangers – forging bonds through gendered language – and that serves as a symbolic means to create familiarity among strangers “through the symbolic use of women to differentiate the national cultural Self against different and threatening Others” (Towns 2019, 278). Furthermore, traditional gender roles shape the intergenerational transmission of national culture by assigning the task of transmitting culture from one generation to the next primarily to women (Towns 2019, 278–79).

In a world of nation-states, nationalist ideas determine which groups in a population are considered part of the nation and therefore entitled to the “right to have rights” (Arendt 2017, 306). In this sense, nationalism operates the construction of the nation as an imagined political community from a preexisting collective sense of shared identity (Anderson 2006). As argued by Yuval-Davis (1997, 11) the fictional assumption that there is a correspondence between the boundaries of the nation and those of the state, constitutive of the concept of nation-state, has been at the basis of nationalist ideologies. In practice, this fiction has worked

to naturalize the “hegemony of one collectivity and its access to the ideological apparatuses of both state and civil society,” and to exclude minorities from important power resources (Yuval-Davis 1997, 11).

Beyond the ideational similarities that approximate anti-genderism and populism, populist performance is itself compatible with the moral conservative view of gender roles, shared also by the radical right. This is because, according to Geva (2018, 17), “hegemonic masculinity and femininity provide the content for the symbolism and performative repertoires through which populists claim to represent the people and fight elites.” Following a populist logic, contemporary anti-gender ideology “juxtaposes innocent, gender-conservative people, whom it claims to represent, against corrupt, immoral elites who are accused of spreading ‘gender ideology’” (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 7). In doing so, it also appropriates anti-colonial frames to justify their opposition to feminist and LGBTQ movements as a matter of self-defense, a discursive strategy that resonates particularly well among right-wing populists (Graff and Korolczuk 2022).

Bound together by similar ideas, style and by the umbrella of radical right ideology, anti-gender organizations and right-wing populists have become allies in the 21st century. Nevertheless, the nature of this alliance is context-specific. For example, right-wing populists in Europe can deploy a sort of ‘strategic progressivism’ in sexual matters, that projects sexism and homophobia onto “racialized Others constructed as intruders and sexual threats to the nation and the national culture” (Dietze and Roth 2020, 13). In these homonationalist (Puar 2017) or femonationalist (Farris 2017) variations of right-wing populism, nativism draws from old Western racist stereotypes of Muslim and non-white men as “animalistic and hyper-sexual predators” (Mudde 2019, 152). By framing foreign racialized groups as “barbarians”, right-

wing populists and far-right parties employ a discursive strategy that “position themselves as defenders of gender equality and liberal democracy, which helps to downplay the ways in which these actors endanger democratic principles [...]” (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 88).

The adoption of pro-women or pro-gay rhetoric in Europe responds to differences in structural conditions and successes of social movements in the continent, and seeks to expand the electorate of radical right parties (Spierings 2020, 49; Mudde 2019, 153). In Western Europe, gender is often used by right-wing populists as part of their anti-immigration agenda, whereas in countries such as Poland it is used to defend patriarchal and socially conservative views on gender and sexuality, which are widespread in the country (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 88). Likewise, in the Netherlands, the recognition of same-sex marriage preceded the creation of the PVV (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, or Party for Freedom), one of the main radical right parties in the country, which made the issue “simply a given and even defended by them” (Spierings 2020, 49). By contrast, transgender rights are perceived as “infringing on the entitlements of the common man in the Netherlands” and therefore are opposed to through populist appeals to common sense (Spierings 2020, 50).

Graff and Korolczuk (2022, 2023, 2025) propose the concept of opportunistic synergy to explain the ideological affinity and political collaboration between right-wing politicians, anti-gender civil society actors, and religious fundamentalists. According to the authors, this affinity “results from a degree of ideological coherence but is not limited to it” (Graff and Korolczuk 2023, 378). For right-wing populists, anti-gender rhetoric can “enhance their appeal in the eyes of traditionalist voters and to demonize their political opponents [...] by associating them with decadence, perversion, and a threat to the family and nation” (Graff and Korolczuk 2023, 378). For anti-gender civil society organizations, the ascension of right-wing

populists to power can yield them “access to funding, voice, and political influence, at times entering state institutions and working from within the system to change laws and institutional practices” (Graff and Korolczuk 2023, 378).

“Right-wing populists draw on anti-gender rhetoric to increase their moral legitimacy in the eyes of traditionalist voters, and to moralize the conflict between the elites and the people. Meanwhile, ultraconservative organizations seek openings in the political opportunity structure; they treat right-wing parties as powerful allies thanks to whom they can introduce legal changes, gain access to funding and participate in policy-making processes. Both forces join in an effort to foster elite change in all spheres of political, social and cultural life, replacing liberal actors and institutions with those who answer to the ruling party only” (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 24).

At the level of the state, this synergy enables religious fundamentalists and right-wing populists to expand their institutional powers (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 24). In countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Spain, for example, conservative politicians have resorted to the fight against “gender ideology” to mobilize electorates and to attack liberal values and democratic practices (Graff and Korolczuk 2023, 379). In each of these countries, anti-gender actors and right-wing populists justified the dismantling of liberal institutions by equating “gender” to liberalism, resulting in the curtailment of minority rights and erosion of democratic institutions and principles (Graff and Korolczuk 2023, 382).

5. Scapegoating

Anti-gender campaigns are more likely to undermine transgender rights in societies marked by deepening social inequalities or affected by economic crises because these conditions can be exploited to frame minorities as scapegoats. As explained earlier in this chapter, the translation of social anxieties in moral terms is more likely in societies marked by the precarization effects of neoliberal policies, which create opportunities for de-democratization from above and below (Brown 2019). Beyond states, the destabilizing effects of neoliberal globalization created opportunities for different illiberal actors to ally against a loosely-defined “globalism” and its liberal principles.

Existing research on anti-gender movements shows that right-wing populists mainly contribute to the success of anti-gender campaigns against transgender people by linking anti-(trans)gender messages to pressing popular concerns in different societies. This connection, facilitated by ideological points of confluence between populism and anti-genderism, further helps to cast transgender people not as part of the “common people” but rather as agents of foreign, globalist elites. Given that right-wing populists are skilled at co-opting popular sentiments of anxiety and dissatisfaction with mainstream politics and translating them into political demands, they can increase the resonance of anti-gender frames. In turn, the scapegoating of transgender people can help these radical right actors to expand their platforms and to increase their popularity among conservative-leaning sectors of the public. Furthermore, if right-wing populists rise to power, they create opportunities for the institutionalization of anti-gender actors within state structures.

Given the opportunistic nature of the alliances between right-wing populists and anti-gender actors, the success of their joint campaigns depends on the existence of deep social inequalities that can be translated into moral terms. This is because the scapegoating of

transgender people, similar to other political minorities, depends on successfully portraying them as threats – to the family, to children, to women, for example –, which is in turn shaped by social cleavages. Moreover, this strategy is more likely to resonate in places where these minorities are more distant from state power, whether because of incipient social movements, institutionalized patriarchal religions, or other characteristics that makes them more vulnerable to attacks. Finally, the mobilization of existing forms of inequalities for the scapegoating of transgender people in a society also means that coalitions among right-wing populists, religious organizations, and anti-gender civil society groups are context-specific.

C. Conclusion

The globalized campaigns against “gender” are anti-liberal and anti-democratic enterprises that seek to replace the global hegemony of liberal values and principles with a moral conservative worldview that favors “natural” or “traditional” hierarchies. Far from being the spontaneous grassroots movements they claim to be, these campaigns are coordinated and funded by a transnational network of elite members, including aristocrats, oligarchs, and high-level religious authorities. These powerful, well-connected actors utilize human rights claims strategically to mask their authoritarian agenda and connections to political and economic power. By framing their agenda as a defense of the “natural” order, they pursue a societal project that prioritizes traditional hierarchies over democratic pluralism and individual human rights.

In this chapter, I built on the existing literature of anti-gender movements as well as other sources from Global Studies, Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology and Religious

Studies to identify two sets of conditions that shape anti-gender campaigns and that affect their likelihood in undermining transgender rights in different countries. In the real world, these two types of conditions, structural and strategic, combine to shape the likelihood of success of anti-gender campaigns. For example, structural conditions such as the precarization effects of neoliberal policies and the institutionalization of patriarchal religion, create fertile ground for conservative actors to translate socioeconomic anxieties into moral panics, resulting in rising illiberalism even in liberal democracies. In face of this opportunity, anti-gender movements can try to maximize their public appeal by forging opportunistic alliances with right-wing populists and moral conservative religious organizations, which in turn helps them to infiltrate state structures and potentially replace liberal institutions. Moreover, by strategically adopting human rights language, these campaigns further increase resonance in public opinion while scapegoating transgender people as agents of a foreign, globalist elite.

In sum, this chapter contributes to the analysis of the processes and dynamics of anti-gender campaigns by identifying the background conditions and the strategies that enable these moral conservative actors to undermine SOGI rights in general, and transgender rights specifically. In the next chapter, I assess the relative influence of the structural conditions quantitatively by measuring the correlation between key indicators of liberal democracy, socioeconomic inequality, and religious institutionalization, and changes in the status of transgender rights in a global sample of countries.

Chapter 2: Patterns of SOGI rights change

Despite claiming to be anti-globalist, the moral conservative opposition to “gender” is a highly globalized enterprise that operates through well-funded and well-connected networks of national and transnational organizations, political parties, and religious authorities (Graff and Korolczuk 2025, 744). Key to this loose “network of networks” is the capacity to co-opt stakeholders and policymakers within countries to their project of dismantling the hegemony of liberal values that underpin the legitimacy of SOGI rights. After all, despite the diversity of their actors, transnational anti-gender networks converge around the opposition to the inclusion of LGBTQ people and consider gender-nonconformity a dangerous threat to human societies and the God-given “natural order”. This ensemble of “anti-gender” actors has globalized the resistance to SOGI by creating a “broad, interlocking agenda [...] that they present as an alternative to the perceived liberal political mainstream” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 95). These transnational advocacy networks (TAN) (Keck and Sikkink 1998) are thus akin to the ones that promote liberal ideas such as democracy or environmental conservation, and rely on their international connections to promote their causes (Velasco and Swindle 2024, 443).

As Velasco (2023b, 1418) shows, until 2013 the cross-national diffusion of SOGI norms followed a typical path: as nation-states were exposed to these norms, they modified their behavior through domestic policy expansions, which helped to “further institutionalize the norm and demonstrate its legitimacy.” From 2013, however, exposure to global SOGI norms started to no longer predict the expansion of rights and changing rates of adoption (Velasco 2023b, 1418). The author attributes this change to the success of anti-SOGI actors

in “reducing the perceived legitimacy and appropriateness of the norm, therefore diminishing its socializing influence” (Velasco 2023b, 1419). Combined with the diminishing probabilities of compliance over time, the effect of anti-SOGI actors is, for the author, one of norm deinstitutionalization (Velasco 2023b, 1419). Nevertheless, Velasco’s work also documents that both SOGI-rights and anti-SOGI networks are growing over time, despite the fact that anti-SOGI international NGOs significantly outnumber their pro-SOGI counterparts (Velasco 2023a, 2108).

For Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024, 9), the structure of the anti-gender TAN resembles a double helix in the sense that “the frames and strategies of one TAN are reciprocal to those of the rival TAN”. These networks operate in a “shared political space across multiple levels from domestic to international” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 9) and intertwine national politics to the moral conservative ideas that circulate through them (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 11). According to Velasco (2023a, 2109), such interdependent dynamics between pro-SOGI and anti-gender TANs are conditional upon the normative, institutional environment within a country’s region. Specifically, transnational SOGI networks are more reactive and responsive to where opposing, anti-SOGI networks are located, while the latter are less responsive to their opponent and instead rely more on domestic political considerations (Velasco 2023a, 2110).

As countries exist in tension between the dynamic opposing forces of SOGI rights networks and their anti-gender counterparts (Velasco 2023a), what structural or contextual conditions are associated with anti-gender success at the national level? More specifically, under what conditions do anti-gender campaigns succeed in undermining transgender rights in a country? In this chapter, I hypothesize that anti-gender campaigns are less likely to

succeed in undermining transgender rights in liberal democracies (H1), and more likely to succeed in countries governed by right-wing populists (H2), and where organized religion is more institutionalized (H3).

To test these hypotheses, I employ a cross-national panel analysis covering 162 countries across three four-year periods between 2011 and 2022, estimating pooled OLS models with period fixed effects, standard errors clustered by country, and lagged independent variables. I find that the results do not support the hypotheses. While liberal democracy and right-wing populist leadership are independently associated with transgender rights change in the expected directions, none of the interaction terms between participation in transnational anti-gender networks and country-level conditions reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

My work in this chapter builds on previous work by Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024), Velasco (2023a, 2023b), Velasco and Swindle (2024), Williamson (2023, 2025) and others to empirically assess the relationship between changes in the status of transgender rights, participation in transnational anti-gender networks, and three country-level key factors: liberal democracy, right-wing populist leadership, and religious institutionalization. Accordingly, it contributes to the scholarship on anti-gender movements, gender-related human rights, and right-wing populism by empirically assessing the relationship between country-level structural and strategic conditions, participation in transnational anti-gender networks, and transgender rights.

A. Key conditions that shape the success of anti-gender campaigns in undermining transgender rights.

1. Liberal democracy

The literature on minority rights and human rights violations analyzed in Chapter 1 suggests that liberal democracies are better-equipped to constrain the efforts of anti-gender actors to undermine the rights of transgender people – at least in theory. This is in part due to the well-documented, inverse relationship that exists between political democracy on human rights violations (Davenport 2023, 244), as well as historical evidence showing that as countries become more democratic, SOGI rights typically expand (Velasco et al. 2024, 132). When it comes to minority rights, it is the *liberal* element of democracy that philosophically underpins the protection of the human rights of minorities by the state, since both contemporary liberal democracy and individual human rights are “derived from and express the assumptions of liberalism” (Langlois 2003, 1010). As argued by Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024),

“If women’s suffrage marked the early starting point of liberal-democratic inclusion, it is the addition of LGBTIQ rights – previously relegated to a handful of small, secular, advanced industrialized democracies – in international human-rights frameworks that symbolizes the achievement of modern egalitarian pluralism” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 60).

Liberal democracy can advance SOGI rights through different mechanisms. Processes of democratization can extend protections for repressed or marginalized groups as part of the evolution of “citizenship”, or membership in the polity (Encarnación 2014, 99). Furthermore,

democracies that protect freedom of speech can foster tolerance for minorities by exposing people to a diversity of ideas and experiences, and the liberal values of pluralism and minority rights may allow people to live more openly and visibly and enjoy fundamental freedoms in practice (Flores et al. 2023, 5; Encarnación 2014). Finally, research also shows that LGBTQ acceptance may be understood, in some cases, as intrinsic to democratic rule, which indicates that democracy and social acceptance of LGBTQ rights to be mutually reinforcing (Flores et al. 2023, 6).

For Velasco et al. (2024), three elements of liberal democracy serve as a vehicle for expanding SOGI rights: first, the freedoms of speech, association, and assembly; second, party and electoral politics; and third, respect for individual and minority rights. The freedoms of speech, association, and assembly are considered critical for creating robust civil societies that enable SOGI rights advocates to gain public visibility and expand LGBTQ visibility in everyday life (Velasco et al. 2024, 133). For the authors, “the consistent strength of this pathway is why opponents in power censor LGBT+ content in the public arena and restrict LGBT+ civil society groups and activities through regulatory crackdowns,” as it happened in the case of Russia (Velasco et al. 2024, 133). Second, party and electoral politics are important forms of increasing the salience of SOGI rights demands and inserting it into national political agendas (Velasco et al. 2024, 133). Finally, respect for individual and minority rights are important to advance other protections. Privacy claims, for example, have served to advance the decriminalization of sodomy in many countries, and claims of equality have been effective to achieve the legalization of same-sex marriage in national legislatures and high courts (Velasco et al. 2024, 134).

Previous empirical research has shown a positive relationship between democracy and SOGI rights but with some nuances. Focusing on the acceptance of LGBTQ people, Flores et al. (2023) find that countries that are highly accepting of LGBTQ people tend to have high levels of liberal democracy and higher GDP per capita. Additionally, they find that liberal democratic countries seem to increase in their level of acceptance of LGBTI people at higher rates as they achieve stronger levels of liberal democracy. Overall, Flores et al. (2023, 5) find democracy to be often a necessary precondition for LGBTQ acceptance, although not sufficient.

Focusing on transgender rights, Williamson (2023) found a positive and statistically significant relationship between democracy and transgender rights in different OLS models with one-year lagged independent variables and a lagged dependent variable. Using his original dataset of *de jure* transgender rights (the Trans Rights Indicator Project, TRIP), Williamson's (2023, 12–13) research considered electoral aspects of democracy – such as freeness and fairness of elections, suffrage, freedom of association, and freedom of expression – as well as institutional ones – such as competitiveness and openness of executive recruitment, constraints on the executive, and competitiveness of political participation. Their results suggest that greater levels of democracy appear to be associated with an increase in a country's transgender rights, a relationship that is statistically significant but not substantial (Williamson 2023, 13).

Adding a layer of complexity to previous research, Velasco et. al. (2024, 135) observed a positive relationship between LGBT+ policies – an original index from Velasco (2023) – and liberal democracy between 1990 and 2009, but a negative relationship between the same indicators in the period of 2010 to 2019. The authors attributed the reversal in the relationship

between SOGI rights and liberal democracy to the rise of the global anti-gender movement in the second period, arguing that “the elements of liberal democracy that are so critical for pro-rights activists are equally meaningful for their opponents [...]” (Velasco et al. 2024, 136). Additionally, the authors note that, while there is a strong association between democratization and SOGI rights, many SOGI-related policies within democracies have been enacted via countermajoritarian mechanisms such as judiciaries and court systems (Velasco et al. 2024, 134). Taken together, such findings lend support to the idea that liberal democratic institutions, while important for the advancement of SOGI rights, are not always sufficient to deter efforts from anti-gender organizations.

Considering previous research and the fact that liberal democratic institutions offer opportunities to both pro-SOGI rights and anti-SOGI groups, should one expect anti-gender campaigns to be less likely to succeed in undermining transgender rights in liberal democracies? I argue that, despite its limitations, liberal democracy is still antagonistic to anti-gender campaigns, which are based on the contestation of liberal, individual rights and on the defense of the supremacy of a theologically-based “natural” order. In liberal democracies, not only laws and institutions are in place to promote and protect liberal rights – against the tyranny of the majority –, but it is also the case, as shown by Flores et. al. (2023), that liberal societies tend to be more accepting of LGBTQ people. Accordingly, my first hypothesis is that:

H1: Anti-gender campaigns are less likely to succeed in undermining transgender rights in liberal democracies than in other regime types.

2. Right-wing populism

In the 21st century, right-wing populism has risen as an important and often powerful threat against liberal democracy and the protection of minority rights, which is antithetical to the populist view of the world. In countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Brazil, rising right-wing populists have directly targeted SOGI rights in association with anti-gender organizations. Like right-wing populists, anti-gender activists reject pluralism, celebrate the idea of “common sense” – in connection with the defense of a “natural order” –, and reject liberal globalization, which they view as a domination plot from corrupt, globalist elites against local, conservative people (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 2025). While in some European countries right-wing populists can deploy a sort of ‘strategic progressivism’ that claims to defend SOGI rights, the goal of such strategy is still an anti-pluralist one, that is, to project sexism and homophobia onto racialized Others as part of their anti-immigration agenda (Dietze and Roth 2020, 13; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Importantly, this strategy does not encompass the defense of the rights of *transgender* people, which have largely been detached from the far-right’s strategic embrace of lesbian and gay rights (Magni and Reynolds 2023, 51).

The ideological affinity and political collaboration between right-wing politicians, anti-gender civil society actors, and religious fundamentalists – more on that below – is best understood as a case of what Graff and Korolczuk (2023) call “opportunistic synergy.” The alliances between right-wing populists and anti-gender organizations, specifically, function to enhance the populists’ moral appeal to traditionalist voters and to moralize the conflict between elite and the people. For the anti-gender organizations, right-wing populists are

powerful allies that can give them access to political opportunity structures and to state institutions, where they can work to change laws and institutional practices against SOGI rights (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 2023).

In deeply divided societies and in those affected by economic crises and/or precariousness, right-wing populists can exploit these conditions to frame minorities as scapegoats. In this sense, right-wing populists contribute to the success of anti-gender campaigns against transgender people by linking anti-(trans)gender messages to pressing popular concerns – for example, by casting transgender people not as part of the “common people” but rather as agents of foreign, globalist elites. Therefore, right-wing populists – who are notoriously skilled at co-opting popular sentiments of anxiety and dissatisfaction with mainstream politics and translating them into political demands – are able to increase the resonance of anti-gender frames and amplify attacks against transgender rights. Crucially, once they become part of the government, these actors facilitate the institutionalization of anti-gender networks within state structures, thus leading to rights resistance.

In sum, anti-gender organizations in many countries have relied on opportunistic synergies (Graff and Korolczuk 2022) with right-wing populists to promote and mainstream anti-gender campaigns against transgender rights. Though opportunistic, these alliances have been mutually beneficial and crucial for mainstreaming anti-gender rhetoric, thus consisting of an important means through which anti-gender campaigns are translated into rights regression. Accordingly, my second hypothesis is that:

H2: Anti-gender campaigns are more likely to succeed in undermining transgender rights in countries where right-wing populists are in government.

3. Institutionalized religion

In Chapter 1, I identified two key means through which institutionalized religion influences the status of SOGI minorities: a direct one, through influence on law and policy; and an indirect one, through religious organizations' influence on civil society and public opinion. According to Htun and Weldon (2018, 122), the institutionalization of religion gives greater authority to patriarchal interpretations of family law, which shield them from contestation and external influences. Moreover, when patriarchal religious traditions are deeply institutionalized, challenges to their interpretations of family law are more fiercely resisted, which in turn creates an incentive for backlash from the religious authorities entrenched within the state (Htun and Weldon 2018, 122).

In addition to its influence over state laws and policies, institutionalized religion impacts the level of discrimination of gender minorities in civil society by shaping social norms related to gender and sexuality. This influence is heightened in more religious societies (Htun and Weldon 2018; Williamson 2025), and during times of disruptive change, which create opportunities for religious fundamentalist interpretations of the world (Ammerman 2003). As discussed in the previous chapter, conservative religious organizations have been, since the 1990s, at the center of anti-gender ideology, informing its convictions about the “natural” order of social relations.

In previous research by Williamson (2025), cross-country variation in transgender rights was shown to be associated with religious institutionalization through laws and policies, as well as to the level of religiosity within a country's society. Williamson's (2025) cross-

national time series analysis employed several OLS models with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) and one-year lagged independent variables to examine the effects of religion depending on where and how it manifests within a country, and distinguishing “between presence of religion in state institutions versus society” (Williamson 2025, 2). Overall, Williamson’s (2025, 21) findings suggest that the effect of organized religion on political outcomes is contextual, varying according to how and where religious influences manifest within a country.

According to Williamson (2025), although the presence of an official religion does not appear to impact transgender rights, there is a negative and statistically significant relationship between religious legislation and transgender rights, which suggests that countries with more laws supporting or privileging religion tend to have fewer rights in place for transgender people (Williamson 2025, 14–15). Additionally, the author found that religious organization support of a country's regime is not statistically significant with transgender rights, but that religious organization consultation – that is, a measure that captures the extent to which policymakers routinely consult religious organizations – is negatively related to transgender rights. Finally, Williamson’s findings lend support to the idea that, “as religious diversity increases, transgender rights should also increase” (Williamson 2025, 18).

Building on earlier findings by Williamson (2025), and considering the influence of transnational anti-gender networks, my third hypothesis is that:

H₃: Anti-gender campaigns are more likely to succeed in undermining transgender rights in countries where organized religion is more institutionalized.

B. Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, I employ a cross-national panel analysis covering 162 countries across three four-year periods between 2011 and 2022 and estimate a series of pooled OLS models with period fixed effects, standard errors clustered by country, and lagged independent variables. In the analysis, I use data from all three four-year periods (2011–2022), but models are estimated only for periods 2 and 3 – the two periods for which lagged independent variables are available. Thus, period 1 (2011–2014) is not modeled directly but serves as the lagged baseline from which independent variables are measured for period 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
GBTR Change (DV)	314	0.019	0.087	-0.170	0.000	0.410
WCF Presence (lag)	314	0.347	0.477	0.000	0.000	1.000
Liberal Democracy (lag)	314	0.437	0.263	0.026	0.413	0.896
RW Populist Years (lag)	314	0.646	1.363	0.000	0.000	4.000
Religious Consultation (lag)	314	0.557	1.027	-2.476	0.701	2.883
Regime Religious Support (lag)	314	0.164	0.200	0.000	0.111	1.000
Gini (lag)	314	38.486	7.770	23.400	38.263	64.850
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	314	9.479	1.148	6.916	9.569	11.838

Note: Analytical sample after listwise deletion (N = 314 observations, 162 countries, 2 modeled periods). GDP per capita logged. All independent variables lagged one period.

Similarly to Williamson (2025), I run OLS models with standard errors clustered by country and lagged independent variables by one period. As argued by the author, although

fixed and random effects models are typical for time-series cross-sectional analyses, these models are not appropriate for data in which key variables show minimal within-country variance – as shown in Table 1 above –, as they have low statistical power and lead to biased and unreliable estimates (Williamson 2025, 10). Conversely, pooled OLS can handle slow-moving variables while also addressing potential issues of heteroskedasticity (Williamson 2025, 10). Differently from Williamson (2025) and given that my analysis aggregates data into only three four-year periods rather than using annual observations, I cluster standard errors by country instead of using PCSE. This approach thus allows me to account for within-country serial correlation across periods while remaining appropriate for the short panel structure of the data.

Table 2: Missing Data Summary

Variable	N Missing	% Missing
GBTR Change (DV)	0	0.0
WCF Presence (lag)	0	0.0
Liberal Democracy (lag)	40	10.2
RW Populist Years (lag)	0	0.0
Religious Consultation (lag)	40	10.2
Regime Religious Support (lag)	41	10.4
Gini (lag)	58	14.7
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	20	5.1

Note: Full dataset (N = 394 observations, 197 countries, 3 periods). GDP per capita logged.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) GBTR Change	1							

(2) WCF Presence	0.021	1						
(3) Liberal Democracy	0.186	0.418	1					
(4) RW Populist Years	-0.013	0.297	0.193	1				
(5) Relig. Consultation	0.077	0.056	0.28	0.15	1			
(6) Regime Relig. Support	0.028	-0.055	-0.165	0.085	0.317	1		
(7) Gini	0.046	-0.251	-0.323	-0.163	0.026	0.082	1	
(8) log(GDP pc)	0.108	0.368	0.527	0.303	-0.025	-0.014	-0.475	1

Note: Pairwise complete observations. Analytical sample (N = 314). GDP per capita logged.

Table 4: Variance Decomposition (Between vs. Within Country)

Variable	Total Var.	Between Var.	Within Var.	% Between
GBTR Change (DV)	0.0076	0.0041	0.0035	54.1
WCF Presence (lag)	0.2274	0.1697	0.0576	74.7
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.0689	0.0685	0.0005	99.3
RW Populist Years (lag)	1.8587	1.6190	0.2397	87.1
Religious Consultation (lag)	1.0538	1.0271	0.0267	97.5
Gini (lag)	60.3718	61.0585	-0.6867	100.0
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	1.3185	1.3170	0.0015	99.9

Note: Variance decomposed into between-country and within-country components. Analytical sample (N = 314). % Between is capped at 100.

1. Dependent variable: changes in the status of transgender rights

To assess changes in the status of transgender rights across countries and over time, I use the Franklin & Marshall's Global Barometer of Transgender Rights Index (F&M GBTR)

as a country-year measure of the status of transgender rights. The F&M GBTR combines quantitative research design with qualitative considerations drawn from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 (YP+10) to determine the extent to which countries protect or persecute their transgender population (Franklin & Marshall College 2026). It is composed of 17 binary variables across five dimensions: de jure protections, de facto protections, LGBT rights advocacy, socio-economic rights, and societal persecution. The GBTR score of each country is calculated by dividing the sum of its binary codes by 17, the total number of items, or 16, if a country has no military. This score is then converted to a percentage and assigned a letter grade (A-F), where 100% (A) is the most protective and 0% (F) is the least protective (Franklin & Marshall College 2026).

Table 5: Components of the Global Barometer of Transgender Rights Index

Dimension	Indicator
De Jure Protections	No criminalization of gender identity or expression
	Country has legal recognition of gender identity
	No physiological alteration requirement for legal gender recognition
	No psychiatric diagnosis requirement for legal gender recognition
	Gender identity minorities are not restricted or banned from serving in the military
De Facto Protections	Freedom from arbitrary arrest based on gender identity or expression
LGBT Rights Advocacy	LGBT organizations are allowed to legally register by the state
	National LGBT organizations exist
	LGBT organizations are able to peacefully and safely assemble
	LGBT Pride events are allowed by the state
	Security forces provide protection to LGBT Pride participants
Socio-Economic Rights	Workplace anti-discrimination laws include gender identity
	Fair housing anti-discrimination laws include gender identity
	Healthcare anti-discrimination laws include gender identity

Societal Persecution	No known acts of murder against gender identity minorities
	No known acts of violence against gender identity minorities
	Crimes based on gender identity are reported to police
Note: The GBTR score is calculated by dividing the sum of binary codes by 17 (or 16 for countries with no military). Source: Franklin & Marshall College (2026).	

In each of the estimated models, change in the status of transgender rights is operationalized as the difference between the GBTR score at the end of a four-year period and the GBTR score at the beginning of that same period, measured on the converted 0–1 scale. In other words, the change in GBTR value represents the absolute change in the proportion of transgender rights indicators achieved over four years, with positive values indicating rights expansion and negative values indicating contraction. As Figures 1 and 2 below show, overall, GBTR scores increased around the world between 2011 and 2023, but with significant differences in countries' trajectories.

Figure 1. Global Trends in Transgender Rights, 2011 – 2023

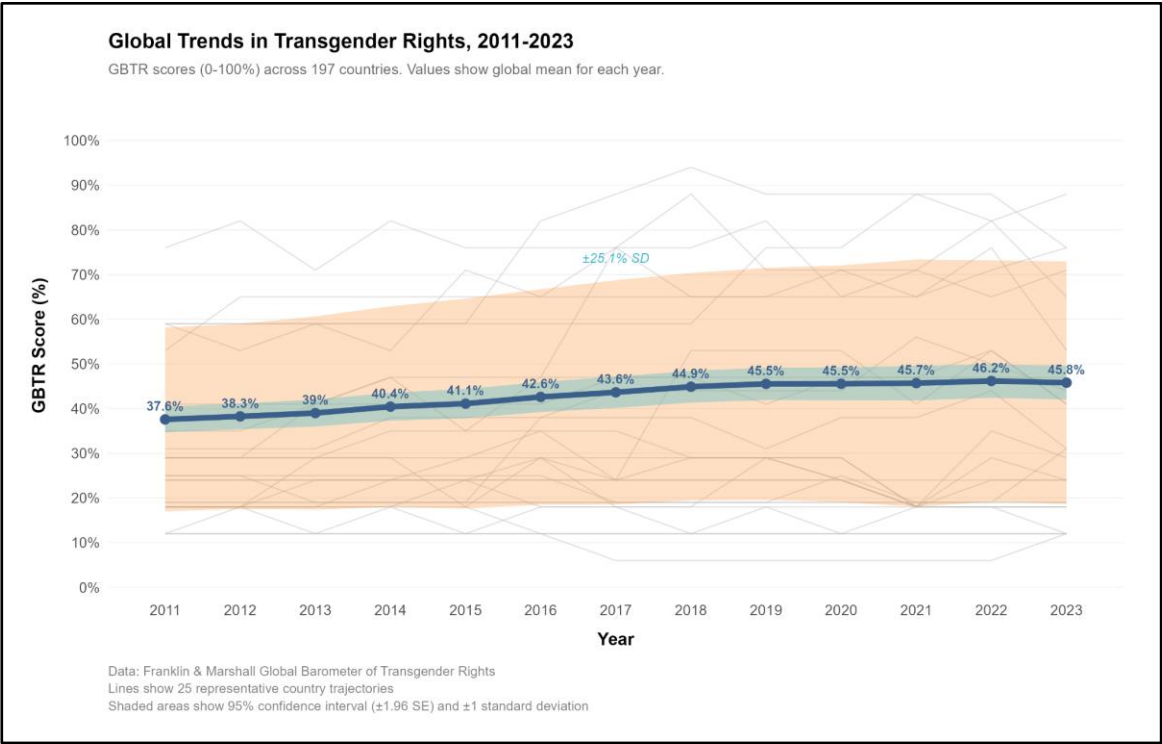
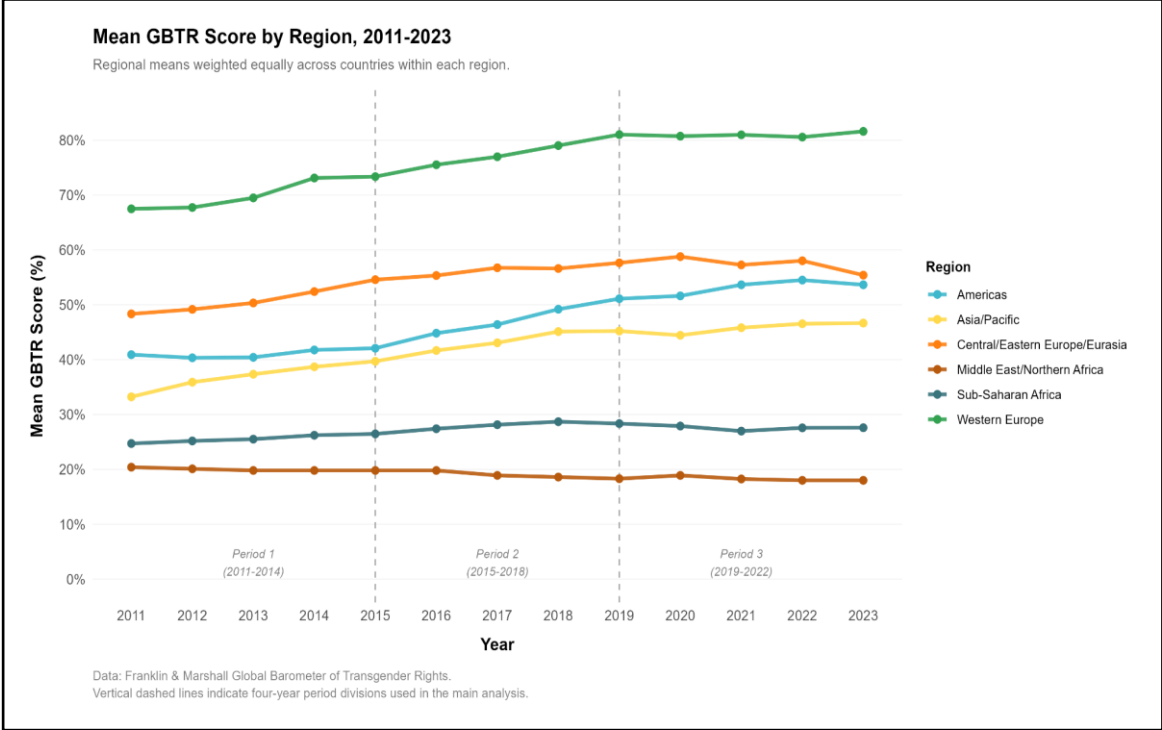


Figure 2. Regional Trends in Transgender rights, 2011 – 2023



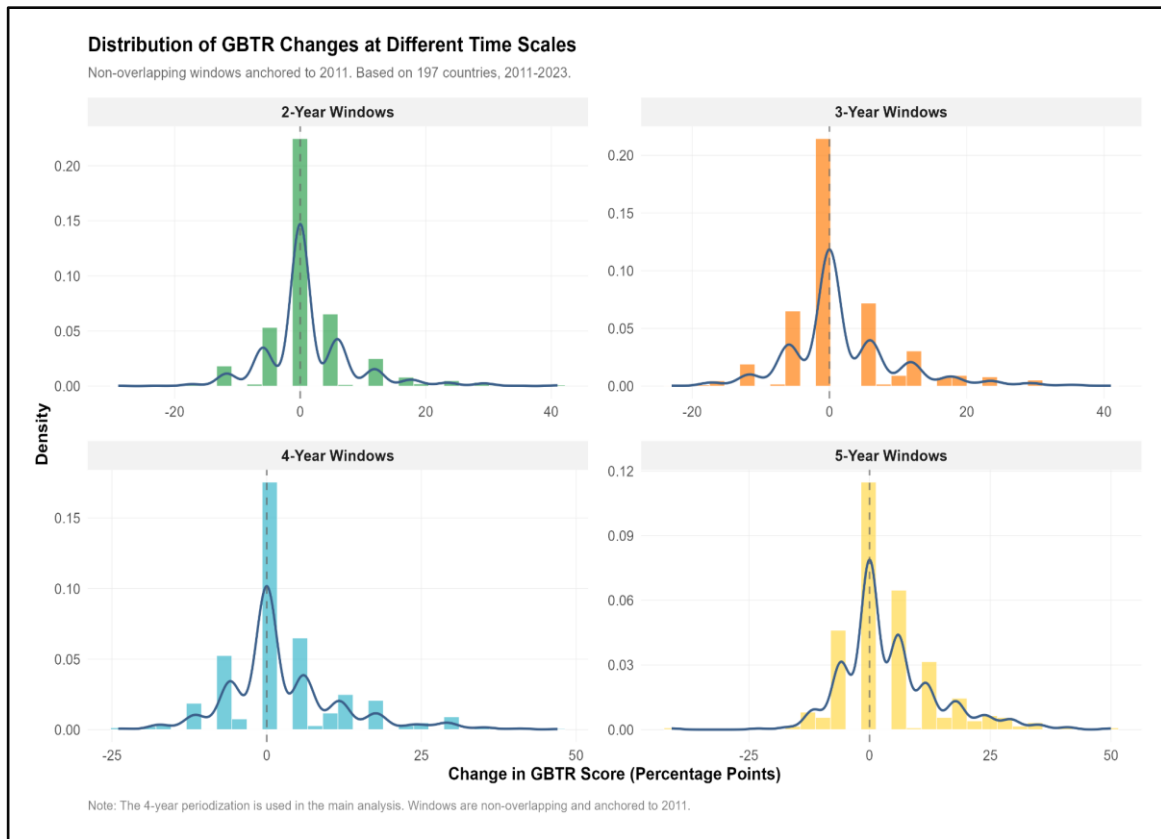
As shown in Table 6 and Figure 3 below, the distributions of GBTR score changes (my dependent variable) shows significant differences depending on the time window considered, which suggests that four-year lagged windows offer enough time to capture substantive rights variation while retaining adequate statistical power through multiple observations per country. For example, at 2-year intervals, 64.9% of country-period observations show no change in GBTR scores, while the four-year window reduces the proportion of stable observations to 43%, allowing for more meaningful cross-national variation to be modeled. Furthermore, this periodization aligns with important political and economic cycles that influence the trajectory of rights changes, such as typical electoral cycles in democratic systems. Robustness checks using 2-year, 3-year, 5-year, and 6-year non-overlapping windows are discussed in the robustness section.

Table 6: Distribution of GBTR Score Changes Across Time Scales

Time Scale	Periods	N (complete)	N (missing)	Mean (pp)	SD (pp)	% Improving	% Stable	% Declining
Annual	12	2,364	0	0.69	.69	20.0	64.9	15.1
2-Year	6	1,182	0	1.37	.41	27.2	54.2	18.5
3-Year	4	788	0	2.06	.34	32.4	47.3	20.3
4-Year	3	591	0	2.74	.58	35.9	43.0	21.2
5-Year	2	394	0	4.06	0.43	44.2	36.0	19.8

Note: Non-overlapping windows anchored to 2011. Changes measured in percentage points. GBTR scores range from 0 to 1; changes multiplied by 100 for interpretability. N (missing) = country-periods where GBTR score is missing at window start or end. Stable = no change (0 pp). Based on 197 countries, 2011-2023.

Figure 3. Distribution of GBTR Changes at Different Time Scales.



C. Independent variables

1. Transnational anti-gender network participation

To account for a country's participation within transnational anti-gender networks, I rely on the World Congress of Families Dataset introduced by Velasco and Swindle (2024). The World Congress of Families is a label for the international events organized by the U.S. NGO that is currently known as International Organization for the Family, based in Washington, D.C. Born from a collaboration between American conservative activist Allan Carlson and Russian family demographer Anatoly Antonov in the 1990s, the WCF is today one of the most influential global coordinators of “pro-natural family” advocates from around

the world, and one of the five nodal organizations of the transnational anti-gender movement (Velasco and Swindle 2024; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). It conveys, at regular intervals, international congresses and regional conferences that bring together moral conservative activists from across the world, thus acting as a convenor for these actors (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 98). As a “network-weaving institution” (Torfason and Ingram 2010) the WCF “provides an ideal vantage point to assess and comprehend the infrastructure enabling anti-gender networks to flourish transnationally” (Velasco and Swindle 2024, 444).

Since its first conference in 1997, the WCF has attracted the interest of several Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as NGOs from around the world (Velasco and Swindle 2024, 444). From 2007, it started to receive sustained financial support from governments led by conservative parties – such as Poland under the Law and Justice Party, Italy under the League Party, and Hungary under Fidesz –, which bolstered the size and political reach of their events (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 100). Today, the WCF events function as important convenors of civil society organizations, religious institutions, academics, and increasingly state officials that share an agenda based on a “narrow reading of Article 16(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which defines the family as the ‘group unit’ of society entitled to protection by the state” (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 99).

To build a country-level measure of participation in the transnational anti-gender network, I drew on two features of the WCF: organization participation and conference hosting. That is, for each country and year in the dataset, I considered: (1) whether it had organizations participating in any WCF event (global and regional); and (2) whether the country hosted any WCF event. From these two measures, I built a binary composite variable (named WCF Presence) and coded 1 if a country had at least one organization participating in

a WCF conference or hosted a WCF event in a given four-year period, and zero otherwise. I then lagged this variable one period. The choice of a binary rather than a count measure reflects the fact that my research question concerns whether countries are embedded in the transnational anti-gender network at all. In this sense, I considered the relevant measure to be presence vs. absence at WCF events rather than degree of participation.

2. Liberal democracy

To measure the extent to which democratic principles are upheld in different countries, I use the country-year liberal democracy index by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, a linear measure that ranges from 0 to 1. Considering that the “liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority,” V-Dem’s liberal democracy index is an aggregated measure of the extent to which, in each of the analyzed countries, the ideal of liberal democracy is achieved (Coppedge et al. 2025, 47). More specifically, the index measures the extent to which constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances together limit the exercise of executive power (Coppedge et al. 2025, 47). It combines the electoral democracy index (an aggregate measure of freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected officials, and suffrage) with the liberal component index, which aggregates measures of equality before the law and individual liberty, judicial constraints on the executive, and legislative constraints on the executive (Coppedge et al. 2025, 423).

3. Right-wing populism

To account for each country's experience with right-wing populism, I rely on a cumulative measure of years under populist leadership based on data from the Global Populism Database (GPD), which provides a measure of populist discourse for political leaders using expert-coded textual analysis of political speeches (Hawkins et al. 2019). The GPD, first published in 2019 and updated several times since then, applies a holistic grading technique to code ideational elements of populism in a quota sample consisting of four speeches for each of a leader's term in office: a campaign speech, a ribbon-cutting speech, an international speech, and a famous speech (Hawkins et al. 2019, 5). In the rubrics, texts are initially assigned an integer score between 0 (few or any populist elements) and 2 (extremely populist), and the total populist grade for each leader-term is the arithmetic mean for all speeches by all coders for that leader-term (Hawkins et al. 2019). Each leader-term is also distinguished by its ideological orientation (left, right, or center) through a categorical indicator.

To translate the GPD's leader-term populist measure into a country-year measure of populist leadership, I created a binary country-year populism variable that considered whether or not there was a populist leader in power in a country in each of the years of the period. I considered a leader to be populist if any of their speeches received a grade higher than zero, and not populist if their grade was zero. Furthermore, I considered the classification of a populist leader's ideology as representative of the experience of populism during the years the leader was in power. This process resulted in a measure of the number of years under each type of populism (right-wing, left-wing, and center) for each country present in the GPD

dataset. For the Hypothesis 2 test, I use the number of years under right-wing populist leadership in each four-year period.

4. Institutionalized religion

Religious institutionalization is operationalized by two alternate measures from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, both based on expert coders' responses: the first measure, religious organization consultation, assesses the degree to which major organizations are consulted by policymakers on policies relevant to their members (Coppedge et al. 2025, 208). Experts answer the question "Are major religious organizations routinely consulted by policymakers on policies relevant to their members?" by indicating the degree of consultation in an ordinal scale ranging from 0 (high degree of insulation of the government) to 2 (important religious organizations are recognized as stakeholders). The answers are then converted to intervals by a Bayesian item response theory measurement model with lower values indicating lower degree of consultation and higher values indicating higher degree of consultation (Coppedge et al. 2025, 208).

The second measure of religious institutionalization is the V-Dem regime support group measure, which consists of a series of economized variables based on expert coder's answers to the question "Which groups does the current political regime rely on in order to maintain power? (Check all that apply.)." Specifically, I focus on the measure of religious group(s) support, which is calculated as the mean response of coders to the dichotomized religious group support variable (Coppedge et al. 2025, 146).

The two measures of religious institutionalization used in this analysis are drawn from the same V-Dem variables used by Williamson (2025) to capture the informal religion-state relationship. As shown in Table 3, they are moderately correlated ($r = 0.317$), which indicates that they tap into related but distinct dimensions of how religion is institutionalized within the state: regime religious support captures a higher-level dependency of the political regime on religious organizations for its survival, while religious organization consultation captures lower-level processes of routine influence over policymaking that can occur even in the absence of that dependency (Williamson 2025, 12). Rather than combining them into an index, I test each separately in Models 3A and 3B. In Model 4 (full), I opt to include only regime support, which is a stronger measure of the level of institutionalization of organized religion I seek to assess.

5. Controls

Finally, to account for alternative explanations and isolate the effects of my variables of interest, I include two controls in all models: economic development and economic inequality. Economic development is measured as the natural logarithm of GDP per capita, based on purchasing power parity (PPP) and expressed in constant 2021 international dollars. Data for this measure is drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (World Bank Group Archives 2024). Economic inequality is operationalized by the Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality across countries and over time that is calculated as the average difference in income between all pairs in a population, divided by twice the average income in the population (Solt 2020, 1184). Specifically, I rely on the Standardized World Income

Inequality Database (SWIID), which provides estimates of income inequality for the broadest possible coverage of countries and years. The SWIID dataset departs from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) to estimate the relationships between Gini indices based on the LIS and all of the other Ginis available for the same country-years. It then uses these relationships to estimate what the LIS Gini would be in country-years not included in the LIS but available from other sources (Solt 2020, 1183).

6. Models

To test my hypotheses, I estimate five different models. The baseline model, reported in the appendix, includes the WCF Presence variable and all controls – liberal democracy, years under right-wing populist leadership, Gini, and logged GDP per capita – without any interaction terms. It serves as a reference point that isolates the main effect of anti-gender network participation before any conditioning effects are introduced. Model 1 tests H1 by adding an interaction between WCF Presence and the liberal democracy index. Model 2 tests H2 by interacting WCF Presence with the number of years under right-wing populist leadership in each period. Models 3A and 3B both test H3, but through different pathways. Model 3A interacts WCF Presence with religious organization consultation, which operationalizes religious institutionalization through formal access to the policymaking process. Model 3B interacts WCF Presence with the regime religious support measure, which operationalizes religious institutionalization through regime survival coalitions. Finally, Model 4 is a full model that includes all three interactions simultaneously, allowing me to assess their combined and independent effects while controlling for potential confounding

between the three moderating conditions. All models include period fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country.

The analysis in this chapter builds on and extends previous work in several ways. First, it incorporates the anti-gender network dimension into the analysis of transgender rights, adding to Williamson's (2023, 2025) cross-national models of the correlates of transgender rights. Moreover, it applies Velasco and Swindle's (2024) WCF dataset to the study of rights outcomes, moving beyond their descriptive analysis of network composition. It also engages with Velasco's (2023a, 2023b) findings on norm deinstitutionalization and network dynamics by examining whether these translate into measurable rights change at the country level. Finally, it complements Flores et al.'s (2023) work on democracy and SOGI rights acceptance by focusing on the conditions under which anti-gender campaigns succeed in reversing formal rights, rather than on acceptance more broadly.

D. Results

Table 7 presents the results of five pooled OLS models estimating the relationship between anti-gender campaign presence, key conditions, and changes in transgender rights across 162 countries. The most consistent finding across all models is the positive and statistically significant association between liberal democracy and rights change ($p < 0.01$ in all models). A one-unit increase in the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index is associated with an increase in the GBTR change score ranging from 0.063 to 0.079 across models – a substantively meaningful effect given that the standard deviation of the dependent variable is 0.087. This finding is consistent with H1's expectation that liberal democratic institutions are

generally more protective of transgender rights, and aligns with previous research on the relationship between democracy and SOGI rights.

Table 7: Anti-Gender Campaigns and Transgender Rights

	Model 1 (H1)	Model 2 (H2)	Model 3A (H3)	Model 3B (H3)	Model 4 (Full)
WCF Presence (lag)	0.013 (0.018)	-0.015 (0.012)	-0.010 (0.013)	-0.007 (0.015)	0.009 (0.020)
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.079*** (0.027)	0.065*** (0.021)	0.063*** (0.023)	0.071*** (0.022)	0.083*** (0.029)
WCF x Liberal Democracy	-0.036 (0.040)				-0.044 (0.041)
RW Populist Years (lag)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.011* (0.006)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.011* (0.006)
WCF x RW Populist Years		0.013 (0.008)			0.014 (0.009)
Religious Consultation (lag)			0.001 (0.005)		
WCF x Religious Consultation			0.008 (0.010)		
Regime Religious Support (lag)				0.021 (0.030)	0.023 (0.030)
WCF x Regime Religious Support				0.011 (0.048)	-0.011 (0.050)
Gini (lag)	0.001** (0.001)	0.002** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	0.008* (0.004)	0.009** (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)	0.007 (0.005)	0.008* (0.005)

N	314	314	314	314	314
R ²	0.100	0.107	0.100	0.101	0.112
Adj. R ²	0.079	0.087	0.077	0.077	0.083

*Note: Pooled OLS with period fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All independent variables lagged one period. GDP per capita logged. Period fixed effects included in all models. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.*

The measures of economic inequality and economic development are also consistently significant across models, with expected signs for GDP (positive, $p < 0.05$ in most models) but a counterintuitive positive sign for Gini ($p < 0.05$ across all models). This positive association between economic inequality and change in transgender rights, although initially puzzling, could reflect characteristics from the sample. Specifically, it is possible that this result is being driven by highly-unequal countries in Latin America where transgender rights have expanded considerably over the analyzed period despite levels of income inequality. That is, it is possible that the regional effect is what is driving these results, rather than Gini itself. To test this possibility, I conduct two robustness tests using regional dummies and estimate two additional sets of four-year models, which are discussed in the next section.

Crucially for my hypotheses, Table 7 shows that none of the interaction terms reach conventional levels of significance in any of the models. In Models 1 and 4, the negative direction of the liberal democracy interaction coefficients (-0.036 and -0.048) are consistent with H1. This direction is consistent with the idea that countries where both WCF-affiliated organizations were present and liberal democracy was higher in $t-1$ experienced less rights change in t in comparison with countries where WCF was present but liberal democracy was lower. In other words, the direction of the liberal democracy interaction terms in Models 1 and 4 are consistent with the hypothesis that higher prior liberal democracy attenuates the

effect of prior WCF presence on subsequent rights change. However, these results fail short of being statistically significant.

Regarding H2, Models 2 and 4 both show a negative and statistically significant effect of the number of years under populist leadership in the previous period and change in transgender rights in the following period. While this relationship is consistent with the theoretical expectation that right-wing populist leadership is antithetical to the promotion of pluralism and of SOGI minority rights, this effect is substantively very small: the -0.011 coefficient is equivalent to roughly one-eighth of a standard deviation of the dependent variable ($SD = 0.087$).

The positive direction of the interaction terms in Models 2 and 4 is opposite of the theoretical expectation, but in neither model these terms are statistically significant. Contrary to the expectations, the positive interaction coefficients of 0.013 (Model 2) and 0.014 (Model 4) suggests that countries where both WCF-affiliated organizations were present and right-wing populist governments had more years in power in $t-1$ experienced more positive rights change in t than countries where WCF was present but populist exposure was lower. This finding goes in the opposite direction of H2, which predicts the synergy between prior WCF presence and prior populist leadership should produce rights contraction, not expansion. As I discuss below, this counterintuitive finding is possibly due to the limitations of the lagged design, and the short panel structure of the data, which may be insufficient to capture the within-period timing of anti-gender mobilization and its translation into rights changes.

Looking at Models 3A, 3B and 4, neither the main effect of the religious institutionalization variables support nor the interaction between religion regime support interaction with WCF presence reaches statistical significance. In Model 3A, the interaction

between WCF presence and religious consultation is positive – contrary to H3 – and non-significant (0.008), and the main effect of religious consultation is effectively zero (0.001). Regarding religious regime support, the interaction coefficient is positive in Model 3B (0.011) but turns negative in Model 4 (-0.011), and in both cases the standard errors are large enough to preclude any meaningful interpretation of the direction. Taken together, these results do not provide evidence that religious institutionalization – whether measured through policymaker consultation or through regime survival coalitions – affects the effectiveness of anti-gender campaigns against transgender rights.

Finally, the WCF composite variable itself is not significantly associated with rights change in any model. This null finding suggests that embeddedness within transnational anti-gender networks is not a sufficient condition for changes in the status of transgender rights, which is consistent with the theory discussed in Chapter 1 that identifies several structural and strategic conditioners of anti-gender mobilization. In other words, the fact that a country is embedded within anti-gender networks is not by itself associated with change in transgender rights in the future.

Several factors may explain the absence of significant interaction effects. First, given the short structure of the panel, the analytical sample is limited to two periods ($t = 2$), which substantially reduces statistical power for detecting interaction effects. Second, the WCF composite variable is binary, which limits its ability to capture levels of network embeddedness that may be relevant. That is, my operationalization treats countries that are highly embedded within the WCF network, such as the United States, identically to countries that have had only a single participating organization, or that have only participated once in WCF events. Third, the four-year periodization, while theoretically motivated, may be

inappropriate to capture the dynamics through which right-wing populist governments or religious organizations translate anti-gender network access into rights changes.

Regarding right-wing populism specifically, the lagged design tests whether the co-occurrence of WCF presence and right-wing populist government in $t-1$ predicts rights change in t , rather than whether these two are actually operating *simultaneously* within the same period. Although this is a theoretically meaningful test, it cannot fully capture the opportunistic synergy (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 2023) between populist governments and anti-gender organizations that can take place between periods. Therefore, cases in which right-wing populists take office late in period $t-1$ would appear in the data as a case of low populist exposure in $t-1$, and the consequences for transgender rights would only be visible in t . As such, the four-year aggregation in practice smooths over the within-period timing of these dynamics, making it difficult to detect the actual mechanism by which right-wing populists in government affect anti-gender campaigns. Furthermore, the temporal structure of the panel data also means that populists who rose to power in the last period (2019-2022), such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, are not included in the analysis.

A similar issue applies to religious institutionalization. My theory argues that religiously institutionalized states are more permeable to anti-gender campaigns because religious organizations already have established channels of access to state structures and they favor conservative interpretations of law and policy. However, the degree to which this permeability translates into rights change may depend on the specific policy arena, the strength of countervailing institutions, and, importantly, the timing of campaign mobilization within a given period, none of which are captured by my models.

E. Robustness Checks

To assess the sensitivity of my findings to modeling choices, I conduct three sets of robustness checks: (1) one varying the length of the time window used to construct the panel, (2) a second one adding regional dummies to the main models to account for unobserved regional confounders; and (3) a third one to test the possible influence of countries in the Americas over the positive and statistically significant Gini coefficients shown in Table 7. Full results are reported in Tables A1 through A6 in the Appendix.

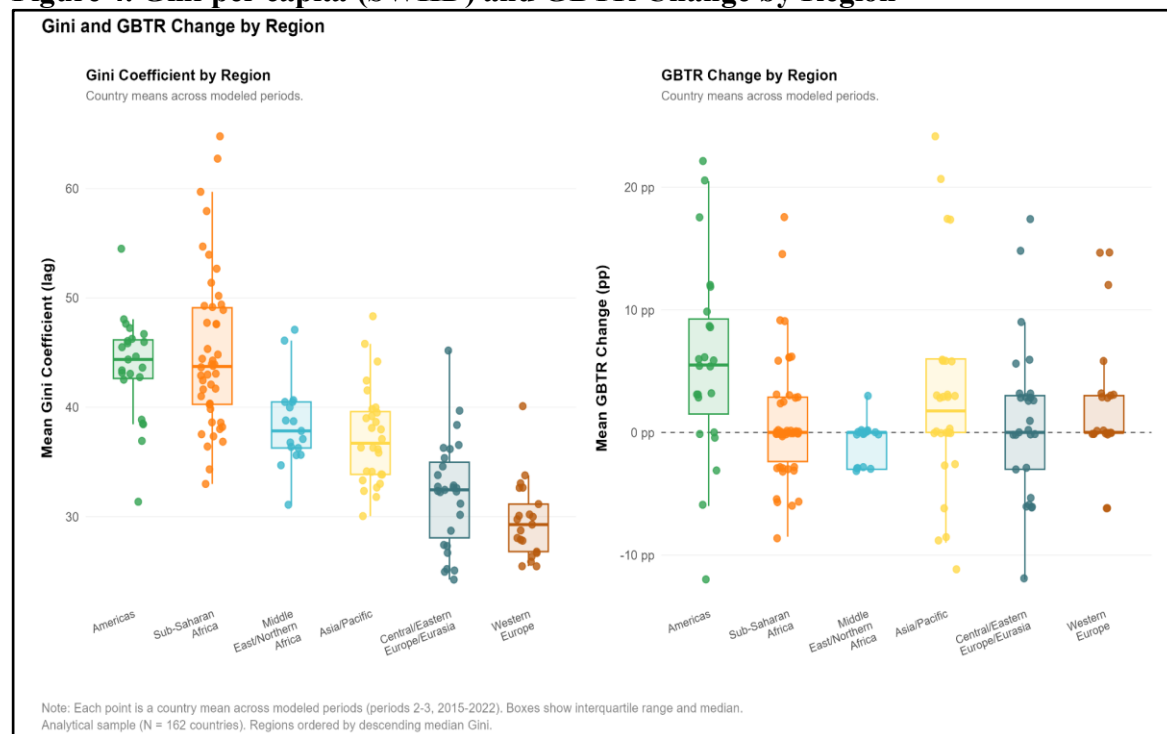
To assess the sensitivity of my findings to the four-year window periodization window, I re-estimate the additional models using two-year, three-year, five-year, and six-year non-overlapping windows anchored to 2011. Again, the most consistent finding across all time windows is the positive association between liberal democracy and transgender rights, which holds in the three, five, and six-year models and weakens only in the two-year window. However, it is possible that the two-year window is simply too short to capture the medium-term institutional effects of liberal democracy due to the slow-moving nature of the outcome variable, shown in Table 1. Overall, the results of the alternate models support the robustness of the direction of the association between liberal democracy and changes in transgender rights, even in the absence of a significant interaction term with WCF presence.

As in the main four-year model, the interaction terms are not robust across different periodizations. The interaction term between WCF presence and years under right-wing leadership, for example, is positive in the two and four-year models but turns negative in the three and five-year windows, which suggests that the direction of this effect is sensitive to the time horizon chosen and cannot be interpreted as consistent evidence in favor of my H2.

Similarly, none of the religious institutionalization interactions reach significance across windows, which is consistent with the null results in the main models.

Two caveats must be mentioned regarding the longer windows. The five and six-year periodizations produce only one modeled period, which means that period fixed effects are not used in those models, making their results merely illustrative. Additionally, the Gini coefficient, which was positive and significant in the main four-year models, loses significance in all windows longer than two years, providing further evidence that this finding is not robust.

Figure 4. Gini per capita (SWIID) and GBTR Change by Region



To test whether the positive Gini coefficient in the main models reflects the compositional characteristics of the sample I conduct two additional checks. First, I add regional dummies to all five main (four-year) models alongside Gini, using Western Europe

as the reference category. As Table A5 shows, Gini loses significance in every model once regional controls are included. In the second test, I replace Gini with regional dummies. As Table A6 shows, the results of this test show the Americas as the only region with a statistically significant positive effect on GBTR change across all five models ($p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.01$).

Taken together, the results of the two robustness checks using region dummies is consistent with the interpretation that the Gini coefficient in the main models was capturing the presence of Latin American countries in the sample, which combine high income inequality with expansion of transgender rights, a phenomenon illustrated by Figure 4 above. GDP per capita also loses significance with regional controls, suggesting a similar compositional dynamic. These two additional tests also show that liberal democracy remains positive and significant in most models after adding regional dummies, which strengthens confidence in the robustness of the H1 direction.

Finally, an interesting finding appears in the results of the region dummy models. In both tests, Models 2 and 4 now show a positive and statistically significant interaction term between WCF presence and years under right-wing populist leadership. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution. As a robustness check adding regional dummies to the main models, this result is not easily interpretable on its own terms, since the regional controls may be absorbing confounders. As such, the finding is best viewed as suggestive rather than conclusive, and it points to the need for more fine-grained data and more sensitive measures of levels of right-wing populism and of network embeddedness to better test the interaction hypothesis.

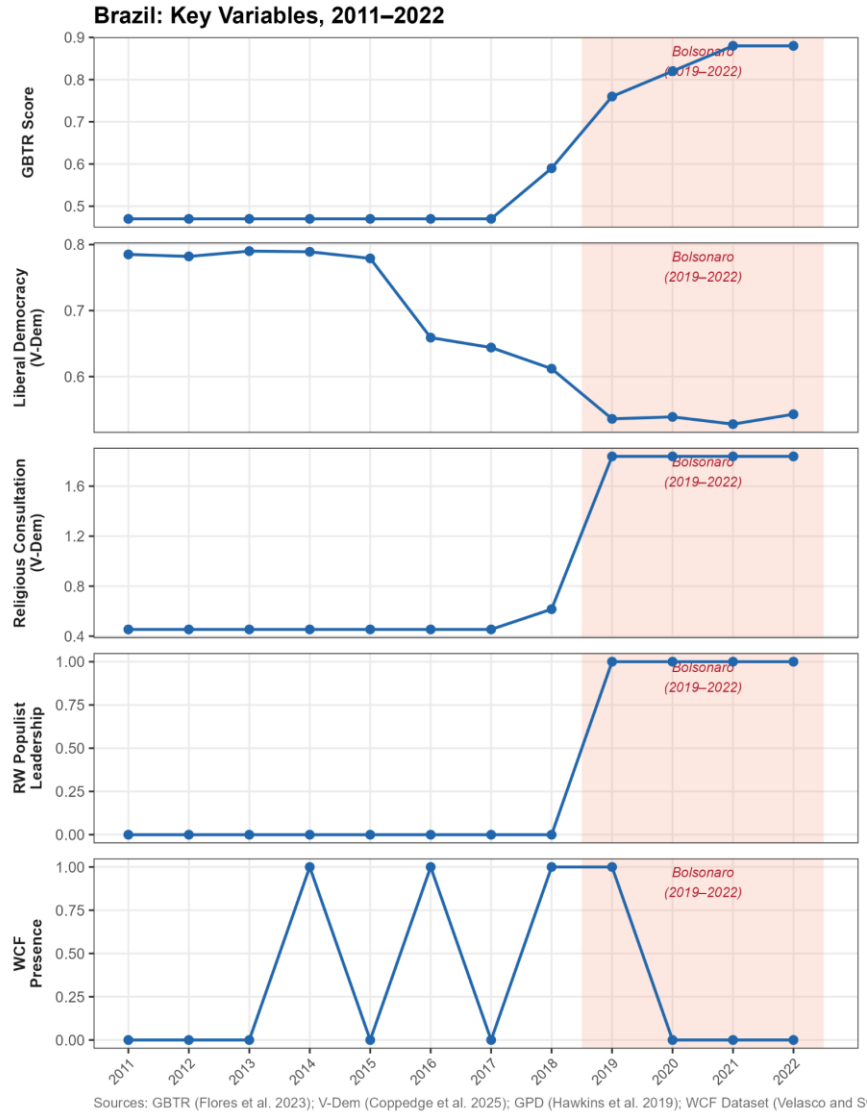
F. Conclusion and further research

This chapter provided an effort to empirically assess the relative importance of country-level structural conditions identified in the previous chapter to the success of anti-transgender campaigns. Overall, the results do not support the hypotheses. Liberal democracy is positively and statistically significantly associated with transgender rights change across all models – consistent with previous research by Velasco et al. (2024), Williamson (2023, 2025), and Flores et al. (2023) on the relationship between democratic institutions and SOGI rights. Right-wing populist leadership shows a small but statistically significant negative association with transgender rights change, which is consistent with the theoretical expectation that populist governments are antithetical to the promotion of minority rights. However, neither of these country-level conditions interacts significantly with participation in transnational anti-gender networks in the expected direction, and religious institutionalization shows no significant association with transgender rights change in any model.

These null results are best understood in light of the significant methodological limitations of this study. First, the short panel structure – a consequence of the data available – offers limited statistical power for detecting interaction effects. Second, the binary operationalization of anti-gender network participation, while useful for the interaction models, also obscures variation in the degree of embeddedness within anti-gender networks. Finally, and importantly, the lagged design is unable to capture the opportunistic nature that characterizes the relationship between right-wing populists and anti-gender actors, a dynamic that is also highly context-dependent.

Overall, the cross-national models used in this chapter are helpful to illuminate the patterns of SOGI rights changes, but they are ultimately unable to capture the complex mechanisms through which anti-gender actors forge alliances and promote their campaigns. The case of Brazil, shown in Figure 5, is an illustrative example of the limitations of the quantitative design: the influence of right-wing populist leadership is not taken into account given that it is the populist leader, in this case Jair Bolsonaro, only rises to power in 2019, which is the last period considered in the analysis. Furthermore, the WCF Presence variable suggests that the country did not participate in transnational anti-gender networks from 2020 to 2023, when in fact it was widely reported that members of the Bolsonaro administration were actively connected to anti-gender organizations in Brazil and abroad. While it is possible that the absence of Brazilian organizations in WCF events for the years of 2020, 2021 and 2022 reflects the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the network, it is also possible that anti-gender activism in Brazil developed outside of the scope of the WCF during these years.

Figure 5: Brazil trajectories



The case of Brazil is also interesting due to the counterintuitive direction of the variables shown in Figure 5. In the period between 2011 and 2023, the status of transgender rights in the country improved significantly while the liberal democracy score decreased and religious influence increased. Crucially, the country’s GBTR score continued to increase even during the period of Bolsonaro in power, which is a puzzling fact given the explicit anti-SOGI rights orientation of Bolsonaro’s campaign and of his governing coalition. In sum, Brazil is a country that combined right-wing populist leadership, increased religious institutionalization,

and maintained participation in transnational anti-gender networks – contrary to what the WCF Presence data suggests in Figure 5 –, yet, transgender rights expanded over the same period. Why was that? In the next chapter, I turn to understanding how and why these dynamics unfolded in Brazil, considering what they reveal about the conditions and mechanisms under which anti-gender campaigns succeed or fail.

G. Appendix

Table A1: Robustness Check — 2-Year Periodization

	Model 1 (H1)	Model 2 (H2)	Model 3A (H3)	Model 3B (H3)	Model 4 (Full)
WCF Presence (lag)	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.005 (0.006)	0.002 (0.007)	0.002 (0.007)	-0.002 (0.013)
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.010 (0.010)	0.011 (0.009)	0.013 (0.009)	0.013 (0.009)	0.012 (0.010)
WCF x Liberal Democracy	0.008 (0.020)				0.001 (0.021)
RW Populist Years (lag)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.007** (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.007** (0.003)
WCF x RW Populist Years		0.009 (0.006)			0.009 (0.006)
Regime Religious Support (lag)			0.009 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)	0.009 (0.010)
WCF x Regime Religious Support			-0.019 (0.025)	-0.019 (0.025)	-0.023 (0.026)
Gini (lag)	0.001* (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	0.004** (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)
N	737	737	737	737	737
R ²	0.027	0.029	0.028	0.028	0.030
Adj. R ²	0.014	0.016	0.013	0.013	0.013

Note: Pooled OLS with period fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All independent variables lagged one period. GDP per capita logged. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A2: Robustness Check — 3-Year Periodization

	Model 1 (H1)	Model 2 (H2)	Model 3A (H3)	Model 3B (H3)	Model 4 (Full)
WCF Presence (lag)	-0.002 (0.014)	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.015 (0.009)	-0.015 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.015)
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.035*** (0.013)	0.031*** (0.011)	0.032*** (0.012)	0.032*** (0.012)	0.035** (0.014)
WCF x Liberal Democracy	-0.016 (0.024)				-0.007 (0.025)
RW Populist Years (lag)	-0.007** (0.003)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.007** (0.004)	-0.007** (0.004)	-0.004 (0.005)
WCF x RW Populist Years		-0.007 (0.007)			-0.007 (0.007)
Regime Religious Support (lag)			0.002 (0.019)	0.002 (0.019)	0.002 (0.020)
WCF x Regime Religious Support			0.027 (0.032)	0.027 (0.032)	0.030 (0.033)
Gini (lag)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	0.005 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)
N	463	463	463	463	463
R ²	0.044	0.045	0.045	0.045	0.048
Adj. R ²	0.027	0.028	0.026	0.026	0.024

Note: Pooled OLS with period fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All independent variables lagged one period. GDP per capita logged. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A3: Robustness Check — 5-Year Periodization

	Model 1 (H1)	Model 2 (H2)	Model 3A (H3)	Model 3B (H3)	Model 4 (Full)
WCF Presence (lag)	-0.052*	-0.012	-0.036	-0.036	-0.059*
	(0.030)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.032)
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.088*	0.110***	0.099***	0.099***	0.084*
	(0.046)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.046)
WCF x Liberal Democracy	0.045				0.073
	(0.062)				(0.063)
RW Populist Years (lag)	-0.003	0.007	-0.003	-0.003	0.006
	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.008)
WCF x RW Populist Years		-0.019*			-0.020*
		(0.011)			(0.011)
Regime Religious Support (lag)			-0.040	-0.040	-0.040
			(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.046)
WCF x Regime Religious Support			0.040	0.040	0.073
			(0.071)	(0.071)	(0.078)
Gini (lag)	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	0.002	0.001	0.003	0.003	0.002
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
N	162	162	162	162	162
R ²	0.068	0.088	0.070	0.070	0.098
Adj. R ²	0.032	0.053	0.027	0.027	0.045

Note: Pooled OLS with period fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All independent variables lagged one period. GDP per capita logged. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A4: Robustness Check — 6-Year Periodization

	Model 1 (H1)	Model 2 (H2)	Model 3A (H3)	Model 3B (H3)	Model 4 (Full)
WCF Presence (lag)	-0.028 (0.031)	-0.023 (0.021)	-0.048** (0.024)	-0.048** (0.024)	-0.039 (0.034)
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.095* (0.057)	0.094** (0.043)	0.090** (0.043)	0.090** (0.043)	0.094 (0.057)
WCF x Liberal Democracy	-0.018 (0.072)				0.008 (0.074)
RW Populist Years (lag)	-0.006 (0.005)	0.002 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)	0.001 (0.008)
WCF x RW Populist Years		-0.013 (0.009)			-0.015 (0.010)
Regime Religious Support (lag)			-0.018 (0.059)	-0.018 (0.059)	-0.017 (0.058)
WCF x Regime Religious Support			0.072 (0.069)	0.072 (0.069)	0.089 (0.071)
Gini (lag)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	0.010 (0.008)	0.009 (0.008)	0.010 (0.009)	0.010 (0.009)	0.009 (0.009)
N	162	162	162	162	162
R ²	0.073	0.086	0.077	0.077	0.093
Adj. R ²	0.037	0.051	0.035	0.035	0.039

Note: Pooled OLS with period fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All independent variables lagged one period. GDP per capita logged. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A5: Robustness Check — Regional Dummies

	Model 1 (H1)	Model 2 (H2)	Model 3A (H3)	Model 3B (H3)	Model 4 (Full)
WCF Presence (lag)	0.004 (0.018)	-0.023* (0.013)	-0.011 (0.015)	-0.011 (0.015)	-0.011 (0.019)
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.065** (0.031)	0.052** (0.025)	0.055** (0.025)	0.055** (0.025)	0.055 (0.034)
WCF x Liberal Democracy	-0.025 (0.039)				-0.033 (0.041)
RW Populist Years (lag)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.014** (0.006)	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.015** (0.006)
WCF x RW Populist Years		0.017** (0.008)			0.017** (0.008)
Religious Consultation (lag)					0.003 (0.007)
WCF x Religious Consultation					0.008 (0.010)
Regime Religious Support (lag)			0.045 (0.033)	0.045 (0.033)	
WCF x Regime Religious Support			0.006 (0.046)	0.006 (0.046)	
Gini (lag)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	0.009 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.011* (0.006)
N	314	314	314	314	314
R ²	0.124	0.138	0.132	0.132	0.145
Adj. R ²	0.089	0.104	0.095	0.095	0.102

Note: Pooled OLS with period fixed effects and regional dummies. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All independent variables lagged one period. GDP per capita logged. Regional dummies included in all models; reference category is Western Europe. Coefficients for regional dummies not shown. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A6 (alt): Robustness Check — Regional Dummies Replacing Gini

	Model 1 (H1)	Model 2 (H2)	Model 3A (H3)	Model 3B (H3)	Model 4 (Full)
WCF Presence (lag)	0.005 (0.018)	-0.022* (0.013)	-0.012 (0.015)	-0.012 (0.015)	-0.009 (0.019)
Liberal Democracy (lag)	0.063** (0.031)	0.049* (0.026)	0.053** (0.026)	0.053** (0.026)	0.053 (0.035)
WCF x Liberal Democracy	-0.027 (0.039)				-0.036 (0.042)
RW Populist Years (lag)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.014** (0.006)	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.015** (0.006)
WCF x RW Populist Years		0.017** (0.008)			0.017* (0.008)
Religious Consultation (lag)					0.003 (0.007)
WCF x Religious Consultation					0.009 (0.011)
Regime Religious Support (lag)			0.048 (0.032)	0.048 (0.032)	
WCF x Regime Religious Support			0.006 (0.045)	0.006 (0.045)	
log(GDP per capita) (lag)	0.009 (0.006)	0.009 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.010* (0.006)
Americas	0.054** (0.021)	0.061*** (0.022)	0.057*** (0.022)	0.057*** (0.022)	0.060*** (0.022)
Asia/Pacific	0.029 (0.022)	0.030 (0.022)	0.026 (0.022)	0.026 (0.022)	0.030 (0.021)
Central/Eastern Europe/Eurasia	0.010 (0.019)	0.016 (0.020)	0.012 (0.019)	0.012 (0.019)	0.014 (0.019)
Middle East/Northern Africa	-0.001	-0.003	-0.016	-0.016	-0.005

	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.019)
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.021	0.021	0.022	0.022	0.019
	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)
N	314	314	314	314	314
R ²	0.122	0.135	0.131	0.131	0.142
Adj. R ²	0.090	0.104	0.096	0.096	0.102

Note: Pooled OLS with period fixed effects. Gini replaced by regional dummies. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All independent variables lagged one period. GDP per capita logged. Reference category: Western Europe. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Chapter 3: Anti-gender campaigns and transgender rights in Brazil

Under what conditions are anti-gender campaigns more successful at undermining transgender rights? In Chapter 1, I argued that the levels of liberal democracy and of institutionalization of organized religion in a country are the two key structural factors that shape the effects of anti-gender campaigns on SOGI rights. Such factors are in turn affected by secondary conditions such as neoliberal ideology and policies, economic crisis and instability, and right-wing populism. Additionally, I identified five main strategies used by anti-gender actors to advance their goals within countries and at international human rights forums: transnational coalition building, diplomacy, contestation of liberal human rights, alliances with right-wing populists, and scapegoating of sexual and gender minorities, such as transgender people. In Chapter 2, I conducted a cross-national panel analysis to assess three hypotheses related to the structural factors identified in the previous chapter, finding that only liberal democracy is positively and significantly associated with transgender rights change across all models

In this chapter I conduct a case study of Brazil in which I investigate how the different structural conditions identified in Chapter 1 and measured in Chapter 2 shaped and intersect with anti-gender campaign strategies in the country. Specifically, I trace when, why, and how each of the structural factors enabled or constrained anti-gender campaign strategies since 2003, the first year of a progressive administration in the country since redemocratization in 1988. To do so, I use a mix of analysis of secondary bibliographic sources, and information collected from eight semi-structured interviews with scholars, Brazilian congressional staff, trans rights activists, and with the National Secretary for LGBTQ Affairs, Symmy Larat. A

list of interviewees with pseudonyms (except for Secretary Larat's) and brief descriptions is provided in the appendix.

The choice for the temporal framework from 2003 to the present is due to the fact that it was during this period that anti-gender rhetoric emerged and was consolidated in the country's political discourse. "Gender ideology" was first mentioned in congressional speeches at the Chamber of Deputies in 2003, and it would only be invoked again in 2010 (Lacerda 2019, 72). In the next section I show that, as one may expect, homophobia and transphobia have deep roots in Brazilian society and politics. Despite the historical pervasiveness of homophobia and transphobia in Brazilian society, it was during the first Lula administration that a coherent anti-gender movement emerged, partly as a backlash against an empowered LGBTQ movement and advances in SOGI protections.

To trace the multifold process through which anti-gender organizations and networks have acted to undermine transgender rights in Brazil, I divided the period between 2003 and the present year into four time periods, according to different administrations. For each of these time periods, I identify critical junctures in terms of transgender rights, the mechanisms that lead to changes, and the actors involved in these changes. Such division is not a matter of convenience but rather based on the fact that each presidential administration had important differences in their approaches to SOGI rights, altering the arena in which pro- and anti-LGBTQ actors interacted. Only one exception is noted: the short administration of Michel Temer, who took power after the ousting of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, and who governed the country from August 2016 to December 2018. Given that no major changes in SOGI rights governance were made during this period, Temer's administration is grouped with Dilma Rousseff's time in power.

The status of transgender rights has significantly improved in Brazil over the last few decades. Since 2003, transgender people have won the right to access gender affirming treatment through the unified public health system (*Sistema Único de Saúde* - SUS); to legally change their name and gender marker with no medical requirements; and, more recently in 2025, to access legal provisions and resources available to victims of gender-based violence. Additionally, transgender people increased their visibility in civil society and presence within state institutions.

According to the Franklin & Marshall Global Barometer of Transgender Rights, (2026) the country's score classification jumped from 47% in 2011 to 88% in 2023. In classificatory terms, this means that the country changed from being considered persecuting of transgender people in 2011, to being protective in 2023. However, this improvement was also accompanied by persistent rates of anti-trans violence. According to the Trans Murder Monitor (TMM) project, the number of reported murders of transgender people went from 57 in 2008 to 99 in 2010, during Lula's first administration; from 103 to 168 during the Dilma and Temer years; and from 115 to 111 during the Bolsonaro years. From 2022 to 2024, the number has decreased from 102 to 65 (Transgender Europe (TGEU) 2025). However, it is likely that, due to TMM's methodological limitations as well as the underreporting of this type of violence, the real numbers can be higher.

During the analyzed period, Brazilian society has been deeply transformed by conflicting phases of economic growth and recession; liberalization and democratic erosion; and expansion of human rights and backlash to this expansion. On the one hand, these factors were not enough to prevent the recognition of basic rights for transgender people, such as the right to access gender affirming treatment, to legally change name and gender marker, and

basic protections against discrimination. On the other hand, these rights were promoted by the country's judiciary and executive branches, and in spite of the opposition in Congress, where opposition to SOGI rights and policies has prevented the passing of any major pro-trans legislation in the analyzed period. As a result, their enforcement is limited and the challenges to human dignity faced by transgender Brazilians are still substantial.

A. A brief history of SOGI rights in Brazil

For most of Brazil's history, discrimination and violence against LGBTQ people was sponsored by both state and religious authorities, and widespread in society. Although sodomy was decriminalized in 1821, one year before the country's independence and due to the liberalizing influence of the Napoleonic Code, most legal SOGI-based protections were only advanced in the 1980s. In the 20th century, transgender people were preferential targets of persecution during authoritarian periods, when government authorities openly defended and implemented actions of police surveillance and violence.

The history of homophobia and transphobia in Brazil cannot be dissociated from the country's Catholic roots, as well as its importance within transnational conservative Christian networks. Over the second half of the 20th century, these networks have expanded and internationalized to become a key element of creation and diffusion of anti-gender campaigns against SOGI rights. In the 1960s, Brazilians played a critical role in shaping Catholic traditionalism through the mobilization of prominent bishops and activists against the liberalization promoted by the Second Vatican Council – also referred to as Vatican II (Cowan 2021). In 1960, lay activist Plínio de Oliveira founded the Brazilian Society for the Defense

of Tradition, Family and Property (*Tradição, Família, e Propriedade*, TFP), a non-profit organization that, alongside Brazilian clerics, would play a major role in the national and transnational politics of Catholic traditionalism, in particular during and after the council (Cowan 2021, 18). Over time, TFP has branched out its activities and geographic focus, and is now one of the largest anti-gender European networks (Datta 2021).

A second important element that shaped the trajectory of SOGI rights in the country was the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. Sometimes referred to as a “civil-military dictatorship” due to the support it enjoyed from the mainstream media, economic elites, and religious organizations such as TFP, this period of authoritarian governance interrupted an incipient liberalization started in the previous decade. The military regime openly persecuted LGBTQ people through arbitrary arrests, extortion and sometimes torture, grounding these actions in the prevailing right-wing authoritarian ideology that considered LGBTQ people subversive entities and therefore threats to national security (Comissão da Verdade do Estado de São Paulo 2015; Globo 2020). During this period, the police regularly conducted raids in areas where LGBTQ people could be found and arrested transvestites and transgender people under accusations of loitering and disturbance of the public order (Comissão da Verdade do Estado de São Paulo 2015).

The dictatorship period not only prevented the recognition of SOGI rights due to its moral conservative authoritarianism, but it empowered two sets of actors that would eventually lead the fight against SOGI rights decades later. The first set comprises the far-right members of the Armed Forces and their political allies, who were critical of the democratization process in the 1980s and that would remain adamantly opposed to demands for accountability over the human rights violations committed during their regime. As we will

see, the military opposition to the creation of a Truth Commission decades later in the 2010s helped catapult right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro to power. Moreover, as I detail later in this chapter, high-ranking members of the Armed Forces held important positions within Bolsonaro's cabinet, and with him conspired against democracy after his electoral defeat in 2022.

The second set of actors empowered by the military regime of 1964-1985 were Evangelical churches and their leaders, which would rise to political power in the late 20th century and eventually become leaders in the organized anti-gender opposition in Congress. It was in the 1970s and 1980s that Brazilian Evangelicals entered the national political arena and dramatically expanded their political influence by exchanging favors and resources with the regime (Cowan 2021). This alliance between the military and an emergent Brazilian Christian Right – composed of rising conservative evangelicals Christians and Catholic traditionalists –, was founded on morality, anticommunism, and opposition to left-wing Christianity (Cowan 2021, 62).

The rise of Evangelicals in the 1970s was not only a function of their strategic alignment with the military dictatorship but also propelled by the expansion of Protestant religions in the country. Although Brazil has been predominantly a Catholic country since its independence, it is believed to have been going through a “religious transition” embodied by the growth of Evangelicals and the weakening of Roman Catholicism that started approximately in the late 1970s (Araújo 2023, 4). Over decades, as we will see, this significant demographic phenomenon would lead to an expansion of religious power in electoral politics,

notably in the early 2000s, a period that saw a sharp increase in the number of Evangelicals, and in particular Pentecostals.⁴

The rise of Evangelical churches and leaders during the dictatorship period not only set the tone for their political participation in the following decades, but also contributed to inserting Brazil within the transnational networks of the US Christian Right. United by their shared conservative values and anticommunist ideology, Brazilian Evangelicals and members of the US Christian Right connected and collaborated through institutions such as the International Policy Forum, created in 1985 by American political activist Paul Weyrich (Cowan 2021). Decades later, these connections would be useful in facilitating US-style cultural wars to be used in Brazilian anti-gender campaigns.

Despite the repression from the dictatorship and parallel to the expansion of openly political Evangelical conservatives, the late 1970s saw the rise of an incipient LGBTQ rights movement that would be strengthened in the following decades. In 1978, the first gay rights organizations were created: the newspaper *O Lampião da Esquina*, in Rio de Janeiro, and the civil society group *Somos*, in São Paulo (Mott 2005). The following years would see the emergence of a national movement for SOGI rights that, in the 1980s, was fueled by the fight against HIV/AIDS (Globo 2020).

⁴ Pentecostalism was first introduced in Brazil in 1910 by two Swedish evangelists that had converted to the religion in the United States and created their own congregation, *Assembleia de Deus* (Assembly of God), in the Northern city of Belém after being expelled from the local Baptist churches. (Dip 2018, 69) In the following decades, and more sharply in the second half of the 20th century, Pentecostalism became more popular through the works of foreign evangelists as well as of Brazilian converts that founded some of the largest congregations such as *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, or IURD (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), founded in 1977 Bishop Edir Macedo and currently present in over 150 countries. (Universal do Reino de Deus 2024) In the 1980s, Pentecostalism became the main expression of evangelicalism in Brazil, a position it held until around 2010, when it was surpassed by non-denominational churches. (Araújo 2023, 12)

During the debates of the National Constitutive Assembly, in 1987, João Antônio de Souza Mascarenhas, the only representative of the “gay rights” movement – as it was known at the time –, advocated for the prohibition of discrimination based on SOGI on the constitutional text, but his demand, fiercely opposed to by Evangelical deputies aligned to the military (Cowan 2021, 61), was ultimately dismissed under arguments that sex-based discrimination would already include discrimination based on SOGI (Fundação FHC 2021). As a result, the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, which institutionalized participatory democracy, did not include protections against such type of discrimination, a limitation that would attempt to be remediated in the following decades.

Between 1988 and 2003, movements for SOGI rights expanded in Brazil, reflecting the development of the country’s democracy as well as the gradual incorporation of these themes in international human rights debates. Despite political and economic turbulence of the period – which included the impeachment of the first president elected through direct vote, Fernando Collor, in 1992, and the introduction of a new national currency in 1994 –, civil society organizations grew in number and strength.

In the 1990s, a national movement for transgender rights started to take shape with the creation of the Association of Transvestites and Liberated (ASTRAL), which later became the National Alliance of Transvestites and Transsexuals (*Articulação Nacional de Travestis e Transexuais*, ANTRA) (Fundação FHC 2021). In 1992, the first transgender politician, Kátia Tapety, was elected for a position at a city council in the state of Piauí and, in 1997, the National Council of Medicine authorized gender reassignment surgery at research hospitals (Fundação FHC 2021). Finally, in 1999 the National Psychology Council issued Resolution

1/99, in which it prohibited its professionals to practice sexual conversion therapies and to publicly support conversion-related practices (Resolução CFP nº 001/99 1999).

The development and strengthening of a national LGBT movement from the establishment of the 1988 Constitution to the early years of a new century seemed to indicate that liberal democracy was poised to triumph in Brazil. Although the crimes perpetrated during the dictatorship era went unpunished due to a comprehensive amnesty law passed in 1979 by the military as part of their gradual descent from power, their anticommunist authoritarianism was no longer mainstream in a post-Cold War world. Nevertheless, this was also a time when new and old religious actors would increasingly be involved in electoral politics, and when, internationally, a Vatican-led movement against “gender” started to take off at UN conferences. Together, these developments would bring ominous prospects for the empowerment of LGBTQ people in Brazil.

B. The Pink Tide and the Lula years (2003 - 2010)

The period between the late 1990s and early 2000s in Latin America is often referred to as the “pink tide” due to the left-leaning character of many of the governments at the time. In countries led by left-leaning coalitions such as Brazil, this period was a window of opportunity for dialogue between state and civil society that was promptly seized upon by women’s and SOGI rights movements, resulting in the appointment of activist figures as cadres of the new administration (Matos 2018, 145). Additionally, Lula’s first two administrations, characterized by a moderation of his earlier left-wing unionist stances,

capitalized on the favorable economic conditions of the time to expand the welfare state and to establish alliances with different sectors of society, both liberal and conservative.

Between 2003 and 2010, SOGI rights advanced in Brazil as a consequence of empowered rights activism and increased civil society participation in the government. Examples of this moment included the implementation of public policies guided by new government institutions – such as the LGBT health committee within the Ministry of Health, created in 2004 –, and by the Supreme Court decision that made gender affirming treatment (surgical and hormonal) available through the unified public health system, in 2008. While the strengthening of LGBTQ movements during this period already sparked opposition for religious conservatives, there was not yet an organized offensive against “gender”. This was partly due to the limited character of the advances in SOGI rights, restricted to some Executive initiatives and the aforementioned Supreme Court decision, and to the fact that both religious conservatives and minority social movements were allied to the government.

1. Democratic expansion and the empowerment of SOGI rights activism

The election of the Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) and union leader Luís Inácio Lula da Silva initiated a period of around 14 years in which economic growth, fueled by the early 2000s commodities boom, was translated into expanded welfare policies and empowered social movements. Since the mid-1990s, Brazil had been benefiting from exporting commodities (such as iron ore, soy and coffee) to Asia, stimulated by the expansion of China (Abu-El-Haj 2016; Azevedo and Robertson 2022, 5). Moreover, its status as an emerging economy had guaranteed the country a significant foreign direct investment (Abu-

El-Haj 2016; Azevedo and Robertson 2022, 5). However, while Lula's predecessor Fernando Henrique Cardoso focused on efforts of economic stabilization and inflation control, the Workers' Party leader started a period of expansion of the welfare state that translated into significant poverty alleviation and income redistribution measures that changed Brazilian society.

The expansion of the welfare state under Lula sought to address one of the key threats to liberal democracy identified in Chapter 1, namely, the antidemocratic pressures from above and below that arise as consequences of neoliberal policies (Brown 2019), such as those implemented by Lula's predecessor. Some of the key initiatives in this regard were: increases in the minimum wage; expansion of income transfer programs – such as *Bolsa Família* –; increases in social mobility through the formalization of informal labor sectors, such as domestic workers and sugar cane workers; universalization of basic health care, and expansion of public education and affirmative action policies that contribute to desegregate higher education in the next decades (Heller 2020, 597). As a result, working and lower middle class incomes rose sharply, and previously marginalized sectors of the workforce saw their wages rise and their collective bargaining power increase (Heller 2020, 597).

The combination of economic prosperity, expansion of welfare policies, and a blooming civil society in the early 2000s led to the strengthening of SOGI rights movements, who were able to pressure the government through activism and official participation channels. One example of this was the National Anti-Discrimination Council (CNCD) that, having been established in 2001, created in 2003 a permanent commission to receive complaints of human rights violations linked to SOGI (Fundação FHC 2021). Two years later, the Council was expanded to include LGBT representatives with voting rights. (Fundação

FHC 2021) Additionally, in January 2004, a march by transgender activists leading to the National Congress led to the creation of the National Day of Trans Visibility, illustrating the growing influence of activists on the political agenda.

2. Lula's "peace and love" governance

Under Lula's charismatic leadership, Brazilian governance in the early 2000s was characterized by a moderation of the PT's left-wing ideology as well as efforts of conciliation of different sectors of society, from human rights organizations to agri-business elites and religious authorities. This conciliatory stance, epitomized by the slogan "peace-and-love *Lulinha*", allowed Lula to meet requirements intrinsic to Brazil's system of coalitional presidentialism, in which presidential power is constrained by the need to build and maintain multi party coalitions that can cultivate a legislative majority (Gatto et al. 2022).

At the same time, Lula's big-tent governing style also allowed for establishing strategic links to businesses that channeled funds into political campaigns (Azevedo and Robertson 2022, 5). In this context, the increasing centrality of the agribusiness sector to the growth and stability of the Brazilian economy, heavily dependent on the export of raw materials and agricultural commodities, furthered the need to form broad alliances that cut through traditional class divides.

As Brazil increased its significance in the global economy, its government sought to extend this prominence to international politics as well. In this context, Brazilian foreign policy incorporated the defense of SOGI rights in international human rights fora as part of a broader agenda that sought to strengthen the country's diplomacy in liberal international

institutions and promote its leadership in the region. This project of a “proud and active” foreign policy – as described by the then-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Celso Amorim – led to the participation of Brazilian researchers in the publication of the Yogyakarta Principles by the UN Human Rights Council, in 2007, and to the passing of the Brazil-sponsored Resolution 2.435/2008 at the Organization of American States, a document in which the organization expresses concern about human rights violations related to SOGI (Fundação FHC 2021).

Meanwhile in Congress, a new informal coalition united representatives interested in advancing demands related to religion, agribusiness, and public security in a formation that would later be known as the BBB caucus. The acronym BBB, which originally stands for the popular reality show Big Brother Brazil, in this case refers to the main guiding issues of each group of representatives: *Boi* (cow, or beef), *Bíblia* (Bible), and *Bala* (bullet). Despite diverging on many issues, the union between these groups would over the years become increasingly important to the functioning of the legislative bodies, as they developed a practice of lending votes to one another to get their individual agendas through parliament (Macaulay 2019).

The emergence of the BBB coalition increased the power of conservative religious representatives, especially Evangelicals, to elect their members to important commissions, and to stall pro-SOGI rights bill proposals. According to Sandra Melo, Evangelical lawyer and experienced legal advisor at the Chamber of Deputies who has worked for members of the Evangelical caucus for the past 20 years, gender-related topics have united religious congressmembers, not only Catholic and Evangelical, but also Spiritualists. According to Melo, “when BBB decides to do something in Congress, there's no one who can stop us.”

3. Early signs of backlash: the Brazil Without Homophobia project

In 2004, the Ministry of Health launched the cross-cutting project Brazil Without Homophobia, which sought to combat anti-LGBT violence and discrimination and promote through a series of recommendations for implementation of actions by the Ministries and Secretariats of the federal government. The blueprint established in the Brazil Without Homophobia project paved the way to other initiatives such as the creation of a LGBT Health committee by the Ministry of Health in 2004, and the National Plan for the Promotion of LGBT Citizenship and Human Rights, in 2009 (Fundação FHC 2021; Lacerda 2019, 70). Such initiatives contributed to the fear of normalization of LGBTQ identities by conservatives who were becoming increasingly concerned with what they saw as higher visibility of LGBTQ people in the media (Lacerda 2019, 68) and misuse of public resources in LGBTQ health and anti-discrimination programs.

At the time, the Brazil Without Homophobia project was met with opposition at the National Congress, mainly led by religious congress members, whose presence was in expansion. However, as we saw, in the early years of a new alignment of conservative forces around anti-gender rhetoric, there was not a significant conflict between the rising presence of religious leaders in politics and the administration. This was partly due to the aforementioned center-left character of the Lula administration, which established broad political alliances across party and ideological lines, but also because anti-gender discourse was not yet at the center of the religious presence in national politics.⁵

⁵ Junqueira (2022, 161) notes that despite the historical influence of the Catholic Church in Brazil, the country was a late adopter of the anti-gender discourse, especially if compared to South

In 2006, a bill proposing the inclusion of LGBT people among the group of people protected against discrimination was approved at the Chamber of Deputies, sounding the alarm to the religious conservatives in the Congress. The criminalization of anti-LGBT discrimination, proposed by bill PLC 122/2006, also known as “the anti-homophobia bill”, fueled several conservative congressional campaigns in the 2007 congressional election and became salient in the political agenda at the time. The criminalization of homophobia and transphobia would later be achieved by the 2019 Supreme Court decision that established that SOGI-based discrimination was a crime under the anti-racism Law 7.716/1989. However, the “traditional family values” frame adopted by conservatives in Congress to oppose PLC 122/2006, combined with anti-LGBT conspiracy rhetoric, would become a powerful weapon in defeating the bill and in electing religious congressional candidates in that year’s midterm elections (Galego 2022).

For Melissa Neves, researcher and technical advisor at the Chamber of Deputies for the past 20 years, the anti-gender movement has acted “very strategically” since Evangelicals entered institutional politics. According to Neves, “they’ve been thinking about this since the 1960s, when Pentecostalism was spread to Brazil by American churches. Back then they already had the perception that political participation is important.” Although she found it difficult to pinpoint the exact moment an opposition against gender was born in the National Congress, she argues that “it definitely was intensified during the second Lula administration”, and that “throughout the two terms, it became clear that advances in human rights matters would be made.”

American neighbors such as Peru and Colombia, where anti-gender rhetoric was already well-established and salient in Catholic networks since the mid-1990s.

4. From “cultural marxism” to “gender ideology”

The negative reactions to the 2004 Brazil Without Homophobia project and the mobilizations to defeat the 2006 anti-homophobia bill in Congress were some of the earliest signs of an organized backlash to prospects of changes in legal norms, policies and social norms. Despite the broad political alliances and the conciliatory stance that characterized Lula’s administrations, the election of the first left-wing president in Brazil’s recent democracy history animated traditional right-wing sectors of society that opposed Lula’s redistributive policies and advocated for a more limited role for the government.

For the anti-Workers Party (*antipetista*) opposition that mobilized against the inclusion of SOGI in the public education curriculum, the problem of “gender” initially emerged as part of a broader subversive threat, namely, left-wing ideology. Like other South American countries such as Peru and Colombia, the conservative mobilization against “gender” was initially focused on opposing pro-SOGI initiatives in public education. At the time, however, the threat was not “gender ideology” but rather “Marxist indoctrination”, the 21st-century iteration of an older anti-communist trope that identified Venezuela’s Bolivarian doctrine as the new communist threat (Miguel 2016, 593).

It must be said that the idea that left-wing parties and their institutions attempted to corrupt the population with “Marxist values” was not new for the Brazilian right. As we have seen, during the Cold War the fight against communism was used to justify the 1964 coup d’état and the repression that followed. In this sense, accusations of “Marxist indoctrination” in the 21st century had little to do with Marxist studies. Instead, they referenced the idea of

“cultural Marxism”, a malleable anti-left expression created by cultural war conservative intellectuals in the 1980s in the United States that arrived in Brazil in the 1990s (Silva et al. 2021). “Cultural Marxism” conflated a series of progressive movements and trends – such as student movements, anti-war movements, post-modernist theories, feminism, SOGI rights movements, environmentalism, etc. – and denounced them as elements of a broader Marxism-inspired conspiracy to defeat Christianity and the Western civilization (Silva et al. 2021, 189).

As a frame of mobilization, “cultural marxism” bears important similarities to “gender ideology”: both are malleable constructs that portray progressive institutions and theories under threatening, conspiratorial lenses. In Brazil, the former commentator, former astrologist, writer and self-described philosopher Olavo de Carvalho was a crucial actor in the translation of U.S. cultural war frames and strategies to a national audience. From his books and opinion columns at mainstream news outlets such as *O Globo* in the late 1990s, the Catholic fundamentalist Carvalho would later rise to become an icon in the anti-PT movement and a mentor to many members of Bolsonaro’s inner circle, including his son Eduardo. Carvalho, who lived in the US from 2005 until his death in 2023, is often pointed out as having facilitated the connection between Brazilian and US far-right networks through figures such as the ideologue Steve Bannon in the late 2010s (Teitelbaum 2021).

Another important advocate against a supposed political and ideological indoctrination of children was the movement School Without Party (SWP). Founded as a “concerned parents” group in 2004 by lawyer and public prosecutor Miguel Nagib, SWP was inspired by similar initiatives in the United States – such as *NoIndoctrination* and *Creation Studies Institute* – that mobilize against a supposed ideological indoctrination in school and advocate for homeschooling. In collaboration with the Peruvian-born movement *Con Mis Hijos No Te*

Metas, Nagib's SWP movement would later evolve to be one of the main anti-gender actors of the early 2010s (Costa 2019, 61).

Initially, SWP focused on the defense of neoliberal economic policies, linked to the think tank *Instituto Millenium*, of which Nagib was part, but later expanded its set of concerns to include "gender ideology" (Miguel 2016, 600). For SWP, the fusion of opposition to "Marxist indoctrination" to that of "gender ideology" not only gave it important allies – among them, Evangelical leaders and members of the Bolsonaro family –, but also yielded them a much wider reach, and a discourse with much more immediate popular resonance (Miguel 2016, 601).

5. A Brazilian Christian Right is born

The reality of 21st century politics in Brazil was that religious voters and the leaders they followed were an important political force to be reckoned with. As such, both of Lula's terms included political alliances with prominent religious leaders, such as megapastor Silas Malafaia, who campaigned for Lula in the 2002 election and was rewarded in the following year with a position in the Council for Sustainable Social and Economic Development (CDESS), a collegiate body composed of representatives of civil society to advise the President on such matters. A decade later, Malafaia would distance himself from the Workers' Party to eventually become a prominent religious figure in the far-right.

In 2003, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front was created in the Congress, and from then on the number and influence of Evangelical representatives would only increase. According to official census data (Agência IBGE Notícias 2012), the proportion of the

population that identified as Evangelical rose from 15.4% in 2000 to 22.2% in 2010, an increase of approximately 16 million people (from 26.2 million to 42.3 million). Ten years later, in 2020, estimates by Datafolha research institute indicated that 50% of Brazilians were Catholic, 31% were Evangelical and 10% had no religion (Agência IBGE Notícias 2012).

Despite the decline of Catholics and the demographic rise of Evangelicals, Catholics and conservative Pentecostals have worked together as part of the anti-gender coalition in Brazil, a political alliance that bears similarity to the Christian Right in the United States, originated in the 1970s (Carranza and Rosado-Nunes 2024). While the Catholic Church has traditionally focused its political activism on the issue of abortion, it has also turned its attention to combating gender ideology as gender issues started challenging traditional social power structures (Carranza and Rosado-Nunes 2024, 12).

According to Helena Moura, scholar of gender and politics and member of the Institute of Religious Studies, when it comes to abortion issues, “Catholics make the bed for Evangelicals to sleep in.” In other words, they pave the way for evangelicals, who have more public visibility. This view is also shared by congressional legal advisor Sandra Melo, who believes that most Evangelical deputies have a “more moderate position towards abortion issues than Catholics”, who have a “more rigid view”. According to her, most Evangelical congress members are favorable to legal abortion, while Catholics are, in general, “more resistant” to it. Nevertheless, when it comes to anti-gender campaigns, conservative Evangelicals have taken the lead, leaving Catholics behind (Bozon 2024, 160). As we will see, Evangelical politicians were the protagonists in the congressional opposition to initiatives against homophobia, and they have led judicial activism to curb the expansion of SOGI rights (Carranza and Rosado-Nunes 2024, 12).

In sum, between 2003 and 2010, Brazil experienced a flourishing democracy and a left-wing government that, aided by economic growth, was able to expand welfare policies and promote the inclusion of several marginalized sectors of the population, such as transgender people, who won the right to access gender affirming care through the public health system. During this period of growing opportunities for demands from civil society, the Christian Right was also on the rise, but anti-gender campaigns were still incipient as anti-SOGI forces had not yet converged around the opposition to “gender”. Nevertheless, it was during this period that important actors – such as the School Without Party and the members of the BBB coalition in Congress – emerged, and that pro-SOGI rights initiatives in the legislative and executive branches put conservative actors into a state of alert.

One of such initiatives was the 3rd National Human Rights Program (*Programa Nacional de Direitos Humanos*, PNDH-3), approved in 2010. The ambitious plan outlined by PNDH-3 included proposals such as the decriminalization of abortion, the legalization of same-sex civil unions, and the right of adoption by same-sex couples (De Abreu 2023). Furthermore, the program recognized the right to memory as a human right and set guidelines for the creation of a truth commission to investigate and publicize the human rights violations committee during the dictatorship years (Secretaria Especial dos Direitos Humanos 2010). Naturally, these proposals were not seen positively by the Christian Right and by the armed forces, which would fuel a strong anti-PT opposition in the following years.

C. Dilma Rousseff's turbulent years (2011 - 2016)

Between 2011 and 2016, Brazil had important advances in the promotion of SOGI rights, such as the creation of a National LGBT Comprehensive Health Policy by the Ministry of Health, in 2011, and the expansion of the availability of gender affirming care in the public health system to include trans men and transvestites, in 2013. However, this was also a turbulent period of economic recession, political polarization and social unrest in which Evangelical leaders, previously allied to the Lula administration, switched sides and joined the growing opposition to the Workers Party. This was also a period in which politicians, religious leaders, and civil society groups started using anti-gender rhetoric more consistently as the framework of “gender ideology” proved to be an effective mobilization tool.

1. The first Presidenta

At the start of Rousseff's first term, Brazilian democracy seemed stronger than ever. However, the election of the first female president in the country's history frustrated expectations that she would follow in Lula's footsteps as a charismatic and conciliatory leader. Despite rising to national politics as Lula's former minister and protégée, Rousseff's administration started off with the threatening prospects of a widening gap between religious authorities and the administration. Even before her electoral victory, in October 2010, and acting to mitigate the controversy of past statements in favor of the legalization of abortion (G1 2010). Then-candidate Rousseff published “an open letter to the people of God” in which

she claimed to be “personally against abortion” and committed to lead an administration that has “the family as its main focus” (Bonin 2010).

The Workers’ Party’s nod toward the religious leaders and constituents can be seen as an attempt at dissuading increasing worries about potential advances in SOGI rights in the National Congress, especially after the approval of the 3rd National Human Rights Program that year. For the Workers’ Party, the nudge toward the conservative, “family values” rhetoric was a necessary and strategic move to secure Rousseff’s electoral victory and to allow the formation of a functioning government coalition after her election. However, this strategy proved to be insufficient in face of the growing alignment among religious leaders around the opposition to “gender ideology”, and their alliances with new and old right-wing actors in the country.

In addition to the tensions with religious leaders, Rousseff faced challenges related to her status as the first female Brazilian president, as well as to her past as a radical left-wing militant. Despite several attempts from the PT at “feminizing” her image through propaganda campaigns that highlighted her role as a mother, she was criticized by opposition figures as a ruthless bureaucrat who had risen to power due to her proximity to Lula. Moreover, Rousseff’s past as a former member of the *Comando de Libertação Nacional* (National Liberation Committee, Colina) guerilla group during the military dictatorship further contributed to her masculinized image, as well as put her administration in clear opposition to the interests of old-school members of the Armed Forces.

The antagonism between Rousseff and figures of the Armed Forces was deepened in 2012, when Rousseff appointed members to direct a truth commission to unveil the crimes committed during the dictatorship era. The establishment of the commission, spearheaded by

the 3rd National Human Rights Program from 2010, which recognized the right to memory as a human right and set guidelines to the creation of a truth commission by the National Congress. Nevertheless, the commission and its findings were largely attributed to Rousseff's term in power, which only contributed to animate a dormant opposition that was nostalgic of the years of repression.

2. The mainstreaming of anti-gender rhetoric

In 2011, two important events fueled the rise of new and old conservative actors in national politics. The first one, in May of that year, was the Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage, which further animated the anti-SOGI opposition and the religious right in Congress. In its ruling ADI 4.277, the Supreme Court decided in favor of the constitutionality of gay marriage, which had been already proposed in several congressional bills since 1995⁶, and that would continue to be the subject of future legislative projects. The second event was the publication of the School Without Homophobia educational material, part of the program of the same name that had been launched in 2007 following recommendations from the Brazil Without Homophobia project.

While the legalization of gay marriage was felt as a hard blow to religious conservatives, the successful backlash against the School Without Homophobia program animated an incipient anti-gender mobilization in the country. The material, crafted by civil

⁶ Previous attempts at legislating homosexual civil unions included: the 1995 Registered Civil Partnership Bill (PL 1151), the 2011 Homosexual Marriage Senate (PLS 612), both authored by congress member Marta Suplicy, from the Workers Party. Bill 1151 was withdrawn from the agenda in 2001 and PLS 612 was shelved in 2018 (Fundação FHC 2021).

society organizations and published after a national survey on homophobia in schools in 11 state capitals, prescribed a series of anti-homophobia activities in public schools. The initiative quickly labeled as “gay kit” by prominent conservative media figures such as then-congressman Jair Bolsonaro, who accused the new material of “stimulating homosexuality and promiscuity” to six-year old children as part of his bid to the leadership of the Chamber of Deputies that year (G1 2011). As a result of the backlash, President Rousseff cancelled the distribution of the material, citing that she did not think it contributed to the combat against homophobic violence, and stating that the government should not “advertise sexual options” (Flor 2011).

The discursive strategy based on the image of the child in danger, which is at the heart of anti-gender ideology, (Graff and Korolczuk 2022) proved to be highly successful in the early 2010s in Brazil, paving the way for anti-gender language to enter the political mainstream. Speeches from congressional representatives against SOGI rights spiked in 2011, when two notable bills were often discussed: the first one, a new proposal dubbed the “gay cure” bill (PDC 234/2011), that sought to reverse the 1999 Council of Psychology resolution prohibiting therapy treatment for homosexuality, and the second one, the anti-homophobia bill from 2006 (Lacerda 2019, 69). From 2006 (the year when the anti-homophobia bill passed in the Chamber of Deputies) to 2010, the proposal had been addressed in 15 speeches, whereas solely in 2011, 25 speeches mentioned it – an increase of 66 per cent (Lacerda 2019, 69).

In sum, Dilma Rousseff’s administration was since its early days marked by a growing opposition from an emerging anti-gender coalition, triggered in part by the uneasiness in which religious leaders related to the figure of the new president, but also prompted by the increased salience of SOGI rights in politics and civil society. Until that year, anti-LGBTQ

campaigns relied on a series of different but similar frames to refer to accuse their opponents of acting with ill intentions: “gay-kit”, “gay-kit”, “gay propaganda”, “gay apology”, “gay lobby”, “gay dictatorship”, “gayism”, “feminazi”, “pro-gay fanaticism”, “heterophobia”, “gay agenda”, “anti-family agenda” and “anti-human ideology” were some of these variations (Junqueira 2018). In August of 2011, however, religious leaders started to converge around the expression “gender ideology” (Junqueira 2018), which provided them a symbolic glue (Kováts, and Põim 2015; Kováts 2017) (Kováts, and Põim 2015; Kováts 2017) and offered them broader opportunities for alliances.

3. Evangelicals lead the way

In 2012, a group of Evangelical jurists created the National Association of Evangelical Jurists (ANAJURE) as a response to advances in SOGI rights in the previous years. Following in the footsteps of preexisting Evangelical and Catholic judicial organizations that fought against abortion and SOGI rights, ANAJURE incorporated the Catholic political agenda against gender and added to it by including demands for the protection of religious freedom – believed to be under attack by SOGI rights movements –, as well as freedom of worship and speech (De Abreu 2023, 55). Importantly, ANAJURE was the first of its kind in Brazil: although religious freedom had been defended by Evangelical denominations and their jurists before, there was no record of legal practitioners mobilizing around an Evangelical identity before (De Abreu 2023, 55).

The creation of ANAJURE in 2012 reflected the growing power of organization and mobilization of the Brazilian Christian Right, but it also showed that efforts against SOGI

rights were being coordinated transnationally. In Latin America, ANAJURE maintains links with the Uruguayan *Federación Interamericana de Juristas Cristianos* (Inter-American Federation of Christian Jurists, FIAJC), founded in 2001 (De Abreu 2023, 56). Additionally, some of ANAJURE's members include representatives of similar religious organizations from other countries who also "share the theme of defending religious freedom and are interested in the debate around human rights" (De Abreu 2023, 56). Through these transnational Christian anti-gender networks, Evangelical lawyers and activists from Brazil have shared experiences and strategies – such as serving as *amicus curiae* in public hearings, and promoting litigation training for its activists – that have shaped anti-gender activism in Brazil ever since.

In March of 2013, Brazilian women's and LGBTQ rights defenders throughout the country were caught by surprise by the election of Evangelical pastor Marco Feliciano as the president of the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities of the Chamber of Deputies. The election of Feliciano, known for his negative remarks about homosexuality and his defense of conversion therapy – labeled "gay cure" –, sparked mass protests in Brazil and abroad (UOL 2013; Neher 2013). This was, according to some of the interviewees, a key turning point in the trajectory of SOGI rights in the country that showed how powerful the religious-based anti-gender opposition had become. According to Melissa Neves, the issue of gender gained momentum in the lower house of Congress after Marco Feliciano's election in 2013. "Before then, gender had received very limited and isolated mentions, mainly from Catholics." For her, 2013 marked the moment in which "the right started occupying public spaces."

The election of Feliciano to head the Human Rights and Minorities Commission in 2013 was made possible by the growing number of elected representatives from his party at the time, *Partido Social Cristão* (Social Christian Party, PSC), but it was also facilitated by a lack of effective opposition by left-wing parties. The choice of presidents and members of congressional commissions obeys a majoritarian logic according to which the representatives from the largest political parties – that is, parties with the largest number of elected representatives – are given the prerogative to choose the commissions they would like to join – as members or as presidents – before members of smaller parties. Additionally, the number of seats that each party is allowed to hold in each congressional commission is proportional to the size of the party. As a result, larger parties – the ones which elected a large number of representatives in that election season – take more space compared to smaller parties.

According to Juliana Brito, who has worked as a legislative analyst for the Chamber of Deputies since 2017, political parties clash around the control and the leadership of the commissions with the highest budget, and those that offer representatives more opportunities of visibility – which can be potentially translated into votes in the following elections. However, membership in these commissions is not equally important for all political parties, since left-wing parties are, according to Brito, pressured by their constituents to be active in commissions related to human rights and social justice. Accordingly, Feliciano's election showed that Evangelicals were expanding their political power not only by publicizing anti-gender talking points but also through concerted political action at the National Congress. At the same time, it also signaled to voters human rights were, at that moment, not a priority for the Workers Party, which was “heavily criticized for letting go of the commission”, according to Brito.

4. The threat of “gender ideology”

In Brazil, legislative debates around the National Education Plan (NEP) cemented anti-gender alliances in Congress and beyond. Discussions around the Plan, which establishes guidelines for education policy for ten-year periods, offered an important space for the dissemination of anti-gender discourse and for the formation of alliances among religious representatives, and between them and non-religious actors. In the period between 2010 – when the Plan was first introduced in Congress by the Executive – and 2014 – when it became law –, discussions about gender and sexuality in public schools allowed right-wing congress members and religious civil society leaders to broadcast their anti-gender rhetoric to a national audience.

Ultimately, the 2010-2014 NEP debates resulted in two important victories by organized anti-gender actors: the suppression of mentions of “gender” in the final document, and the popularization of the expression “gender ideology” in Congress and among voters. In September of 2013, the expression “gender ideology” was reintroduced in the lower house of Congress by federal deputy and Evangelical Pastor Eurico, who argued in a speech that the concepts of “gender”, “gender identity”, and “sexual orientation” were underlined by an ideology that sought to eliminate sex-based differences between humans (Lacerda 2019, 72).

The use of the expression “gender ideology” in the Brazilian congress by Evangelical figures such as Pastor Eurico demonstrates the power of this construct in acting as a symbolic glue (Kováts 2017; Kováts, and Põim 2015) binding Catholics and Evangelicals. In his speech against what he describes as a hidden infiltration of gender ideology in congressional bills

(Lacerda 2019, 72), Pastor Eurico borrows the logic of early Vatican texts, also evoked by intellectuals such as Dale O’Leary and Gabrielle Kuby. Such logic is also raised by Sandra Melo, who in her interview argued that religious congress members “can clearly see through intellectual hoaxes embedded in concepts such as ‘gender’ and ‘intersectionality’”. Melo further confirmed that the Evangelical caucus was highly mobilized by the introduction of the National Education Plan, and that they acted to prevent the inclusion of “gender” in “all education plans” during the period.

The disputes around the inclusion of themes of gender and sexuality in the National Education Plan also brought closer together elected representatives, often right-wing Christians, and conservative civil society organizations, such as SWP. As debates on state and municipal education plans followed from the national debate, legislative bodies at different levels became spaces where a more or less coherent form of pro-family activism defended that Christian – or traditional – values represented the majority of the population and, therefore, should prevail. For these actors, the traditional family was the most effective mechanism at preventing gender-based violence, poverty, teenage pregnancy, among other social problems (Lacerda 2019, 93).

From 2013 on, the defense of traditional gender roles and the nuclear family would unite an increasingly larger number conservative religious representatives and members of the civil society, prompting the creation of several legislative initiatives. In 2013, an Evangelical Right lower house deputy presented a bill, labeled the Family Statute, that provided a legal definition of family that excluded same-sex unions. The bill, which would only be debated two years later, was highly praised by Evangelical representatives, and it was presented again in 2015 by a Catholic representative that slightly altered its content by suppressing the explicit

prohibition of adoption by same-sex couples and adding a provision that considered it was the shared responsibility by the state and society to protect the right to life from conception (Lacerda 2019, 94).

In 2014, Flávio Bolsonaro, Jair Bolsonaro's eldest son who was, at the time, a state deputy in Rio de Janeiro, asked the leader of the School Without Party movement, Miguel Nagib, to formulate a bill summarizing the movements' demands to be introduced at the state assembly (M. D. D. C. Machado 2020, 101) The result of this cooperation was the online publication of a bill proposal that created a SWP program which served as a template of future legislative initiatives at the three levels of legislative power – federal, state, and municipal (M. D. D. C. Machado 2020, 101). In the following years, several bills based on the SWP program would be introduced in Rio de Janeiro and at the National Congress, often by Evangelical representatives.

5. “In the name of the family”: Rousseff's impeachment

In 2013, a series of mass demonstrations erupted in the streets of nearly all of Brazil's major cities. Coordinated over social media, these mobilizations quickly expanded from local protests against the rising cost of transportation in the city of São Paulo to massive demonstrations animated by a loose set of anti-government demands that contributed to the growing polarization of public opinion (Miskolci and Balieiro 2023, 483). The theme of corruption was especially salient during that time, as in December 2012 the Supreme Court had issued rulings on the *Mensalão* scandal, a series of corruption cases initially exposed in

2006 that tarnished the image of the Workers Party in the country.⁷ However, the June 2013 demonstrations were more than a Brazilian phenomenon. In addition to their similarities to mass uprisings such as those of the Arab Spring (Bevins 2023), these protests also offered a ripe opportunity for internationally-connected right-wing organizations to intensify their fight against leftism in the country.

The social unrest unleashed with the June 2013 demonstrations was evidence that there was serious potential for popular mobilization in Brazilian society. At the same time the domestic opposition to the Workers' Party grew, an array of pro-market institutions, think tanks, and youth groups also expanded its presence and influence in the country. Many of these organizations were connected to the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, now known as Atlas Network, a U.S.-based, transnational network of pro-neoliberalism think tanks founded in 1981 (Fang 2017). For domestic and international right-wing organizations, the crumbling of the Workers' Party popularity and coalitions announced a broader realignment in the region that could mean the end of the “pink tide” era (Fang 2017). With the support from the Atlas Network, not only the number of Brazilian pro-market think tanks multiplied in the early 2010s, but their influence in public opinion increased through anti-left campaigns in social media (Fang 2017). Among these campaigns, those that relied on anti-gender discourse were especially effective in mobilizing public opinion.

Among the many new right-wing, libertarian organizations created at this time was *Movimento Brasil Livre* (Free Brazil Movement, or MBL), which would be central to the creation and popularization of anti-gender campaigns in Brazil. Originally a pro-market youth

⁷ *Mensalão*, or “allowance”, was “an alleged corruption scheme to buy Congressional votes to support proposals of the Lula government” (Miskolci and Balieiro 2023, 484).

group funded and trained by Atlas Network and the U.S. conservative non-profit Students For Liberty (Amaral 2015) MBL was established in 2014 and quickly grew in number of associates and in political influence – largely due to its aggressive anti-left activism that heavily relies on anti-gender rhetoric. In the following years, MBL would grow to establish chapters across the country, elect representatives at local and national levels, and to play a central role in Rousseff’s impeachment. Eleven years after its creation, in 2025, MBL would give rise to *Partido Missão* (Mission Party), its own political party.

Back in 2014, one year after the June protests, Brazil faced an economic recession that further fueled popular discontent about the Rousseff administration. To make matters worse for the Workers’ Party, a federal police investigation nicknamed Operation Car Wash (*Operação Lava-Jato*) began to uncover several corruption scandals related to some of its key figures, leading to a deeply divided electorate in the 2014 presidential election. Although Rousseff was reelected that year, her popularity had declined over the years and her administration faced multiple challenges coming from allies in the Congress and well as from opposition parties, who contested the election results.

In 2016, amid growing charges of corruption, political rivalries, and a formal accusation of mismanagement of public funds, Dilma Rousseff was impeached in a widely broadcasted trial that further polarized the country and that increased the visibility of anti-gender discourse. As representatives cast their votes in front of cameras during the televised session that resulted in the approval of Rousseff’s impeachment at the Chamber of Deputies, mentions to “God” and “family” were frequent, as well as tributes to family members. Among representatives who voted in favor of the ousting of the president, 35.1% invoked their own family members in their vote justifications, and 8.7% invoked the institution of family, a

contrast with 4.4% and 2.9% among representatives who opposed the impeachment (Prandi and Carneiro 2018, 14). Moreover, 93.8% of the members of the Evangelical caucus voted in favor of impeaching Rousseff, while the percentage was 67.7% for non-Evangelical representatives (Prandi and Carneiro 2018, 18). It was clear that the “family values” frame had been successfully mainstreamed in Brazilian politics.

Over the hours during which hundreds of representatives justified their votes on live TV, one congressman received special attention: Jair Bolsonaro. In his speech in support of Rousseff’s impeachment, federal deputy Jair Bolsonaro dedicated his vote to Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, a notorious dictatorship-era Army colonel known for torturing political prisoners such as Rousseff herself. As we have seen, Bolsonaro’s praise of the violent repression of the dictatorship years was not news, having himself voiced multiple times his opposition to the truth commission, concluded in 2014. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro’s transgressive praising of Ustra in such a widely broadcast event illustrated the ongoing process of mainstreaming of right-wing populism in the country and offered him the opportunity to stand out as a fearless, contrarian leader.

Three years after Rousseff’s impeachment, in July 2019, an extensive journalistic investigation based on leaked documents conducted by The Intercept and several other news outlets would expose Operation Carwash as a politically motivated and corrupt endeavor led by the former federal judge and then-Justice Minister Sérgio Moro. As revealed by a series of leaked documents and conversations between the judge and the case prosecutors, the operation acted to cripple the power of the Workers’ Party and to imprison the former president Lula da Silva, a goal that was realized in April 2018, in the midst of a presidential campaign season in which Lula was the top contender. In November of 2019, Lula was released after being

imprisoned for 580 days. The accusations against him and Rousseff were later revoked by the Supreme Court, but the reputation of the Workers' Party would remain tainted ever since.

6. The Temer years (2016 - 2018)

Rousseff's impeachment marked the end of the Workers' Party leadership in the country after 13 years. Rising after Rousseff's fall was her former vice-president Michel Temer, an experienced center-right politician who favored neoliberal reforms and austerity measures. Unsurprisingly, Temer's administration faced strong opposition from left-leaning parties that argued the impeachment process was the result of a broad alliance against the Workers Party and not motivated by factual evidence of misconduct from the president. As a result of the political turmoil and the rearrangement of political coalitions that led to Rousseff's impeachment, Brazilian democracy did not appear as solid as it did a decade before.

In 2016, V-Dem decreased the classification of Brazil's electoral democracy index from 1 to 0.75, but the country was still considered an electoral democracy (Coppedge et al. 2025). During the next two years, the political landscape of the country would be marked by an unpopular president and the expansion of far-right activism through the empowerment of organizations such as MBL. Between 2016 and 2018, "gender ideology" and anti-gender rhetoric became more popular in Congress, in the media, and in civil society. However, at the same time pro-SOGI laws were staunchly resisted in Congress, the federal government did not promote significant policy changes in this realm, as this was not a priority for the short-lived Temer administration.

Meanwhile, anti-gender discourse gained momentum and increased its popularity in public opinion, at the time dominated by concerns with corruption-related themes. For scholars such as Miskolci and Balieiro (2023), the destitution of Rousseff in 2016 marked the moralization of politics in Brazil. According to the authors, it was during this period that Brazilian politics were reduced to a manichean battle between the corrupt left and the anti-corruption heroes on the right (Miskolci and Balieiro 2023, 487).

Similarly to what was happening in Europe and in other Latin American countries at the time, anti-gender campaigns in Brazil sought to link their messages to pressing popular concerns. In Brazil's case, the main concern at the time was political corruption, a theme highly salient in the mainstream media due to the unfolding of the Car Wash Operation and its related investigations. Therefore, it was only natural that campaigns against SOGI rights drew from social anxiety over economic recession and the pervasiveness of corruption in the country to scapegoat SOGI minorities. Due to the popularity of "gender ideology", attacks against transgender people was a logical strategy for those who aspired to political relevance and power.

7. Opportunistic synergies and the rise of the "outsider" candidate

Nowhere was the opportunistic facet of anti-gender campaigns more evident than among the ranks of MBL, which in the previous years had savvily managed to direct much of the outrage from the June 2013 protests against the Workers' Party and its welfare policies (Fang 2017). With Rousseff's out of the way, the millennial activists of MBL turned to the next target: gender ideology. In September 2017, the organization led an online campaign

against the art exhibition *Queermuseu* in the city of Porto Alegre, which included artworks with religious symbols, sexually explicit images, and representations of diverse forms of gender and sexuality, including of gay and transgender children. Although a local event, the exhibition quickly made national news as the MBL-coordinated campaign accused the sponsoring institution, the bank Santander, of being pro-pedophilia, pro-zoophilia, and anti-Christian, and called for a boycott of its services. With the support from religious groups and of Porto Alegre's MBL-supported mayor, the campaign against *Queermuseu* resulted in the cancellation of the exhibition (Sperb 2017).

In November of the same year, protests against the visit from U.S. scholar Judith Butler to São Paulo marked the strengthening of the moral panic around “gender” in the country. Butler, who had flown to the country as a guest lecturer for an event about democracy, was received by a small crowd of angry protesters who held signs and burned an effigy with the face of the author of *Gender Trouble* (1990). She was later harassed and filmed at the airport on her way out of the country (Finco 2017). Because Butler is considered by many Brazilian anti-gender activists to be the “mother of gender ideology”, her visit provided an unparalleled opportunity for action. In addition to the protests on the day of the event, the announcement of Butler's visit had also prompted the creation of an online petition against her presence in the country with more than 300,000 signatures on the Spanish platform CitizenGo, which is part of the ecosystem of the far-right Catholic group *Hazte Oir*, founded in 2001 and established in Brazil in 2016 (Finco 2017; Datta 2021; Dip et al. 2021).

For anti-gender actors in Brazil and beyond, the aggressive demonstrations against Butler's visit offered further proof that the threat of “gender ideology” had enough power of mobilization to connect people online and bring them to the streets. This offered interesting

opportunities for foreign organizations such as *Hazte Oir*, which had been active in organizing anti-gender campaigns and since its founding in 2001 in Madrid. Over the years, *Hazte Oir* created multiple, different branded offshoots to focus on specific areas, such as abortion – *Derecho a Vivir*, or Right to Live – and social mobilization – the aforementioned CitizenGo (Datta 2021). Earlier in 2017, the organization had made international headlines with its anti-transgender buses on the streets of Madrid, a campaign that became known as “the bus of hatred” and that was later banned due to its discriminatory content (Reuters 2017). Years later, in 2021, a WikiLeaks document would reveal that Brazilians were among the largest donors to the Spanish organization (Dip et al. 2021).

Amid the consolidation of a moral panic around “gender”, Bolsonaro’s aggressive anti-LGBTQ rhetoric served to portray him as a moral corrective to the immorality attributed to the left (Miskolci and Balieiro 2023, 487). By 2016, the former Army captain Jair Bolsonaro was already a known figure in Brazilian politics as a low-ranking member of the Chamber of deputies. He had started his political career 1988 as an elected councilman in Rio de Janeiro, and two years later, he was elected as a federal deputy, a position he would hold for the next twenty-eight years. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Bolsonaro performed well in local and state elections due to his pro-military lobby and increasingly due to voters who liked his “hard on crime” stance (Lapper 2021, 26).

Like other right-wing populist around the world, Bolsonaro successfully portrayed himself as an outsider of mainstream politics. Despite occasionally making national news due to his praising of the military dictatorship as well as misogynistic and homophobic statements in his many participations in entertainment TV shows, Bolsonaro was not considered a relevant political player by his peers in Congress. During his time as a congressman, he had

little influence and was rarely responsible for legislative initiatives and his political ideas were regarded as unserious and anachronistic (Lapper 2021, 26).

The expansion of Bolsonaro's influence in politics happened in the context of the strengthening of the Christian Right in Congress and the multiplication of conservative civil society organizations in the 2010s, described earlier in this chapter. The approximation between the Catholic Bolsonaro and Evangelical politicians and voters was gradual and likely linked to events in his personal life, such as his marriage to his wife Michelle Bolsonaro, an Evangelical, in 2007, and the fact that his three older sons are members of the Baptist church (M. D. D. C. Machado 2020, 100). In 2016, amid the Rousseff impeachment proceedings in the Senate, Bolsonaro had been baptized by Evangelical pastor and congressman Everaldo in the waters of the Jordan river, in Israel, in what was possibly an effort to earn the sympathy of Evangelical leaders and voters (M. D. D. C. Machado 2020, 104).

Scholars such as Machado (2020, 100) argue that Bolsonaro saw an opportunity for increasing his visibility in Congress and in the media by joining the Christian Right through their shared opposition to SOGI rights demands. As the opposition to Rousseff grew during her second administration, so did his participation in anti-PT discourse and mobilization. (M. D. D. C. Machado 2020, 100) According to Lacerda's (2019, 187) systematic analysis of Bolsonaro's speeches in the lower house between 2000 and 2018, it was between 2011 and 2014 that the congressman started to emphasize issues related to morality and sexuality. It was also during the same period that the electoral performance of the former army captain improved dramatically: if in 2010 he had obtained 120,646 votes, an increase of 21% compared to the previous election four years before, in 2014 Bolsonaro received 646,572 votes, an increase of 436% compared to 2010. (Lacerda 2019, 187)

8. The far-right mainstreamed

By 2018, there was a clear strategic value for right-leaning politicians to adopt a populist anti-gender rhetoric, and an additional incentive for doing so through appeals to Christian values. The growing number of Evangelical churches and the incredibly wide reach of their messages, disseminated through capillary networks throughout the country, offered a seductive opportunity to current and aspiring politicians. Right-wing populists such as Bolsonaro and his family expanded their influence and political capital by emphasizing generic appeals to Christian values and attacks on LGBTQ people as part of their platform.

The common ground between Bolsonaro's right-wing populism and the Christian Right's anti-gender ideology offered mutual benefits for both parties: On one hand, Bolsonaro and his family expanded their influence and political capital by emphasizing generic appeals to Christian values and attacks on LGBTQ people as part of their platform. On the other hand, Christian Right leaders helped to elect a candidate that, once in power, would heavily favor their demands and place members of their organizations and congregations within the state apparatus. It was a clear case of what Graff and Korolczuk (2022, 2025) identified as an opportunistic synergy.

D. The Bolsonaro years: the far-right in power (2019 - 2022)

On January 1st, 2019, the newly-elected Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro declared in his inauguration speech that his administration would “unite the people, cherish the family,

respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, fight gender ideology and preserve our values” (UOL Notícias 2019). The reference to “gender ideology”, unprecedented in a speech of its kind in the country, continued his campaign strategy of deploying anti-gender rhetoric to mobilize the more conservative and religious voters.

Bolsonaro’s years in power were marked by the erosion of Brazilian democracy, the further empowerment of the Christian Right, transgressive populism, and explicit efforts at building alliances with right-wing authoritarians around the world. In the period of January 2019 to December 2022, V-Dem’s liberal democracy index for the country decreased from 0.75 (minimally democratic) to 0.50 (ambivalent), and the liberal component index decreased from 1 (democratic) to 0.75 (minimally democratic) (Coppedge et al. 2025). In this context, participation opportunities for pro-SOGI rights civil society were reduced, and budget cuts to health and education programs were sometimes justified – explicit or implicit – by anti-gender rhetoric. Nevertheless, in June of 2019 the Brazilian Supreme Court ruled in favor of the criminalization of homophobia and transphobia (Supremo Tribunal Federal 2019), a decision that presaged the antagonism between the executive and judiciary branches that would characterize the next four years.

1. Populism, democracy erosion, and international ties

From its first days, the Bolsonaro administration sought to institutionalize anti-gender discourse, empower the Christian Right in Congress and in civil society, and roll back protections for LGBTQ people. However, despite turning anti-gender attacks into official state policy (Maracci and Prado 2022), the Bolsonaro administration was ultimately unsuccessful

at reversing SOGI-related protections advanced in previous decades. This was due to a mix of institutional limitations, the engaged opposition from left-wing representatives in Congress, as well as the fact that the advances in these rights over the years had been obtained mainly through judicial means. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro's authoritarian populism eroded official mechanisms of participation for SOGI rights groups, and further opened the doors for anti-gender activism in civil society and in Congress, which further decreased possibilities for the legal codification of SOGI-based protections.

Upon his inauguration, Bolsonaro renamed the existing Ministry of Human Rights, which then became the Ministry of the Woman, Family and Human Rights (MWFHR), a change that announced an "epistemic shift in the understanding of the field of human rights itself" (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1376). To lead the new Ministry, he chose pastor, lawyer and ANAJURE founder Damares Alves, the only woman in the original composition of his cabinet.

Alves' tenure introduced an explicit focus on the traditional family into the ministry, Alves implemented two important institutional changes: the creation of the National Secretariat for the Family and the transformation of the Undersecretariat for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights into the National Secretariat for Global Protection (Maracci and Prado 2022), a change that sought to establish the broadest possible scope for the protection of people (Governo Federal 2019). These changes within the executive branch attracted ultraconservative and traditionalist political forces to the Ministry as the new Secretariat disseminated anti-gender ideas in its materials, distance learning courses, and through its partnerships with mayorships and NGOs (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1378).

One of the ways in which anti-gender campaigns infiltrated the new ministry was through a coalition with conservative research groups that sought to legitimize the policy focus on the traditional family through pseudoscientific research. For example, in 2019 the ministry started to host pro-conversion therapy groups, despite the existence of the aforementioned National Psychology Council resolution of 1999 that had already banned such practices (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1377). In 2020, it created the National Observatory of the Family, with the goals of encouraging “the development of studies and research related to the theme of the family”, and of subsidizing family policies and “scientific knowledge about the family in Brazil and worldwide” (Ministério dos Direitos Humanos e da Cidadania 2021).

The alliance between the executive and anti-gender actors was made explicit through the nomination of notorious anti-abortion lawyer and Opus Dei member Angela Gandra as Secretary of Family at the Ministry of the Woman (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1376). Gandra, a leading Brazilian voice in transnational anti-gender networks, made use of her new status to connect with likeminded diplomats, politicians, and lawmakers abroad in events such as the 2021 Prayer Breakfast in Kyiv (Chade 2025). In 2022, Gandra was among a group of 19 Brazilian specialists listed as *amici curiae* in the United States Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that revoked the constitutional right to abortion in the country (Medeiros 2022).

Under Alves’ leadership, the Ministry of the Woman’s approach to SOGI issues was mainly guided by the idea that LGBTQ people should receive some protections, but not be granted rights as minorities (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1379). For example, the ministry’s LGBT Directorate, headed by Mariana Reidel, a transgender activist, kept its name and leadership until 2022, when it was turned into the Department for the Protection of the Rights

of Social Minorities and Populations at Risk (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1377). On the other hand, the rejection of “gender” was clear from the beginning. For example, during the 2020 Mercosul’s Human Rights High Authority meeting in Argentina, the LGBT Directorate refused to sign a document that included “gender identity”, “gender expression” and “hate crimes” among the items to be considered within the scope of human rights of the signatory countries (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1377).

The increased connection between anti-gender actors in Brazil and abroad during the Bolsonaro years went hand in hand with the reduction of institutional spaces for pro-SOGI rights civil society participation. As opportunities opened up for conservative activists and policymakers to be involved in the public administration, funding for welfare policies was diverted away from minorities. For example, in January 2019, the newly-appointed Minister of Education, Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez, extinguished a national secretary that was responsible for creating education policies related to human rights, racial and sexual diversity (Saldaña 2019). A few months later, a presidential decree revoked the National Social Participation Policy, ending important official mechanisms of civil society participation, such as the National Council for Combating LGBTQIA+ Discrimination (*Conselho Nacional de Combate à Discriminação LGBTQIA+*) (Jucá 2019).

Over the next years, the budget of the Ministry of Health was drastically reduced and its HIV/STI prevention program – whose materials were withdrawn as they were deemed offensive to families –, and reduced public funding for federal universities, especially in Social Science departments (Bozon 2024, 159). Moreover, Bolsonaro’s administration restricted the budget of research funding agencies, especially grants for doctoral students and for international mobility programs (Bozon 2024, 159). These attacks on higher education, often

centered at defunding Gender Studies departments (Green 2024, 69) contributed to disseminate fear among scholars and public school teachers.

According to Sofia Prado, scholar of Education who researches anti-gender movements in Brazil, the dissemination of fear among scholars and educators is “one of the most relevant gains by the anti-gender movement” in the country. In addition to creating a climate of fear, online and in-person anti-gender actions, such as the organized harassment of teachers, is coordinated by a mix of civil society organizations – such as MBL but also local associations of concerned parents – with the support of local politicians with whom members of these organizations have a direct connection.

Prado explains that such groups use social media to “build community and to coordinate interventions”, such as protests in front of schools. This type of mobilization not only causes educators of all levels to be wary of their words in the classroom and censor themselves, but it also increases the support from this sector to more conservative policies that promise a safer school environment. One of these policies was the National Civil-Military School Program (*Programa Nacional de Escolas Cívico-Militares*, Pecim), created by Bolsonaro’s Ministry of Education in 2019 with the goal of increasing the number of public schools that are partly administered by the Military Police or the Armed Forces. By 2023, when the program was canceled by Lula, 213 schools had joined the initiative (Pinotti and Rittner 2023).

2. The empowerment of the Christian Right

Under Bolsonaro, the Brazilian Christian Right had a leading role inside the administration and in the coordination of anti-SOGI forces in Congress. Once in power, Bolsonaro appointed conservative and religious leaders to key positions in the state apparatus. In addition to Damares Alves, he appointed Ernesto Araújo, an unknown diplomat and Olavo de Carvalho follower, to lead the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the aforementioned Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez to head the Ministry of Education. Both Araújo and Vélez, as well as Abraham Weintraub, who would succeed Vélez, were recommended by Carvalho himself. Together, these ministries became “the ideological core of Bolsonaro’s administration”, pushing forward a political project based on a mix of reactionary nationalism, opposition to “gender ideology” and globalism and the defense of ‘Christian/conservative’ values” (da Costa Santos 2025, 10). From the days of Bolsonaro’s campaign until his passing in January 2022, Carvalho would remain as a sort of informal advisor to some members of the former president’s coalition (Teitelbaum 2021).

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic initiated a period of increased political instability due to conflicts between the federal administration – which opposed lockdown measures and downplayed the effectiveness of the vaccines –, states’ governments, and the Supreme Court. Although the Covid-19 pandemic had devastating effects in Brazil with the death of more than 700,000 people, this period also presented Evangelical leaders and organizations an opportunity to raise their banner in defense of religious freedom, which was now being used to contest lockdown measures (Carranza and Rosado-Nunes 2024). This allowed Evangelical legal organizations, such as ANAJURE, to lobby parliamentarians and senior government officials, and to rally the religious media around campaigns in defense of religious freedom, including those against LGBTQ people (Carranza and Rosado-Nunes 2024, 7–8).

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic fueled an anti-intellectual backlash that is an important element of contemporary right-wing populism around the world. In Brazil, the anti-intellectualism of this period added to previous attacks on public education. As a result, in 2020 there was an uptick in legislative bills that proposed the criminalization of “gender ideology” in public schools and the prohibition of the participation of transgender people in sports competitions (Maracci and Prado 2022, 1377). At the National Congress, right-wing representatives sought to seize the momentum to further restrict abortion rights (*Estatuto do Nascituro, Unborn Child Statute*) and to narrow the definition of family (*Estatuto da Família, Family Statute*).

Despite such initiatives, the Christian Right was unable to pass anti-“gender ideology” bills during the Bolsonaro years. This was in no small part due to institutional factors, such as the sluggish nature of the legislative process, and the presidential coalition system, mentioned previously. Elected by a small party (Social Liberty Party), Bolsonaro struggled to build and consolidate a strong coalition in the National Congress in his first years, often relying on unstable alliances with the leaders of the so-called *centrão*, a center-right supra-party bloc that has supported all presidents since re-democratization in 1985 (da Costa Santos 2025, 11).

Another important institutional factor that explains the legislative deadlock around SOGI rights during that time was the role of the Supreme Court in resisting rights regression and limiting executive power outreach. Nevertheless, the court continued to be an important space of dispute for SOGI rights and for anti-gender mobilization from Catholic and Evangelical organizations such as ANAJURE. Furthermore, the conflict between the executive and judiciary branches during this period ignited a *bolsonarista* campaign against

the Supreme Court that has since worked to animate his supporters and to align – somewhat precariously – Bolsonaro’s interests to those of the global far-right, as we will see.

3. Transnational ties and coup attempt

Under Bolsonaro, Brazilian diplomats, right-wing parties and anti-gender groups deepened their ties to figures and institutions of the global far-right. At the international level, ideological affinities among Bolsonaro’s Brazil and other countries governed by right-wing populists – such as Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, Andrzej Duda’s Poland, and Donald Trump’s United States – resulted in concerted diplomatic action in some international organizations (da Costa Santos 2025, 12). One example of this was the 2020 Geneva Consensus Declaration, a document signed by 32 countries that condemned abortion and exalted the defense of the family (da Costa Santos 2025, 12).

Adding to the institutional channels connecting Brazil to the global far-right, an unofficial type of diplomacy led by Eduardo Bolsonaro, one of Jair Bolsonaro’s four sons, has further integrated Brazilian far-right groups and leaders to their international counterparts. At the same time he held an official position as a congressman during his father’s administration, Eduardo engaged in forging alliances between Brazilians and far-right intellectuals and politicians such as Steve Bannon and Donald Trump Jr. Such approximation, in addition to leading to the creation of networking events for conservatives – such as Brazilian editions of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) since 2019 – also helped to consolidate an aggressive *Bolsonarista* rhetoric against the Supreme Court and the electoral process that bears strong similarities to that of Donald Trump in the United States.

Amid the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, new corruption scandals, and a growing tension between the presidency and the Supreme Court, Jair Bolsonaro and his allies gradually relied less on anti-gender moral panic and more on the contestation of rule of law. In the election year of 2022, right-wing leaders sought to direct popular anger and frustration not against corruption or “gender ideology”, as they once did, but towards contesting the integrity of the electoral system. Unlike the previous presidential election in 2018, Bolsonaristas now faced the opposition of former president Lula da Silva, who had been released from prison and was now leading the polls as a presidential candidate. Their response to this threat from the left was to discredit the electoral system as well as a series of thinly veiled threats of overthrowing the democratic order through a military-assisted coup d’état.

In November of that year, Bolsonaro’s efforts were frustrated by Lula’s victory at the polls. Although the same electoral season was largely positive for the Christian Right, with the election of several representatives, Bolsonaro’s defeat motivated a series of coordinated demonstrations that called for overturning the election results and overthrowing democracy altogether. As it would only be publicly known many months later, in the last months of his administration, Bolsonaro, his allies, and Armed Forces commanders plotted a coup d’état that would establish a state of exception in the country and guarantee their permanence in power (Ionova and Nicas 2025).

Despite the intentions of their backers, the plans for a coup were not put into practice in time to avoid the inauguration of a new president in January of 2023. Nevertheless, on January 8th, 2023, one week after Lula’s inauguration, supporters of Jair Bolsonaro reenacted their own version of the 2021 attacks to the U.S. capitol by storming into the buildings of Congress, the presidential offices and the Supreme Court in Brasilia – an event coordinated

by members of the Armed Forces and the military police. While unsuccessful at triggering the state of exception they desired, the events of January 8th showed that, forty years after the end of the military dictatorship, the threat of authoritarianism was still alive in the country.

E. Lula's comeback and the new democratic normal (2023 - present)

Since January 2023, the status of democracy and of SOGI rights in Brazil have improved, but important challenges remain. In 2023, Brazil's V-Dem liberal democracy index increased from 0.50 (ambivalent) to 0.75 (minimally democratic), and in 2024, the electoral democracy index went from 0.75 (minimally democratic) to 1 (democratic) (Coppedge et al. 2025). In 2023, a Supreme Court decision extended the legal protections against intimate partner violence granted by the Maria da Penha Law to same-sex couples and transgender people (Vivas 2025). Moreover, an increasing number of public higher education institutions have created affirmative action programs for transgender people, a trend initiated in 2018 but that until 2022 had only been adopted by a handful of Universities (Soares 2024).

After scoring a narrow electoral victory in 2022, Lula da Silva started off his third administration fostering civil society participation and adopting a pro-human rights rhetoric. Accordingly, his administration has overseen the re-creation of pro-LGBTQ policies and of official mechanisms of civil society participation that are conducive to the advancement of SOGI rights. In 2023, the National LGBTQIA+ Rights Defense Secretariat was created within the newly-reformulated Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship; and the Secretariat for Literacy and Inclusion was re-created within the Ministry of Education (Bimbati 2023).

4. Challenges old and new

Despite the optimistic outlook at the beginning of the new administration, some transgender rights advocates are worried about the possibilities of promoting long-lasting changes, which usually require codifying rights into laws. According to Lorena Figueiredo, trans rights activist and community educator at a federal clinical research institute, “Lula cannot handle everything himself.” She highlighted that the administration faces pressures due to lack of public funds for transgender-specific health services, as well as opposition from within the National Federal Health Council, which has been mobilizing against gender-affirming care for minors, a position that, in her view, is “very influenced by the [U.S. President] Trump wave”.

According to Paola Silveira, who has worked as a Senate legislative advisor for the past 11 years, these initiatives, although important, face significant institutional and political constraints. In her view, the administration’s preoccupation with future elections and with securing support in Congress limits the ability of these initiatives to promote change. Additionally, she views members of these new institutions, many of them activists, as “inexperienced in matters of public administration”. Furthermore, she argues that LGBTQ rights receive poor explicit support in the Senate, where there is only one LGBTQ representative. According to her, “no senator wants to buy into this fight” and advances have been timid and mostly made “under the public radar”.

Despite the re-creation of policies and institutions, and the 2023 Supreme Court decision, the conservative majority at the National Congress is still a considerable obstacle to be overcome for increasing protections for transgender people. Although Bolsonaro lost the

2022 election, several *Bolsonaristas* were elected as congress members and governors using his name and platform. His own party, the Liberal Party (*Partido Liberal*, PL), scored an unprecedented victory with 99 deputies and 13 senators elected to Congress, an increase of 30% and 8% respectively (Lima 2023).

Overall, the National Congress remains as a key space of dispute around gender, but LGBTQ representation has increased. In 2023, the first two transgender congress members in the country's history, Erika Hilton and Duda Salabert, took office as members of the Chamber of Deputies. In the same year, more than 200 congress members approved the re-creation of a LGBT+ Congressional caucus, after members of the Evangelical caucus proposed a bill that would criminalize same-sex marriage in the country (Ferraz and Cerqueira 2024). In 2024, Hilton and Ferraz formed a national LGBT+ caucus composed of 22 representatives at different levels (municipal, state, and federal) to counter the advances of the far-right and to support local LGBTQ campaigns (Galvani 2023). Nevertheless, mobilization by anti-gender representatives is still very active and successful at eliminating any mention of "gender" from official documents. According to Sandra Melo, conservative congress members actively monitor attempts at including LGBTQ issues in draft legislation, and are preemptively coordinating against this possibility in the upcoming discussions of the new National Education Plan, which are set to start in 2025.

In 2025, religious mobilization against "gender ideology" may not be news anymore, but anti-gender discourse is still useful for candidates to win elections and to increase their public visibility and support. One notable example of this is Nikolas Ferreira, a 29-year-old member of the Chamber of Deputies, elected in 2020. Ferreira, who comes from a family of Evangelical pastors and rose to fame as a young activist and YouTuber, has been one of the

leading public figures mobilizing against transgender rights. On March 8th, 2023, Ferreira made national headlines when he wore a blonde wig and self-declared to be a transgender woman named Nikole during his speech on the International Women's Day. At the time, his transphobic act was condemned by several public figures and authorities, and earned him a public civil action that was ultimately decided against him in April 2025.

For the National Secretary for LGBTQ Affairs, Symmy Larat, the use of transgressive anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, aided by a lack of a comprehensive legislation against SOGI-based hate speech, is still effective in creating a media platform for right-wing politicians. Likewise, for both Juliana Brito and Sandra Melo, performative actions such as the one by Ferreira in 2023 are increasingly used by far-right deputies for their own political benefit: for Brito, deputies “feel increasingly empowered to say things that were previously seen as absurd”, and that the “polarization around gender has been growing in televised discussions of proposals.” For Melo, spats between figures such as Hilton and Ferreira “feed off each other”, and should not be the focus of lawmakers’ attention.

While disputes around transgender rights often take the form of public performances tailored for social media when in front of the cameras, behind the scenes in Congress and in ministries, the dispute around these rights is much less allegorical. In the Senate, the former Ministry of Woman Damara Alves was elected president of the Senate Human Rights and Participatory Legislative commission in February 2025, a move that bears similarities to the election of Marco Feliciano to a similar commission in 2013.

As a senator, Alves continues to nurture her connections with anti-gender movements abroad by participating in international events, such as a series of talks on female leadership organized by Brazilian churches in the U.S. in February 2024 (Carvalho 2024). Additionally,

Alves is now ambassador to the new conservative civil society movement Conservative Women (*Mulheres Conservadoras*), founded in 2024 to mobilize women to “defend society against attempts at destroying the family and deconstructing the roles of women and men” and to “protect children from attacks from those who want to corrupt their innocence and purity” (*Mulheres Conservadoras* 2025). Similarly to Alves, Angela Gandra, former Secretary of State for Family Affairs continues her work in establishing connections abroad, now as a Secretary of International Relations in the state of São Paulo.

Finally, but not less importantly, the creation of organizations such as Conservative Women reflects the growth of another wing of anti-transgender mobilization in the country: one that is led by women, often but not always self-identified feminists, who oppose transgender rights in the name of the rights of “real” or “biological women”. This type of anti-transgender activism, which has grown expressively in countries such as the United Kingdom, is frequently led by TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism) groups that include female public figures, academics, influencers, politicians and lawmakers.

In Brazil, most TERF-related talking points echo traditional feminist demands connected to motherhood and rights of children, but their exclusionary rhetoric can also be used by lesbian feminists, who are nonetheless marginal to the broader women-led anti-trans activism (Benevides 2025, 118). According to Sandra Melo, who prefers to refer to pro-women initiatives in Congress as “feminine” rather than “feminist”, the use “gender” in bills and policy proposals is very upsetting because it displaces and captures female-specific demands. Similarly, MATRIA (Association of Women, Mothers and Workers of Brazil), a civil society organization created in 2023, argues in favor of sex-based women’s demands in their website (MATRIA - *Mulheres Associadas, Mães e trabalhadoras do Brasil*, n.d.).

Outside of Brazil, in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, women-led anti-trans and TERF activism has successfully used topics such as the use of public bathrooms and women's sports as efficient wedge issues to oppose LGBTQ rights. One of the organizations that have helped to build this coalition, Women's Declaration International, an international advocacy organization founded in the UK, has a website in Portuguese in which they invite donations and expressions of support from Brazilian individuals and organizations (Women's Declaration International, n.d.).

5. Perspectives for the future

Since 2023, the status of SOGI rights has generally improved in the country, despite logistic limitations and institutional pushback coming from conservative civil society organizations and an increasingly conservative National Congress. While Lula's presidency has renewed institutional channels of communication with civil society and an overall shift toward pro-human rights governance, the conservative-controlled Congress continues to obstruct deeper institutional change. For the National Secretary for the Rights of LGBTQIA+ People Symmy Larat, a combination of slow bureaucratic processes and a powerful Congress limit the administration's ability to address SOGI rights demands.

The Christian Right continues by its turn to play a major role in shaping the political landscape around transgender rights. Figures like Nikolas Ferreira, Damares Alves, and Angela Gandra remain influential voices in promoting conservative values and resisting gender-inclusive policies, both within national institutions and through international networks. Behind the scenes, Evangelical leaders such as Damares Alves and traditional

ultracatholic figures such as Angela Gandra institutionalize anti-gender agendas through congressional initiatives and international alliances. Finally, the last years have also been characterized by a growing segment of women-led activism, often aligned with TERF rhetoric, that opposes transgender rights under the banner of protecting “real” women and children, in an attempt to reproduce the success of anti-trans initiatives wrapped as pro-women elsewhere.

F. Conclusion

As expected, democratic institutions were vital for the expansion of SOGI rights protections in Brazil. During periods of democratic deepening between 2003 and 2015, the empowerment of civil society organizations through increased spaces for official participation in state institutions such as the Ministry of Health paved the way for important pro-SOGI regulatory measures, especially for transgender people. At the same time, there has been a clear tension between majoritarian and countermajoritarian processes of democracy, identified by Velasco et al. (2024, 135), ultimately showing that different elements of democracy matter differently (Davenport 2023).

The Supreme Court, while a locus of dispute between progressive and conservative judicial organizations, was essential for protecting SOGI rights against the growing influence of the Christian Right in Congress, especially during the Bolsonaro administration. This dynamic thus underscores the critical role that courts play in “protecting minority rights against popular prejudice” (Velasco et al. 2024, 136). This protective effect, derived from the logic of checks and balances that characterizes democratic regimes, points to the limited

ability of majoritarian institutions to recognize and address rights violations and inequalities when these are founded on deeply-rooted, exclusionary social norms. Accordingly, the Brazilian case illustrates the potential that majoritarian mechanisms have to inhibit rights expansion or roll back existing protections, also identified by Velasco et al. (2024, 136).

The Brazil case also suggests that authoritarian experiences in a country's past matter for rights outcomes in the present, even if indirectly. After all, elements of the authoritarian right-wing ideology that upheld the military regime until 1985 lived long after its end. "Gender ideology", for example, while popularized almost three decades after the end of the military dictatorship, was informed and shaped by earlier anticommunist frames mainstreamed during the dictatorship. Depicted as a new iteration of the communist threat, the "gender ideology" frame enabled dormant and new far-right groups to restore anti-left sentiments among conservative sectors of society.

More generally, the emergence of right-wing populism under Bolsonaro, though not fully explained by the dictatorship experience, was undoubtedly shaped by the political forces and ideas of the period. Bolsonaro's own trajectory to the presidency from the lower echelons of the Chamber of Deputies was characterized by his cartoonish defense of military repression against internal enemies and loud opposition to leftists and any kind of minority. Moreover, his political ascent partly relied on the support he received from powerful Armed Forces commanders, who benefited directly and indirectly from his administration.

In line with Brown's (2019) theory, neoliberal ideology produced in Brazil an antidemocratic culture from below that animated and legitimized far-right ideology and actors. As we saw, this process took the form of new civil society organizations, such as *Escola sem Partido* and *Movimento Brasil Livre*, that successfully converted sentiments of lost

entitlement into “righteous rage against the social inclusion and political equality of the historically excluded” (Brown 2019, 45). However, much of the sentiment mobilized by these neoliberal organizations was animated not by the deleterious consequences of neoliberal public policies of dismantling public provisions, but rather by the expansion of welfare policies of the early 2000s. That is, the antidemocratic culture that proliferated in the 2010s was not triggered by an antidemocratic form of state power from above (Brown 2019), but rather preceded it.

Fostered by civil society organizations linked to US-based right-wing libertarian networks, this antidemocratic culture shifted from its initial focus on *antipetismo* to increasingly radical ideas. In 2014, the combination of economic recession and successive political corruption scandals salient in the media added fuel to the fire by increasing popular outrage against the Workers Party and by enabling moralist interpretations of the crisis. Ultimately, this resulted in the convergence between neoliberal and anti-gender ideologies that would be translated into policy during the Bolsonaro administration.

Similarly to what happened in Europe after the start of the financial and economic crises in 2008, the translation of economic concerns into socio-cultural terms (Mudde 2019) drove an increase in popular support for the far-right in Brazil. The combination of economic recession and political crisis was a catalyst for an illiberal swing that found fertile ground due to accumulated frustrations (Snegovaya 2024). For the far-right leaders and groups emerging in that moment, embracing anti-gender campaigns was a successful strategy that ultimately paid off.

Since 2003, religious organizations have increased their influence on law and policy as well as on civil society and public opinion, thus shaping SOGI rights both directly and

indirectly. This was particularly the case for Evangelical organizations and their leaders, whose support became vital to secure votes and to form political coalitions at all levels of power as result of a growing Evangelical electorate and an increasingly politicized leadership. Nevertheless, as it happened in several countries – including in South American neighbors Peru and Colombia –, anti-gender campaigns in Brazil united Catholics and Evangelicals around a common agenda and discursive framework. Together, these religious actors successfully used the fight against “gender ideology” to contest advances in SOGI rights, and to scapegoat transgender people as threats to children, families, and cisgender women.

While anti-gender campaigns and their supporters ultimately failed to reverse existing legal SOGI-related protections in Brazil, they were successful in stalling and blocking initiatives that would have amplified existing protections or inscribed them into law. This success was largely driven by an empowered Christian Right, which deployed a series of common anti-gender frames to mobilize public opinion against SOGI rights and to have their members elected to public office. This complex pattern of influence, not entirely captured by the V-Dem measures of religious institutionalization employed in Chapter 2, shows that organized religion is not *per se* antithetical to mechanisms of liberal democracy. Instead, pluralism and democratic representation offered opportunities for religious leaders to expand their influence in politics and to increase their power to shape social norms.

G. Appendix: List of Interview subjects:

1. **Helena Moura**, scholar of gender and politics and member of the Institute of Religious Studies
2. **Melissa Neves**, researcher and technical advisor to the National Observatory of Women in Politics (ONMP) of the Chamber of Deputies.
3. **Lorena Figueiredo**, trans rights activist and community educator at a federal clinical research institute.
4. **Sofia Prado**, scholar of Education researching anti-gender movements in Brazil.
5. **Juliana Brito**, Legislative Analyst at the Women's Secretariat of the Chamber of Deputies.
6. **Paola Silveira**, Senate Legislative Advisor.
7. **Sandra Melo**, lawyer and Legal Advisor at the Women's Secretariat of the Chamber of Deputies.
8. **Symmy Larat**, National Secretary for LGBTQ Affairs

Conclusion

In the last three decades, an expanding and diverse network of ultra-conservative actors has pooled resources and built alliances across the globe towards the shared goal of defeating the “gender” menace. Mobilizing against liberal globalization while laying the foundation for an alternative form of global connectedness, anti-gender actors are best understood as a challenge to the global hegemony of liberal norms, but not of globalization itself. After all, the anti-gender movement is itself a globalized, collective enterprise that actively engages in global governance forums.

Across the world, the mobilization against “gender” is a rebellion against challenges to patriarchal social orders. For anti-gender actors, gender roles are immutable and universal, as they are part of the natural order of humanity as established by God. Men and women are thus complementary to each other, and their relationship provides the foundation of the family, which is necessary for human flourishing and development. Confronted with processes of secularization, modernization, and of SOGI rights expansion, these actors mobilize against the privatization of the family and attempt to limit further diffusion of progressive norms regarding gender and sexuality.

Determined to create an alternative framework to liberal human rights, these actors connect across borders to design and promote public campaigns that cast LGBTQ people – and transgender people especially – as products of a nefarious ideology that aims to subvert the natural order of all human societies. In this dissertation, I used mixed methods to investigate how different structural conditions and advocacy strategies shape the success of anti-transgender campaigns across countries.

This investigation, conducted in three parts, yielded two types of original evidence: one based on a statistical analysis of secondary-source data and a global sample of countries, and a second one based on a qualitative case study of Brazil in which I applied the logic of process tracing to qualitative data from interviews and secondary literature. While the quantitative part focused only on the relationship between structural conditions and rights outcomes, the qualitative part also considered how advocacy strategies interacted with such conditions in affecting the observed changes in the status of transgender rights in the country.

The most consistent finding throughout this investigation was that liberal democracy imposes obstacles for the success of anti-gender campaigns. The hypothesized negative relationship between anti-gender campaigns and liberal democratic institutions was confirmed by both quantitative and qualitative studies in the following chapters. The effect of the second structural condition (religious institutionalization), however, was only observed in the case study, and cannot be generalized. Moreover, four out of the five advocacy strategies identified in the first part of the investigation – transnational coalition building, diplomacy, alliances with right-wing populists, and scapegoating – were present in the case study of Brazil, but with different functions and degrees of importance.

In Brazil, three strategies were prominent in shaping the success of anti-gender campaigns. The first one, scapegoating, was crucial for the mainstreaming of anti-gender discourse and for increasing the popularity of right-wing populists. The second one, alliance between anti-gender actors and right-wing populists, further facilitated the dissemination of campaigns and allowed for the institutionalization of anti-gender actors through electoral and party politics, especially during the Bolsonaro administration. The third strategy, transnational coalition building, was important for the coordination of early anti-gender campaigns and as

well for the implementation of policies during the Bolsonaro years. On the other hand, diplomacy and contestation of liberal human rights were mostly confined to foreign policy but intersected with efforts of transnational coalition building that would prove to be important to informing key cadres within the Bolsonaro administration, such as Damares Alves and Angela Gandra.

Despite the global ambitions of anti-gender actors and their campaigns, the scope of the findings in this dissertation is not global. By focusing on anti-gender campaigns against transgender rights, this investigation yielded findings that related to contexts where there has been change in the status of transgender rights in recent decades. Accordingly, while anti-gender transnational coalition building and diplomacy strategies involve countries with little or no recognition of transgender rights, the focus of this investigation lies on countries where such rights have emerged in the first place. Nevertheless, the structural conditions and strategies identified in this work are still relevant factors for understanding mechanisms that enable or constrain processes of anti-gender campaigns that act preventively against the recognition of SOGI rights as forms of norm immunization (Nuñez-Mietz and García Iommi 2017), such as the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda, and the explicitly anti-LGBTQ campaign Fetrah, in the Gulf countries (Almazidi 2024).

In Chapter 1, I identified structural conditions and multi-level advocacy strategies that, according to the relevant literature, are likely to affect the translation of anti-gender campaigns into negative changes in the status of transgender rights in a country. Based on an

interdisciplinary literature review, I proposed that there are two key country-level structural conditions that shape the effects of anti-gender campaigns: liberal democracy, which functions as a deterrent against the erosion of SOGI rights; and religious institutionalization, which is likely to include anti-gender frames in law and policy, to disseminate anti-gender ideology in society, and to favor fundamentalist interpretations during times of instability and change. Furthermore, I identified five key and often overlapping strategies employed by anti-gender actors to advance their cause: transnational coalition building, diplomacy, contestation of liberal human rights, alliances with right-wing populism, and scapegoating.

In Chapter 2, I conducted an empirical assessment of the hypothesized relationships between the two structural conditions and changes in transgender rights through a cross-country panel analysis. Additionally, and based on the theory examined in the preceding chapter, the panel analysis also considered right-wing populism as a potential constraint to liberal democracy. In line with previous research on the relationship between SOGI rights and democracy, the analysis showed a positive and statistically significant association between levels of liberal democracy and change in transgender rights. On the other hand, it did not offer evidence to support the hypotheses about the positive effect of right-wing populist governments and of religious institutionalization on anti-gender campaigns. Given the limitations of the data and the models, however, this null finding does not mean that right-wing populism and religious institutionalization do not matter for anti-gender campaigns. Overall, the quantitative design, while helpful to illuminate the patterns of SOGI rights changes, is ultimately unable to capture the complex mechanisms through which anti-gender actors forge alliances and promote their campaigns.

Chapter 3 addressed the limitations of the quantitative investigation of the previous chapter by providing an in-depth, qualitative analysis of how liberal democracy and religious institutionalization shapes anti-trans campaigns in a case study of Brazil. As expected, liberal democratic institutions were indeed essential for SOGI rights in the country, as it was during periods of democratic deepening that empowered civil society rights groups successfully pressured the government into creating and expanding protections. Furthermore, the most significant advances in SOGI rights advances were promoted by the judiciary, which protected these minority protections from a hostile Congress. As such, the Brazil case brings attention to the tension between majoritarian and countermajoritarian democratic processes, identified by previous research, and illustrates the limitations of the former in addressing deeply-rooted forms of discrimination.

The Brazil case study adds further complexity to the relationship between structural conditions and anti-gender success by showing that legacies from past authoritarian experiences can also fuel anti-democratic projects in the present, especially when aided by economic and political crises. As explained in Chapter 3, some anticommunist frames mainstreamed during the dictatorship in the country were restored decades later by campaigns against “gender ideology”, which greatly contributed to empowering right-wing populists, such as Jair Bolsonaro, who relied on scapegoating transgender people during times of economic anxiety and political upheaval. Framed as the new communist threat, “gender ideology” bridged the interests of different conservative actors in the country and paved the way for the rise of illiberalism.

With regards to the effects of the institutionalization of religion on anti-gender campaigns, the Brazil case provided evidence consistent with the literature examined in

Chapter 1. The construction of a Brazilian Christian Right in legislative bodies, led by Evangelicals, was key to mainstreaming anti-gender discourse and to blocking pro-SOGI rights initiatives in Congress. As the number of Evangelicals grew and leaders became more invested in politics, they leveraged the threat of “gender ideology” to shape public opinion and earn votes from the more conservative sectors of society, which allowed them to exert great influence within representative bodies. Once empowered in Congress, they formed alliances with conservative and other religious representatives, which in turn allowed them to stall pro-SOGI rights initiatives. Accordingly, this process also shows that increased religious institutionalization can also be achieved through mechanisms of liberal democracy.

When examined in a broader context, the trajectory of anti-gender mobilization in Brazil points to two important findings. First, it shows the effectiveness of “gender ideology” in functioning as a symbolic glue (Kováts 2017; Kováts and Põim 2015) bridging interests from different types of actors. Similarly to other countries in Latin America, anti-gender campaigns in Brazil have united Catholics and Evangelicals, and have been central to processes of de-democratization (Corrêa 2020, 14). Second, the Brazil case illustrates that, although a contemporary phenomenon, anti-gender campaigns map onto earlier right-wing mobilization frames and strategies. This is because, while in Latin America “gender ideology” entered the political mainstream as the new communist threat, in Central and Eastern Europe right-wing populists have combined anti-gender discourse with a critique of neoliberalism and globalization (Graff and Korolczuk 2022).

Although the combination of statistical analysis and case study provided important insights, this investigation also faced some limitations. First, the fact that anti-gender campaigns operate simultaneously at different levels of analysis (within and across countries)

complicated the comparative cross-country framework. While the Brazil case offered important insights into the importance of transnational conservative networks in promoting at the same time pro-neoliberalism and anti-gender campaigns, a full comparative analysis would require the researcher to consider the broader patterns of international relations as a preexisting factor that shapes the country's participation within networks. Second, given the expansive, de-centralized and often covert nature of anti-gender networks, there is not enough publicly available data on all of its members. This was clear in the case of Chapter 2, which instrumentalized a country's participation within these networks based solely on data about events of the World Congress of Families. Finally, advocacy strategies such as alliances with right-wing populists respond to incentives particular to each national context, which further complicates cross-countries comparisons and generalizations at the same time it points to the need of further research that identifies such patterns.

This dissertation showed that liberal democratic principles matter for the effectiveness of anti-gender campaigns in reversing or undermining transgender rights. First and foremost, they inform the construction of mechanisms and institutions that protect individual rights against threats from the state or the majority. In the case of Brazil, anti-gender initiatives were prevented from resulting in rights reversals by a powerful judiciary, which served to counter a mostly-conservative Congress and an executive hostile to SOGI rights under Bolsonaro.

Such upholding of SOGI rights by judicial means was also observed in other countries in Latin America and beyond. In Mexico, for example, a legislative proposal requiring

parental authorization for schools to conduct activities involving content related to gender and sexuality was defeated by the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation in 2020 (Flores Ivich and Zaremborg 2025). In Slovenia, despite the existence of a powerful anti-gender movement, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of same-sex partnership rights in 2022, after the rejection of two referendums on marriage in the previous decade (Smrdelj 2025). However, in other contexts the defense of individual SOGI rights has been supported by other mechanisms, such as the legal frameworks of the Council of Europe and the European Union institutions (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 48). Therefore, while in many countries the promotion of SOGI rights has been advanced by court systems (Velasco et al. 2024), the key element for deterring anti-gender campaigns is the existence of institutional spaces and mechanisms that uphold minority rights against threats.

A second element of liberal democracy that functions as an obstacle against anti-gender campaigns is the existence of a plural civil society, which allows for SOGI rights advocates to influence social norms and public opinions. Strong and plural civil society spaces are essential for SOGI rights activism for they allow activists to gain public visibility, advance rights frames, shape public opinion towards tolerance, and openly contest anti-gender campaigns. As shown by the Brazil case study, empowered SOGI rights activism can impact party and electoral politics by shaping the government's agenda through sustained pressured – as it was the case during the different Workers' Party's administrations –, and by political representation – as illustrated by the growing number of LGBTQ representatives in the recent years.

However, as noted throughout this dissertation, civil society is in itself a space of dispute, and it offers opportunities for both SOGI rights groups as well as to anti-gender actors.

In this sense, one must also how consider how civil engagement spaces are connected to government structures: in Brazil, for example, channels of connections between SOGI rights advocates and the administrative state resulted in the expansion of rights in the Lula and Dilma years, but were mostly operated by anti-gender actors in the Bolsonaro years. Finally, a plural civil society can also contribute to the institutionalization of organized religion through party and electoral politics. This is notably what happened in Brazil, where religious conservatives increased their influence on law and policy by electing representatives whose popularity was largely aided by anti-gender discourse.

It is worth noting that, as the Brazil case also indicates, subnational political dynamics are relevant for the creation of anti-gender campaigns as well as their effects. This is especially the case of campaigns against gender and sexuality in public school curricula, which require anti-gender activists to form alliances with representatives at the municipal and state levels, and to closely engage with constituents to spread their message. Accordingly, it is at the subnational levels that some anti-gender campaigns are first created, with local politics serving as a laboratory for national campaigns. Importantly, the effects of anti-gender campaigns on transgender people are often felt locally, as campaigns against gender in education often take the shape of coordinated actions that can result in the harassment of educators and that generates a climate of fear.

As we saw in Chapter 3, campaigns against the inclusion of topics of gender and sexuality in public school curricula in Brazil cemented alliances between right-wing populists

and a rising Christian Right at different levels simultaneously. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, for example, anti-gender politics produced country-wide effects: in 2014, then-state deputy Flávio Bolsonaro (Jair Bolsonaro's eldest son) and the School Without Party group allied to create a legislative bill against "gender" that served as a template for subsequent legislative initiatives at all levels of legislative power. At the time, the alliance served to increase the visibility of the Bolsonaro family and the political relevance of SWP, and its success was also enabled by religious – most often Evangelical – leaders, key players in municipal and state-level politics.

The findings of the Brazil case also indicate that subnational politics are especially relevant to religious actors, whose influence over regular citizens is mostly exercised in everyday life through vast networks of churches and congregations. The capillary action enabled by such networks, unparalleled in civil society, serves to disseminate anti-gender ideology and frames widely among a country's population. In Brazil, Evangelical churches and organizations such as ANAJURE, for example, are able to reach people even in remote areas such as indigenous communities.

Overall, the dynamics of anti-gender politics in Brazil have followed a pattern similar to that of other Latin American countries, where "gender ideology" has infiltrated public discourse and served to raise mass support for right-wing populists. Once in power, these populist leaders have enabled anti-gender actors to undermine SOGI-related protections from within state structures. In Argentina, for example, president Javier Milei has publicly decried "gender ideology" as related to pedophilia and shut down several SOGI rights-related government institutions, such as the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity, in addition to banning the government's use of gender-inclusive language, among other similar actions (Rey

2024; Yebra 2025). In El Salvador, president Nayib Bukele also supported the anti-gender agenda by vowing to ban “gender ideology” in schools and colleges in the country (Maldonado 2024). Finally, in Chile, the victory of Ant3nio Kast in the 2025 presidential election represented an important win for the transnational anti-gender movement, as Kast himself served as the president of the Political Network for Values between 2022 and 2024 (GPAHE 2025). Taken together, these developments signal that anti-gender actors have successfully infiltrated state institutions in Latin America, and while anti-gender discourse may not any longer be in the spotlight in countries such as Brazil, the anti-gender project is still very much alive in the region.

Despite the similarity between countries in the region, the Brazilian case showed one important particularity, namely, the important role played by the Armed Forces in fostering the return to authoritarianism in the country. While the activation of older right-wing frames in the country in the early 2010s illustrates a broader pattern of anti-gender activism, the far-right groups that were animated by the rise of a new anti-communist threat were directly connected to the dictatorship period. This was, in no small part, facilitated by members of the Armed Forces themselves, who continued to exert influence in the country’s politics after the end of the dictatorship.

This dissertation provides a contribution to previous empirical and theoretical research on SOGI rights and anti-gender mobilization by connecting its global elements to the local implications of these campaigns for transgender people. Furthermore, the research conducted

here contributes to the studies of the far-right ideology and of populism by examining how populist ideology, performance, and strategies converge with those of the anti-gender movement. More specifically, I analyzed how anti-gender campaigns are associated with each of the three dimensions of right-wing populism, and built on the work of Graff and Korolczuk (2022b; 2023; 2025) to argue that anti-gender mobilization is part of the expanding far-right project of global governance.

In Chapter 2, I built on previous research by Flores et al. (2023), Velasco (2024), and Williamson (2025) – whose findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between democracy and SOGI rights – by focusing specifically on the liberal element of democracy, which I argue to be essential for protecting transgender rights against the anti-gender offensive. Additionally, I considered potential constraints presented by anti-gender actors, organized religion, and right-wing populism. As such, my work builds on previous research by Velasco (2023), who showed that countries exist in tension between the dynamic opposing forces of SOGI rights and anti-SOGI forces, and extends on the work of Velasco and Swindle (2024) by using their World Congress of Families dataset to investigate the relationship between organizational participation in WCF conferences and subsequent changes in rights. It also builds on Williamson’s (2025) work on religious institutionalization and transgender rights by also considering the potential effects of right-wing populist leadership and anti-gender network participation. By considering these additional elements, my research expands on Williamson’s (2025) finding that, while religion plays an important role in explaining variation in transgender rights, its effect on political outcomes likely depends on how and where religious influences manifest within a country.

In Chapter 3, I show that religious influence can be expanded through democratic institutions, which further complements Williamson's (2025) assessment about the diversity of forms through which religious organizations exert political influence. Importantly, I provide qualitative evidence for Velasco et al.'s (2024) claim that the freedoms of speech, association, and assembly are essential in enabling liberal democracy to serve as a vehicle for expanding SOGI rights. Additionally, the Brazil case study also provides evidence of the importance of individual and minority rights frames to advance SOGI-based protections, also identified by Velasco et al (2024). Finally, Chapter 3 provides qualitative evidence of the interaction dynamics between pro-SOGI rights and anti-gender networks, examined by Velasco (2018, 2023, 2023) and by Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024).

The research conducted in this dissertation contributes to the interdisciplinary field of Global Studies by providing an investigation into a transnational movement of anti-globalization actors that seeks to replace liberal globalism with their own illiberal alternative. Bolstered by the grievances incited by neoliberal liberalization and united by their shared view that sex binary and heterosexuality are pillars for human flourishing, anti-gender actors coordinate across borders and engage in global governance forums to replace liberal human rights with their own theologically-inspired rights regime. Accordingly, this form of transnational mobilization aims not only to deter the advancement of SOGI rights in different countries but more broadly to weaken the international human rights regime itself.

This dissertation also contributes to the growing literature on anti-gender movements by presenting elements for a systematic, global categorization of anti-gender campaigns according to their impact on the rights of a political minority. In doing so, it also offers useful insights to the human rights and populism scholarships. In the past years, anti-gender literature has expanded from its initial focus on national episodes toward more comparative studies that consider its transnational character. As scholars continue to advance the understanding of the anti-gender phenomenon through new case studies and conceptualizations, this research can contribute to these efforts by offering elements for a comparative framework on the patterns of anti-gender influence on SOGI rights.

Further research on anti-gender campaigns and transgender rights can build on the findings of this dissertation to better identify patterns of anti-gender successes and failures across countries and regions. Given the burgeoning literature on common anti-gender strategies and its effects in different countries, the scholarship would benefit from developing comparative perspectives that take into account common patterns of structural conditions and strategies. For example, future research could draw on existing case studies to develop macro-level frameworks that explain how different types of democratic regimes shape anti-gender campaigns, or how international relations and geopolitical interests offer opportunities for anti-gender organizations. Likewise, the importance of religion and religious institutionalization could be further explored by comparative cross-country analyses that assess whether different religions are more likely or not to offer opportunities for anti-gender campaigns.

The move towards a more comparative perspective on the effects of anti-gender campaigns could offer building blocks for global theories of the anti-gender phenomenon,

which can in turn inform SOGI rights advocacy strategies. Although the main predictor of anti-gender success continues to be a country's level of democracy, SOGI rights advocates can benefit in drawing from experiences of different – democratic and non-democratic – contexts to adapt strategies and develop new ones. Furthermore, a better understanding of the structural conditions that affect anti-gender campaigns across countries can help SOGI rights advocates to internationalize their own campaigns and to forge cross-cultural alliances in defense of their fundamental human rights.

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