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Policy dismantling and democratic regression in Brazil under Bolsonaro: Coalition politics, ideas, and underlying discourses

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Abstract

Drawing on a cost–benefit approach, policy dismantling literature typically examines case studies following omitted and blame-avoidance strategies, which contrasts with the highly visible dismantling fostered by Bolsonaro’s far-right administration in Brazil. This study examines the mechanisms leading to this active process and places it in the context of major policy changes in several fields (i.e., rural development, land titling, social protection, environment, and protection of indigenous peoples). It shows that dismantling decisions were made incrementally by conservative coalitions that seized upon the economic crisis to consolidate a neoliberal turn; however, this turn was radicalized with the expansion of the conservative alliance and tied together by populist rhetoric. This study sheds light on the *politics* of policy dismantling and addresses it as a process of democratic backsliding.

KEYWORDS

Brazil, democratic backsliding, far-right populism, policy change, policy dismantling

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INTRODUCTION

Policy dismantling has been addressed in policy studies from several perspectives, the welfare-state retrenchment literature being one of the most prominent. Drawing on institutionalist approaches, scholars like Pierson (1994) have examined the weakening of social policies. A parallel body of literature has focused on deregulation processes and how liberalization affected the state-regulated society, particularly in environmental fields (Majone, 1994). Bauer et al. (2012) provided a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the mechanisms, causes, and outputs of policy dismantling in different policy fields. Conceived as a change that either diminishes the number of policies or policy instruments and/or lowers their intensity, policy dismantling can modify core elements of a policy or the capacities to implement and supervise it (Bauer et al., 2012).

Using a cost–benefit approach, most case studies that applied Bauer's framework showed omitted forms of dismantling. This framework posits that the political costs of dismantling are inherently unpopular; hence, these costs might be reduced if policy-makers are able to avoid, deflect, or reduce blame. For instance, Bianculli et al. (2012) described the passive dismantling of child benefits in Spain between 1975 and 1990, showing how political officials adopted a range of opaque tactics for dismantling to avoid blame by the electorate. Similarly, studies examining the active dismantling of social policies in Italy and Switzerland have adduced blame-distribution strategies and the influence of external factors like socio-economic conditions (Schmitt, 2012). Recent studies in the European Union (EU) have also highlighted these concealed strategies. For instance, the stagnation in EU environmental and climate policy via “the backdoor” and “comitology procedures” has been extensively researched (Burns et al., 2020; Gravey & Jordan, 2020; Pollex, 2021; Pollex & Lenschow, 2020; Steinebach & Knill, 2017).

These omitted dismantling patterns contrast with the process currently unfolding in Brazil. Since the mid-2010s, government measures have weakened several public policies in such areas as food and nutritional security, poverty reduction, territorial development, and deforestation control (Sabourin & Grisa, 2018; Sabourin, Grisa, et al., 2020), with an overt and systemic approach at the beginning of the far-right Bolsonaro administration in 2018. Although some dismantling stages partially originated from initially obscure decisions and reductions in public spending during the tenure of Workers' Party President Rousseff, it has now become a fundamental government strategy. Hence, this study updates the dismantling literature through an examination of the empirical case of a highly visible dismantling strategy in a context beyond Europe and North America.

These major changes in Brazilian politics have drawn increasing attention from scholars, resulting in more related literature in the field (Barbosa et al., 2021; Barcelos, 2020; Fernandes et al., 2017; Granemann, 2016; Macambira, 2020; Sabourin, Craviotti, & Milhorange, 2020; Sabourin, Grisa, et al., 2020). However, most studies have focused on specific sectors and have failed to address the dismantling process from a systemic perspective or place it in the context of a broader political shift. This study sheds light on the *politics* of policy dismantling and addresses it as a process of democratic backsliding. Specifically, it examines the role of populist rhetoric in forging diverse coalitions under a large government alliance and supporting highly visible dismantling strategies.

While we acknowledge the limits of addressing these macro-processes in a single article, we argue that this approach is useful for understanding the mechanisms and the significance of changes observed in Brazil. To tighten the scope of analysis, the study considers an interrelated set of socio-environmental policy fields (i.e., rural development, land titling, social protection, forest and water conservation, and protection of indigenous peoples). This is a qualitative in-depth research of the Brazilian case, building on literature review, legal

documents, and media articles. We analyzed nearly 70 academic studies published between 2012 and 2022. In addition, we critically reviewed the results of previous research on the evolution of these policies since the early 2000s, for which we conducted more than 200 interviews with policy actors.¹ On this basis, we examined qualitatively the regression in policy density and intensity in various fields, traced the political processes that led to these changes, and identified the main underlying ideas and discourses supporting active dismantling.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE DISMANTLING ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In the early 2010s, scholars argued that policy dismantling and ruptures should be analyzed more systematically, with a focus on the process and extent of dismantling rather than on its occurrence or non-occurrence (Bauer et al., 2012; Jordan et al., 2013). Therefore, Bauer et al. (2012) developed a comprehensive framework for understanding dismantling mechanisms, causes, and outputs. This focuses on a specific direction of policy change whose factors were divided into three types: (i) external factors and prevailing macro conditions, such as the stability of the financial system, technological change, spread of certain ideas of reform, and unforeseen elections; (ii) situational factors, which are primarily contextual issues; and (iii) institutional constraints and opportunities, particularly those related to opportunity structures reflecting the features of the political system (the polity).

Furthermore, depending on the specific combination of costs and benefits affecting the preferences of political actors and their capability to pursue policy dismantling, hidden or disclosed strategies can be chosen. Thus, the framework mainly contributes to highlighting governments' strategies to abandon certain policies, including strategies that remain hidden from political attention, which is often the case for EU-led policies (Bauer et al., 2012; Pollex & Lenschow, 2020).

Finally, Bauer et al. provided an in-depth analysis of the institutional settings favoring or preventing dismantling, particularly the weight of institutional constraints and veto players. Therefore, the institutional—even constitutional—context influences not only the mode but also the concrete target of policy dismantling. For instance, the features of the United States (US) polity—legalism, based on distributed power and several checks and balances—has historically contributed to constraining dismantling and prevented “unilateral strategies.” This includes the role of state bureaucracy, which shows how political leaders—even populist leaders such as Donald Trump—must face an established administrative order characterized by embedded bureaucracies, institutional legacies, and path dependencies that constrain the available choices (Bauer et al., 2012; Bauer & Becker, 2020). Similarly, the EU's “hyper-consensual polity” characterized by the presence of multiple veto players, distributed governance, and complex implementation systems makes visible dismantling or policy amendment challenging (Gravey & Jordan, 2016; Lenschow et al., 2020).

Another series of studies has focused on the policy outputs of dismantling by addressing changes in the configurations of policy instruments that may influence policy impacts (Knill et al., 2009). Barnett et al. (2020) analyzed the US subnational biofuel policy and showed that removing or adding policy instruments to a policy regime or portfolio can reduce or obliterate its effects by causing inconsistency between the instruments.

These studies indirectly addressed an important element of policy change analysis: defining the real object of change. In other words, before analyzing the strategies and causes of

dismantling, it is important to identify the policy components undergoing change, such as the issues in question, the structure and content of the policy agenda, the content of the policy program, or the outcomes of implementation (Capano, 2009). Furthermore, this is an essentially epistemological choice, as there are substantially different views in the literature regarding the drivers of policy change (e.g., rational choice, ideas, interests, political institutions, actors, networks, and socioeconomic conditions) (Capano, 2009; Hogan & Howlett, 2015; Muller, 2013; Sabatier & Weible, 2014). The policy dismantling framework proposed by Bauer et al. highlights politicians' rationality; hence, several studies adopting this framework agree that different types (or fields) of policies imply distinct distributions of costs and benefits that make them more or less vulnerable to dismantling (Bauer et al., 2012; Burns et al., 2020; Gürtler et al., 2019).

Following this argument, the dismantling of policies that are perceived to have concentrated costs and diffused benefits (such as environmental policies) would benefit some political actors, depending on the strength of the interest groups bearing the costs (for instance, well-organized economic groups opposing environmental regulation groups). Conversely, the dismantling of social policies, perceived to have diffused costs and concentrated benefits, is normally led by politicians' blame-avoidance narratives. For instance, in the context of economic austerity, politicians are "forced" to withdraw public funds from vulnerable beneficiaries (Bauer et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, while this study draws on Bauer's view of policy dismantling as a multifaceted policy process, we argue that neither public opinion nor the perception of the distribution of the costs and benefits of dismantling is an objective indicator; they reflect political actors' ideas and are significantly affected by the momentum of coalition politics, narratives, and the institutional settings in a political system. As noted by Morais de Sa and Silva (2021), the cost-benefit approach, although reasonable in cases of fiscal constraints, is secondary in recent examples of illiberal populism. Likewise, Bauer, Peters, et al. (2021a) recently extended dismantling research to consider illiberal policy change. We contribute to the expanding literature by centering our analytical lens on previously overlooked aspects, such as the role of political actors and their coalitions in framing policy problems and solutions to promote dismantling. Coalitions are groups of actors who share a set of interdependently bound ideas and practices and coordinate their activities to influence policy options (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018). The next section identifies the main political groups that have been coordinating to push dismantling on different fronts.

EMERGENCE OF A CONSERVATIVE AND POPULIST WAVE IN BRAZIL

Brazil underwent important changes during the 2010s. It shifted from economic growth to recession, from left-wing to far-right politics, and from neo-developmental to ultra-liberal economic policies (Andrade, 2020). The impacts of the 2008 global financial crisis were felt in the mid-2010s. Additionally, economic measures established by President Rousseff and the government's inability to deal with social contestation, along with the gradual rise of conservative groups of interest, resulted in a major crisis that culminated in Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. Michel Temer took office and replaced 13 years of the Workers' Party left-wing administration with a conservative-oriented government. This political turn reached its peak after the election of the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.

The governmental shifts in 2016 and 2018 opened the door to the dismantling of a wide range of public policies, including social, rural development, environmental, health, educational, and

cultural. A common feature of most policies targeted by this process was their creation during the democratization period and consolidation during the Workers' Party governments, particularly during Lula da Silva's mandates (2003–2006; 2007–2010).

Populist delegitimizing narratives have been important factors in this large-scale dismantling process, bringing together different conservative groups. These include (i) evangelical churches, concerned with conservative family values; (ii) middle and upper-middle-class voters and militarist groups, mostly critical of the Workers' Party heritage and affected by the media coverage of corruption scandals and increased rates of violence; and (iii) economic groups active in the financial markets who supported Bolsonaro's economic plan, which was designed by Paulo Guedes, a liberal economist who had graduated from University of Chicago (Christophe et al., 2021; Feres Júnior & Gagliardi, 2021). This conservative alliance was partially sustained by criticism of the inadequacy of state measures in overcoming the economic crisis (Burity, 2020), and such criticism radicalized Bolsonaro's election promise to "replace all that is in place." In his discourse, the economic crisis was cast as eminently moral, caused by corruption and attacks on family values waged by the left (Feres Júnior & Gagliardi, 2021).

Although populism has recently reemerged, the diversity of populist experiences in different countries has worked against a consensus on its definition in the literature. It has been interpreted in different ways: as ideology, discourse, political logic, or a strategy to gain power (Cesarino, 2020; Christophe et al., 2021; Huber et al., 2021).

The juxtaposition of "the people" versus a threat of some kind from an "other," generally "the elite," is a central feature of populism. Given that these notions are essentially empty vessels, populism is commonly attached to a host ideology that provides them with sense and shapes the underlying ideas and policy positions. For instance, right-wing populists often define "people" based on cultural traits (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). National identity is a determined source of exclusion, which is often defined by reference to ethnically or culturally "different" individuals and groups, migrants, or representatives of religious or social minorities, as well as the corrupt or aloof elite. The political system, which ignores the needs of "the people," is depicted as hostile (Christophe et al., 2021). Sophisticated communication strategies based on performance and emotions serve to evoke crises and threats, and to instill a sense of their imminency.

This article does not seek to analyze this "contested concept" (Rooduijn, 2018) or its origins and nuances; rather, it looks at the *populist rhetoric* translated by Bolsonaro to show how it brought together political groups that were not necessarily like-minded such as those founded on economic neoliberalism, conservative societal values, and lawfare and militarist beliefs. The coordination between these groups, sustained by politicizing their dissatisfaction with the status quo, has successfully promoted policy change. As stated by Laclau (2007), populism commonly draws on the logic of "equivalence," according to which solidarity links can be developed between distinct social groups that remain unsatisfied by public power. Correspondingly, common symbols appealing to frustrated masses can lead to the politicization and blending of heterogeneous demands.

The populist politicization of existing policies by Bolsonaro's allies, who framed Brazil's economic crisis as a moral crisis created by their predecessors, became one of the foundations of an active dismantling strategy. Dismantling was thus presented as a suitable decision. It is noteworthy that populist politicians often come to office with a transformative agenda that differs from a regular transfer of power (Bauer, Peters, et al., 2021b). Therefore, an additional feature of the movement observed in Brazil has been its attack on the country's democratic instruments.

MECHANISMS FOR ACTIVE DISMANTLING AND MAJOR POLICY CHANGE

This section illustrates the main fronts of the active dismantling of socio-environmental policies. Characterized by a decrease in both the density and intensity of these policies, the dismantling process is part of a major change in Brazilian politics and institutions. This section is structured according to the key ideational disputes and changes operated by the emerging conservative coalitions described above. It shows that the neoliberal narratives used to justify state reforms in the early 2010s were later exploited by populists to promote radical change of the country's policy foundations, including its definition of citizenship, development models, and democratic nature. Hence, while dismantling was first observed in discrete and incremental changes during Rousseff government, this process was reinforced, redirected, and strongly accelerated under Temer, and particularly Bolsonaro.

From fiscal austerity to the review of minority rights

The criticism of the *developmentalist* state, as promoted by the Workers' Party, gained renewed attention in the early 2010s as a result of the economic crisis. Fiscal austerity measures were implemented by the Rousseff administration that reduced the scope of action of various policies—for instance, family farming, social protection, land titling, environmental monitoring, and management of protected areas (Barbosa et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2017; Magnusson et al., 2018; Pereira et al., 2020; Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2020; Sabourin, Craviotti, & Milhorange, 2020; Sabourin, Grisa, et al., 2020). Both the amount of funds and public coverage of such programs declined, characterizing the change in policy intensity (Bauer & Knill, 2014); however, the goals of these policies did not change. The emphasis on aspects such as poverty reduction based on a structural approach, universalization of access to basic social services, and rural development remained central to the government's agenda.

It is worth mentioning that these policies have been traditionally promoted by coalitions involving social movements that benefited from the election of the Workers' Party in the 2000s but lost resources, political weight, and legitimacy in the 2010s (Niederle et al., 2019; Sabourin et al., 2014).

The early dismantling phase marked by the decrease in the means of policy implementation was later followed by an active strategy to change the broad policy framework and proceed with a substantial austerity movement. After Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, Michel Temer used his first week in office to abolish the Ministry of Agrarian Development and reduce the scope of several social policies, including conditional cash transfers (i.e., *Bolsa Família Program*) (Andrade, 2020). Another example is the approval of Constitutional Amendment 95/2016, which froze public spending for 20 years, including spending on education and the universal health system (Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2020). The reform of the national pensions also progressed during this period, although it was approved by Congress only in 2019. These measures have driven an unprecedented regression in the public system established by Brazil's 1988 Constitution to reduce social inequalities and protect vulnerable populations (Laschefski & Zhouri, 2019; Reis, 2018).

This process peaked during the Bolsonaro administration, as the Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes, highlighted a single solution for the economic crisis: reducing public spending. This neoliberal approach was reinforced by the narrative that reducing the size of the state and replacing state prerogatives with private initiative was necessary to hinder corruption. Wide

media coverage of corruption scandals contributed to attracting popular support for this idea (Andrade, 2020; Christophe et al., 2021; Feres Júnior & Gagliardi, 2021). As a novelty of this populist rhetoric, beneficiaries of social policies (e.g., traditional communities, indigenous peoples, and family farmers) were portrayed as the “enemies” of the nation, subjects of “assistentialist” policies, and drainers of public resources. The establishment of affirmative action measures in the early 2000s to balance discrimination and exclusion provoked nationalist criticism (Christophe et al., 2021). Bolsonaro and his campaigners have made intensive use of new media technologies to politicize these affirmative action policies, leading to a campaign promise to end them (Feres Júnior & Gagliardi, 2021).

Additionally, non-state actors promoting basic social rights have been criminalized and accused of illegally profiting from public funds. These included NGOs that were attacked for promoting indigenous rights in the Amazon region. The objective of obstructing civil-society groups' ability to implement their projects was to weaken one of their main sources of financial resources, the Amazon Fund. Managed by the National Bank for Social and Economic Development (BNDES), the Amazon Fund has received donations of over US\$ 1 billion from countries such as Norway and Germany to fight deforestation and foster resilience in rural communities. Similarly, special departments for indigenous health and indigenous special health districts were eliminated, which strongly impacted indigenous populations, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. Established to reduce social and geographical inequalities in access to public services, these had been key health policy instruments since the 2000s (Polidoro, 2020). Equally alarming was the sharp increase in violence toward rural people that followed Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and consolidation of these populist narratives (Andrade, 2020).

Arguments based on the existence of a “universal Brazilian citizen” were used to justify the dismantling of inequality-reduction policies that targeted specific beneficiary groups (i.e., indigenous peoples, family farmers, and other vulnerable populations) (Polidoro, 2020; Sabourin, Grisa, et al., 2020). More than a neoliberal turn, this discourse sought to homogenize the beneficiaries and erase the diversity of rural territories (Niederle et al., 2019), and was employed to change the overall policy goals and review the historical rights of minority groups and indigenous populations. The austerity argument was applied only to policy fields considered beneficial to the opposition. Simultaneously, military spending was gradually expanded, including salary increases to compensate for military pension reform (Schreiber, 2020). As a military reserve officer himself, Bolsonaro's support from military forces has been a key force for stability of the government, despite internal disagreement with the Minister of Economy.

From environmental deregulation to an extractive land-use development model

Disputes over the regulation of natural resources are not new in Brazil. Since the early 2000s, business entities, particularly in the agribusiness, energy, and mining sectors, have urged greater agility in environmental licensing, simplification of bureaucratic procedures and rules, more flexible agreements, greater participation of the private sector in the regulatory system, and the “freedom to invest.” Deregulation attempts regarding, for instance, infrastructure development in protected areas and indigenous lands have been highlighted since the early 2010s (Ferreira et al., 2014; Viola & Franchini, 2014). Moreover, the 2012 Forest Code lowered the level of forest protection under Brazilian law and exempted many rural producers from environmental obligations. However, Rousseff mitigated the opposition to this reform by vetoing some items of the bill

and establishing new conservation instruments, such as payments for environmental services (Kröger, 2017).

The establishment of an environmental “self-declaratory” regulation to overcome the “burden” of public hearings and social compensation for land expropriation has progressively gained support in Congress since the Temer administration, and it became one of the main agendas of Bolsonaro’s administration (Barcelos, 2020; Pereira et al., 2020). The Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, became the main sponsor of the deregulation agenda. An anti-environmental activist, Salles gained international notoriety due to his negligent watch over the Amazon and for stating, during a high-level meeting on the COVID-19 crisis in May 2020, that the government should take advantage of the media coverage of the pandemic to pass more flexible environmental protection laws—that is, easing the occupation of indigenous land and weakening the surveillance and prosecution of violations. An additional move in support of environmental deregulation was the adoption in 2022 of the “pesticides bill” (6299/2002) by Congress, with the authorization of pesticide importation and use that had been intensified since 2019 (Pereira et al., 2020).

Another measure was the attempt to transfer the responsibility for the demarcation of indigenous lands from the National Indian Foundation to the Ministry of Agriculture, headed by agribusiness groups. Claims of the “unproductive use” of these lands by indigenous populations and a desire to integrate them into an “economic development pathway” were put forward as justifications for these changes. Pereira et al. (2020) argue that this was a clear effort to encourage the expansion of agriculture in public lands and followed Bolsonaro’s campaign promise to not proceed with land titling and reforms, one of the more controversial agendas in Brazil (Sauer & Mézsáros, 2017). It is noteworthy that during the Temer administration, the neoliberal management of lands reemerged in the policy agenda, while the rules for regularizing the illegal occupation of public lands were loosened and further facilitated by the Bolsonaro administration.

Significant budget cuts were observed for the agencies that directly supervised the Amazon Forest, the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio). In its first year, Bolsonaro cut 95% of the budget for the National Policy on Climate Change; 26% of the Federal Conservation Management and Implementation Program budget; 24% of IBAMA’s Inspection and Control Program budget; and 20% of the Environmental Inspection, Prevention, and Control of Forest Fires Program budget. Some of these cuts involved discretionary expenses, such as buying fuel for vehicles to monitor the forest and providing lodgings for agents who combatted deforestation at the street level (Pereira et al., 2020).

Coalition politics reinforcing this “brown economy” are behind the origins of the gradual change that unfolded in the late 2010s. The power of agribusiness and other extractive-led economic groups has historically been considerable owing to their substantial material capabilities, access to positions of legal authority, and a successful discourse that promotes large agroindustries as beneficial for national development and global food security. A cross-party group called *bancada ruralista* is known to promote their interests in the Congress, and the growth of commodity exports in the 2000s has been a source of their increasing power (Barcelos, 2020; Lima & Mairon, 2021; Pereira et al., 2020). The prevailing hegemony of these groups, including under the mandate of the Workers’ Party, has been a common theme in the literature²; however, it does not fall within the scope of this study.

This also follows the significant tension between the federal government and environmental NGOs mentioned earlier. Based on sovereigntist arguments over the Amazon, the populist narrative of a “foreign enemy” interested in Brazil’s natural resources has gained support (Sabourin,

Grisa, et al., 2020). Likewise, Bolsonaro's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araujo, reinforced this narrative by showcasing climate and anti-deforestation policies as part of an "international Marxist complot" (Watts, 2018). Another major element has been Araujo's troubled relationship with China, Brazil's main trade partner, whose government was painted in 2021 as an ideological rival. This claim also showed that the alignment with the US was centered more on the conservative values represented by Donald Trump than on economic considerations (De Sá Guimarães et al., 2021).

The dismantling of environmental regulations and land policies has led to an unprecedented increase in deforestation rates and forest fires, pesticide pollution, and land conflicts (Barbosa et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2014; Levis et al., 2020; Sabourin, Grisa, et al., 2020). These changes have not gone unnoticed, as international attention has been drawn to Brazil's environmental deregulation and attacks on traditional populations and their lands. The rising awareness of Europe's consumers have led to calls for a more nuanced, less ideological discourse on the part of agribusiness actors by the Minister of Agriculture. However, this does not mean that in the agricultural-commodity producer territories, the continuous attacks on environmental NGOs and restrictive environmental laws are not welcomed. The extent to which domestic actors will be able to re-establish their political legitimacy and build new coalitions with support from international actors remains to be analyzed (Capelari et al., 2020).

From reducing state bureaucracy to democratic backsliding

Driven by a security-led and authoritarian project, one of Bolsonaro's strongest measures was to extinguish most of the country's participatory stances, established in the democratization process of the 1980s. These monitoring and consultative councils have been trimmed since the Temer administration, with a sharp reduction in the number of meetings preceding the decision to simultaneously abolish them through the 2019 Presidential Decree n. 9.759. A major example is the National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (Consea), a consultative body of the Presidency of the Republic and a resonance chamber of societal demands (Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2020). In other instances, they have been weakened, such as the National Council for Rural Sustainable Development (Condraf) and the territorially based platforms created to coordinate state and non-state actors.

Following critical public opinion regarding the extinction of these councils, some of them were recreated but with different and less participatory memberships. For instance, the establishment of the Amazon Council, mainly composed of military officers and headed by the Vice-President, a General himself, confirms the militarized turn in Brazilian policies and the weakening of participatory instruments. Finally, civil society members have been excluded from the National Council for the Environment (Conama) and the National Council for Water Resources (CNRH). Such changes initially relied on the argument of reducing public spending associated with the functioning of participatory forums; the populist narrative of a "communist" ideological danger arising from the growing role of civil society in public management was then once again mobilized.

An additional strategy of Bolsonaro's administration was the centralization of decision-making and policy implementation. For instance, Brazil's water policy has traditionally been characterized by decentralized governance, with a key role for the river basin committees composed of local state and non-state actors. However, a water bill was sent to Congress in 2021 (4546/2021), without any debate or transparency about its content. Some of its objectives include

detaching river basin committees from the implementation of water management plans and establishing a water market that would be regulated by the hydropower sector in response to water allocation disputes.

Recent studies observed the same centralization strategy in the implementation of water access policy in the Northeast semiarid region (Nogueira et al., 2020). The historical role of civil society organizations in the dissemination of rainwater catchment cisterns in rural areas has been incrementally weakened. Another argument relies on the allegation of irregularities in implementing programs involving civil society (Sabourin, Grisa, et al., 2020).

These changes in participatory instruments have been followed by a partial capture of state bureaucracy. For policy fields such as family farming, the Ministry of Agrarian Development never had a stable body of civil servants, and most of its programs had volatile budgets, constantly subject to cuts and contingencies. In 2020, more than 1500 military officers were estimated to have been appointed to the sectoral ministries, ousting technical civil servants from these management positions (Sabourin, Grisa, et al., 2020). It is important to note that the politicization of personnel or norms and reduction of accountability or pluralism of political spaces are particularities of populist discourses, justified by the claims to speak for a single person and mold and steer the state according to the leader's ideological needs (Bauer & Becker, 2020). These results also align with studies showing how policy dismantling has been marked by authoritarian dynamics, serving to disarrange the federal bureaucracy. Additionally, these studies show that civil servants have been subject to intimidation and fear, institutional dismantling, and decision-making paralysis (Morais de Sa & Silva, 2021).

Finally, Bolsonaro's inclination to govern using presidential decrees left Congress and the Supreme Court with the decision of whether to accept some of the daily policy decisions and reinforced the gradual judicialization process (Vilhena, 2018). Despite the highly conservative Congress, parliamentary alignment with the executive body is far from automatic. According to Avritzer (2021), Bolsonaro won the presidency as the leader of a political movement. His government was initially formed by few politicians and was built on an anti-system narrative of a corrupt political elite in the confrontation of Brazil's multi-party alliance presidentialism (Vilhena, 2018). The option of only interacting with allies (e.g., public security, evangelical, and agribusiness parliamentary fronts) failed. Several governmental projects dependent on congressional approval were paralyzed in the first year of governance. Negotiations over budget allocation through parliamentary amendments and political appointments emerged as a crucial issue for political support; however, this option has also created conflicts with the economic group in the government, favoring budget cutoffs (Avritzer, 2021; Couto, 2021).

To sum up, dismantling was initially justified by the need to reduce state bureaucracy and expenditures for the functioning of participatory forums and the state. However, it later reflected a major change in policy goals and the consolidation of Brazilian democratic institutions. The breadth of this backsliding process and the resilience of administrative orders, political groups, and institutions require further analysis.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study analyzed some of the processes driving a systemic and active policy dismantling in Brazil. The main changes analyzed are summarized in [Table 1](#).

The origins of these changes may be traced to the early 2010s, under the Workers' Party administration, which addressed the scope and means of policy implementation (or policy *intensity*),

TABLE 1 Non-exhaustive synthesis of dismantling measures and political changes from 2011 to 2022

	Dilma Rousseff administration (2011–2016)	Michel Temer administration (2016–2018)	Jair Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022)
<i>Main policy changes</i>	<p>Fiscal austerity reduced the means of implementation of several policies (i.e., family farming technical advice, environmental monitoring, and management of protected areas)</p> <p>Suspension of and titling of agrarian reforms settlements</p> <p>The reduction in the level of forest protection on rural properties following the 2012 Forest Code was partially balanced by new conservation instruments</p> <p>Civil society organizations were increasingly excluded from policy implementation (i.e., Cisterns Program, Food Public Procurement Program)</p>	<p>Significant expansion of fiscal austerity and reduction of the scope of social and environmental policies (i.e., reduction of conditional cash transfers, freeze of public spending in health and education, national pensions bill, environmental deregulation (self-declaration environmental licensing))</p> <p>Reduction of funds for the functioning of participatory bodies</p> <p>Extinction of key institutions (i.e., abolition of the Ministry of Agrarian Development)</p>	<p>Fiscal austerity presented as the single and unquestionable solution to the economic crisis</p> <p>Drastic reduction in funds for environmental inspection agencies (i.e., IBAMA, ICMBio, Climate Change Department, Federal Conservation Management and Implementation Program, etc.)</p> <p>Attacks/administrative inactivity/extinction of affirmative action instruments (i.e., family farming support, protection of traditional populations and their lands, indigenous health districts, etc.). Attempt to transfer the demarcation of indigenous lands to the Ministry of Agriculture</p> <p>Occupation of the Ministry of Environment by anti-environmental activists and militarist groups. Loosening of environmental licenses and massive authorization of import and use of agrochemicals and pesticides</p> <p>Extinction of most participatory councils and recreation of some of them with distinct members (mainly executive and military officers)</p>

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Dilma Rousseff administration (2011–2016)	Michel Temer administration (2016–2018)	Jair Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022)
<i>Underlying policy goals</i>	Continuity with previous governments and emphasis on poverty reduction (based on a structural approach, universalization of access to social services, basic human rights, focus on family farmers and traditional populations)	Change in goals of reduction of social inequality and protection of vulnerable populations (based on targeting and affirmative instruments) Change in participatory governance mechanisms Change in environmental regulation and protection of indigenous and public lands to ease private investment	Reinforcement of an ultra-liberal economic approach Illiberal changes marked by strong centralization of policy-making and implementation (i.e., capture of state bureaucracy and harassment of public servants, reduction of accountability, exclusion and criminalization of civil society actors in policy implementation)
<i>Coalitions, ideas, and discourses</i>	Gradual reinforcement of conservative coalitions, particularly economic groups advocating for more flexible environmental rules and support to agribusiness sector. Weakening of social movements that contributed to policy design and implementation during the Workers' Party governments	Expansion of the conservative wave to include social conservative, lawfare, financial sector, and militarist groups. Anti-corruption narratives were largely diffused by mainstream media vehicles Changes initially relied on the argument of reducing public spending associated with the functioning of social policies and participatory forums	Reinforcement of the conservative alliance, tied together by populist discourses and anti-corruption rhetoric diffused by conservative media vehicles and social networks Narrative that reducing state size and replacing state prerogatives with private initiative was necessary to hinder corruption. Beneficiaries of social and rural development policies were portrayed as the “enemies” of the nation and drainers of public resources Rhetorical endorsement of the illegal occupation of protected areas and indigenous lands to promote “economic development,” prevent “unproductive use,” and integrate indigenous populations into an “economic development pathway” Centralization of policy-making to prevent a “communist danger,” criminalization of non-state actors promoting basic social rights and environmental protection, accused of illegally profiting from public funds
<i>Policy dismantling dynamics</i>	Decrease in policy intensity and gradual change in policy means (result of democratic political processes)	Decrease in both policy intensity and density, and major change of policy goals (weakening of democratic policy instruments)	Systemic policy dismantling, and illiberal policy change sustained by authoritarian strategies and populist discourses

particularly through budget cuts. These measures were incrementally sequenced as conservative coalitions, supported by media vehicles, seized upon the economic crisis to consolidate a neoliberal turn in Brazilian politics. Fiscal austerity, environmental deregulation, and state reforms were some of their goals. Rousseff's impeachment marked the expansion of this conservative wave to include social conservative, lawfare, and militarist groups tied together by populist rhetoric and anti-corruption narratives. The dismantling process then acquired high visibility and an aggressive strategy for reducing the *density* and reviewing the core goals of public policies established during the 2000s.

This active dismantling was operated through legislative, administrative, and symbolic measures (i.e., fund reduction, change in procedural rules, administrative paralysis, memberships revision of participatory instances, change of implementing partners, presidential decrees, constitutional amendment, arena displacement, politicization of state bureaucracy, etc.). These strategies are common to several policy fields and are influenced by the same mechanisms, hence the interest in portraying the picture of the political process. We acknowledge the limitations of this broad type of study and encourage further research, namely, a more in-depth analysis of the observed changes. Drawing on recent literature (Pollex & Lenschow, 2020), a focus on post-legislative and policy implementation phases can be useful to examine the extent of these changes. We showed, for example, that the replacement of civil society members in participatory instances can also mean dismantling, although some of these instances were maintained.

These results partially align with studies showing the impact of path dependence and re-active sequences on active policy dismantling: the emulation of previous political strategies tends to lower the negotiation needs for future attempts at dismantling due to path dependency. The literature argues that the success or failure of previous dismantling attempts directly affects the path leading policymakers either to reinforce prior policies or to replace them (Schmitt, 2012). In the Brazilian case, policy framing based on populist rhetoric was determinant in producing an illusion of the continuity of the neoliberal reforms first launched by Rousseff in the early 2010s. On the one hand, active dismantling was justified as a strategy to advance these reforms to improve state efficiency. On the other hand, the economic crisis was framed as the responsibility of Bolsonaro's predecessors, which entailed the need for a rupture with previous actions.

Several scholars showed the effect of economic crises on policy dismantling (Burns et al., 2020; Jordan et al., 2013). An additional point addressed here is the populist interpretation of crises as key to providing an understanding of their causes and overtly legitimizing alternative political orientations. In this sense, the study nuances the cost-benefit approach proposed by Bauer et al. (2012) and highlights the elements of cognitive policy analysis, such as coalition politics, political ideas, and discourses (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018; Surel, 2019). The rise of populism and authoritarian leaders raises new research questions, as shown by Bauer, Peters, et al. (2021a), and requires an analytical lens that looks beyond politicians' rational choices. This study was particularly interested in the Brazilian case; however, the relevance of these analytical lens can be tested in other cases beyond Latin America. Differences and similarities with processes unfolding in other parts of the world could be examined; for instance, in countries such as Hungary, Turkey, and Poland.

Finally, we put forward policy dismantling as a process of more profound changes in Brazil's policy regime, which reflects a review of the country's development models, definition of citizenship and citizens' rights, and democratic foundations. This argument also aligns with studies that treat dismantling under Bolsonaro as an illiberal type of policy change (Morais de Sa & Silva, 2021). In this context, analysis of the factors that trigger resilience and

political resistance to dismantling is needed. These have been understudied, except for emerging literature concerned with the role of public bureaucracies (Bauer, Guy Peters, et al., 2021; Guedes-Neto & Guy Peters, 2021; Lotta et al., 2021; Morais de Sa & Silva, 2021). Owing to the involvement of civil society actors in the design and implementation of the policies examined here, this study highlights the role of actors beyond the state bureaucracy. The emphasis on formal institutions in the literature to explain resistance to dismantling should also achieve greater nuance.

Policy resilience and robustness is a dense academic body (Capano & Woo, 2017, 2018; Howlett, 2019) that would benefit from a greater connection with the dismantling literature and a focus on factors such as coalition politics, ideational factors, and informal institutions. For instance, scholars found that the EU's complex institutional set-up was not the only factor of resilience to the outright dismantling of the community's environmental policy, but also its deep ideational anchor and the role of specific policy actors (Burns et al., 2020; Lenschow et al., 2020). Empirically, the limits of populist and negationist rhetoric in terms of concrete effects were reached by Donald Trump in the US, who experienced an election defeat in 2020, partially owing to the disastrous results of his management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, dreadful human impacts of the pandemic crisis have been observed in Brazil. Therefore, the theoretical and empirical responses to policy dismantling and democratic backsliding are key research agendas in the coming years.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Projects “Articulating policy mixes across scales & sectors to address adaptation to climate change challenges in vulnerable tropical agricultural landscapes” (Artimix, ANR France), “Observatory of Socio-environmental dynamics” (INCT-Odisseia, University of Brasilia), “Brazil's South-South cooperation policy: new geographies of global policy-making” (doctoral project, CIRAD, University of Brasilia).
- ² See, for instance, Saad-Filho (2014), Milhorance (2018), Laschefski and Zhouri (2019), Sirohi (2019), and Andrade (2020).

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