

Two Nationalists and Their Differences - an Analysis of Trump and Bolsonaro

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In the last decade, the re-emergence of nationalist populism has sparked much research into possible reasons for its renewed attractiveness and its implications worldwide (Van Hooft, 2016, p. 30). Especially US President Donald Trump's rhetoric and policies are considered as signs and impetus to a renationalisation of global politics, in which national interests are prioritised and international challenges and partners subordinated (Kagan, 2018). Other leaders with nationalist messages all around the globe have been riding on the wave of nationalist messages that Trump spreads since his election campaign in 2016. One especially successful propagator of nationalist appeals is Jair Bolsonaro, who was elected Brazil's President in 2018. During his election campaign, he promised to fight globalism and has been called the "Trump of the tropics" based on their similarly nationalist rhetoric (Shear & Haberman, 2019). Together, Trump and Bolsonaro govern more than 500 million people and their nationalist rhetoric can have great consequences not just regarding immigration policy and international cooperation, but also by the type of economic policy that is combined with nationalism.

This research paper goes beyond previous comparisons of Trump's and Bolsonaro's nationalist rhetoric by also explicitly contrasting their economic policies. Thus, the following research question will be answered: To what extent are Trump's and Bolsonaro's political and economic agendas similar, and how do relative power positions and domestic factors explain the differences? In the next section, the theory of neoclassical realism will be introduced and the concepts nationalism, neoliberalism and mercantilism defined. Based on this analytical framework President Trump's nationalist politics and his domestic and international economic policies will be compared to those of President Bolsonaro. Thereafter, the focus lies on explaining the policy differences between both nationalists from a neoclassical realist perspective and engaging with possible criticism of the analysis.

Theory: Neoclassical Realism

To address the research question extensively, both the international power positions of the United States and Brazil and other mitigating internal factors will be regarded. The theoretical background of this analysis is a theory named neoclassical realism by Gideon Rose and emphasises the role of the power capabilities, while also incorporating intervening domestic variables into the analysis (1998, p. 146). More specifically, the relative economic and military power capability in the international system is the primary independent variable in this analysis, which is mediated by the perception that the country's leader has of other states and by the influence that people in the state apparatus and social forces such as voters and elites have on the policies (Rose, 1998, p. 154). Merely having a strong power position cannot explain why one state leader chooses nationalistic rhetoric and certain economic policies and another state leader with similar power another political and economic agenda. Therefore, the power position is merely the starting point from which leaders make foreign policy decisions. When deciding, the perceptions of reality by leaders and the state administration, elites and voter base can all play a role in the final foreign political and economic agenda.

Both neorealists and neoclassical realists attribute fundamental importance to the world structure of international anarchy, but while anarchy automatically leads to states seeking security as main national interest for neorealists, for neoclassical realists anarchy and additional domestic factors define state interests (Rose, 1998, p. 152). By doing so, the theory of neoclassical realism used in this essay can be seen as an extension of neorealism that is distinguishable from liberalism and constructivism by attributing anarchy the role of central force in international relations (Rathbun, 2008, p. 311).

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It is crucial to clarify that in this research paper nationalism is defined as an ideology in which individuals place the nation above all other states or groups and want to promote the nation's interests (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Additionally, two economic policy stances will be found in the further analysis. Mercantilism is an economic stance based on realist thought and shaped by the belief that states should maximise their military power in an anarchic world of competition (Heckscher, 2013, p. 12). Mercantilist states try to increase their own wealth by exporting more than they import as that means more material wealth compared to other countries. This comparatively higher wealth is then invested in military strength and serves the final goal of increasing the state's military power comparatively more than other states (Heywood, 2014, p. 364). The second economic theory regarded, namely neoliberalism, is explicitly not used as a theory of international relations but solely as a term for a set of economic practices. The main claim of neoliberalism is that individual well-being can be advanced most effectively when the state merely provides strong property rights and does not intervene in free-markets (Harvey, 2007, p. 71). For neoliberals, the appropriate tool for distributing all social goods are free-market transactions that are deemed as the most efficient and effective in tackling virtually all societal problems (Harvey, 2007, p. 72).

Analysis

Comparison of Trump's and Bolsonaro's Policies

Donald Trump's rhetoric and policies are built on the slogan "America first" (Kagan, 2018). This ideological motto is enacted by Trump's isolationist rhetoric, which he exhibits by frequently questioning international alliances and cooperation. Since his election Trump has decreased the US' involvement in foreign politics for example by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, withdrawing troops from Iraq and generally being reluctant to cooperate in international organisations (Kagan, 2018). Trump has questioned NATO's collective defence agreement and denounced globalist cooperation because it ignores national interests (Borger, 2019). His isolationist actions and rhetoric undermine the international order and can lead US allies to stop relying upon and trusting the US (Van Hoof, 2018, p. 37). The second pillar of Trump's nationalism is his anti-immigration stance, which is most prominently visible in his project to build a border wall to Mexico and limit immigration by criminalizing it and decreasing quotas (Kagan, 2018). Bolsonaro's slogan "Brazil above everything else" (Anderson, 2019) resembles that of Trump heavily and so do his nationalist and anti-globalist views. Bolsonaro has in the past called the United Nations a useless institution, promised to leave the UN Human Rights Council and eventually quit the UN Migration Pact (Casarões & Flandes, 2019, p. 4). Whereas Trump's nationalist rhetoric and policies focus on isolationism and decreasing immigration, Bolsonaro's focus lies on isolationism and fighting the globalist project of the UN, which supposedly wants to rob people of their national values (Casarões & Flandes, 2019, p. 2). Despite the different focal points of their nationalist politics, it is fair to assert that superficially "for Trump, Brazil's President is like looking in the mirror" (Shear & Haberman, 2019).

When contrasting Trump's and Bolsonaro's domestic and foreign economic strategies, a more comprehensive picture emerges. Trump is employing domestic neoliberal policies such as decreasing taxes on income and corporations, tightening the requirements for social welfare and loosening up labour laws (Cozzolino, 2018, p. 59-66). Bolsonaro follows Trump in his domestic neoliberal approach and has named Paulo Guedes, a University of Chicago trained economist and hardcore neoliberal, his Finance Minister (Biller & Colitt, 2018). Mr Guedes has proposed plans to privatise many of the 138 state-companies, cut federal spending and taxes and deregulate the economy (Biller & Colitt, 2018). Both administrations thereby follow the neoliberal claim that society's welfare is best enhanced when the state is small and stays out of the markets.

Although both presidents are neoliberals domestically, their stances differ substantively regarding trade with other countries. Bolsonaro's Finance Minister Guedes is also neoliberal in his foreign trade approach and has pledged to open Brazil for trade and competition with other countries (The Economist, 2019). Guedes' ideas for enhancing free trade in South America with a new forum and Brazil's willingness to establish free trade between the EU and Mercosur also stand in line with the neoliberal belief in comparative cost advantages and mutual gains by trade (The Economist, 2019). Trump's government on the other hand has a very different, anti-free-trade stance. Based on the conviction that the US trade deficit to other countries is unfair, the US government withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement and has started trade wars with the EU and China, (Cozzolino,

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2018, p. 68). Many scholars ascribe a mercantilist view of foreign economic policy to Trump, who seems to seek more wealth and thereby military security for the US compared to other nations (Ahmed & Bick, 2017).

Remarkably, both presidents have connected what is generally seen as antithetical: nationalism, which is generally thought to be anti-globalisation, and neoliberalism, which seems to be pro-globalisation (Harmes, 2012, p. 61). Adam Harmes argues that neoliberalism and nationalism are compatible because neoliberalism is in fact not necessarily pro-globalisation and trade but merely pro domestic free market (2017, p. 61). Thereby neoliberal nationalist leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro can present themselves as both pro-free-market and nationalists. Although both are neoliberal nationalists domestically, they differ in a crucial aspect. In the next section, neoclassical theory will be used to explain why Trump pursues a mercantilist and Bolsonaro a neoliberal foreign economic approach.

Explanation of the Differences in Economic Foreign Policy

The first aspect that helps to explain the difference in Brazil's and the US' foreign economic policy are their relative material power capabilities in the international system of anarchy. The United States had a gross domestic product ten times larger than that of Brazil in 2018 and the US military expenditure is more than six times that of Brazil (World Bank, n.d.). That means that the US trumps the Brazilian government's power in military strength, economic development and population size. Because of these power capabilities and its veto power in international organisations such as the UN Security Council and International Monetary Fund, the US are a great power, on which other states depend militarily and economically. The US can translate its immense material power into relational power when dealing with other actors as their counterparts normally seek advantages by conforming to the US' demands and do not want to risk a conflict (Heywood, 2014, p. 221). In fact, this dependency of other states on the US is exemplified by Bolsonaro's own frequent submissiveness, which he for example showed by saluting the American flag during campaign events (Spektor & Fasolin, 2018). Brazil's power position is different from that of the US in that it has a lower GDP, military capacity, population, no veto powers and as a consequence less relational power in relationships with other states and organisations.

Even the US cannot completely disregard its competitors and economic partners when choosing a foreign economic policy stance, but as a major economic and military power in the world, it has a lot of leeway to decide independently. Brazil on the other hand although being the 9th biggest economy in the world, has a weaker bargaining position and can therefore not decide on its foreign economic policy as independently as the US. That means for Trump that based on the US' power position he can choose which trade policies he seems fit including neoliberal and confrontative mercantilist approaches. As Brazil has a weaker bargaining position than bigger economic powers like China and the US, for Bolsonaro opposing free trade is risky, as he is the one with less economic and military leverage. Superficially, it might seem like their power positions can sufficiently explain why Trump is able to adopt mercantilist economic policies that fit his nationalism while Bolsonaro is forced into a neoliberal stance and compliance with the international liberal order despite his nationalist views. Applying a neorealist perspective would mean to stop at this point of the analysis. However, that would be an inadequate explanation, as neorealism cannot explain why Trump and Bolsonaro are openly nationalist and different from liberal leaders worldwide in the first place, and what role their ideology, administration, and social forces play in their choice for a certain economic policy. In the next part, the focus lies on how these intervening domestic variables explain the difference.

The perspective that the leader himself has of international politics is one intervening domestic variable that influences his final policies. Trump's remarks on foreign policy in the last 30 years exhibited a sense that the US were taken advantage of by its partners, which do not pay for the security provided and of which many export more to the US than reversely (Van Hooft, 2018, p. 36). As businessman he adopted a zero-sum view in which one can only gain if the other one loses and only relative gains matter. Whereas Trump's nationalism is remarkably economic focused, Bolsonaro himself declared to have no idea of economics and gave all responsibility to his ministers (Gallas & Palumbo, 2019). Anti-Marxism, religious beliefs and resentment against the perceived global bureaucratic apparatus all characterise Bolsonaro's main ideological sentiments (Casarões & Flandes, 2019, p. 2). As Bolsonaro's nationalism is focused on anti-globalism in cultural and political but not so

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much economic terms, it becomes clear why he does not strive for mercantilist policies. He might simply not understand and be interested in it enough.

The second intervening domestic variable regarded is the state apparatus. As Bolsonaro himself claims to not understand economics, his administration's ideas are of immense gravity. As mentioned earlier, his Finance Minister Guedes is a neoliberal, but his influence in the administration is not as uncontested as it might seem. In fact, tensions between Brazil's Foreign Minister Ernesto Aurojo, who is a populist-nationalist and opposes economic dependence on exports to China, and the neoliberal parts of the administration have emerged since Bolsonaro came into office ("The Economist", 2019). Trump, who has a clear mercantilist vision himself, chose his closest advisors based on their view on trade and has fired or pressured advisors that embrace neoliberal internationalism to leave the administration (Siegel, 2019). This shows that not only power positions and the leader themselves decide on foreign policy, but as in Brazil, in the absence of the leader's own economic vision the administrations play a major role. Whereas the Trump administration follows Trump's demands, Bolsonaro's administration is torn between neoliberals and mercantilists, with the neoliberals being dominant for now.

The voter base of a democratic president is another relevant factor in determining what policies he implements. In the 2016 election Trump exploited the fear that most American voters had of international trade threatening their job security and promised that he would improve bad trade deals and bring back manufacturing jobs to the US (Cozzolino, 2018, p. 49). In the Brazilian election trade and anti-globalism were quasi absent in the general discourse. Rather, commentators have stated that Bolsonaro got elected because of strong support by the influential evangelical churches and because he portrayed himself as strongman, who can reinstall public safety and end corruption by the Workers Party (The Economist, 2019; Casarões & Flandes, 2019, p. 2). In contrast to the American elections where Trump set the stage for his future anti-trade policies, in Brazil trade did not play a role for voters but even more so for elites.

We now look at the fourth intervening variable: elite interests and influence. Trump has frequently promised to take back control from the globalist elite to average Americans, but his biggest donors were the elite of American hedge funds and banks (Sorkin, 2016). It is striking that despite his ties to transnational capital elites and their interest for free trade, these have not convinced Trump to back down on his trade wars and instead elitists that are known for opposing free trade have gained the most crucial positions in Trump's administration (Sorkin, 2016). Trade-dependent Brazilian elites have been more successful in achieving their goals, namely free trade policies and especially the so-called ruralistas have used their immense power. The ruralistas are an association of politicians of different political parties, who want to promote the interests of Brazilian agrobusiness owners and account for a staggering 55% of members of parliament (Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuaria, n.d.). Bolsonaro's coalition includes many of the ruralistas and therefore it would be unwise for him to enrage them and risk Brazil's status as the world's largest beef and soy exporter with any openly mercantilist policies. The pressure by the ruralistas for free trade is a further reason for Bolsonaro not to act economically nationalistic. The particular feature of the elites is that there are trade-dependent elites and elites that would prefer protectionist measures in both countries. Whereas the Brazilian trade-dependent elites are successful in their actions, the US trade-dependent elites have lacked persuasiveness in stopping Trump from his mercantilist foreign economic policies.

Further Critique

As was mentioned before, neorealists might criticise that a mere look at the different power positions of Trump and Bolsonaro explains their different economic policies sufficiently. However, as neorealism only considers power positions, it cannot explain why both presidents enact different economic policies than their predecessors, as the power positions have not changed. Other critics have argued that neoclassical realism is merely an ad hoc effort to save neorealism from its limited explanatory force (Rathbun, 2018, p. 294). Quite on the contrary, I argue that neoclassical realism is a necessary extension of neorealism in that it also regards states' need for high domestic power to be able to exert any power internationally (Rathbun, 2018, p. 296). A weak leader within the country would have problems presenting himself as powerful abroad. A final accurate but not necessarily unfavourable critique is that the choice of the intervening domestic variables in this analysis is contingent. Neoclassical realism does not prescribe any domestic variables that must be considered but exactly this variety of

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variables is also the greatest strength of the theory, as it can be adapted to explain a variety of International Relations questions (Van Hooff & Freyberg-Inan, 2019, p. 10). Employing another theory than neoclassical realism would mean to either downplay the importance of international anarchy or ignore domestic variables, however influential.

Conclusion

Based on a neoclassical realist framework, a comprehensive account of Trump's and Bolsonaro's policies has emerged throughout this analysis. Both politicians are nationalists that promote isolationist views but while Trump focuses more on immigration, Bolsonaro focuses on targeting the globalist elite. It is peculiar that they both connect domestic neoliberal policies with nationalist sentiments and thereby have constructed a neoliberal nationalism for themselves. Based on their rhetoric one might erroneously expect both presidents to employ mercantilist economic foreign policies. The US' great power position has enabled Trump to indeed pursue mercantilist policies while not explaining why his predecessors acted differently. Unlike most of his predecessors since World War II Trump has a zero-sum ideology of trade and chose his administration based on his views. By opposing free trade Trump complies with election promise of bringing back jobs to the US and US trade-dependent elites have not been able to change his stance. Bolsonaro on the other hand abides by the economic international liberal order. Brazil's limited power position explains the starting point from which Bolsonaro decided to adopt a neoliberal foreign economic approach, as a mercantilist approach towards more powerful states would be risky. By looking at the domestic variables involved, a more complex explanation as to why Bolsonaro does not enact his nationalism in international economics emerges. In Brazil not so much the President's economic ideology but rather his lack thereof is decisive. Because Bolsonaro does not have an own view on economics, an anti-globalist mercantilist and a neoliberal block in his administration vie for being dominant. While Bolsonaro's voters are generally not interested in his foreign economic policy, the influence and interests of the trade-dependent agrobusiness elites explains why the neoliberals are dominant in Brazil's economic policies. This analysis has established that Trump and Bolsonaro's differ in their foreign economic approach based on their power position as starting point from which they make their decisions. Importantly, however only when adding their ideologies, administrations, voter base and local elite interests can the difference fully be explained.

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