

RESEARCH NOTE

Representing Agribusiness Interests in Brazilian Foreign Policy: The Role of the Parliamentary Agricultural Front (FPA) Between 2015 and 2022

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This article explores Brazil's foreign policy related to agribusiness, examining how the Parliamentary Agricultural Front (FPA) leverages its legislative power to influence Brazilian Foreign Policy (BFP) in favour of agribusiness interests. This exploratory study highlights the interests at stake and the formal mechanisms employed by the sector to influence Brazil's international agenda. The analysis covers the period from 2015 to 2022, encompassing two legislative terms under the presidencies of Rousseff (2015-2016), Temer (2016-2018) and Bolsonaro (2019-2022). Methodologically, the study qualifies as research in progress, presenting partial results from an ongoing analysis of FPA activities in the Legislative on foreign policy issues. To this end, the study takes a qualitative approach, drawing on data collected from the House of Representatives database. After discussing the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis, its focus on interest groups, and the role of the Legislative in foreign policy. Along with a brief overview of agribusiness in Brazilian foreign policy, the study concludes that the FPA uses formal mechanisms, such as requirements, assessments, recommendations, legislative proposals, and the creation of parliamentary groups, to influence Brazilian foreign policy in favour of agribusiness interests.

Keywords: Foreign policy; parliamentary agricultural front; agribusiness; interests.

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Agribusiness is a crucial player in Brazil's political economy, encompassing globalised production chains and intense international trade relations. The sector's activities interact with a range of global issues, such as attracting technologies and resources to boost agricultural productivity, sanitary regulations and certification standards set by international agencies, developing strategies to compete with protectionist policies in the global market and different international negotiations on matters such as environment, property rights and labour practices.

As one of the pillars of Brazil's international presence and development, agribusiness is essential to the country's economy. According to data from the Centre for Advanced Studies on Applied Economics (CEPEA, 2021), from 1996 to 2020, the sector's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – including inputs, agriculture, industry and services – ranged between 34.8% and 18.7% of Brazil's GDP, averaging 25% during this period. By 2023, agribusiness GDP was projected to reach 24.4% of the country's total GDP (CEPEA, 2023a). In foreign trade, agribusiness makes a substantial contribution to the country's economic performance and to generating trade balance surpluses. In 2022, Brazilian agribusiness exports reached a record of U\$160 billion, representing 47% of the country's total exports (CEPEA, 2023b).

As seen, agribusiness is fundamental to Brazil's international projection, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of the sector's landscape, the private and public actors involved, and the interests that are represented and integrated into the Brazilian political agenda.

Private actors organize through confederations, companies and associations that exert pressure as interest groups. These actors began to organize themselves more effectively and actively during the economic liberalization of the 1990s, when they emerged as central players in Brazilian foreign trade and encountered increasing competition from international lobbies. The leading organization in this arena is the Brazilian Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (CNA), founded in 1951, which unites associations and political and rural leaders (MACHADO, 2009).

In the Legislative, we must consider the role of the Parliamentary Agricultural Front (FPA, 2019), which represents the Rural Caucus in the National

Congress. The FPA promotes an agenda in favour of the agrarian and livestock sectors, frequently conflicting with other agendas related to environmental, health, and human rights issues. Thus, the Legislative is central to understanding the formulation of foreign policy in the agricultural sector, especially for agribusiness. Currently, the Instituto Pensar Agro (IPA) – a think tank that bridges agribusiness interests and the Rural Caucus’s activities – has become increasingly influential. Within the Executive, the roles of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAPA) cannot be overlooked, with MAPA's involvement becoming increasingly institutionalized since the 1990s, particularly in trade negotiations.

As Silva (2019) notes, since the 1990s, when the action of interest groups became a research focus in Brazilian political science, most studies have concentrated on the actions of industrial entrepreneurs. In contrast, equally important and politically important sectors, such as agriculture, have received comparatively less attention. However, the increasingly organized efforts of the agricultural sectors underscore the importance of studying their actions and their coordination mechanisms with the government.

In this article we examine Brazilian foreign policy (BFP) in relation to agribusiness, focusing on the role of the Parliamentary Agricultural Front (FPA) from 2015 to 2022. Since the agribusiness sector is organized within the Rural Caucus of the Legislative, the FPA acts as a key representative of Brazilian agribusiness interests, coordinating efforts that unite both the private and political sectors. Thus, we arrive at the guiding question of our research: what formal legislative mechanisms did the Parliamentary Agricultural Front (FPA) employ to promote agribusiness interests in Brazilian foreign policy between 2015 and 2022? We selected this timeframe because it covers two legislative terms of the federal representatives in the Rural Caucus of the National Congress, under the presidencies of Dilma Rousseff (2015-2016), Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022).

Methodologically, this study is a work in progress, presenting partial results from a broader analysis of the role of federal representatives in the FPA within the Legislative on BFP issues. We adopted a qualitative approach, using a data collection

method that involves the analysis of articles, academic texts and information sourced from the House of Representatives database. We focused on the House of Representatives due to the greater number of representatives in the FPA compared to senators, thereby broadening our sample¹. We conducted our search using the keywords ‘agriculture’ and ‘Parliamentary Agricultural Front’, applying a specific filter for foreign affairs, and covering the period from 2015 to 2022. We then complemented this search with a detailed examination of the speeches and content related to the processing of the collected documents. Additionally, we surveyed the composition of the 55th and 56th legislatures, identifying the parliamentarians who comprised the FPA and their respective political parties. To analyse the data, we aimed to draw a correlation between the selected legislative procedures and the formal typologies parliamentarians used to advocate for agribusiness interests, thus providing a deeper understanding of the political dynamics at play within the sector.

In addition to this introduction, the article is structured into four further sections. The next section outlines the analytical framework, drawing on contributions from the fields of Political Science and International Relations, particularly Foreign Policy Analysis, with a focus on interest groups and the role of the Legislative in foreign policy. Next, we provide a brief history of agribusiness interests in Brazilian foreign policy, concentrating on the period from 2015 to 2022. The following section looks at the role of the FPA and its representation of interests in BFP by analysing the data obtained from the Chamber's database. Finally, we present our concluding remarks.

Interest groups, the legislative and foreign policy

The foreign policy of states is the object of study of Foreign Policy Analysis, a subfield of International Relations (IR), whose origin and evolution are closely linked to the development of other fields of knowledge, such as Public Policy Studies and Political Science. The creation and consolidation of Foreign Policy Analysis have contributed in various ways to blurring the ontological distinction between

¹The Brazilian legislative system consists of two chambers: the Senate, which is made up of 81 senators, and the Chamber of Deputies, which comprises 513 deputies.

domestic and foreign policies, reinforcing their shared nature as public policies that arise from comparable political processes (LIMA, 2013).

This article operates on the premise that foreign policy is a public policy. It is subject to the interactions of government policy, allowing us to evaluate its decision-making processes, identify the actors involved and their interests, examine the interactions between state institutions and private entities, and explore the role of information in decision-making. However, foreign policy has a 'sui generis' nature: while it competes with and involves domestic actors and political interests, it also deals with issues traditionally associated with core state policies, such as defence, territorial integrity and national identity. In this sense, it resides within what Milani (2015) describes as the state's grey zone. Our research engages specifically with discussions on interest groups and the role of the Legislative in foreign policy, drawing on the contributions of Milner (1997), Dietrich (1999) and Onuki (2023).

Milner (1997) places particular emphasis on the domestic political arena, arguing that the dynamics of the political game vary according to three main factors: the interests of domestic actors, the power-sharing institutions of these actors and the distribution of information. These factors collectively determine which actors will be involved in the decision-making process, how much power each one has to influence the political process and how their preferences diverge. Interests play a significant role in shaping how domestic policy impacts foreign actions, as various domestic groups strive to influence decision-making to maximize their own benefits. In turn, political institutions, whether in the Executive or Legislative, define the process by which domestic preferences are aggregated into policy. In this process, some groups are favoured over others, revealing which actors hold power over the decision-making process. As for the distribution of information, Milner (1997) argues that when not all actors have complete information on an issue, it creates inefficiencies and provides political advantages to those involved in the decision-making process.

The author highlights the relationship between the Executive, the Legislative, highlighting how interest groups can be key sources of information for parliamentarians. The issues the author raises to shed light on the decision-making

process are highly relevant to our study and can enhance our understanding of the interactions between the FPA in Congress, other government actors (whether the MRE or MAPA), and even interest groups, including various sectoral representations within agribusiness.

Dietrich (1999) defines interest groups as “an organized association that engages in activities related to government decisions” (DIETRICH, 1999, p. 280). These groups consist exclusively of non-governmental actors, thus excluding government bodies, and include individuals organized around a variety of issues, such as human rights and business, among others.

According to Dietrich (1999), interest groups can frame issues on the political agenda, monitor the actions of the Executive Branch – often advising Congress in the process – and provide information and political analysis, operating faster and more efficiently than government agencies. Our research, therefore, focuses on the interactions between the FPA and agribusiness-focused interest groups, exploring how these groups engage with government officials through the Legislative’s institutional channels to ensure their interests are represented on the political agenda.

The role of the Legislative in Brazilian foreign policy began to gain significance in the 2000s. Onuki (2023) notes that the National Congress (Senate and Chamber of Deputies) was once considered a minor player in Brazil’s international decision-making. However, growing pressure from private actors and debates surrounding the ratification of international agreements have positioned Congress as an increasingly influential actor in this sphere. Additionally, rising demands and pressure from interest groups on deputies and senators have pushed the Legislative to take a more active role in international affairs, prompting representatives to take stances in various debates, influenced by factors such as ideology, political party, and opposition to the government.

Onuki (2023) shows that studies on this topic in Brazil employ both qualitative methodologies – such as documentary analysis, analysis of parliamentarians’ speeches and case studies – and quantitative and econometric methodologies, which evaluate plenary votes.

Finally, she argues that the Legislative becomes more active when foreign trade themes are discussed, as these topics are highly politicized, involve distributive effects, and mobilize a variety of interest groups (ONUKI, 2023).

Building on the authors discussed, the following sections aim to frame the analysis of the FPA and the representation of agribusiness interests within the Brazilian foreign policy agenda. Focusing on the relationship between the FPA, the Executive and interest groups; how interests are represented in the discussions in which FPA is involved; and how sector-specific information is integrated into the political agenda and decision-making process through the FPA.

A brief history of agribusiness in Brazilian foreign policy

The interests of agroexporters have long been a powerful force in Brazilian foreign policy, driven by the sector's importance to the national economy and the enduring influence of the rural political elite, which remained significant even during periods of industrial growth. However, it was the rise of agribusiness in the 1970s, followed by its major economic expansion in the early 2000s, that laid the foundations for the sector's contemporary role in foreign policy.

Authors such as Jank, Nassar and Tachinardi (2005) and Delgado (2012), from different ideological perspectives, agree on dividing the development of agribusiness into three distinct periods. The first, during the military dictatorship, was marked by the modernization of agriculture with state support, focused on the domestic market. The second phase, during the redemocratization period, saw external shocks and a financial restructuring of agribusiness, which continued to face export obstacles due to exchange rate policies. The third period began in the 2000s, when Brazilian agribusiness grew exponentially, driven by the commodities boom.

In examining this more recent period, Milmanda (2022) explains how agrarian elites succeeded in gaining political influence through the Rural Caucus. By employing a multiparty strategy to elect ruralist candidates across different political parties, they have secured influential positions in Congress and ensured a presence in government coalitions. Pompeia's (2020) research adds depth to this analysis,

describing a new pattern of political representation within the sector, which he calls 'agribusiness political concertation', characterized by the formation of large intersectoral nuclei, such as the Instituto Pensar Agro (IPA) and the Agro Council/CNA, which bring together various agricultural institutions. These institutional nuclei coordinate closely, organizing the sector's diverse entities, developing unified campaigns and collaborating with state agents, especially through the FPA and the Ministry of Agriculture (MAPA). Mancuso et al. (2024) reinforce the growing influence of agribusiness in Congress through their research on the 55th legislature (2015-2019), highlighting the sector's success in advancing legislation aligned with its interests.

Madureira (2023) argues that the political-economic-institutional crisis that began in Brazil in 2015 was a decisive factor in boosting the agribusiness sector's influence on foreign policy, as it was one of the few sectors to maintain economic dynamism during this period, with the Rural Caucus expanding its influence amid the crisis facing traditional political parties. This allowed the sector to gain enormous bargaining power and play a more prominent role in shaping Brazilian foreign policy.

While the agribusiness sector had its interests represented in Brazilian diplomacy during the 2000s, particularly in World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations, it was particularly after 2015 that it has gained decisive weight in BFP. Thus, Lima, Pereira and Barbanti (2018) argue that the contentious 'impeachment' process of President Dilma Rousseff and the subsequent rise of Michel Temer to power in 2016 were decisive in strengthening agribusiness within foreign policy, at the expense of sectors tied to family farming and anti-hunger policies. Similarly, Siebeneichler (2021) observed a notable increase in the participation of both the FPA and the private agribusiness lobby in foreign policy between 2010 and 2020.

In this direction, since 2015, there has been a noticeable increase in the interaction between agribusiness and foreign policymakers. FPA-affiliated parliamentarians have chaired international committees in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Additionally, the Itamaraty has also organized events such as the 'Agribusiness Diplomacy' seminar in 2019, while the MAPA has become more involved in foreign policy issues, including a rise in the number of agricultural

attachés abroad. The next section explores how agribusiness has engaged with foreign policy, particularly through the actions of FPA-linked representatives in Congress.

The role of the parliamentary agricultural front in representing interests in Brazilian foreign policy

The efforts of parliamentarians linked to agribusiness to influence Brazilian foreign policy involve a range of strategies. This article focuses specifically on their formal institutional actions. We conducted a search in the House of Representatives database of proposals, applying filters for 'foreign relations' and the keywords 'agriculture' and 'Parliamentary Agricultural Front' from 2015 to 2022. Our search results cover proposals from the entire legislative process, including both the House Plenary and the committees².

After cross-referencing data with members of the FPA in the 55th and 56th legislatures, also sourced from the Chamber's database, we retained only the proposals from members of the Rural Caucus. Upon analysing the data, we identified 128 proposals, which were categorized into five types based on their nature: 01. requirement; 02. assessment; 03. recommendation; 04. legislative proposal; and 05. creation of parliamentary groups. Table 01 below outlines each type, the corresponding acronyms used by the Chamber, and the number of cases observed between 2015 and 2022.

Requirements, which are divided into Requirements for Information (RIC) and Requirements (REQ) in the Chamber's database, allow members of Congress to question ministers and other authorities on a given issue, typically used to call for public hearings, summon authorities or request information on a given issue. This mechanism enables direct dialogue between members of both Houses and authorities with privileged information on the subject, allowing agribusiness-related interests to be brought to light.

²The committees are divisions within the House of Representatives, responsible for discussing legislative matters before they are brought to a vote in the plenary session. However, our analysis was not based on individual committees but on keywords that span across all committees.

Table 01. Parliamentary activity of the representatives by typology and proposals (2015-2022). Analysis of the type of proposals made by FPA members from 2015 to 2022

Typology	Type of Proposals	Number of Proposals
Requirement	RIC; REQ	63
Assessment	Assessment; EMR; SBT; VTS; RLF	34
Recommendation	INC	15
Legislative Proposal	PL; PDC; PDL	12
Creation of Parliamentary Group	PRC	4
Overall Total	128	

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data compiled from the National Congress database (CÂMARA DOS DEPUTADOS, 2023).

Examples include RIC 2963/2017, which requests information from the Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding multilateral agreements of interest to agribusiness that Brazil is a signatory to; REQ 95/2019 CAPADR, which calls for a public hearing on the impacts of the Mercosur-European Union agreement on agriculture. And REQ 203/2022, which proposes the creation of an External Committee for analysing and proposing solutions to mitigate the economic impacts on Brazilian agribusiness resulting from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Requirements were the most commonly used method by parliamentarians, according to the data collected for our analysis, accounting for 63 out of the 128 proposals.

Assessments refer to reports and analyses conducted by parliamentarians on legislative proposals. This category includes: Assessment, Rapporteur's Amendment (EMR), Substitute (SBT), Separate Vote (VTS) and Final Report (RLF). These mechanisms enable Rural Caucus members to intervene in legislative projects relevant to the agribusiness sector in their Houses, either by advancing these proposals or by recommending modifications. Some examples include:

Assessment 1 CCTCI of PDC 34/2015, supporting the Brazil-Senegal Agreement for Scientific and Technological Cooperation, which involves joint agricultural research programs;

EMR 5 CREDN (2016) of PLP 115/2011, addressing Foreign Trade and certain national economic activities, such as agriculture; SBT 1 CAPADR of PL 1712/2015, which restricts imports of agricultural and forestry products that do not meet Brazilian environmental standards;

VTS 2 CPIBNDES of RCP 2/2019, which investigates illegal practices within the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES) related to agricultural activities; and,

RLF 1 CAPADR of PFC 20/2019, which clarifies PROEX fund payments to Brazilian agroindustry for exports to Cuba. Our analysis identified 34 assessments in total, making it the second most frequent category.

Recommendations (INC) refer to suggestions made by parliamentarians to authorities on specific topics, intended to highlight an issue or influence a particular agenda. Some examples include INC 623/2015, which suggests measures to curb the increase in dairy imports to the Minister of Development, Industry and Foreign Trade; and INC 1005/2020, which recommends the Minister of MAPA to suspend exports of rice and other staple food items. We found a total of 15 recommendation proposals, although some proposals were repeated by the same parliamentarian during their term.

Legislative proposals represent bills or amendments to laws presented by the Legislature. They are classified into three categories: Bill of Law (PL), Legislative Decree on International Agreements, Treaties, and Acts (PDC), and Legislative Decree Project for Suspending Normative Acts of the Executive Power (PDL). For the purposes of this research, examples include PL 4547/2016, which regulates the import of meat and related products; PDC 844/2017, which reinstates customs duties on certain agricultural products within Mercosur; and PDL 21/2019, which addresses foreign trade issues affecting the agribusiness sector. We identified a total of 12 legislative proposals during the study period.

The creation of parliamentary groups focused on Brazil's relations with specific countries or international organizations is another strategy employed by agribusiness representatives. These groups are formed through Resolution Projects (PRCs) and typically address agribusiness-related issues, such as expanding export markets, promoting technical cooperation in agriculture, and securing agricultural inputs. For instance, PRC 193/2016 established the Brazil-African Union Parliamentary Group, while PRC 32/2019 created the Brazil-India Parliamentary Group. Our study identified only four instances of parliamentary group creation, making it the least common type of action among those examined.

Even if some of the proposals are not approved or do not achieve their intended outcomes, they provide a clear pathway for members of the Rural Caucus to influence the Brazilian foreign policy agenda on behalf of agribusiness interests. This analysis is consistent with the existing literature, which recognizes the growing role of agribusiness in foreign policy issues in recent years, particularly through the actions of parliamentarians from the Rural Caucus.

Similarly, this scenario reveals the political game predicted by Milner (1997), where agribusiness groups channel their interests through their representatives in Congress, particularly within the FPA, to shape foreign policy. In this process, interest groups coordinate with the Legislative, leveraging it to engage with members of the Executive. The main interests represented by the FPA in the Legislative, as found in most of the cases, revolve around trade issues. As Onuki (2023) observes, the data analysis indicates that the Legislative is most active on matters involving international trade. For agribusiness, key topics include international agreements, the import and export of specific products, and customs duties.

Another important dimension of the FPA's work in the Legislative is its ability to influence the decision-making process through the use of information. This is seen in their requests for public hearings, summons of ministers, and efforts to gather specific information on foreign policy issues that affect agribusiness. This approach reflects a deliberate effort by the FPA to gather information directly from those who hold it to gain deeper knowledge on certain issues. This is especially important in the case of international agreements, where the Legislative plays a more prominent role in the decision-making process.

It is important to note that, in addition to the formal institutional channels analysed in this study, agribusiness can influence foreign policy through other means, such as direct lobbying of the Executive or public awareness campaigns. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that individual parliamentarians from the Rural Caucus may also attempt to shape foreign policy directly through informal or non-congressional methods. However, these avenues were not covered in this research, as the focus was on analysing the Chamber's databases.

The FPA has well-defined interests, as outlined in its statute. In general, its goal is to promote and shape public policies that foster the development of Brazil's agricultural sector (FPA, 2019)³. Our analysis of the data, focusing on the formal actions of parliamentarians, revealed several strategies used by congressional representatives to advocate for and protect agribusiness interests at the international level. These strategies reflect the political game described by Milner (1997), emphasizing its three key elements, as well as the parliamentary mobilization proposed by Dietrich (1999), which enables the Legislative to influence foreign policy and advance the interests of groups backing the parliamentarians in power – in this case, the agribusiness sector represented by the Rural Caucus in Congress.

In summary, the FPA plays a vital role in representing agribusiness interests in the formulation of public policies that advance the development of the national sector. Its influence extends to both domestic and foreign policy, underscoring the growing role of Congress in international affairs, as highlighted by Onuki (2023).

Conclusion

This article explored the role of agribusiness as an actor in Brazilian foreign policy, focusing on the actions of FPA representatives from 2015 to 2022 as well as the role of this caucus within the Legislative. Drawing on discussions about interest groups and the role of the Legislative in foreign policy, we provided a brief history of the representation of agribusiness interests in Brazilian foreign policy. Additionally, we analysed the actions of the FPA and the formal mechanisms – such as requirements, assessments, recommendations, legislative proposals, and the creation of parliamentary groups – employed in the House of Representatives to advance the sector's interests in foreign policy.

An analysis of the data extracted from the House of Representatives database revealed that, of the 128 proposals put forth by parliamentarians, the majority were requirements, which enable direct communication with authorities

³It is important to note that we acknowledge the FPA represents certain segments of the Brazilian agricultural sector and holds a particular perspective on Brazilian agriculture. While this discussion is outside the scope of this article, it can be further explored in 'Disputas e desafios do modelo agrário brasileiro: quando novos instrumentos reforçam velhas desigualdades' (HEINRICH BOLL STIFTUNG, 2022).

possessing privileged information on matters of interest to the sector. The second most common mechanism was assessments, which allow parliamentarians to actively express their stance on legislative proposals. Other mechanisms, such as recommendations, legislative proposals, and the creation of parliamentary groups, were used to a lesser extent.

Together, these mechanisms employed by the FPA in the Legislative clearly demonstrate the connection between its actions and the interests of the groups supporting the Rural Caucus in Congress, particularly commercial interests. They also reveal how the relationship between interest representation, access to information and institutional channels significantly shapes the decision-making process of public policies, including foreign policy.

As this is ongoing research, we plan to further explore the FPA's role in the Legislative, examining additional mechanisms of interest representation used by parliamentarians, including senators, in relation to the Executive. Nevertheless, the research conducted in the Chamber's database has proven valuable in supporting the argument presented in this article: that the FPA plays an important role in representing agribusiness interests in Brazil's foreign policy, a role that has been steadily growing in recent years.

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