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Bootleggers, Baptists, and Policymakers: Domestic Discourse Coalitions in EU–Mercosur Negotiations

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of coalition formation in the context of the EU–Mercosur negotiations, utilizing the "Bootleggers and Baptists" analogy to understand how diverse actors—such as import-competing sectors, civil society organizations, and policymakers—engage in issue-linkage in public debates surrounding preferential trade agreement negotiations. The framework explores three types of coalition formation: opportunistic framing, strategic alliance, and mediated convergence, each representing varying degrees of coordination between moral and economic actors. The findings suggest that active coordination between such groups is rare, yet de facto coalitions are quite important. The empirical analysis uses quantitative text analysis of online debates in France and Ireland to show that coalitions are formed through opportunistic framing, rather than strategic alliance or mediated convergence. The findings are corroborated through a congruence analysis of discourse networks demonstrating that Bootleggers and Baptists represent distinct communities, each primarily engaging with their own narratives and borrowing from the other only when it serves a strategic purpose. These findings suggest that policy outcomes are shaped more by the overlap of win-sets and the de facto coalitions necessary for ratification, rather than deliberate issue-linkage by policymakers or the formation of alliances across groups. The results have important implications for understanding how environmental, labour, and human rights concerns become intertwined with trade policy. We demonstrate that, even when there is a confluence of interests between actors, discourse coalitions tend to grow across actor types as a result of discursive opportunism rather than strategic alliances.

Keywords

coalition formation; European Union; package treaties; trade

1. Introduction

Political economic explanations of the opposition to preferential trade agreements assign pride of place to import-competing producers harmed by liberalization. When states exchange market access, international competition reduces domestic prices, putting the livelihoods of relatively less efficient producers and their employees under threat. Approaches focusing on politicization and contestation of preferential trade agreements, meanwhile, generally attribute pride of place to the independent agency of so-called civil society mobilization (Dür et al., 2023). Indeed, the greater the politicization of a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) negotiation, the less the concerns of businesses are at the forefront of political attention from both citizens and policymakers (Dür et al., 2019). In this article, we investigate how these two groups come together in contestation networks, taking issue with one-sided explanations that present politicization as a direct result of stakeholder action. Of course, (preferential) trade liberalization creates economic winners and losers. And of course, other social goals, such as environmental protection, defence of labour rights, rule of law, good governance, and development are the priority of other organized groups. The scientific challenge, however, is not to explain why those who feel harmed engage in contestation, but why those who are not harmed by market access changes take on the arguments of actors who are. The theoretical issue at stake is to explain under which circumstances actors engage in coalition formation to further their respective political goals.

To investigate this dynamic, we focus on discourse coalition formation in the context of the proposed EU–Mercosur Association Agreement, which saw contestation from agricultural producers concerned about being priced out of the EU market by cheap imports, on one hand, and civil society organizations stressing environmental justifications, on the other. Agricultural producers are known for mobilizing in defence of their particularistic interests at the expense of other diffuse groups in society (Olson, 1965). However, individual sectors, like agriculture (or the steel industry; or the pharmaceutical sector), lack the numerical and electoral clout to automatically prevail in majoritarian democratic politics. The real puzzle is therefore to explain how the agricultural sector finds itself in coalitions *with* other groups or policymakers, given that the selective interests of the agricultural sector are supported at the expense of all domestic consumers and voters (Nguyen et al., 2021).

In Europe, import-competing agricultural producers had contested the EU–Mercosur agreement from early in the negotiation stage. In the lead-up to the "political agreement" of June 29, 2019, between the EU and its Mercosur partners, a second contestation narrative emerged, and the proposed agreement was contested on the basis of Brazil's poor environmental record. At this point, opposition fit the description of a so-called "Bootleggers and Baptists" coalition, a de facto union of unlikely bedfellows between business and civil society who support the same position because it helps them achieve divergent but complementary objectives. The original authors of the Bootleggers and Baptists metaphor highlight the crucial role of policymakers in building bridges between constituencies which do not overlap. But policymakers acting as the brokers of such coalition formation is just one possible answer to how such de facto coalitions come about. We do not want to jump to the conclusion that policymakers are the magical deus ex machina actor that links different issues to make package deals pleasing to multiple constituencies. Rather, we approach patterns of coalition formation as a phenomenon to be explained, proposing a generic theory which accounts for *when* one group resonates with the demands of another.

We argue that contestation leads to further contestation because actors take on the problems of others *insomuch as available frames of contestation are useful in resolving their own problems*. The empirical implication is that constituencies with moral and material interests could lobby for policies together, separately, with the help of entrepreneurial policymakers, or not at all. The underlying argument places a very clear limitation upon when they will *not* support each other: Even when objectives are complementary, they are unlikely to lobby with others unless this helps to rectify a political problem. In short, our aim in this article is to outline a theory that explains what these political problems look like, and to describe situations in which coalitions do not form, as well as those in which they do.

We expect that Bootleggers, Baptists, and policymakers are all likely to adopt arguments of the others insomuch as this serves a *political* purpose, either by providing closure through the broad legitimization of specific interests or control by facilitating the accumulation of enforcement resources (Bartolini, 2018). Conversely, we expect them to ignore the arguments of others if such de facto coalition formation does not serve one of these political purposes. We expect Bootleggers to appropriate the concerns of Baptists when they need to show that their demands are legitimate. We expect Baptists to take on the concerns of Bootleggers when they are sufficiently popular to provide an opportunity for organizational maintenance. Finally, we expect policymakers to only take on the concerns of either Baptists or Bootleggers insomuch as they align with the revealed preferences of their constituents.

We test these expectations by analysing the language use patterns of civil society organizations, agricultural producers, members of parliament, and individuals in response to the EU–Mercosur negotiations in online debates. We do so at the actor level in France and Ireland, as these member states emerged as prominent critics in the EU–Mercosur debate. Emmanuel Macron was among the leaders to raise concerns over Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's intention to adhere to Brazil's obligations under the Paris Climate Agreement in December 2018 (which all parties to the EU-Mercosur agreement commit to uphold), and the Irish Dáil was the first European parliament to pass a motion declaring its intention to *not* ratify the proposed EU-Mercosur agreement. The two are therefore most likely cases for analysing patterns of coalition formation because opposition was so pronounced.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we present the theory of resonance—or how actors can take on the concerns of others strategically—within the literature on coalition formation. We explain how it adds to the literature on coalition formation by establishing hypothetical conditions in which a range of otherwise non-deterministic outcomes might occur. In Section 3, we apply these expectations directly to the EU–Mercosur debate to elaborate a set of empirical implications. In Section 4, we present the Twitter dataset which we use to test the theory and explain our methodological choices. The findings are presented in Section 5, and in Section 6 we draw conclusions and discuss the implications of our findings for the study of political actors or environmental networks more broadly.

2. Coalition Formation Across Policy Fields and Across Borders

2.1. Bootleggers and Baptists

Contestation against the proposed EU–Mercosur Association Agreement consisted of environmentalists arguing that the agreement was not aligned with the EU's climate change mitigation policies as well as

longstanding protectionist resistance from agricultural producers. This fits the description of a so-called "Bootleggers and Baptists" coalition, a phrase coined by Bruce Yandle based on two unlikely bedfellows finding common ground in support of a policy that required bars and liquor stores to close on Sunday (Yandle, 1983). Yandle describes an unspecified state, in which "Bootleggers" support prohibition laws because they eliminate competition once a week, and "Baptists" support them because they want the state to enforce teetotalism. The coalition therefore combines the public demands of one group motivated by values, Baptists, with another constituency which receives selective benefits, Bootleggers. Baptists need to maintain their moral high ground, while Bootleggers need to continue to reap the rewards of anti-competitive regulation. Policymakers are the entrepreneurs in this allegorical tale, which suggests that they will bridge the gap by crafting policies with both constituencies in mind (Simmons et al., 2011; Smith & Yandle, 2014; Yandle, 1989).

Bootleggers and Baptists can be used to describe a situation in which a coalition including actors motivated by complementary interests and values find common political ground in their pursuit of instrumental policy change (Darst & Dawson, 2008; Vogel, 1995; Winslett, 2021). In those EU member states where public resistance to the proposed EU–Mercosur Association Agreement did take form, agricultural producers and civil society organisations would seemingly correspond to such a coalition. Not only did agricultural producers advocate restrictions on import competition, but climate change mitigation efforts were also raised as the basis for these restrictions by a number of actors. As early as February 2016, the largest agricultural labour union in France had claimed that Brazilian beef was less sustainable than European beef (Copa & Cogeca, 2016), and in 2018, the UK-based civil society organization Fern published a report which detailed the toll Brazilian ranchers were taking on deforestation (Fern, 2018). When forest fires in the Amazon were raging in the summer of 2019, many actors presented forest fires as being caused by land clearing for cattle grazing and feed production (e.g., Greenpeace, 2019). When concern over imports is mixed with concern over the environment, European agricultural producers benefit from the moral support of environmentalists for their anti-competitive policy position, while environmentalists ground their concerns in a tangible European constituency harmed by foreign activities which they oppose.

The language of Bootleggers and Baptists has an intuitive appeal and simplicity which helps to explain how coalitions succeed. We, on our part, begin with a cast of characters which is familiar to political economic analysis. Factor-, sector-, and firm-centred approaches have long emphasized how the policy needs of different economic actors provide incentives for lobbying, while scholars of politicization have more recently focused on how civil society groups have been instrumental in raising salience and opposition to trade agreements (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2016; Eckhardt, 2018; Eckhardt & Poletti, 2016; Hiscox, 2002; Rogowski, 1989; Van Ommeren, 2023; Young, 2017). The Bootleggers and Baptists logic collapses all the complexity of this society-centred model of political economy down to a world in which actors outside government have one of two kinds of interests: moral or material. With a generous reading of the intentions of Baptists, we could also claim that they are promoting a general interest (despite the will of people who want to drink on Sunday), whereas Bootleggers promote their own specific interests. In this way, the Bootleggers and Baptists logic also touches upon the Olsonian dynamic of concentrated versus diffuse interests, though the logic does not develop those interest types into causally relevant distinctions (Olson, 1965).

The dichotomous division of non-state actors into Bootleggers and Baptists also corresponds with the division within the interest group literature which sets actors who serve the public interest apart from those

with their own material interests, with different sets of behavioural expectations and framing strategies associated with each group (Dür & Mateo, 2016; Winslett, 2021). Whether we think of them as "insiders and outsiders" (Dür & Mateo, 2016), the holders of different types of resources (Berkhout, 2013; Beyers & Kerremans, 2007; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Salisbury, 1969), or providers of different types of incentives (Rothenberg, 1988), Bootleggers and Baptists aligns with how interest group scholars conceive of the causally relevant differences among different types of groups. Finally, the Bootleggers and Baptists analogy also presents office-seeking policymakers in line with political theories: rational, strategic, and self-interested (Dür & De Bièvre, 2007).

While the parsimony and familiarity of Bootleggers and Baptists lay a strong foundation for theorizing about coalition formation, we still see two avenues for improvement. First, there is remaining ambiguity on the side of the dependent variable: It is unclear what range of coalition formation outcomes are possible among these diverse actors. What happens if policymakers have already committed to a different course of action because they are also accountable to yet other societal actors? What if policymakers are already captured by either Bootleggers or Baptists—do they still feign interest in the other? Or what if the reputational consequences of cooperation among morally and materially motivated actors are not so severe as they are in the allegorical tale of mobsters (Bootleggers) and priests (Baptists)? Even though there are other logical possibilities, the theory only presents one version of coalition formation, where policymakers bridge a great divide.

Second, to make the theory testable, it is necessary to specify which causal conditions correspond with different coalition formation outcomes. If the differences among actors alone lead to coalition formation, this would be structurally deterministic. If the outcome relies solely on the ingenuity of policymakers, this only leaves us only with a clever versus stupid policymaker explanation. In short, a specification of the balance between structure and agency is necessary in order to turn Bootleggers and Baptists from a descriptive metaphorical tale into an explanatory political science theory.

2.2. How Actors Coalesce

On the variation in outcomes, the Bootleggers and Baptists story presented by Smith and Yandle suggests that two groups of actors with common interests are joined together by policymakers (Smith & Yandle, 2014). They are the "policy brokers" envisioned by the advocacy coalition framework of Sabatier (1988). They bridge separate channels of policy demands by proposing solutions which find common ground without treading on the core beliefs of either group (Cairney, 2020; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). This resolution invokes particularly adept policymakers, and uncooperative interest groups. But policymakers may also be unable to bridge the interests of two groups and may feel compelled to demonstrate stability in their policy choices or valorise their past decisions (Grube, 2016; Meguid, 2005). They may also be limited in their capacity to change course by the restructuring of veto players within government after an election, or after an institutional change like the entering into force of a treaty.

In the event that policymakers are locked in by their existing positions, two more potential outcomes exist. First, other actors who are well led and equipped to learn and adapt may produce an "external shock" by transforming an external event into a policy failure to which a new, different response is necessary, creating a focusing event within the policy subsystem (Cairney, 2013, 2016; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible, 2006). In other words, there is a possibility that a Bootleggers and Baptists "coalition" could actually be a

unilateral push by one of these well-equipped groups in response to an external event that they attempt to produce, i.e., make relevant to a policy debate. In such a case, a group would attempt to turn the event into a "shock" by means of creative framing and possibly even employing the frames of unrelated organizations to do so. For example, a greenwashing campaign by a business incorporates the language of environmentalist critics without their consent (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). On the other hand, it is possible that both Bootleggers and Baptists use the same external event to advocate the same policy change, using the same framing strategy, and that they do so irrespective of past positions of policymakers. In that case, policymakers are not brokers insomuch as targets of a focused collaborative effort. So, there are actually three possible coalition formation outcomes between groups with mutually supporting objectives: (a) *opportunistic framing* by either Baptists or Bootleggers; (b) a *strategic alliance* between Bootleggers and Baptists; and (c) *mediated convergence* enabled by policymakers.

There is also a fourth logical possibility that there is no capacity or necessity on the part of the interest groups, and no willingness on the part of politicians, and therefore no resonance, even though businesses are harmed by a policy decision and civil society organizations are aligned with their policy objectives. In this fourth possible outcome, there is a *de facto coalition* between Bootleggers and Baptists but neither adapts their framing strategy to reflect the expressed concerns of others. This last possibility is akin to Olson's concept of "latent" groups which could emerge, but do not.

2.3. Success Conditions

Next, we specify *why* these field-spanning coalitions are likely to occur, or not. Our argument rests on the assumption that political dilemmas associated with each type of actor affect the likelihood that they will participate in political struggles. This builds on the principle that not just stakeholders, but also "bystanders" play a critical role in determining the outcome of political struggles, and that they are influenced by the narratives which frame political conflict (Schattschneider, 1960). Whenever contestation occurs, those who are unaffected, or at least do not share the stated concerns of mobilized constituencies, face a choice about how or whether to become involved. Their options include actively participating in contestation, free-riding on the efforts of others, confronting mobilized constituencies, or avoiding them altogether (Dür et al., 2023). The theory which we advance is that Bootleggers, Baptists, and policymakers can all be expected to become actively involved, or "resonate" with mobilized constituencies, insomuch as this resolves a problem they face.

2.3.1. Bootleggers

Market actors advocating specific interests, such as agricultural producers, have an interest in allowing market access to their own suppliers while limiting access to competitors and the suppliers of competitors' inputs. Their control over markets is therefore dependent on their capacity to legitimate levels of exclusion which work to their advantage. If others are contesting or promoting market access on the basis of general interests, market actors can resonate to show that their own positions are legitimate, even if they are self-interested. Bootleggers should be expected to resonate *insomuch as the support of policymakers is uncertain*, i.e., insomuch as they need legitimacy.

2.3.2. Baptists

Meanwhile, interest organizations advocating for societal interests, like civil society organizations, operate in a highly competitive environment in which they cannot, by definition, exclude others from participating. They have no authority to do so, and it would work contrary to their stated objective of mobilizing support for public goods. When individuals such as agricultural producers contest a policy, interest groups can resonate to show that their positions are also representative of this mobilized constituency, appealing to those who hold resources necessary for sustaining their own campaigns. Existing research suggests that even the expectation that such a constituency exists and could be mobilized is enough to motivate bandwagoning by interest groups (Dür & Mateo, 2014; Halpin, 2011; Hamilton, 2023). We can therefore assume that the presence of an actual mobilized constituency should lead interest organizations to resonate as a means of seeking the resources they need to pursue political objectives. Baptists should be expected to resonate *insomuch as the mobilized constituency provides an opportunity for obtaining resources through representation.*

2.3.3. Policymakers

Finally, policymakers share characteristics with both Bootleggers and Baptists. On one hand, they are a lot like interest groups who need to appeal to mobilized constituencies in order to obtain votes, funding, expertise, and other resources which allow their organizations to survive. They should therefore be just as attentive to the voices of mobilized constituencies and attempt to echo these voices in their own policy positions. On the other hand, policymakers are a lot like Bootleggers in the sense that they have an interest in dominating the market by excluding competition. Insomuch as narratives are popular among the electorate, they represent a source of potential competition which rival candidates can seize to obtain power in political institutions. It is therefore in the interest of officeholders to incorporate the criticisms of mobilized constituencies into their own discourse in order to prevent rival policymakers from taking their offices. Policymakers should be expected to resonate *insomuch as adopting narratives provides an opportunity for support*, either to take advantage themselves, or prevent others from doing so.

3. Changing Discourse Coalitions

As a result of the strategic behaviour of actors, we expect that the composition of *discourse coalitions* should change over time as actors resonate with stakeholder contestation. By discourse coalitions, we mean de facto coalitions of actors *who use the same narrative* to describe a policy or problem (Hajer, 1995; Leifeld, 2020). This changing composition should reflect Bootleggers resonating insomuch as they need legitimacy, Baptists resonating insomuch as there is an opportunity to represent mobilized constituencies, and policymakers resonating insomuch as an opportunity for support becomes available. In this section, we explore the empirical implications of these generic expectations in relation to the proposed EU–Mercosur Association Agreement in two member states, France and Ireland. Both France and Ireland are home to major beef exporters which opposed the agreement on economic grounds, and both are also home to strong environmental movements with organizations capable of raising concerns about the impact of the agreement on fires in the Amazon basin. The two states are also very similar in terms of median income, attitudes towards the environment, and agricultural employment levels, suggesting that neither is more inclined to accept narratives based on economic or moral incentives alone. While the debate in France eventually garnered more public attention after a high-profile spat between Macron and Bolsonaro, public

debate centred around the same themes and actors from both France and Ireland were readily quoted and commented upon in the others' national media.

3.1. Representations of Market Actors: The "Farmers" Narrative

Chronologically, the first narrative which was used to contest the EU–Mercosur Association Agreement was what we call the "Farmers" narrative—with agricultural producers opposing the agreement on the basis of the threat it posed to their sector since negotiations began in 2001. When agricultural producers contest policies on their own, there is a disjuncture between the responsibilities of government to a broader population and the selective benefits which are claimed by these producers, their employees, their subcontractors, and their associations. Even if their concerns are legitimate, they are representative of the interests of a very limited segment of the population. Whereas civil society organizations are able to provide political information about a broad constituency which might threaten the government's capacity to maintain office or produce legislation, agricultural producers and their associations only provide political information about the preferences of a constituency with limited electoral impact. This is true in most EU member states where only 1–2% of the population is employed in the agricultural sector.

But beyond their own capacity to control access to specific government offices, agricultural producers are also an essential element of an agrarian master frame which celebrates notions of pastoral virtue, market competition, national history, and the rights of domestic producers (Mooney & Hunt, 1996). In this master frame, agricultural producers are not presented as the suppliers of chemical inputs, biotechnology patents, and industrial machinery, nor as large land-owning investors who profit from food production in the EU. Neither are they depicted as categories of labourers who are denied rights afforded to workers more generally, either through their categorization as seasonal labour in northern countries, or through informal systems of acceptance and lack of enforcement which allow undocumented migrant labour and modern slavery to persist in the south. Instead, agricultural producers are presented as "Farmers." "Farmers" are Europeans who symbolically represent hard work and tradition as well as modernity—being symbolized by the industrial machinery they use to block access to city centres or spray industrial inputs like milk and fertilizer on symbols of power. This legitimating master frame can be used by other political actors to signal a commitment to these aspects of an imagined community, regardless of whether agricultural producers are really pastoral, competitive, or the prime beneficiaries of their own labour. Eurobarometer polls show that over 90% of Europeans believe that agriculture and rural areas are "Very" or "Fairly important for our future" even though nearly as many have never heard of or don't know the details of the Common Agricultural Policy, and around 60% believe preferential trade agreements are positive for EU agriculture and consumers (European Commission, 2018). We would argue that these paradoxes of public opinion underline the symbolic quality of the "Farmers" narrative, demonstrating that many Europeans, if asked to form an opinion, will identify with the pastoral virtue of European farmers without understanding the details of agricultural policy.

For societal interest actors, the representative image of local "Farmers" harmed by faraway practices renders demands concrete and local. On one hand, it helps them to connect abstract or normative arguments directly to the intended beneficiaries of a democratic process. When civil society organizations wish for a government to help protect an endangered forest beyond the geographic scope of its jurisdiction, protecting downtrodden "Farmers" from unfair competition becomes a very specific and tangible way of working towards that broad policy goal while localizing the harm done by environmental degradation. On the other hand, and this is in

line with the hypothesized causal mechanism, by using the "Farmers" narrative, civil society organizations can appeal directly to agricultural producers. By formulating their claims in a manner that is consistent with the values of a potential support constituency that is already mobilized, they can appeal to an additional group of potential supporters that they know will at least partially agree with their newly formulated position.

Likewise, policymakers and political parties wish to show potential supporters that they are serving their interests to gather electoral and material support. They cannot easily accomplish this task by supporting policies which defend the interests of wealthy landowners and raise food prices. Instead, they can show their devotion to "Farmers" whose symbolic qualities are shared by the electorate and thus navigate a field full of veto players and other institutional obstacles such as majority voting requirements or public consultations. In other words, the "Farmers" narrative can serve a dual purpose for policymakers, allowing them to make decisions which seem representative of their electorate while buying in the potential veto players which they rely upon to pass legislation.

3.2. Representations of Societal Interests: The "Fires" Narrative

While "Farmers" is one discursive tool which agricultural producers' associations use to legitimate their particularistic demands, societal interests claimed by civil society organizations can help to legitimate these self-interested positions. Since the re-launch of the EU–Mercosur agreement, many "civil society" actors have advanced what we call the "Fires" narrative. Concerns over the environmental impact of Mercosur agriculture had already been advanced by labour unions in 2016 (Copa & Cogeca, 2016), but the issue came to a head in the summer of 2019 when the size and intensity of forest fires in the Amazon basin surged (Both Ends, 2019). The image of the Amazon on fire was mobilized as a symbol of how the agreement would exacerbate climate change, with campaigners arguing that direct human intervention and policy failure were key causes of the catastrophically strong fire season. This argument came in a context where climate change was on top of the public agenda, ranking among the "two most important issues facing the EU at the moment" across Europe, including in France and Ireland (European Commission, 2019).

Our argument is that *whether* market actors like agricultural producers avail themselves of this opportunity to broaden the appeal of their particularistic arguments depends crucially on whether they need legitimacy. If policymakers are already receptive to the opposition of Bootleggers, the frames of civil society groups add little more than rhetorical flourish. However, if there is uncertainty as to whether policymakers will adhere to their demands, market actors are likely to seize the opportunity to embed their discontent within broader societal interests. As a result of the European Commission's push to reach an agreement and eventually pass it through the EU's deliberative bodies, including national parliaments, French and Irish agricultural producers should then be expected to resonate with civil society.

As the position of civil society organizations gains traction in public debates, policymakers should also be compelled to resonate. The more citizens have revealed their alignment, the more they present an opportunity for policymakers who rely on public support like elected leaders, as well as policymakers who need to bypass many veto players in government. Even when policymakers have other priorities or would prefer to ignore politicized issues like the Amazon fires, the most expedient course of action is to pay lip service to critics. For opposition policymakers, salient contestation campaigns present an opportunity to align with a group which has revealed their preferences, and they too should be expected to focus on the most salient issues.

4. Data and Methods

The preceding discussion has empirical implications regarding how political actors in the EU and Mercosur countries are likely to resonate with one another in response to contestation of the proposed EU–Mercosur Association Agreement. We have advanced four hypotheses regarding the extent to which actors resonate by adopting the narratives of others:

H1: As the salience of the Fires narrative increases, Bootleggers resonate with Baptists.

H2: As the salience of the Farmers narrative increases, Baptists resonate with Bootleggers.

H3: As the salience of the Fires narrative increases, policymakers resonate with Baptists.

H4: As the salience of the Farmers narrative increases, policymakers resonate with Bootleggers.

Each of these hypotheses reflects empirical implications at the level of individuals or collective actors, reflecting a more general expectation that they adapt the language they use insomuch as it serves a parallel political purpose, unrelated to the position they are advocating.

We test these hypotheses using a dataset composed of all Twitter interactions containing the phrase "EU–Mercosur" or "UE–Mercosur" in the period of 2014–2021. This includes all tweets, retweets, quotes, and reply tweets containing the name of the agreement in the two-year period before the resumption of negotiations and the two-year period after the conclusion of negotiations in 2019. We will refer to these collectively as tweets. Timestamps on tweets make it easy to position narratives in relation to one another as well as major events like the conclusion of negotiations or rejection of the agreement. Users are also forced to abide by a strict character limit, meaning that the things which are observed, tweets, are all very similar: They are a maximum of 280 characters long and use a common syntax for identifying ideas that are relevant to or taken directly from other users. The brevity of these expressions makes it so that word placement and text structure matter very little. Twitter is therefore very suited to comparing the positions of different actor types because it reduces them to a homogeneous, time-stamped format which can be processed semi-automatically.

Beyond providing a relatively uniform sample of text from each type of actor, it matters whether agricultural producers, civil society organizations, and policymakers on Twitter are typical of those engaged in the EU–Mercosur debate. This concerns both who is represented on Twitter and how they behave. While the platform is known to over-represent white, educated, and socio-economically well-off men, this bias is not unique to online settings but reflects broader patterns of political representation offline. Moreover, Twitter activity tends to be very concentrated: A quarter of the users made up for 97% of the activity on the site (McClain et al., 2021). This means a few highly active accounts—some of which are official organizational accounts—drive most of the discussion. Our hypotheses are formulated at the level of actor types (Bootleggers, Baptists, and policymakers), based on their incentives to solve political problems, rather than assuming a fully representative sample of all members of these categories. While the actors we observe on Twitter do not speak for all farmers, environmentalists, or policymakers, they do provide empirical examples of how members of these groups articulate their interests in the context of the EU–Mercosur negotiations.

We acknowledge that these Twitter users are not statistically representative of their broader constituencies, nor do they always speak in an official capacity. However, many are verified users or institutional accounts, and their discourse is informative for understanding how narratives circulate and resonate within and across actor types.

4.1. The Dataset

The dataset was prepared by scraping approximately 130,000 tweets containing "EU–Mercosur" or "UE–Mercosur" in 2021, before academic access to Twitter (now re-branded as X) was curtailed. These hyphenated referents were used to maximize relevance across multiple language spheres while maintaining content validity. Expanding the scope to include a broader range of linguistic variants, such as "Mercosur" AND ("agreement" OR "abkommen" OR "accord" OR "accuerdo," etc.), could have captured more geographically diverse engagement, but would have risked including off-topic or ambiguous content. In the transition from Twitter to X, not only was academic access restricted, but many users from the political mainstream closed their accounts and fled the platform, so it is no longer possible to update the dataset.

The subset of the corpus used for this analysis consists of all tweets originating from France and Ireland in the years 2014–2021. These are considered most likely cases for politicization and resonance because French president Macron was at the centre of a mediatized row over the agreement in the summer of 2019, and because the Daíl became the first European parliament to pass a motion against the agreement around the same time. To locate French and Irish tweets, the user-entered location for each actor making a tweet was converted into geographical coordinates using the "tidygeocoder" R package and then reverse geo-coded to determine which state each tweet originated in. The remaining 6,400 unresolved user-entered locations were coded by hand. To identify actor types, users who had sent tweets from France and Ireland were compiled into lists of users which were hand-coded as "Bootleggers," "Baptists," policymakers, and individuals. Other categories of actor types included media, thinktanks, and bots; however, they are not considered in the current analysis. The hand-coding of actors was performed by looking up actors on Twitter and using information contained in the "about me" sections of their profile to determine if they were affiliated with a civil society organization, political party, or agricultural producers' association. All 1,544 Irish users and 2,255 of the 17,430 French users were coded in this way. The French users were selected based on their eigenvector centrality on a mention network constructed for an earlier draft of this article. This ensures that the actors most engaged in the online debate were included in the analysis and optimizes coding time. The actor type was then appended as metadata for each tweet. After these operations, the dataset which we analysed consisted of 544 tweets by policymakers, 371 by Bootleggers, 769 by Baptists, and 2,303 by individuals not visibly aligned with a party, agricultural producers' association, or interest group.

4.2. Narrative Scoring and Congruence

To identify narrative use, we used a multilingual dictionary-based approach with the "quanteda" R package. Dictionaries for the "Fires" and "Farmers" narratives were compiled in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. Each tweet was scored for the presence of these terms. For each actor group, we calculated the proportion of tweets per month that included each narrative. This proportion serves as our measure of narrative salience, capturing how widely a narrative was adopted at any given time.

To measure narrative alignment between actor groups, we calculated pairwise congruence as follows:

$$\text{Congruence}_{ij} = 1 - |x_i - x_j| / \max(x_i, x_j)$$

Where x_i and x_j are the monthly narrative salience scores (proportions) for actor groups i and j. This yields a value from 0 (complete divergence) to 1 (perfect alignment) and is undefined if neither actor group used the narrative in a given month.

4.3. Statistical Models

We test our hypotheses using two sets of linear regressions. First, we regress monthly congruence between actor types on the narrative salience among individuals. This tests whether non-aligned users act as catalysts of discursive resonance. Second, we regress changes in narrative salience by each actor group on changes in narrative use by individuals. This tests whether narrative shifts among Bootleggers, Baptists, and policymakers can be predicted by contemporaneous shifts in public discourse. All models use monthly data and are estimated separately for the "Fires" and "Farmers" narratives. We also split the analysis into two periods: January–August 2019 (when the ratification outcome was uncertain) and September 2019–December 2021 (when ratification stalled), to reflect shifting strategic incentives.

To account for the interdependent structure of temporal network data, we conducted regression diagnostics including the Durbin-Watson test for autocorrelation and the Breusch-Pagan test for heteroscedasticity. These tests revealed some assumption violations with respect to autocorrelation in split-period models. We therefore re-estimated all models using standard errors clustered by month and included controls for group-level tweet activity (tweets/month) to account for heterogeneity in visibility. These adjustments did not alter the direction or significance of core findings and, in some cases, improved model fit.

We did not include lagged variables, as our hypotheses focus on narrative resonance at a given time, not delayed effects. Our expectation is that actors adopt narratives rapidly while they are politically useful. This assumption is consistent with historical institutionalist theories emphasizing punctuated equilibrium, interest group literature on attention cascades, and social movements literature on "moments of madness," (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Halpin, 2011; Tarrow, 1993). Moreover, since our data are binned monthly, short-term fluctuations are likely smoothed over, reducing the impact of temporal noise.

5. Findings

The results of the regression analysis examining whether individuals' use of narratives predicts congruence among actor types are presented in Table A1 (see Supplementary FIle) and visualized in Figure 1. The figure shows coefficient estimates (represented by fire and tractor icons), 95% confidence intervals, and levels of statistical significance. The models use the proportion of tweets from unaffiliated individuals in each month that include the "Fires" or "Farmers" narrative as the independent variable and test whether this salience predicts similarity in narrative use among actor groups. Results for the "Fires" narrative show strong evidence of resonance. As unaffiliated individuals increasingly referenced fires in the Amazon, Bootleggers and Baptists became significantly more aligned in their narrative use ($\beta = 0.528$, $p = 0.004$), as did Baptists and policymakers ($\beta = 0.602$, $p < 0.001$) and Bootleggers and policymakers ($\beta = 0.683$, $p < 0.001$). These models show relatively high R^2 values (0.44, 0.58, and 0.73, respectively), indicating that a

substantial share of variance in actor congruence is explained by the salience of the "Fires" narrative among individuals. Regression diagnostics (reported in full in Table A5 in the Supplementary File) reveal no strong violations of OLS assumptions: Durbin-Watson statistics range from 1.66 to 2.54, with no significant evidence of autocorrelation. Among the three models testing the effects of the "Fires" narrative, two show no signs of heteroscedasticity, while one—Bootlegger–Policymaker—shows significant heteroscedasticity (Breusch-Pagan $p = 0.024$) despite no indication of autocorrelation (Durbin-Watson = 1.75, $p = 0.18$). This may reflect the episodic nature of politicized policy debates on Twitter, which tend to take place in concentrated episodes.

By contrast, results for the "Farmers" narrative are more mixed. Only Baptist–Policymaker congruence was significantly predicted by narrative salience among individuals ($\beta = 0.544$, $p = 0.001$), with a moderate R^2 of 0.45. The effects for Bootlegger–Policymaker ($\beta = 0.235$, $p = 0.114$) and Baptist–Bootlegger ($\beta = 0.163$, $p = 0.334$) were not statistically significant, and the explained variance was comparatively low ($R^2 = 0.26$ and 0.20, respectively). Diagnostics again suggest no major issues, with all Durbin-Watson values near 2 and non-significant Breusch-Pagan results. For the models testing the "Farmers" narrative, Durbin-Watson statistics range from 1.91 to 2.54; while one model (Bootlegger–Policymaker) shows a relatively high statistic (Durbin-Watson = 2.54), none of the associated p-values are significant (all $p > 0.33$), and all Breusch-Pagan tests indicate homoscedasticity ($p > 0.18$), suggesting no major violations of OLS assumptions.

Taken together, these findings support the idea that individual narrative salience—particularly around environmental harm—coincides with greater alignment among different actor groups. The effect of the "Fires" narrative is broader and more consistent than that of the "Farmers" narrative, suggesting that civil society framing may play a stronger role in generating resonance across actor types.

To better understand which actor groups are driving the narrative congruence identified above, we tested whether narrative salience among unaffiliated individuals predicts changes in narrative use by Bootleggers,

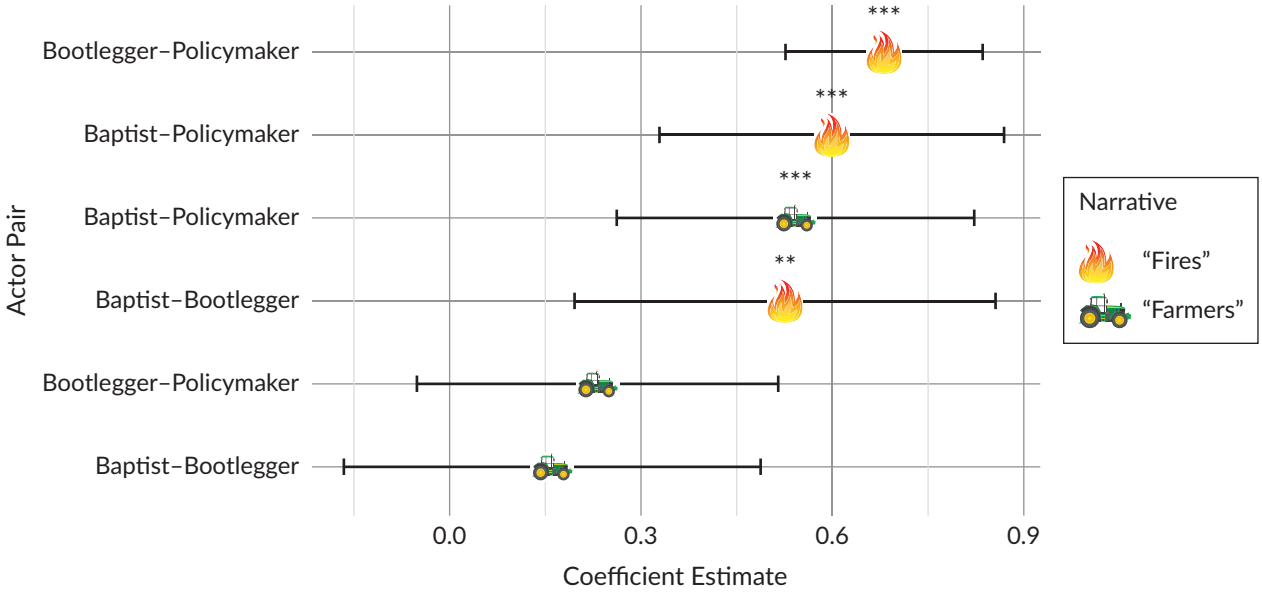

Figure 1. Effect of narrative salience on actor congruence: coefficient estimates, with 95% confidence intervals. Note: Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Baptists, and policymakers. The results are presented in Table A2 in the Supplementary File and visualized in Figure 2, which displays coefficient estimates (represented by fire and tractor icons), confidence intervals, and significance levels for each model.

Overall, two actor-narrative relationships emerge as statistically significant. First, as unaffiliated individuals increased their use of the "Fires" narrative, policymakers became significantly more likely to adopt the same narrative ($\beta = 0.638$, $p = 0.017$). This model has a modest explanatory value ($R^2 = 0.26$), suggesting a meaningful but partial relationship between public salience and policymaker adoption. Second, increased use of the "Farmers" narrative by individuals is associated with a significant increase in use by Baptists ($\beta = 0.596$, $p = 0.005$), with a higher R^2 value of 0.34, indicating that public cues may be especially resonant among civil society actors. Other coefficients were not statistically significant. Neither Bootleggers nor Baptists show a significant relationship with individuals' use of the "Fires" narrative ($\beta = 0.073$, $p = 0.895$; $\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.368$, respectively), and Bootleggers and policymakers also did not significantly adopt the "Farmers" narrative ($\beta = 0.091$, $p = 0.469$; $\beta = 0.447$, $p = 0.146$, respectively). These results support the idea that narrative resonance is actor-specific, being driven particularly by policymakers' and Baptists' responses to changes in public salience.

Regression diagnostics for the models in Table A2 are presented in Table A6 in the Supplementary File. Durbin-Watson statistics range from 1.90 to 2.84, and none of the associated p-values indicate significant autocorrelation. One model—Bootlegger responses to the "Fires" narrative—shows a relatively high Breusch-Pagan test statistic ($p = 0.099$), suggesting a potential concern for heteroscedasticity, though it does not cross the conventional threshold for significance. All other models show no evidence of heteroscedasticity ($p > 0.28$). These results suggest that the models in Table A2 in the Supplementary File do not suffer from violations of OLS assumptions.

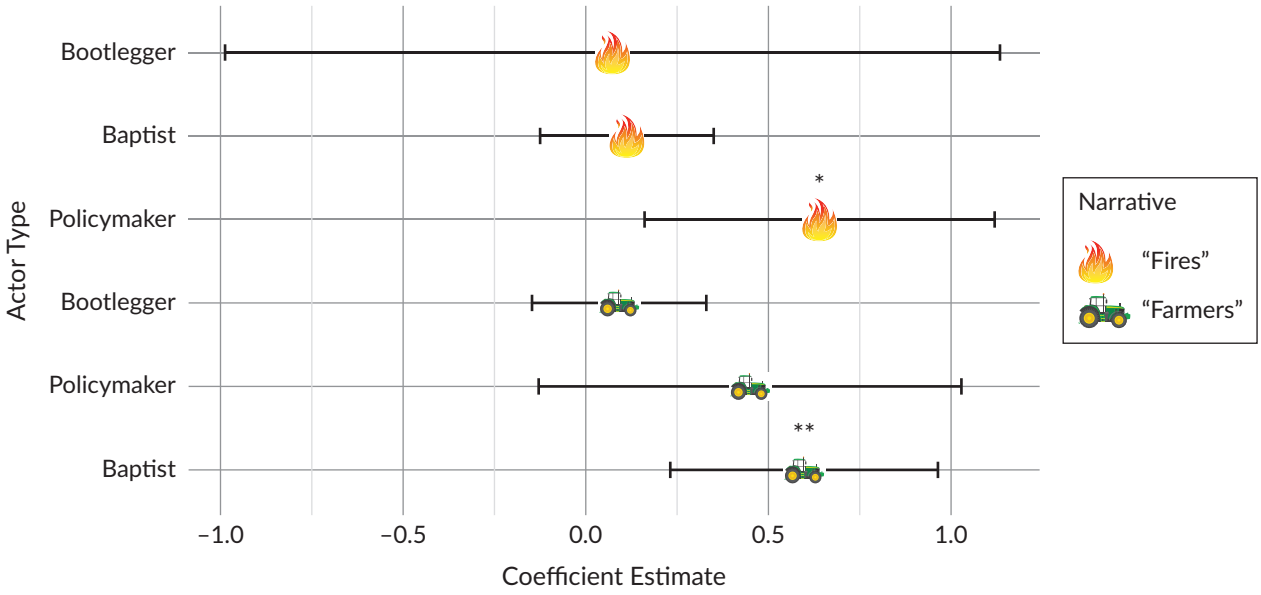

Figure 2. Effect of narrative salience on actor resonance: coefficient estimates, with 95% confidence intervals. Note: Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Notably absent in Figure 2 are the Bootleggers, who do not appear to adopt the "Fires" narrative as it becomes more salient. Since Bootleggers are expected to resonate when they lack legitimacy, we tested whether their behaviour shifts under conditions of heightened uncertainty. To do so, we divided the data into two periods: "Agreement Pending" (January–August 2019), when ratification of the EU–Mercosur agreement was still possible, and "Ratification Stalled" (September 2019–December 2021), after key actors in France and Ireland had publicly rejected the deal. The average proportion of tweets using each narrative is visualized in Figure 3, which shows clearly divergent trends beginning shortly before ratification stalled in August 2019. During the "Agreement Pending" period, and especially as the salience of the "Fires" narrative grew, agricultural producers had greater need to align themselves with civil society narratives to legitimize their opposition. For policymakers, the "Fires" narrative became a greater opportunity as the relative salience of each narrative shifted. For Baptists, meanwhile, the need to localize their demands in reference to the needs of "Farmers" evaporates as "Fires" become the salient focal point. The results of this analysis are presented in Table A3 in the Supplementary File.

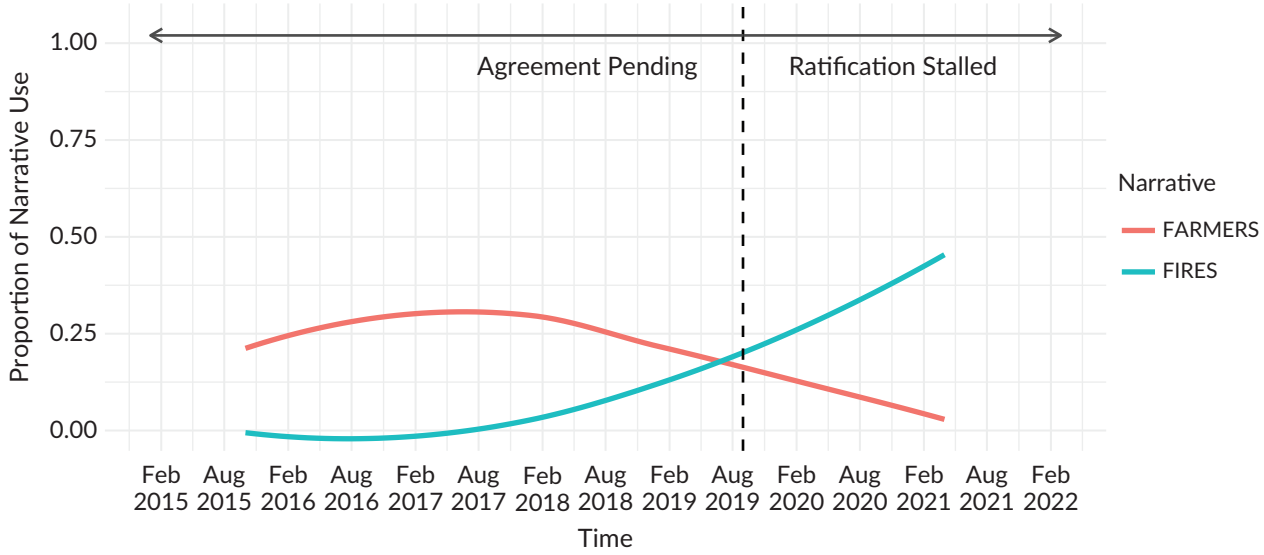

Figure 3. Proportion of narrative use over time (smoothed).

The correlation between Bootleggers' and individuals' use of the "Fires" narrative was highly significant during the pending period ($\beta = 1.160$, $p < 0.001$), but not after the ratification process had stalled ($\beta = 9.656$, $p = 0.143$). The extremely large coefficient and high standard error in the second period suggest that narrative use by Bootleggers became far more erratic once their position was no longer threatened. This is consistent with the idea that Bootleggers strategically resonate with civil society actors only when seeking legitimacy.

In contrast, Baptists show a consistent relationship with the "Farmers" narrative across both periods. During the pending phase, the correlation was significant ($\beta = 0.575$, $p = 0.014$), and it remained significant, even slightly increasing, after ratification stalled ($\beta = 0.670$, $p = 0.008$). This suggests that civil society actors continued to engage with agricultural narratives, perhaps to broaden their coalitional appeal. Policymakers, meanwhile, appear to adapt their framing depending on which narratives are more publicly salient. In the pending period, they were significantly associated with the "Farmers" narrative ($\beta = 1.034$, $p = 0.006$), whereas in the stalled period, they shifted toward the "Fires" narrative ($\beta = 0.522$, $p = 0.050$). This transition

implies a shift in alignment from concentrated producer interests to broader civil society concerns as the political landscape changed.

Diagnostics for the actor response models (included in Table A7 in the Supplementary File) reveal significant autocorrelation in two cases—Baptist responses to the "Fires" narrative during the "Agreement Pending" period (Durbin-Watson = 1.375, $p < 0.001$) and policymaker responses to the "Fires" narrative during the "Ratification Stalled" period (Durbin-Watson = 1.097, $p = 0.037$). A third model—policymaker responses to the "Farmers" narrative during the early period—also shows borderline evidence of autocorrelation (Durbin-Watson = 1.346, $p = 0.058$). This autocorrelation indicates that monthly changes in narrative use are not fully independent, which aligns with existing research on the dynamics of attention and influence in policy debates. Indeed, prior work emphasizes how actors engage in communicative feedback loops to generate "attention cascades" (Halpin, 2011), suggesting that some degree of serial correlation is an inherent feature of resonance dynamics. While we cannot eliminate this effect entirely, we mitigate its impact by clustering standard errors by month. Since none of the models exhibits significant heteroscedasticity, clustering by activity was not necessary.

Together, these results underscore the conditional nature of resonance: Bootleggers align with Baptists only when they need legitimacy, while Baptists consistently resonate with Bootleggers when doing so offers an opportunity to represent a known support constituency, and policymakers adaptively shift their alignment depending on which narratives dominate public discourse.

Based on this analysis, we find a strong corroboration of H1, that Bootleggers align their positions with civil society organizations when they need legitimacy. When assessed over the entire period, the correlation between individuals' use of the Fires narrative and resonance by Bootleggers is not significant, and the confidence intervals appear to extend from −0.76 to 0.95, showing wide variability and effectively demonstrating that they appear to be nearly random. But if we consider the behaviour of Bootleggers only during the time period in which the Fires narrative was available and when agricultural producers had a greater need to legitimate their self-interested position, the relationship is stronger than any other in our analysis. This is especially indicative of opportunistic framing given that congruence between Bootleggers and Baptists was weakest in the long run, and that the same correlation is absent in all other periods.

We also find a strong corroboration of H2, that civil society organizations align their positions with agricultural producers when a group of potential supporters reveals itself. This finding is robust across the entire period as well as in the two shorter periods in which the agreement was pending, and when ratification was stalled. We also find support for H3 and H4, that policymakers align their narratives with both agricultural producers and civil society organizations when their ideas are shown to be popular among potential supporters. While policymakers were more likely to adopt the narratives of civil society organisations across the entire period, sub-setting the data revealed that they were more likely to do so in the period when the public had also started to link the agreement to the civil society narrative. Otherwise, they were inclined to align with agricultural producers. Given that agricultural producers withdrew from public debate once ratification was stalled, we cannot draw definitive conclusions about how policymakers choose between competing narratives. But the general trend which we observed was a transition by policymakers away from the Farmers narrative to the Fires narrative, effectively moving from more concentrated to diffuse interests to justify their positions.

Discourse coalition formation thus appears to be the result of opportunistic framing by some actors, yet not others: Bootleggers do not readily take on the positions of Baptists; Baptists are willing to take on the narratives of Bootleggers; and policymakers appear quite willing to take on the general interest arguments of civil society organizations but were also willing to adopt narratives defending the specific interests of agricultural producers when they were more salient. Hence, Bootleggers do not seem to make consistent use of the moral cover provided by Baptists. This finding is thus in line with scholarly findings that economic actors tend to withdraw from public debates as they become more salient (Dür et al., 2015, 2019). We add the rather surprising finding that this is also true even when the public supports them.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we have set out to transform the Bootleggers and Baptists metaphor into a theory of domestic coalition formation so as to shed light on the opportunities and obstacles to package treaty-making at the international level. We have conceived of policymakers as policy-brokers, providing solutions which please multiple constituencies, and of business and environmental groups as fabricating exogenous shocks to the policy subsystem through the mobilization of their resources, individually or collectively. The emergence of Bootlegger–Baptist coalitions could come about as the result of opportunistic framing, deliberate strategic alliance building, or convergence mediated by policymakers. A fourth theoretical possibility would be a de facto coalition which applies to instances when no actor blends the positions of two groups into a common one.

Our theory of resonance consists of a set of causal arguments about why different groups might become engaged. To that end, we specified conditions under which different actors are likely to advance each other's arguments, namely when taking on the argument of another actor resolves a problem within their own field of interaction, as it provides an opportunity to obtain support from actors who have revealed their alignment with a narrative. We derived concrete, empirically testable hypotheses about how this could be demonstrated in the EU–Mercosur case.

First and foremost, we found that Baptist–Bootlegger coalitions do indeed not emerge as the result of *strategic alliance* formation in the form of genuine collective action between business and environmental groups. Very much in line with the metaphorical story of Bootleggers and Baptists, which do not wish to be associated with each other in public, business and environmental groups do not actively coordinate their efforts. Instead, they merely resonate with each other by engaging in *opportunistic framing*. We found this behaviour for both agricultural producers and civil society environmental organizations. During the period when the two trading blocs were closest to forging an agreement and until the ratification process was stalled, agricultural producers adopted the increasingly salient narrative of civil society organizations in order to justify their opposition. Yet they let go of this justification as quickly as they latched on to it—once the ratification process was stalled, they no longer varnished their particularistic stance with rhetorical devices borrowed from civil society. Meanwhile, throughout the entire period under analysis, civil society organizations took on the arguments of agricultural producers as they became increasingly salient among potential supporters, claiming that their concerns about the agreement were also related to beef and farming. Likewise, policymakers, while attendant to the particularistic concerns of agricultural producers from the outset, eventually shifted to the broader positions of civil society organizations, moving from one position to the other in line with the change in salience of each narrative.

It is thus remarkable that it was the Bootleggers who appear to have shunned the Baptists despite the opportunity to give a moral justification to self-interested arguments. On the one hand, this finding could be interpreted as reflecting that they are simply not in ideological alignment with civil society organizations and do not subscribe to their framing of the nature of the problems at hand. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as further evidence of their opportunism, whereby Bootleggers can more efficiently fade into the background as civil society organizations take over their battle and policymakers fight for the same ends, but with general interest arguments. In any case, our findings strongly show that Baptist–bootlegger coalitions are anything but a coordinated effort, as the narratives of these groups are least likely to converge, and Bootleggers withdraw at the point when an alliance seems most supportive of their cause. An important conceptual distinction thus emerges between genuine intensively coordinated collective action on the one hand and the emergence of strategic and opportunistic discourse coalitions on the other hand, both of which have a demonstrable effect on what policymakers can work with to deliver workable public policies.

Finally, we found little evidence of *mediated convergence*, wherein policymakers would be the ones that bridge the gap between Bootleggers and Baptists. While the congruence of policymakers' narratives with Bootleggers and Baptists was significantly correlated with increases in both the Fires and Farmers narratives, the analysis of how this related to changes in behaviour showed that this was not a result of policymakers opportunistically bridging the gap between the two groups. Policymakers, rather, were selective about how they chose to align their narratives, taking on the positions of agricultural producers first before shifting to the more generally interested civil society organizations' narrative while (at least publicly) abandoning the positions of agricultural producers. Contrary to the logic of mediated convergence, policymakers did not act as intermediaries linking the concerns of agricultural producers to those of environmentalists. Rather, over the course of our analysis, both agricultural producers and policymakers increasingly echoed similar concerns—not due to direct alignment with one another, but because each independently incorporated the arguments of environmentalists as those narratives gained salience. This underscores a key insight of our theory: that what appears to be alignment between disparate actors is often the result of strategic narrative adoption rather than genuine coalition-building. In the politics of package treaties, resonance may matter more than coordination.

Our findings also carry implications for the study of environmental networks and political economy beyond Western contexts. The prevalence of opportunistic framing in driving the formation of Baptist and Bootlegger coalitions in the EU–Mercosur case shows that concerns originating in the Global South, such as deforestation and Indigenous rights in the Amazon, do not on their own reshape Northern political alignments. Instead, these concerns become effective only when they parallel the strategic interests of Northern actors—such as protecting domestic agricultural sectors, appealing to the revealed preferences of concerned citizens, or pre-empting potential veto players within government. This dynamic aligns with critiques of transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) that suggest Northern actors often instrumentalize Southern issues rather than serving as benevolent conduits for Southern demands (Bob, 2005; Choudry, 2012). These findings complement research on ecological unequal exchange and environmental justice (Hornborg, 2009; Martinez-Alier, 2002), highlighting how global environmental governance can reinforce existing hierarchies of power and value.

Rather than flattening global asymmetries, environmental networks may reproduce them, subordinating the politics of the Global South to the strategic imperatives of actors in the Global North. In this respect, our

findings contribute to recent scholarship on environmental governance networks, which emphasize both their structural properties and the discursive processes through which they are constituted and maintained (Fischer et al., 2022; Ingram et al., 2014, 2019). We also build on discourse-analytics perspectives that underscore how environmental problems are constructed, contested, and strategically mobilized within broader struggles over meaning and power (Feindt & Oels, 2005). Our study responds directly to calls for a more explicit conceptualization of agency and strategic action in discourse analysis by using discourse networks to trace how actors actively construct coalitions through opportunistic framing strategies (Leipold et al., 2019). By foregrounding these dynamics in a concrete case of EU trade politics, we contribute to broader debates on the politics of environmental networks, the political economy of environmental governance, and global justice (Dauvergne, 2014; Okereke, 2010; Roberts & Parks, 2007), showing how the strategic mobilization of actors in the Global North may serve to entrench rather than contest their dominance in sustainability discourse.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All twitter data and the *R* script used to code and analyze the tweets have been uploaded to the Harvard datverse: Hamilton, S. M., & De Bièvre, D. (2025). *Replication data for Bootleggers, Baptists and policymakers: Domestic discourse coalitions in EU-Mercosur Negotiations* (Version V1) [Data set]. Harvard Dataverse. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/SEANTX

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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