

Homogenizing machine: the agribusiness caucus's building of voting convergence in the Brazilian Congress

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Abstract

Dissensions among private leaders of agricultural commodity chains have drawn attention in Brazil, particularly concerning climate-related issues. However, these divisions have not manifested in the National Congress, where the agribusiness caucus usually builds a highly homogeneous voting base in matters connected with these issues. This article analyses this contrast by means of an ethnography of the complex movements involved in constructing this homogeneity. To do this, the work followed a legislative measure related to the Forest Code as it moved through Congress. The research triangulated data obtained from long-term participant observation in Congress and the *Instituto Pensar Agropecuária*, corporate and state documents and interviews with politicians and heads of business associations. The results evidence a political machine that produces voting convergence linked with agribusiness agendas in the Legislative branch.

Keywords: Ethnography; Congress; Agribusiness Caucus; Forest Code; Deforestation; Climate Change.

Máquina homogeneizadora: a Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária e sua construção de convergência de votos no Congresso Nacional

Resumo

Divergências entre líderes privados das cadeias de *commodities* agropecuárias têm chamado atenção no Brasil, particularmente em questões relacionadas ao clima. No entanto, essas divisões não se manifestam no Congresso Nacional, onde a Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária tem mobilizado um bloco de votação altamente homogêneo nas matérias relacionadas a tais questões. Este artigo analisa esse contraste por meio de uma etnografia dos complexos movimentos envolvidos na construção dessa homogeneidade. Para isso, o trabalho acompanhou a tramitação de uma medida provisória relacionada ao Código Florestal. A pesquisa triangulou dados obtidos a partir de observação participante de longo prazo no Congresso e no Instituto Pensar Agropecuária, documentos empresariais e estatais e entrevistas com parlamentares e dirigentes de associações do agronegócio. Os resultados evidenciam a existência de uma máquina política produzindo convergência de votos em agendas do agronegócio no Poder Legislativo.

Palavras-chave: Etnografia; Congresso; Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária; Código Florestal; Desmatamento; Mudanças Climáticas.

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Introduction

Actors linked with agribusiness in Brazil often have disagreements among themselves. Involving farmers, transnational corporations and state agents, these frictions are particularly amplified around discussions related to climate change. Indeed, concerning this issue, criticism from civil society organizations, changes in consumers' values, threats of disinvestment and obstacles to international trade deals force some leaders of agricultural commodity chains to express reservations in regard to what they classify as the “backward side of agribusiness” in the country. This discourse is used with special impetus to distance these leaders from anti-environmental bills in Congress.

However, these differences do not generally materialize in terms of significant divisions in the Brazilian Legislative branch. In fact, quite the opposite prevails, as can be seen in the activities of the agribusiness caucus. This caucus is the most organized and influential cross-party bloc in Congress and known for its high degree of political convergence. As pointed out by Carneiro da Cunha et al. (2017), most of the caucus's members tend to vote as a bloc when it comes to legislative processes connected with agribusiness interests, many of which concern the environment and traditional territorial rights. This article examines this contrast. It deals with the following questions: in cases of public disputes among private agribusiness actors, how does the process of building political homogeneity occur in Congress? What are the main actors involved in this process and what are their key practices?

There is a growing movement in anthropology to analyse the heterogeneity of positions and practices of agribusiness actors operating in Brazil. This expansion, it should be noted, follows the need for more ethnographies of elites, as suggested by authors such as Nader (1969), Marcus (1983), Pina-Cabral and Lima (2000) and Gomes et al. (2021). By proposing the notion of “agri-mineral export strategies”, Almeida (2019: 67) has encouraged readings of neo-extractivism that examine its diversity and dynamism. Carneiro da Cunha (2021) has likewise referred to the multiplicity of positions taken by agribusiness associations on social and environmental issues. Meanwhile, Pompeia (2021; 2023a) has placed heterogeneity and historical changes as central elements of his analyses concerning the private and state actors who have adopted the terms agribusiness (*agronegócio*) and *agro* as the foundation for their aggregation and legitimization.¹

By encouraging perspectives on the diversity and changes regarding agribusiness actors, these works do not ignore the fact that these actors are skilled in constructing alliances with each other. Almeida (2010; 2019), for example, identified a coalition of political and economic interests that are closely linked with neo-extractivism in Brazil, while Pompeia (2020a: 2) used the notion of “political concertation” to name configurations managing conflicts and fostering convergences among predominant agribusiness actors. By the way, the dialectic between centrifugal and centripetal political dynamics in this field is consistent with Marcus's proposal (1983).

¹ For an analysis of the symbolic, political and economic mobilizations of the notions of agribusiness and *agro*, see Pompeia (2021).

If he supports the examination of diversity among elites, he does not suggest overlooking their coalitions. Quite the contrary: he encourages ethnographies of the strategies that distinct elites mobilize to build and manage alliances among themselves (Marcus 1983).

As regards these analytical focuses, the literature (in anthropology, in particular, and in the human sciences, in general) that addresses the dominant agribusiness actors in Brazil faces the challenge of understanding the practices that turn divergent public positions into convergent votes in Congress. After all, it is precisely this political convergence of the caucus that materializes its power to advance bills related to social and environmental issues, as analysed by authors such as Carneiro da Cunha et al. (2017), Moutinho, Guerra and Azevedo-Ramos (2016), Pereira and Viola (2019) and Rochedo et al. (2018).

In order to contribute to this challenge, the present article chooses a specific case: the processing of a provisional measure (*medida provisória*, or MP) in Congress. This is MP number 867, whose original focus was the extension of the period for adherence to the Environmental Regularization Programme (*Programa de Regularização Ambiental*, or PRA) – which consists of commitments taken on by holders of rural areas, within the scope of the Forest Code, to recover or recompose irregularly altered native vegetation. The MP received a set of amendments, however, that (among other things) allowed some properties that did not comply with the law to become regularized without engaging in effective recovery activities (see Chiavari and Lopes 2019; Rajão et al. 2019). In this regard, it is important to contextualize that the Forest Code had been markedly weakened in 2012 (Carneiro da Cunha 2021; Rajão et al. 2020; Sauer and Mészáros 2017; Veiga 2013), with a significant amnesty given to those who had conducted illegal conversions of vegetation (Soares-Filho et al. 2014). Therefore, the amendments to MP 867 meant that the Code would be subjected to a new round of debilitation.

In the months during which the abovementioned measure was passing through Congress, it was the object of divided public positions of associations funding the *Instituto Pensar Agropecuária* (IPA, or institute). Operating through three sets of actors – agribusiness associations, technical agents and members of Congress –, the IPA has become the main political forum for the negotiation and definition of the agendas that are advanced by the agribusiness caucus in the Legislative branch (Pompeia 2022a). Nonetheless, later on, when the MP was finally voted upon in the Chamber of Deputies, the divergent positions among the associations did not translate into significant differences within the caucus (Câmara dos Deputados 2019a).

Despite the specific characteristics of the MP, the votes on it presented noticeable similarities when compared to other legislative processes of interest to agribusiness during the government of Jair Bolsonaro.² An important example in this regard occurred with the movements in Congress related to so-called “land regularization”, when disagreements among business associations also ended in a largely convergent vote by the caucus (Câmara dos Deputados 2021a). As will be shown, these results are linked, *inter alia*, to the political culture that has been built within the caucus.

To reach its objective, this article emphasizes an aspect strongly defended in the anthropological literature on elites: the potential of ethnographic immersion “inside” the spaces in which they operate (see, for example, Shore 2002; Gomes et al. 2021). In accordance with this aspect, the research was centrally based on long-term participant observation in Congress and the IPA. Data and reflections from these immersions were triangulated with the analysis of 66 interviews with business leaders and members of Congress, as well as with the examination of corporate and state documents. The participant observation took place between February and July 2019, and the interviews took place between February 2019 and April 2023.

² Bolsonaro was affiliated with the Social Liberal Party (*Partido Social Liberal*, or PSL) during the period analysed in this article.

The measure, the amendments and the caucus's rings

At the end of his government, on 27 December 2018, President Michel Temer³ had MP 867 published in the Brazilian Federal Register. Even though MPs are norms with the force of the law, producing immediate legal effects, they need to be passed by the Chamber of Deputies (lower House) and the Federal Senate (upper House) to be converted into ordinary law. If this does not occur, the MP loses its effectiveness. The period for reviewing MP 867 ended on 3 June 2019.

On 22 January 2019, the agribusiness associations that fund the IPA convened at the institute's headquarters in Brasília. On the occasion, they elected the IPA's board of directors (Cecafé 2019). The Mato Grosso Association of Cotton Producers (*Associação Brasileira dos Produtores de Algodão*, or AMPA), one of the founders of the IPA, took over the presidency. Other leading posts went to the Brazilian Association of Soybean Producers (*Associação Brasileira dos Produtores de Soja*, or APROSOJA BRASIL), the Mato Grosso State Federation of Agriculture (*Federação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Estado de Mato Grosso*, or FAMATO), the Brazilian Rural Society (*Sociedade Rural Brasileira*, or SRB) and the Brazilian Agribusiness Association (*Associação Brasileira do Agronegócio*, or ABAG) (Cecafé 2019). As of January 2019, the ABAG was under the new leadership of Marcello Brito, who would later stand out in public criticism of some of the positions taken by the caucus and the government (Pompeia 2021).

On the same day, the associations at the IPA also defined the main cross-cutting themes that were to be worked on by the institute during the year. The definition was followed by activities in the specialized commissions created in the IPA to deal with each of these themes (Pompeia 2022a; 2022b). One of them was the environment commission, which was then beginning to be coordinated by the Brazilian Tree Industry (*Indústria Brasileira de Árvores*, or IBÁ) and the SRB (IPA 2019). And MP 867 was not ignored by the environment commission on that occasion. Among the various initiatives planned and registered by the technical agents at the IPA, one finds the following decision by its business associations: "MP 867 of 2018 – Prepare amendments for the necessary corrections to the Forest Code" (IPA 2019: 3).

The associations at the IPA had, therefore, already reached a joint decision to insert amendments into the MP. By way of comparison, it should be noted that, during the same strategic planning of early 2019, there were disagreements in another commission of the institute, which were accordingly registered by the secretariat (IPA 2019: 6) – no such registrations occurred within the scope of the environment commission. It is important to consider the prior agreement to insert amendments to MP 867 in this light because, months later, some associations funding the IPA (including the IBÁ itself) would publicly present positions contrary to the changes in the original content of the measure sent by President Temer to Congress.

With the deadline for the presentation of proposed amendments to the MP set for between 4 and 11 February 2019, the associations and members of Congress working at the IPA had about three weeks to prepare, negotiate and officially present their amendments in Congress. At the end, 35 amendments were presented. Of these, 31 were advanced by Deputies Alceu Moreira,⁴ Evair de Melo,⁵ José Mário Schreiner,⁶ Nelson Barbudo⁷ and Pedro Lupion,⁸ in addition to Senator Luis Carlos Heinze⁹ (Congresso Nacional 2019a). These politicians were part of a collective of approximately a dozen members who politically led the agribusiness caucus. This hard core was commanded by the president and vice-presidents of the bloc in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, along with some other members of the caucus's board who were very active in the IPA (FPA 2019a; Pompeia 2022a).

3 Brazilian Democratic Movement (*Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*, or MDB).

4 MDB, state of Rio Grande do Sul.

5 Progressives (*Progressistas*, or PP), state of Espírito Santo.

6 Then in the Democrats (*Democratas*, or DEM), state of Goiás. In 2021, the DEM merged with the PSL to create the Brazil Union (*União Brasil*).

7 At that moment in the PSL, state of Mato Grosso.

8 PP, state of Paraná.

9 PP, state of Rio Grande do Sul.

It was these members who, on behalf of the caucus, conducted negotiations with the presidencies of the two Houses of Congress and the Executive branch, in addition to making the strategic public speeches regarding the caucus's objectives.

The abovementioned hard core is identified in this article as the first ring of the agribusiness caucus. In order to classify this and the next two rings of the cross-party bloc, the following main aspects were considered: the insertion of members in the formal hierarchy of the caucus and the degree of their articulations within the scope of the IPA (with its business associations and technical agents). When it comes to legislative processes related to agribusiness, the decisive factor behind the votes of the members of these three rings is the caucus's official position, as will be shown below.

The second ring was formed by the rest of the politicians of the caucus's board of directors. Its members had a relevant presence in the IPA, although they were less assiduous and decisive in their activities than the ones of the bloc's hard core. Furthermore, the members of the second ring were not normally part of the group that negotiated on behalf of the caucus with leaders in the Legislative, Executive and Judiciary branches. In a contrary manner, they acted and expressed themselves mainly on specialized themes or in relation to specific geographic regions, according to the attributions given to them by leaders of the caucus. It is worth contextualizing that this second ring was formed during the 2010s, following the growing complexity of the command structures of the caucus, a process that was driven mostly by the consolidation of the IPA. Between 2011 and 2019, the functions undertaken by the caucus's board of directors increased by 188.9% in terms of the number of formally designated positions, revealing a significant increase in internal subdivisions and their respective specializations (Pompeia 2022a). The third ring of the agribusiness caucus was composed of members of Congress who attended the IPA (albeit irregularly) but did not hold official positions on the board of directors (unlike politicians of the first and second rings). On the occasions when the members of the third ring are more directly involved in negotiations at the institute, they do so with regard to issues related to their direct preferences or to the interests of their electoral bases and donors.

Two additional rings, the fourth and fifth ones, complement the classification scheme put together in this article concerning the caucus. These consist of members of Congress who are officially linked with the cross-party bloc but are distant from the day-to-day work of its leaders and are thus not very often present at the IPA's headquarters (FPA 2019a). Party membership is essential in distinguishing between the fourth and fifth rings: members were sorted according to their belonging to parties whose leaders, during the Bolsonaro administration, tended (or not) to follow the voting guidance of the agribusiness caucus. To differentiate parties in this regard, three legislative measures were taken into consideration. These are bills (*projetos de lei*, or PL) 2633/2020 (related to "land regularization") and 3729/2004 (concerning environmental licensing), in addition to MP 867 itself (Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; 2021a; 2021b). All three of these measures implied public disagreements, major or minor, among agribusiness associations. Parties whose leaders tended to forward voting guidance following the caucus were defined in the article as those that incentivized favourable votes in at least two of the three measures mentioned in the paragraph and concomitantly presented an absence of unfavourable guiding in relation to any of them.¹⁰ Following this differentiation, the fourth ring is made up of members of Congress whose respective party leaders tended, in legislative processes related to agribusiness, to guide votes in accordance with the official preferences of the caucus. By contrast, the fifth ring consisted

¹⁰ The parties identified according to this criterion were the MDB, the PP, the DEM, the PSL, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*, or PSDB), the Cidadania (*Cidadania*), the New Party (*Novo*), the Social Democratic Party (*Partido Social Democrático*, or PSD), the Solidarity (*Solidaridade*), the Brazilian Labour Party (*Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro*, or PTB) and the Social Christian Party (*Partido Social Cristão*, or PSC), besides the then-Party of the Republic (*Partido da República*, or PR), which in May 2019 changed its name to the Liberal Party (*Partido Liberal*, or PL), and the Brazilian Republican Party (*Partido Republicano Brasileiro*, or PRB), which in August 2019 was renamed the Republicans (*Republicanos*).

of the remaining members of the caucus, whose party leaders did not satisfy the conditions established for the fourth ring.¹¹ Table 1 shows the numbers identified in each of the agribusiness caucus's rings in 2019, in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate.

Table 1 - Members of the agribusiness caucus, by ring

Ring	Chamber of Deputies	Senate	Total
First	12	1	13
Second	8	5	13
Third	19	4	23
Fourth	143	17	160
Fifth	43	5	48
Total	225	32	257

Sources: Author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional 2019b; FPA 2019a.

It should be added that in the first three rings taken together (and including both Houses), there was a considerable share of members of Congress with assets in agribusiness: 40.8%. This percentage was substantially reduced to 21.3% and 18.8% in the fourth and fifth rings, respectively (author's calculations based on TSE 2023). The article considered landowning as well as assets related to industrial and tertiary activities linked with agriculture (see Pompeia 2020b). The percentage difference between the first three rings and the next two suggests that these possessions may be one of the relevant factors encouraging a more active performance of some members of Congress in the caucus, although attention should also be paid to the presence of a significant number of politicians operating within the IPA's headquarters that did not have assets related to agribusiness.¹²

Returning to the amendments presented by the first ring of the caucus, one should draw attention to the identical phrases that some of its actors used.¹³ Considering this and other factors – the systematic nature of these members' work in the IPA, in constant negotiations with private actors (Pompeia 2022a), and the decision recorded by the associations in the institute's environment commission to prepare amendments to MP 867 –, one can point out, with a reasonable degree of confidence, that a portion of these amendments came from an agreement in the IPA between some politicians and associations. However, there were also amendments proposed by members of the caucus that contained relevant differences when compared to each other, as happened in relation to the ones greatly affecting the regularization initiatives of the PRA. These differences indicate that there was probably some degree of disagreement in the IPA before all the amendments were finalized.

This disagreement would take on a more evident public form months later, as will be examined below. Leaders of the three groups that operate in the IPA – politicians, business associations and technical agents – made several observations regarding situations of conflict in the forum. A deputy from the board of directors of the caucus stated that, when there are differences among private actors in the institute, these are brought forward and each member of Congress decides on them (Federal Deputy 1, interview, 3 Jul. 2019). An influential businessperson linked with an association that funds the IPA corroborated this observation, saying that members of Congress tend to make the final choices in cases of unresolved frictions within the institute (Business leader 1, interview, 12 June 2022). But this is only part of the story. It was a technical leader, one that had been working in the IPA for nearly a decade, who provided information to give a more comprehensive understanding of how political disputes within the institute are dealt with. While he confirmed that when

¹¹ See Bruno (2021) for a detailed analysis of what is classified in this article as the fifth ring of the caucus.

¹² These percentages should be viewed with a certain caution, given the low level of details available in part of the asset declarations of candidates who were elected members of Congress, along with inaccuracies and other factors.

¹³ The details of the amendments will not be discussed here. For analyses focused on them, see Chiavari and Lopes (2019) and Rajão et al. (2019).

an agreement is not reached among business associations in the institute, the differences are passed along to members of the caucus, he added that, in these situations, the associations continue to pressure the bloc's members on their own (Technical agent 1, interview, 29 Apr. 2019).

In this regard, the analysis based on interviews, as well as on multi-sited participant observation and documents indicates that what often happens is that business interests keep working to influence politicians of the caucus by means of subcoalitions. In the case of MP 867, one of the many associations that supported the insertion of the amendments was the SRB (see SRB 2019), which, it is worth remembering, was one of the coordinators of the IPA's environment commission.¹⁴ Moreover, the examination suggests that there is no defined moment concerning the legislative processes in which the political action of the IPA's business associations (whether more or less convergent) ceases, although, of course, these processes have their specific dimensions within Congress. Such absence of temporal (and also spatial) limits highlights the importance of a joint examination of economic and political factors in the representation of business interests.

Finally, it is necessary to note that there were amendments to the MP whose topics were dealt with by only a single member of Congress, as was the case of the one that defined new temporal criteria for the Forest Code's application concerning legal reserves.¹⁵ According to experts, one of the consequences of these changes would be the legalization of some irregular deforestation practices (see Chiavari and Lopes 2019; Rajão et al. 2019).

The congressional committee

Simultaneous to the preparation, negotiation and proposal of amendments, a second objective was being implemented by the main members of the caucus: to dominate the mixed congressional committee that would examine MP 867. This process had to take place quickly (although some adjustments were later made regarding the committee members). On 2 February 2019, the legislative session began and on 15 February, the committee was appointed. Obtaining a majority in the composition of the committee and its leadership posts were both fundamental to the homogenization process set forth by the caucus's leaders.

Congressional committees for analysing provisional measures are made up of twelve members of the Chamber of Deputies and an equal number from the Senate. Vacancies on the committees are distributed among parties or parliamentary blocs in proportion to the number of their respective members in each House of Congress. In the case of parties that do not reach the minimum quota to participate, there is a provision for an additional vacancy for each congressional House, which is filled on a rotating basis. The committees' deliberations are passed according to a majority vote, in the presence of an absolute majority of the members of each of the Houses. Additionally, there are substitute members for the committees that must be taken into consideration.

Members of Congress from the different rings of the caucus negotiated with their respective party leaders to be nominated as members of the committee – a movement that usually is supported by the caucus's leadership. In the end, 15 of the 26 (57.7%) full members of the committee were part of the caucus, 9 from the Chamber of Deputies and 6 from the Senate. Among the 23 alternates, 12 (52.2%) were linked with the caucus, with 7 from the Chamber of Deputies and 5 from the Senate (author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a). Table 2 shows the numbers of each of the rings indicated by their parties to the committee.

¹⁴ It should be added that these subcoalitions tend to be stronger when organically connected with influential regional bases of agricultural elites.

¹⁵ The legal reserve is a concept within the Forest Code that refers to the percentages of native vegetation that rural properties and possessions must maintain in each biome.

Table 2 - Members of the agribusiness caucus appointed as members and alternates of the mixed committee related to provisional measure 867, by ring

Ring	Members	Alternates
First	6	0
Second	2	1
Third	2	5
Fourth	3	6
Fifth	2	0
Total	15	12

Sources: Author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional (2019a; 2019b); FPA (2019a).

It is noteworthy that six members of Congress who were part of the first ring of the caucus were nominated as committee members by their respective party leaders. Although they represented only 5.1% of the caucus's total, the politicians of this ring constituted 40% of the caucus's members in the committee (author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a).

The caucus's objective in relation to the committee was complemented on the day of the body's inauguration: 27 March 2019. On this occasion, Senator Judge Selma,¹⁶ then the institutional coordinator of the agribusiness caucus and a member of its second ring, was elected president of the committee. She immediately designated Deputy Sérgio Souza¹⁷ as the body's rapporteur. Souza was the vice-president of the caucus and a key player in its first ring (Congresso Nacional 2019a). Consequently, by the end of March 2019, a set of elements of the caucus's strategy for MP 867 had been implemented: amendments to modify the MP had been presented; a majority had been secured on the committee; and its presidency and reporting tasks were under the control of the caucus's leaders. At this stage, the caucus's homogenizing machine was clearly in full operation. From this point on, the processing of the measure started to receive emphasis during the morning meetings on Tuesdays at the IPA's headquarters, under the leadership of members of the caucus's first ring (FPA 2019b). According to one of them, these meetings are essential for a reduced group of politicians to debate and organize their political activities for the week (Federal Deputy 2, interview, 12 June 2019).

On 26 March, the day before the committee was inaugurated, one of the monthly general meetings had taken place at the IPA (Aprosoja Brasil 2019). During these occasions, the funding associations receive updated news about the advancement of their interests in Congress and engage in talks with the caucus's board of directors (see Pompeia 2022a). Therefore, while being aware of the caucus's amendments to MP 867, the associations that financed the IPA also had knowledge of its drive to establish dominance over the mixed committee related to the provisional measure. Thus, if there was the purpose of counteraction by some associations that disagreed with the directions that the MP was taking, the fact is that until that decisive moment, they had not mobilized effectively to influence the core members of the caucus. Likewise, they had not decided, at that time, to use their strong press connections to bring public attention to the MP, clearly explaining the existence of divergences in the IPA concerning the measure.

It is important to situate, considering the end of March 2019, the two agribusiness associations in the IPA that would later make public criticism of the amendments to MP 867: the ABAG and the IBÁ. The former had been under the leadership of Marcello Brito for three months (since January 2019); the latter, heading the institute's environmental commission, had a change of its presidency on 18 March 2019, when Paulo Hartung took office. In an interview, a senior executive linked with the pulp and paper industries pointed out that the

¹⁶ Podemos, state of Mato Grosso.

¹⁷ MDB, state of Paraná.

group that took over the IBÁ in 2019 had come with new agendas and had to be careful implementing them in the face of the association's previous positions (Business leader 2, interview, 21 June 2022). In fact, in the following years, the IBÁ would show a greater engagement in forums related to climate issues. However, one should also consider that approximately one month after Hartung's entry into the association's presidency, the IBÁ renewed the accreditation of the professional who had been working as its representative in the Chamber of Deputies before the entry of the new leadership group (Câmara dos Deputados 2019b).

On 1 April, during the meeting of the associations with the technical board of the IPA (witnessed by myself), some of those present were clearly uncomfortable with the public hearing that Deputy Nilto Tatto¹⁸ (who was here considered a member of the fifth ring of the caucus) had proposed in order to debate MP 867. A representative of one business association claimed that it would be better to try to avoid this hearing, but a second, more pragmatic proposal prevailed. There would be two public hearings: one organized by the opposition (mostly left-wing parties), the other solely dominated by actors linked with agribusiness. At the meeting on 1 April, no association took the floor to expose criticism of the way that MP 867 was being conducted. And none of the associations that were later publicly critical of the amendments made a request to participate in the public hearings.

On 10 April 2019, the first hearing took place. Organized by those opposed to the amendments, it featured a researcher, a federal attorney, a state-level secretary for the environment and members of socio-environmental organizations. The second hearing came six days later, with members of the Bolsonaro government and representatives of two of Brazil's most important agribusiness associations: the Brazilian Cooperatives Organization (*Organização das Cooperativas Brasileiras*, or OCB)¹⁹ and the Brazil's Agricultural Confederation (*Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil*, or CNA) (Senado Federal 2019a; 2019b). The OCB representative was a legal specialist and supported the way in which the procedures to modify MP 867 were being conducted. He also praised what he considered to be the public debate being held around the amendments. The CNA, chosen to speak because it was seen by the federal state branches as a fundamental voice of agricultural employers, slightly distanced itself from the OCB (Senado Federal 2019b). In fact, the confederation became the first prominent agribusiness association to publicly express a degree of discomfort regarding the changes to MP 867. To understand the CNA's position, one needs to consider that it was at that moment in time not funding the IPA but competing with the institute for leadership in Brasília (Pompeia 2020a). However, it is also important to note that, in his speech, the CNA's representative highlighted the aspects in which the confederation agreed with the dominant line of the IPA, only vaguely suggesting reservations about some of the amendments that moved further away from the original motive of the MP (which was the extension of the deadline for joining the PRA).

The report

On 24 April 2019, Deputy Sérgio Souza delivered his report containing the bill of conversion (*projeto de lei de conversão*, or PLV) related to MP 867 (Congresso Nacional 2019a). Its content showed that the objections and reservations during the hearings did not have significant influence on the decisions of the rapporteur. He considered that amendments dealing with the Forest Code could be included in the MP, even if they were largely unrelated to the extension of the period for adherence to the PRA – the original reason for the measure published by President Temer. Thus, among other decisions, Deputy Souza introduced into MP 867 parts of

¹⁸ Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or PT), state of São Paulo.

¹⁹ Although the OCB represents a wide range of cooperative activities in the country, it is led by interests linked with agribusiness. For an analysis of this association, see Mendonça (2010).

amendments with great potential to affect the Forest Code. According to specialists (see Rajão et al. 2019), the resulting PLC could impact legal reserves and permanent preservation areas²⁰ while promoting amnesties for some of the irregular deforestation practices.

On the same day that Souza's report was presented to the congressional committee, the Brazilian Coalition on Climate, Forests and Agriculture (*Coalizão Brasil Clima, Florestas e Agricultura*, or COALIZÃO) issued a statement on its website. Comprised mainly of agribusiness associations and certain environmental organizations, the COALIZÃO had the ABAG as its business leader. The statement claimed that it was "[...] imperative to enforce the law, we cannot waste time with further modifications to its provisions" (Coalizão 2019a). The IBÁ, which also played an important role in the COALIZÃO, reproduced the statement (Ibá 2019). It was a relevant criticism, but the decision to issue a public position at that time is noteworthy, given that there would have been much greater scope for effective changes within the Chamber of Deputies had these issues been aired earlier. Moreover, two days after presenting the COALIZÃO's position on its site, the IBÁ had the accreditation of its former representative renewed in the Chamber of Deputies, as noted above (Câmara dos Deputados 2019b).

During a meeting at the IPA's headquarters on 6 May 2019, it was announced that Deputy Souza would submit his report for approval in the congressional committee (as I wrote in my field diary). Note the confidence expressed in the idea of submitting the document not for consideration but for approval. Not unexpectedly, approval in the committee was secured two days later, on 8 May. There were 15 votes in favour and only 3 against the report.²¹ Of the total number of favourable votes, 13 (86.7%) came from members of the agribusiness caucus (author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a).

After being determinant in presenting the amendments to the MP, the first ring also proved key in the congressional committee, with six of the favourable votes for Souza's report. As a senator who belonged to the third ring of the caucus told me during a long interview in the Senate, the caucus's hard core had the highest degree of organization among the caucuses in Congress. This politician added that, prior to voting sessions, the caucus's leading actors held strategic planning sessions in which they elaborated clear instructions to members to enhance political efficacy (Senator 1, interview, 10 Jul. 2019). It should be added that there were, from the second, third, fourth and fifth rings, one, four, one and one votes for the approval of the report, respectively (in some cases through alternates) (author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a).

The other two favourable votes were cast by politicians who were not members of the caucus at the time. These votes showed, however, the relevance of the caucus's alliances with other multi-party groups. Both votes came from prominent figures: one from a leader of the evangelical caucus and the other from an important actor of the so-called "*Centrão*" (a group of members of different parties in Congress that presents ideological malleability and tends to offer support to whatever government is in power in exchange for political posts and resources to strengthen its electoral machines in home constituencies). Of the three contrary votes, one was cast by a politician from the fifth ring of the caucus (author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a).

²⁰ Permanent preservation areas are the ones that, according to the Forest Code, must be protected because of their fundamental roles for the preservation of essential ecosystem functions. Examples are springs, mangroves, banks of rivers, steep slopes and hilltops.

²¹ It is worth considering that, of the 15 members of Congress who voted favourably in the committee, 6, or 40.0%, had agribusiness assets (author's calculations based on TSE 2023).

Frictions

On 9 May 2019, the report of Deputy Souza was published in the Journal of the National Congress, and the PLV arising from MP 867 was presented to the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Rodrigo Maia.²² But Bolsonaro's disputes with Maia (in particular) and with Congress (in general) were especially acute in the first half of 2019, and this situation hindered the heads of the caucus in moving forward the measures they were interested in. Additionally, unlike agribusiness corporations that were critical of the PLV, leaders of Brazil's indigenous peoples had gone to the Chamber of Deputies (on 25 April) to put pressure on Maia regarding measures that were contrary to socio-environmental values. And on 8 May, seven former environment ministers released a joint statement in which they criticized, among other actions, the new attempt to weaken the provisions of the Forest Code.

The difficulties for moving the PLV to final voting in the plenary hall of the Chamber of Deputies resulted in noticeable irritation being expressed during a meeting of business associations at the IPA on 13 May, the week following the publication of the report. The deadline (3 June) for processing the project in both Houses before it expired was closing in. For their part, leaders of the Chamber of Deputies' Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development (*Comissão de Meio Ambiente e Desenvolvimento Sustentável*, or CMADS) gave space to voices that criticized the way in which the MP had been modified. They held hearings on the Forest Code, specifically, and on other environmental issues, more generally. Levels of disagreement among the main agribusiness political representations then began to become clearer. In the hearings, the OCB, an important funder of the IPA, continued to support the PLV. The CNA's representative, on his turn, was more emphatic in his criticism than he had been in the previous hearing. He stated that matters that strayed far from the MP's original intent should not be part of the PLV but be dealt with by means of specific bills (Câmara dos Deputados 2019c). The CNA's concern was driven by the high possibility of lawsuits being brought by environmentalists in relation to the modifications that could be introduced in the Forest Code. The CNA thus differed from a significant number of associations in the IPA, which, feeling strengthened by the Bolsonaro administration and the ascending reactionarism in the country, chose to support a short-term view that required several new changes to the abovementioned Code.

During another hearing, the president of the Brazilian Association of Vegetable Oil Companies (*Associação Brasileira das Indústrias de Óleos Vegetais*, or ABIOVE) – which mainly represents grain traders – made a speech. Not distancing himself from one of the predominant arguments in the IPA (in which the ABIOVE was actively inserted), André Nassar argued that he did not see any relevant changes in the Forest Code stemming from the new criteria in the PLV concerning the application of the law over time for legal reserves. However, this opinion was not shared by experts (see Chiavari and Lopes 2019; Rajão et al. 2019), who stressed that the modification implied, among other consequences, the consolidation of some deforestation practices carried out irregularly. Simultaneously, the ABIOVE's representative complained about the withdrawal, in the PLV, of the deadline for the inclusion of properties in the Environmental Rural Registry (*Cadastro Ambiental Rural*, or CAR), a mandatory registry containing environmental information on rural properties and possessions. In this regard, the ABIOVE acted according to the needs of traders, which, faced with international pressure, see the CAR as one of the primary tools needed to monitor suppliers (Câmara dos Deputados 2019d). In any case, the statements by the CNA and the ABIOVE were non-detailed and highly selective, respectively. Neither came anywhere near to being effective public criticism of the caucus's strategies regarding MP 867.

The only speech by agribusiness actors in the hearings held at the CMADS that unequivocally contested the PLV came from the Brazilian Business Council for Sustainable Development (*Conselho Empresarial Brasileiro para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável*, or CEBDS). Using her space in the debates, Marina Grossi, the president of

²² At that moment in the DEM, state of Rio de Janeiro.

the CEBDS, emphasized that she was against alterations to the Forest Code through the PLV. She claimed that such changes would increase strategic risks for actors in Brazil who were linked with the export of agricultural commodities (Câmara dos Deputados 2019e).

Acting mainly outside Congress, the ABAG's and the IBÁ's leaders participated in the publication of an article in the press on 21 May 2019 (Guimarães et al. 2019). In this article, they expressed strong disapproval as regards the amendments to MP 867, claiming that the changes were disconnected from the original purpose of the measure, compromised fundamental aspects of the Forest Code and could increase deforestation, among other problems. Moreover, the article pointed out that the alterations would be detrimental not only to commodity exports from the Brazil but also to obtaining foreign investments.

Following growing criticism (in the country and internationally) concerning anti-environmental initiatives in Brazil, the disagreements in the IPA reached a boiling point on 28 May 2019. During a lunch meeting on this date at the institute with the presence of politicians and private actors, I noticed that a leader linked with the ABAG was sitting by himself, gazing pensively. On that morning, as is customary on the last Tuesday of each month, the meeting between the business associations and the leaders of the caucus had taken place, and the occasion was marked by heated argument. As reported in the press (Racha... 2019), the main factor for friction was the announcement of the elaboration of a public note written at the IPA's headquarters to defend the approval of the PLV (FPA 2019c). This action had been taken without broader deliberation among the associations financing the institute, as was usually the case in such situations. Although there was, on the occasion, a relevant conflict inside the IPA, it is necessary to consider that its timing may suggest that the intention of the aggrieved associations was rather to publicly disassociate themselves from the modified MP (and the contestations that accompanied it) than to try to put effective obstacles in the way of its processing and approval.

On the same day, the COALIZÃO launched a video campaign on the internet, entitled "In defence of the Forest Code". In the campaign, the ABAG and the IBÁ stated that the amendments to MP 867 were disrespectful to businesspeople who complied with the Forest Code's rules. Furthermore, they reinforced that the changes would negatively affect the image of economic actors linked with commodities who operated more directly with investors and importers from other countries (Coalizão 2019b). Nonetheless, it is important to note that neither of them decided to stop financing the IPA. The fact that the ABIOVE did not participate in the campaign was revealing as well, since this association was influential not only in the IPA but also in the COALIZÃO. At the same time, the SRB's leader left an unclear impression in one of the videos of the campaign, defending the implementation of the Code but avoiding criticism of the amendments. There was a reason for this: although internally divided, the São Paulo-based association – led mostly by cattle ranchers – would go public a few days later to support the PLV's approval (SRB 2019).

One could also observe the associations that, despite being highly active in the IPA, remained silent in the public sphere during the debates concerning MP 867. This was the case, for example, of the Brazilian Beef Exporters Association (*Associação Brasileira das Indústrias Exportadoras de Carnes*, or ABIEC), which represents large meat processors. As stated in an interview that I conducted with a senior executive linked with meat processing companies (Business leader 3, interview, 4 Jul. 2022), the ABIEC preferred to avoid conflicts that could destabilize strategic agreements in the IPA. An example of such agreements concerns taxes.

The quorum challenge and the outer rings

While the backstage conflicts and alliances were taking place, on the one hand, and some public demonstrations were unfolding, on the other hand, Deputy Souza undertook emergency initiatives with party leaders to take the PLV to final voting in the plenary hall of the Chamber of Deputies (as reported during

meetings I attended at the IPA). Souza was often accompanied in these efforts by other members of the first ring of the caucus. Following such initiatives, this leading group met with the President of the Chamber of Deputies and finally obtained a favourable indication for the measure to be voted on by the lower House of Congress.

After this indication, a meeting at the IPA between business associations and technical leaders was quite eventful. The institute's executive board confirmed that the plan agreed upon in the Chamber of Deputies was to carry out the voting related to the PLV very shortly. Subsequently, the technical director urged agribusiness leaders present at the meeting to put pressure (in person or virtually) upon federal deputies over whom they had direct influence.²³ At the same time, the caucus's main actors were leading the final moves in Congress to bring the PLV to voting. First of all, they needed to guarantee that a minimum number of deputies would be present in the plenary hall. The lowest quorum for voting on provisional measures is an absolute majority, which is equivalent to 257 deputies. To achieve this number, it was essential for the agribusiness caucus to count on members of its different rings as well as on members of Congress who were not associated with it.²⁴

In the plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies on 29 May, 25 members of the first three rings of the caucus were present (author's calculations based on *Câmara dos Deputados* 2019a; *Congresso Nacional* 2019a; 2019b; *FPA* 2019a). Thus, in order to reach the required quorum, the caucus needed to efficaciously mobilize its enormous fourth ring of 143 deputies. These representatives formally belonged to the caucus but did not often participate in the activities at the IPA. To get them involved, a set of operations had been conducted. These operations will be dealt with in detail later in the article, when it analyses the movements that preceded the voting itself. However, it should be stressed that they were carried out both by members of the rings closest to the IPA and by some of the business associations that finance the institute.

The initiatives related to the fourth ring of the caucus were successful, resulting in the presence of 89 of its deputies. Nonetheless, it was only part of the challenge facing the cross-party bloc. Considering the 15 politicians from the fifth ring who were also present, the caucus could mobilize 129 of its members, or 50.2% of the number to meet the required quorum (author's calculations based on *Câmara dos Deputados* 2019a; *Congresso Nacional* 2019a; 2019b; *FPA* 2019a). As a result, they still needed 128 more deputies. The need for members of Congress who were not part of the caucus meant a critical difference from the dynamics that occurred within the scope of the mixed committee that had evaluated Deputy Souza's report, in which the caucus's members provided not only a large part of the necessary presence but also 13 of the 15 votes in favour of the report's approval.

Consequently, at this point in the analysis, it is imperative to delimit two complementary rings that may be identified concerning issues related to agricultural commodity chains. They are related to the remaining members of Congress, i.e. those who were not officially part of the caucus. In the case of what this article classifies as the sixth ring, political actors were linked with parties whose leaders tended to forward voting guidance following the caucus's official preferences (as explained at the beginning of this article). In a distinct manner, the seventh ring was made up of members of Congress connected with parties that did not usually guide votes in the directions defended by the caucus's leadership (as also explained at the beginning of this work).

23 For this influence, donations at the 2018 election played a considerable supporting role. In this regard, it is relevant to note some of the effects of the Brazilian Supreme Court's 2015 decision to ban corporate donations to election campaigns. When one compares donations from actors linked with agricultural commodity chains to congressional candidates between the elections of 2014 and 2018, one can identify the rise (in 2018) of the relative importance of large landowners and seed producers as donors (TSE 2023).

24 It should be noted that, at the time, leaders of the opposition were concentrating efforts in postponing the voting – a central orientation was for deputies under their leadership not to have presences considered in the plenary hall.

To examine the sixth and seventh rings, this article focuses on the Chamber of Deputies, where the vast majority of initiatives related to MP 867 took place. If the 5 rings of the caucus encompassed 225 deputies, the sixth and seventh rings held 164 and 124 deputies, respectively (author's calculations based on Congresso Nacional 2019b; FPA 2019a). Additionally, it is important to recognize that these two rings, although programmatically distant in relation to each other when one considers agricultural commodity chains' interests, showed similar percentages of deputies holding agribusiness assets: 15.9% in case of the sixth ring and 16.1% in the case of the seventh ring (author's calculations based on TSE 2023).

Characterized by members of parties with voting positions that converged with those of the caucus's command, the sixth ring was unsurprisingly the centre of attention of the leaders of the cross-party bloc as regards reaching the required quorum for voting the PLV. And the adherence of the members of the sixth ring was significant: 119 of its deputies attended the plenary session. With 17 additional politicians from the seventh ring, the caucus was able to ensure that the necessary quorum was achieved, with a total of 265 deputies showing up in the voting session (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a). The importance of members of the sixth ring in making the required quorum corroborates observations previously made by other works (Vigna 2001; 2007), which point out the simultaneous relevance of members and non-members of the caucus to some of the actions related to agribusiness interests in the Brazilian Congress.

In short, the caucus's strategy to meet the required quorum depended mainly on two fundamental rings: the fourth and sixth ones. Indeed, they represented 33.6% and 44.9% of the deputies who were present in the plenary session, respectively (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a). Despite their differences as regards insertion (fourth ring) or not (sixth ring) in the caucus, all of their members belonged to parties whose leaders tended to follow the caucus's voting preferences concerning agribusiness-related themes. The crucial relation between the caucus and party leaders will be addressed in the next part of the article.

The voting

With a sufficient quorum, the PLV was approved at 4:30 pm on 29 May. For its approval, a majority of the votes of the present members of the Chamber of Deputies was required. There were 264 deputies who voted: 243 of them for approval and 19 against it, besides 2 abstentions (Câmara dos Deputados 2019a).²⁵ In keeping with their importance for reaching the necessary quorum, the fourth and sixth rings proved to be the most decisive in the voting. In fact, these two rings delivered 87 and 111 "yes" votes related to the PLV, respectively, which were equivalent to 35.8% and 45.7% of the total votes cast for its approval. Added together, the favourable votes from the first three rings reached 25, or 10.3% of the "yes" votes. Furthermore, 13 and 7 votes for approval came from the fifth and seventh rings, respectively, comprising 5.3% and 2.9% of the "yes" votes (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a). Table 3 shows these results.

²⁵ As president of the Chamber of Deputies, Deputy Maia did not vote, in accordance with the House's rules.

Table 3 - Favourable votes in the Chamber of Deputies for the approval of the bill of conversion related to provisional measure 867, by ring

Ring	Favourable votes	Participation in the total of favourable votes (%)
First	10	4.1
Second	5	2.1
Third	10	4.1
Fourth	87	35.8
Fifth	13	5.3
Sixth	111	45.7
Seventh	7	2.9
Total	243	100

Sources: Author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a.

It is necessary to examine the ways in which influence on the key rings is operated. Not intended to be exhaustive, the examination in this respect will highlight some of the fundamental procedures. The first of them is the unification of the positions among the members of Congress that make up the first and second rings of the caucus. This movement is mostly conducted inside the IPA and subsequently involves members of the third ring. The identification of this politically centripetal process has already been pointed out in other analyses (Bruno 2015; Carneiro da Cunha 2021).

As a leader of a business association that finances the IPA revealed in an interview (Business leader 2, interview, 21 June 2022), there are often strong moves to make sure that no one breaks ranks from the caucus's official decisions among the group of about 50 members of Congress that make up its first three rings. This group of politicians is diverse, some holding more and others holding less conservative positions. In this sense, one may cite two important procedures to guarantee the loyalty of politicians who frequently work at the IPA. Before voting dates, considerable pressure is put upon these politicians to ensure that there are no divisions in public speeches and in decisions in Congress. Over a longer timeframe, there is a continuous effort to modify the positions and political perspectives of new members, bringing them closer in line to what the leaders of the caucus want – as observed by a representative of the fifth ring (Federal Deputy 3, interview, 13 June 2019).

Convergence in the first three rings of the caucus was highly noticeable in the plenary votes related to the PLV. Out of the 25 votes cast by its members (10 in the first ring, 5 in the second and 10 in the third), all were for approval (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a). Adherence to the official position of the caucus in the first three rings was also evident in the decisions of two of its members (considered in the numbers above in this paragraph) who, despite not having official party guidance to vote “yes” in relation to the PLV, decided to do so (one of them also went against the party's orientation not to have his presence considered in the plenary hall). Regarding this scenario, a member of the first ring stated in an interview I conducted that he had autonomy and the understanding of his party leader to disagree with party positions when it came to issues related to agribusiness (Federal Deputy 1, interview, 3 Jul. 2019). It should be noted that such an operation to ensure convergence within the first, second and third rings is reinforced in the IPA both by the decisive pressure of some business segments and the purposeful withdrawal of some others that prefer to avoid conflicts. It is also worth noting that the political structure functioning at the institute was financially supported by all the associations that were officially part of it, including the ABAG and the IBÁ.

Following the construction of political convergence in the rings of the caucus that operated inside the IPA, an “intense work of mobilization” takes place to involve members of Congress who are less close to the institute, as I was informed by a deputy from the first ring (Federal Deputy 2, interview, 12 June 2019). This work has as its essential axis a focus on party leaders, especially the ones of the conservative parties. In effect, as it is the parties (and not the caucuses) that have a greater capacity for disciplining members (see Figueiredo and Limongi 1999; Santos 2002), the command of the caucus does not aim to compete with party leaders but to influence their voting guidance. Concerning issues that are related to agribusiness, actions in this respect occur by means of two main (and mutually reinforcing) procedures.

The first of these consists of direct negotiations between the president and vice-presidents of the caucus and party leaders. The second procedure is pursued in a less centralized way. It is undertaken by the rest of the members of the first three rings of the caucus in relation to the leaders of their respective parties. In this sense, a deputy from the first ring told me that, in his party, it was customary for his opinion to be consulted on issues related to agribusiness and to play a major role in defining his party positions (Federal Deputy 2, interview, 12 June 2019). Members of the first three rings were present in all parties that defined voting position for the approval of the PLV (with the exception of the PSC). Moreover, both procedures are further supported by the official insertion of many of the party leaders in the caucus, often in its fourth ring (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019b; FPA 2019a).

If, on the one hand, the “work of mobilization” needs to place emphasis on convincing party leaders, on the other hand, it involves taking actions focused on the bases of parties. When it comes to matters of interest to agribusiness, a fundamental objective of these actions is to increase loyalty to the preferences officially set by supporting party leaders. Aimed mainly at individual politicians from the fourth and sixth rings, these procedures occur through short- and long-term procedures. On the weeks before important voting sessions, efforts are made to bring members of Congress to the Tuesday lunches at the IPA (see Pompeia 2022a). Additionally, individual initiatives by some of the caucus's politicians are taken outside the institute to convince their colleagues. Supporting these initiatives, many business actors and associations that (indirectly or directly) finance the IPA exert pressure on the members of Congress over which they have greater influence (because of a set of factors, including donations during elections). Long-term processes include informal spaces for socializing among politicians (such as football matches) and the various protocols to engage new members in Congress (especially from urban areas) in the caucus's activities. Practices adopted to attract “newcomers” (*novatos*) (as new politicians elected for Congress are named in the IPA) include, for example, the attribution of reporting tasks. Besides all these actions, one should not ignore the caucus's negotiations with other robust caucuses, such as the evangelical one.²⁶

Having considered some of the caucus's pivotal procedures for mobilizing congressional support, it is important to observe the voting in the Chamber of Deputies as regards the PLV with a complementary perspective. To this end, the analytical focus is specifically on the decisions of deputies who received directions from their respective parties to vote for the approval of the PLV. In this regard, one can identify that the closer these politicians were to the IPA, the higher the degree of their loyalty to party directions (and, consequently, to the caucus's official preference). In the first, second and third rings, adherence was 100% (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a).

This percentage decreases slightly when observing the actors of the fourth ring with party positions to approve the amended MP. Formally inserted in the caucus but far from the IPA, these deputies followed their party directions to vote for the approval of the PLV in 98.8% of the cases. In the sixth ring, loyalty showed a greater decrease (although the percentage of adherence was still high). Not related to the caucus but

²⁶ On the relations between caucuses, see Bruno (2015), Carneiro da Cunha et al. (2017) and Macaulay (2017).

belonging to parties that were politically convergent with the cross-party bloc, the members of the sixth ring with directions from the parties to vote “yes” in relation to the amended measure did so in 94.0% of the votes (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a).²⁷

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge the caucus's work in relation to the fifth and seventh rings – which, as delimited above, are composed of members of Congress whose parties did not usually follow the bloc's official preferences. Concerning the PLV, this work included, among others, efforts to encourage defections in parties whose leaders pushed against the approval of the measure. In the voting session on 29 May, there were five and one members of the fifth and seventh rings, respectively, who, despite the party directions not to have their presences considered in the plenary hall, decided to do so (thus contributing to the quorum) and, besides that, voted for the approval of the PLV (author's calculations based on Câmara dos Deputados 2019a; Congresso Nacional 2019a; 2019b; FPA 2019a).

Disarticulation in the Senate

On 29 May 2019, the approved PLV (9/2019) was forwarded to the Senate. However, the caucus's dominance in the Chamber of Deputies in relation to MP 867 did not carry over to the upper House. Objections during a session in the Senate on the afternoon of 29 May, which ran concurrently with the voting on the PLV in the Chamber of Deputies, were quite revealing in this respect. On the occasion, senators from both the government's base and the opposition were emphatic in their criticism of the amendments included in the measure. Confúcio Moura,²⁸ Randolfe Rodrigues,²⁹ Reguffe³⁰ and Espiridião Amin³¹ are four senators who can be cited in this respect (Senado Federal 2019c). None of them had a formal connection with the caucus. At the same time, a public hearing in the Environment Committee of the Senate presented reasoned disapprovals of the PLV. In this context, it was also clear that public pressures had proved more effective in the upper House than in the lower one.

With the homogenizing machine's power in the Chamber of Deputies, many of the associations that made up the IPA's private subcoalition supporting the amendments inserted in MP 867 had preferred to refrain from publicly endorsing the changes. Upon experiencing difficulties in the Senate, however, some agribusiness actors decided to come forward to defend the approval of the PLV on the floor of that House. As indicated above, one of these was the SRB, which expressed “[...] unrestricted support for provisional measure (MP) 867/18, which ensures more predictability and strengthens the application of the Forest Code” (SRB 2019).

The objections from several senators to the amended MP 867 occurred alongside the dissatisfaction of the upper House with the leaders of the Chamber of Deputies. In fact, the Senate was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the little time it had available to examine legislative measures coming from the other House. All things considered, the President of the Senate, Davi Alcolumbre,³² announced that the altered MP would not be voted upon by senators (Senado Federal 2019c). A deputy linked with the caucus commented to me that one of its leaders was furious with Alcolumbre's decision (Federal Deputy 3, interview, 13 June 2019). Nevertheless, there is no denying that the actors operating in the IPA had not managed to involve a reasonable number of senators in their negotiations concerning MP 867.

²⁷ These results occurred despite the fact that the fourth and sixth rings were composed, respectively, of 81.1% and 84.1% of deputies who did not have assets related to agribusiness (author's calculations based on TSE 2023). The percentages reinforce the importance of other forms of mediation and influence operating in this homogenizing machine.

²⁸ MDB, state of Rondônia.

²⁹ Sustainability Network (*Rede Sustentabilidade*), state of Amapá.

³⁰ Then without a party affiliation, Federal District.

³¹ PP, state of Santa Catarina.

³² DEM, state of Amapá.

In this regard, a senator inserted in the third ring of the caucus declared that, when compared to deputies, senators were less engaged in the political activities at the IPA (Senator 1, interview, 10 Jul. 2019).³³

Provisional measure 867 lost its effectiveness on 3 June 2019, having expired without its processing through both Houses of Congress. If the present article ends here, it is worth considering that the political actions of the members of Congress who operated systematically at the IPA's headquarters were then acquiring momentum in relation to the Executive branch. Not fortuitously, on the same afternoon of 3 June, eight deputies from the first ring of the agribusiness bloc presently met with then-president Jair Bolsonaro. This was one of the key meetings taken to build a political pact that, between 2019 and 2022, was strategic for both the caucus and the government.³⁴

Final considerations

As climate-related issues force the differentiation of public positions among agribusiness actors operating in Brazil, by what means does the representation of their interests in Congress remain highly homogenous? This political ethnography analysed this question by following the complete processing of a legislative measure related to the Forest Code, which had been amended to include anti-environmental provisions. Particularly, it examined how public disagreements among dominant agribusiness associations regarding this measure ended up being translated into largely convergent voting results in the Chamber of Deputies (lower House of the Brazilian Congress).

Combining, on the one hand, political and economic dimensions as regards the representation of business interests and, on the other hand, public and backstage politics, the research was based on the triangulation of corporate and state documents, interviews with business leaders and politicians and long-term participant observation in Congress and the *Instituto Pensar Agropecuária* (IPA). Operating by means of three sets of actors – agribusiness associations, technical agents and members of Congress –, the IPA is the main political forum for defining the agendas that are subsequently advanced by the agribusiness caucus, the most powerful cross-party bloc in the Brazilian Legislative branch.

The work identified levels of disagreement at the IPA among agribusiness associations concerning the anti-environmental amendments to the abovementioned legislative measure. There were associations actively supporting the changes implemented by the caucus in the measure, some others expressing slight reservations about the alterations, and a few showing strong disapproval of the amendments. However, the article found that the different critical stances of some associations had a low level of effectiveness on the caucus's operation. Among several factors at play, the research highlighted ambiguous speeches by certain agribusiness actors that did not fully support the amended measure and called attention to contradictory actions or a lack of timeliness by some of the associations that declared opposition to the amendments.

The article also closely examined the relations among the members of the agribusiness caucus. In order to do so, it segmented the caucus into five rings, considering the members' positions in its hierarchy, their work within the IPA and their party affiliations – while also taking into account the influence of agribusiness assets by politicians and donations received during election processes. Beginning with a hard core systematically connected with business actors and moving outwards to the congressional segments most distant from the daily negotiations that take place at the IPA, this segmentation was used to analyse some of the pivotal ways by which the caucus gradually builds convergence in the Legislative branch.

³³ The caucus's mobilization of senators has received a greater emphasis since then. These efforts have produced some relevant changes in this direction, particularly after the 2022 congressional elections.

³⁴ For an analysis of the relationship between divergent agribusiness currents and Bolsonaro's government, see Pompeia (2023a; 2023b).

Some of the principal results of the article as regards this convergence were: strengthened by the absence of timely and clear contestation within the IPA, a subcoalition of private agribusiness actors worked in tandem with some politicians of the caucus to define and support the bloc's position to insert amendments into the legislative measure; the decisive element behind the votes of the members of Congress closer to the IPA was the caucus's official position, even when it meant going against party directions; a central factor concerning the supporting votes of the caucus's politicians that were not assiduous at the IPA was the influence on leaders of parties, especially of the conservative ones, to adopt the bloc's official position; the approval of the measure in the Chamber of Deputies required a significant mobilization of deputies who did not belong to the agribusiness caucus; with substantial support from business actors, the work of mobilization was aimed not only at party leaders but also at individual members of parties, by means of both short- and long-term procedures.

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