

Mapping the Fault Lines of Global Neoliberal Philanthropy: A Relational and Multi-Scalar Analysis of Transnational Think Tank Networks in Latin America

Tomás Gold

University of Southern California
tgold@usc.edu

Abstract

How do transnational partnerships between global philanthropic foundations and neoliberal local think tanks operate in practice, and why do some relationships become durable and consequential while others remain fragile or largely ceremonial? Drawing on an original database of transnational partnerships, 152 in-depth interviews, archival research, and participant observation, this paper examines the operation of multi-scalar transnational interorganizational networks within neoliberal advocacy in Latin America. The paper first theorizes a distinctive organizational object: networks composed of formally independent organizations operating simultaneously across global, regional, and national levels, without hierarchical integration or centralized authority. Rather than treating such networks as coherent or unitary structures, I argue that coordination within these multi-scalar interorganizational forms is produced—and often undermined—through a set of relational mechanisms that operate unevenly across levels and over time. The paper identifies and illustrates four such mechanisms: (1) “Ideological alignment and boundary work” shape the establishment of partnerships at the dyadic level but remain unstable as political meanings are translated across national contexts; (2) “Governance through intermediation” stabilizes partnerships through bureaucratic brokers and alumni networks, while generating mistrust and selective exclusion; (3) “Associational coordination” operates through regional federations that foster communication and symbolic unity, yet remain episodic and weakly binding; and over time, (4) “cumulative advantage” transforms repeated partnering decisions across levels into unequal organizational trajectories, concentrating resources and authority among a small subset of long-established organizations. Taken together, these mechanisms explain why multi-scalar interorganizational networks that appear expansive and cohesive at a structural level often generate fragile cooperation, uneven coordination, and persistent organizational inequality. The analysis contributes to organizational debates by theorizing how transnational cooperation is effortfully enacted across multiple scales and temporalities, and to the sociologies of culture and political life by showing how classificatory frameworks and moral evaluations still structure highly ideological advocacy across borders.

Over the past several decades, neoliberal think tanks have expanded globally, promoting free-market ideas across nations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Dezalay and Garth 2002; Mudge 2008). A transdisciplinary literature has shown how conservative philanthropic foundations in the United States and Europe support these organizations abroad by financing their operations, training their personnel, and convening transnational forums (Álvarez Rivadulla, Markoff, and Montecinos 2010; Bob 2013; Djelic and Mousavi 2020; Fischer and Plehwe 2017; Plehwe and Walpen 2006; Teles and Kenney 2010; Velasco and Swindle 2024). By channeling knowledge and resources from North to South, these foundations are portrayed as key organizers of dense transnational networks that expand the reach, coordination, and capacity of conservative actors across countries.

With the aim of exploring the influence of free-market think tanks in Latin America, I developed an original database of organizations and arrived in Buenos Aires to interview a sample of their leading professionals. One of my first interviews involved the Executive Director of a well-known organization established in the mid-1990s, which counted a couple dozen researchers and prominent members in its Academic and International Councils, including professionals affiliated with renowned conservative foundations from the Global North—such as the Atlas Network, the Foundation for Economic Education, the Cato Institute, and the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung. Unusually scheduled at a chain café rather than at the foundation’s office, the interview initially focused on broader political developments before turning to more direct questions about the organization’s structure, operating budget, and ties to similar institutions. After a few moments of hesitation, the director acknowledged that the organization operated almost entirely online, sustained by only two young professionals who helped keep the organization afloat. Having lost its main donor several years earlier, the website remained active,

but the think tank had experienced a pronounced organizational decline that he had been unable to reverse. Its activities were largely restricted to posting a limited number of videos online and conducting occasional interviews with public intellectuals.

This experience was far from unique. Dozens of think tanks I had included in my database appeared to maintain only “ceremonial conformity” (Meyer & Rowan 1977) with those powerful organizations depicted in the literature. Puzzlingly, many of these organizations were listed as active partners in the directories of global conservative philanthropic foundations, despite displaying a limited local presence or sustained activity. How do transnational partnerships between global philanthropic foundations and local think tanks operate in practice? And how does variation in this process systematically shape the organizational capacity and coordination of neoliberal networks? While existing work infers ideological and political coordination from formal interorganizational ties, we still lack fine-grained relational data to unpack how professionals from Northern foundations and Southern think tanks establish, evaluate, and govern such partnerships, influencing their trajectories over time.

To answer these questions, in this paper I selectively draw on insights from “inhabited institutionalism” within organizational sociology as well as recent developments in the sociology of culture and development to examine transnational advocacy networks as organizational accomplishments that must be sustained in practice. Rather than treating networks as stable structures or efficient forms of coordination, I focus on how ties between philanthropic foundations and local think tanks are interpreted, negotiated, governed, and leveraged over time. Drawing on an original dataset of 159 Latin American free-market think tanks, in-depth interviews with 152 directors, staff, donors, and foundation officers across ten countries, archival sources, and participant observation, I analyze how these partnerships operate in Global South

contexts, marked by differences within conservative and neoliberal traditions and pronounced resource asymmetries.

The analysis shows that conservative transnational networks are far less coherent in practice than they appear from the outside. Rather than operating as seamless channels of coordination, partnerships are enacted through recurring relational mechanisms that shape how ties deepen, remain thin, or unravel over time. More specifically, I show that (1) efforts to align ideological positions across contexts require continual cultural interpretation and boundary work; (2) attempts to stabilize and govern partnerships through oversight and mediation generate constant tensions along the network; (3) regional horizontal coordination often increases communication without integrating material resources; and (4) longstanding organizational advantages allow a small subset of think tanks to hoard opportunities, consolidating durable advantages within the network. In sum, even when ties endure and neoliberal organizational networks expand over time, partnerships remain highly uneven, reinforcing stratification as a handful of organizations accumulate opportunities while many others struggle to survive.

1. The Global Expansion of Neoliberal Think Tank Networks

Sociological literature on neoliberalism has focused on two main drivers of transnational diffusion. First, scholars have emphasized the coercive pressures exerted by international financial institutions on indebted nations of the Global South, particularly through the policy prescriptions associated with the “Washington Consensus” (Babb 2013; Babb and Kentikelenis 2021; Kentikelenis and Stubbs 2023). Second, research has highlighted the normative pressures linked to the reshaping of professional fields, especially the diffusion of free-market economics

through professional training and expertise (Markoff and Montecinos 1993; Fourcade 2006; Hirschman and Berman 2014). In these perspectives, neoliberal reforms spread as global models traveled across states via macro-institutional pressures, professional authority, or a dynamic combination of both (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Henisz et al 2005; Swank 2006; Chorev 2012).

More recently, an interdisciplinary strand of scholarship has shifted attention from states and economic technocrats to the organizational infrastructures of neoliberal advocacy. Instead of portraying neoliberal diffusion as driven primarily by global coercion or professional consensus, this meso-level account shows how neoliberal ideas advanced through transnational networks linking philanthropic foundations, intellectuals, and policy entrepreneurs. Studies of think tanks and their sponsors describe these networks as key vehicles of ideological power, capable of reproducing free-market discourse across diverse national contexts (Mudge 2008; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Djelic 2017).

Drawing on neo-Gramscian and related perspectives, scholars associate the expansion of these networks with broader projects of class coordination and the diffusion of “soft power” from the Global North (Parmar 2014; Plehwe and Walpen 2006; Cannon 2016; Gill 2020). Relatedly, organizational approaches portray think tanks as providing an architecture for elite-led “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992) or “transnational discourse communities” (Plehwe 2010). Neoliberal elites act as institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio 1988) across countries, mobilizing resources to diffuse the think tank form and connecting philanthropic foundations to local advocacy efforts (Djelic 2017; Fischer and Plehwe 2017). By tracing the expansion of these organizational infrastructures, scholars show how a handful free-market foundations provided

scripts, funding, and training to stabilize and reproduce networks of similarly oriented organizations over time (Djelic and Mousavi 2020; Plehwe and Fischer 2019).

A related body of work approaches neoliberal organizations through the lens of transnational advocacy networks (TANs). Building on Keck and Sikkink's (1998) influential definition, scholars examine how conservative activists engage in cross-border struggles over agenda-setting, often in response to progressive mobilization (Bob 2013; Smith et al 2017; Velasco 2023; Velasco and Swindle 2024; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). This literature recognizes that "neoliberalism" and "conservatism" encompass multiple positions around contested issues and that coalitions are frequently uneasy (Bob 2012; Álvarez Rivadulla, Markoff, and Montecinos 2010), yet coordination is still inferred from shared campaigns and overlapping activist networks.

Taken together, this scholarship explains why neoliberal transnational networks emerged and expanded until acquiring global reach. It says less, however, about how coordination is enacted in practice once interorganizational partnerships are formed. Given the shared interest in neoliberal advocacy, partnerships are presumed to translate automatically into "joint actions and mobilization" (Fischer and Plehwe 2017: 180). However, we lack a systematic study of whether the formal existence of such ties leads to collective coordination. This gap has been noted by sympathetic observers, who underline that an organizational architecture is a "necessary precondition for the influence of ideas," but a more careful reconstruction of how interorganizational relationships work across regions remains lacking (Djelic and Mousavi 2020: 282; Plehwe and Fischer 2019: 194; Teles and Kenney 2010: 137).

2. Inhabited Transnational Organizational Forms

To understand how coordination unfolds within transnational think tank networks, it is necessary to move beyond structural mappings of affiliations to examine how such ties are enacted in practice. Rather than treating networks as pipelines through which ideas and resources automatically flow, the relational perspective proposed here views interorganizational partnerships as relationships that must be interpreted and stabilized over time. Coordination depends not only on broadly shared ideological commitments or interests, but on ongoing processes of interpretation and governance.

To examine such processes, I build upon theories of “inhabited institutionalism,” which shift attention from institutions as external structures to organizations as interactional, cultural accomplishments (Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Hallett and Hawbaker 2021). Exploring interactions among actors in further detail is particularly useful to go beyond frameworks focused on explaining diffusion and homogeneity across the world polity (Hallett 2010: 56), redirecting attention to how actors build *relations* that are adapted, recreated, or rejected through practice (Binder 2007: 550). When multiple nationally-anchored organizations are involved in joint transnational tasks, their professionals need to engage in shared collective representations to work with one another, slowly developing shared cultural frameworks via interaction (Kay 2023; Benzecry 2022). In sum, instead of theorizing organizations as automatic carriers of institutional and cultural scripts, inhabited institutionalism understands interorganizational partnerships as social relations endowed with meaning, focusing on how professionals work together “on the ground” towards similar goals.

Building upon this work, I extend inhabited institutionalism for the study of what I term *inhabited transnational organizational forms*, defined as cross-border interorganizational

networks in which professionals working in distinct institutional and cultural contexts must continually produce, interpret, and negotiate shared understandings about the terms of their cooperation—including ideological alignment and accountability, the depth of interorganizational commitment, and the distribution of opportunities and resources. Contrary to other transnational organizational settings, inhabited transnational organizational forms are characterized by two features: they are composed of *interorganizational networks* and present a *multi-scalar* structure.¹

First, inhabited transnational organizational forms present a networked structure, with coordination depending on ongoing interaction among relatively autonomous organizations rather than hierarchical control or a single legitimate authority capable of resolving disputes (Podolny and Page 1998: 59). Formal ties alone are therefore insufficient to sustain collaboration: trust and mutual recognition must be continually cultivated between organizations' professionals if partnerships are to endure (Gulati and Gargiulo 1999; Provan, Fish, and Sydow 2007). Even in highly institutionalized policy networks where actors share links and policy goals, collaboration breaks down when they cannot align their interpretive frameworks and understandings of appropriate action (Mische 2008; Weare, Lichterman and Sparza, 2017; Hadden 2015). This implies that partnerships across neoliberal think tank networks hinge on

¹ *Inhabited transnational organizational forms* builds upon, but conceptually departs, from two related concepts: transnational advocacy networks and weak fields. TANs emphasize shared issues and cross-border mobilization (Keck and Sikkink 1998), but conceptualize networks primarily as linkages among activists rather than among relatively autonomous organizations, thereby underplaying coordination problems rooted in organizational governance and divergent interpretive frameworks. As scholars in this tradition have pointed out, the concept of TAN underscores transnational activist dynamics, but underplays coordination problems related to trans-scalar advocacy (von Bulow 2010; Pallas and Bloodgood 2022). In turn, the concept of “weak fields” (Vauchez 2011; Mudge and Vauchez 2011) usefully highlights competition among transnational professionals over symbolic capital, thus emphasizing cultural dynamics in transnational settings. Yet it also offers limited conceptual leverage for analyzing how such professionals navigate multi-scalar organizational arrangements and balance multiple, and sometimes conflicting orientations and sources of authority. The notion of inhabited transnational organizational forms builds on these approaches by foregrounding transnational cooperation between organizations oriented toward shared projects, while remaining agnostic about the degree, direction, or success of coordination within networked and multi-level organizational settings.

cultural processes of communicative interaction through which ideological alignment and expectations of reciprocity are continuously produced—and sometimes fail—over time.

In addition to being networked, inhabited transnational organizational forms are multi-scalar, operating across global, regional, and national levels. Within neoliberal organizational networks, global philanthropic foundations, regional federations, and local think tanks each introduce distinct—yet incomplete—expectations, goals, and rules, producing nested but loosely coupled layers of coordination (Vasi 2007). Such arrangements present institutional structures that selectively formalize elements such as membership, hierarchy, monitoring, or resource allocation without consolidating them into a single, integrated authority (Ahrne and Brunsson 2010). Inhabited transnational organizational forms are therefore held together less by formal authority than by professionals that mediate across scales, translating expectations and stabilizing cooperation in the absence of absolute hierarchy (Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017; Harrington and Seabrooke 2020; Kay 2023).

As a result of their networked and multi-scalar structure, inhabited transnational organizational forms present a form of coordination that is neither fully centralized nor fully decentralized, but persistently fragile, as professionals must sustain cooperation across partially organized and unevenly governed interorganizational partnerships that cross-cut global, regional, and local concerns. For such professionals, these multiple partnerships involve the development of advocacy projects that require continuous interpretive and strategic work, as commitments made in one arena reverberate across others. This intensifies coordination challenges, especially when the object of interactions relates to complex cultural knowledge—such as neoliberal narratives or conservative policies, as explained below.

2.1. Relational Mechanisms of Transnational Coordination

To unpack the inner workings of inhabited transnational organizational forms, this section identifies four relational mechanisms (Mische 2003) through which coordination is enacted but also strained between actors. Because such mechanisms involve professionals working in relatively autonomous organizations across partially organized arenas, coordination cannot be assumed to follow automatically from formal affiliation or shared ideological labels. Instead, it emerges through projects of cooperation that operate at different relational levels and temporal horizons.²

The four mechanisms theorize how neoliberal transnational professionals (1) interpret and enforce ideological fit and (2) govern partnerships across scales, (3) pursue horizontal cooperation within the region, and (4) produce long-term organizational trajectories through path-dependent interactions. Together, they provide an analytical framework for examining how coordination is practically achieved within inhabited transnational organizational forms that appear dense and coherent from a structural perspective, but remain uneven and unequal on the ground—helping to account for a multiplicity of organizational trajectories.

2.1.1. Ideological Translation and Boundary Work

² Even when these mechanisms involve relations and shared practices among actors, “they can be seen as ‘mechanisms’ from the perspective of explanatory theory-building: they consist of regularized processes that recur across many different kinds of contexts, and which contribute to higher-level relational processes” such as transnational coalition-building or strategic coordination (Mische 2003: 269; see Gross 2009 for a similar definition).

Because transnational think tank networks are composed of actors located across multiple levels—philanthropic foundations with a global scope, regional federations, and think tanks embedded in national political arenas—political coordination requires translating ideological categories across them. Global philanthropic foundations articulate broad commitments ranging from free markets and liberal democracy to ethno-nationalism or moral conservatism that must be rendered meaningful by professionals within local contexts marked by different party systems, intellectual traditions, and political histories. Research on transnational professional projects shows that such multi-level forms generate persistent tensions, as ideological categories that appear coherent at one scale rarely travel intact to another (Dezalay and Garth 2002; Bockman and Eyal 2002; Blok et al 2018), contesting the universality of unitary classification systems (Gonsalves 2025) and therefore undermining political coordination even among actors who share broad normative goals (Nelson 1997; Shawki 2011).

To react accordingly and stabilize such partnerships, actors must engage in translation and boundary work—two processes that constitute a single mechanism. First, interorganizational coordination depends on successful ideological translation: the interpretive labor through which actors adapt abstract and complex cultural knowledge into locally intelligible political positions (Levitt and Merry 2009; Jijon 2019; Kay 2023). To sustain interorganizational partnerships, professionals must infer what a given ideological position would entail in a different cultural and political context—such as translating an “ethno-nationalist” or “social-Catholic” project articulated by a German foundation into locally actionable political claims in Venezuela or Uruguay. Yet translation does not secure coordination by itself. Once positions are rendered legible across contexts, actors must evaluate whether those translated positions remain compatible with their existing collective projects, expectations, and relations on the ground. This

second moment involves boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002), with professionals classifying partners, assessing similarities and differences, and drawing distinctions that delimit what is a legitimate cooperation for their organizations (Levitt 2005; Blok et al 2018).

Together, ideological translation and boundary work constitute a single relational mechanism: translation makes cross-context cooperation imaginable, while boundary work determines whether it can be sustained. Coordination in transnational think tank networks thus hinges not on shared doctrine alone, but on the recursive processes through which meaning is produced and evaluated across multiple organizational levels.

2.1.2. Governance through Intermediation

While ideological translation and boundary work make transnational cooperation intelligible, they do not by themselves stabilize partnerships over time. Sustained coordination requires organizational forms that monitor and govern relationships between organizations as they unfold. However, the process by which conservative philanthropic foundations make relationships governable remains so far a “black box,” in part because existing work on philanthropic tie formation focuses on project-based funding schemes without strong ideological content (Wong, Levi, and Deutsch 2017; Levi, Dinovitzer, and Wong 2022). Recent work on relatively “mainstream” international philanthropy shows that influence over grantees depends on the construction of governance infrastructures (Provan and Kenis 2007) that make compliance and performance legible—often through ongoing negotiation with partners rather than one-off grants (Gonzalez-Ocantos and Morcillo Laiz 2023).

Unlike humanitarian or service-oriented philanthropy, neoliberal philanthropy seeks to shape public discourse and policy by building and sustaining partnerships with local advocacy organizations—rather than delivering services. In this sense, foundations are not simply donors but organizational principals attempting to stabilize partnerships to advance their worldview across nations, developing an “action profile” (Martin 2009: 11) or blueprint of what a good partner looks like. Governance through intermediation captures how conservative foundations render partnerships durable by inserting organizational brokers—regional offices, rotating officers, or local alumni—who translate expectations and evaluate local partners’ “fit” with their goals, sustaining various ongoing relationships over time across multiple levels. These governance arrangements selectively formalize elements of organization—monitoring, membership, hierarchy, or rule enforcement—without consolidating them into a single integrated structure (Ahrne and Brunsson 2010).

These governance structures matter because interorganizational partnerships are continually exposed to divergence between donor expectations and local practices. Organizational accounts of developmental projects show how non-profits produce “good projects” tailored to funders’ priorities that are decoupled in practice, especially when they must satisfy multiple audiences and maintain legitimacy in distinct environments (Krause 2014; Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012). Similarly, although both philanthropic foundations and local think tanks engage in fundraising and political advocacy, they occupy structurally distinct positions within transnational networks. Foundations control mobile resources and define eligibility criteria, while think tanks operate in volatile domestic contexts where organizational survival could depend on securing external support. Professionals must constantly recalibrate accountability and manage discrepancies across a large number of partnerships and projects.

2.1.3. Associational Coordination

Transnationally-oriented organizations are structurally unequal and tend toward regionalization, as actors outside the global core face thinner ties and limited access to global arenas (Beckfield 2003). At the same time, organizational professionals operating within specific regions share similar reference points given the interconnected institutional and cultural history of the contexts in which they work (Adams and Kang 2007; Mudge and Vauchez 2012; Appe 2022). One recurrent response to this process of regionalization in the world polity is the construction of federations that link organizations across national settings. A third mechanism therefore concerns associational coordination: the production of horizontal coordination through regional meta-organizations that increase communication and collective representation between professionals working across countries.

Rather than coordinating through monitoring or enforcement, federations create low-intensity associational infrastructures—boards, assemblies, convenings, joint statements—that make coordination possible without the more vertical consolidation of authority present in M1 and M2. In conservative TANs, such associational coordination has been widely documented, with umbrella organizations facilitating counter-mobilization and regional leadership while leaving substantive action and resource control firmly in the hands of individual partners (Bob 2012; Velasco and Swindle 2024). Neoliberal think tank networks are not the exception in this respect, with a handful regional federations founded to coordinate action and discourse among organizations that are presumably aligned and share similar stances on a region's political issues (Fischer and Plehwe 2017).

However, given that member organizations already possess their own resources, status, and ties within their own countries, their participation remains optional rather than necessary, and members retain exit options. As a result, regional federations tend to attract and retain weaker members, while stronger organizations—those most capable of acting independently—often resist constraints on their autonomy (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005). This asymmetry has direct implications for coordination, creating an intermittent mode of engagement across scales. Organizations move in and out of regional coordination through sporadic “scale shifts” (Tarrow 2005) rather than investing in more sustained and horizontal transnational cooperation (von Bülow 2010: 26-27). This mechanism of coordination is thus constitutively limited: it mitigates fragmentation by making cooperation periodically available without enforcing enduring operational integration across countries.

2.1.4. Cumulative Advantage

A final mechanism concerns how repeated partnerships within networks generate durable organizational inequalities between local think tanks over time. Much of the literature implicitly assumes that a vertical affiliation developed by a Southern think tank with a powerful Northern foundation automatically yields domestic influence. Yet research on non-profits suggests otherwise. Agenda-setting within transnational fields reflects processes of gatekeeping and brokerage that systematically privilege some organizations, issues, and actors while marginalizing others (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2007; Krause 2014; Bush 2015). In contexts marked by political volatility and resource scarcity, dependence on donor expectations intensifies

competition among local partners, fragmenting coalitions and reproducing asymmetries of power across the network (Cheng et al. 2021).

Cumulative advantage captures the relational mechanism through which such asymmetries emerge over time. In uncertain and shifting environments, philanthropes rely on prior reputation and perceived reliability to guide future collaboration—penalizing those organizations that defy classification (Podolny 2001; Zuckerman 1999). Past participation and achievements thus become a proxy for trustworthiness and political alignment, producing cumulative advantages: integration early into networks of neoliberal advocacy involves further access to resources and visibility, which are often converted into increased opportunities over time.

Given the multi-level structure of inhabited transnational organizational forms, philanthropic foundations face strong incentives to minimize risk by renewing ties with local think tanks that have demonstrated to be ideologically legible and aligned (M1), administratively competent (M2), and in positions of regional leadership (M3)—especially across the unstable institutional and political environments of the Global South. In this sense, cumulative advantage operates through repeated decisions about whom to fund or endorse. Progressively, older and well-funded local organizations are able to “hoard” opportunities (Tilly 1998), leading to more stable path-dependent trajectories over time—sometimes independently of substantive performance or political impact. As a result, networks that appear stable and expansive at the level of formal affiliation can simultaneously produce highly uneven organizational trajectories, concentrating resources and opportunities among a small subset of actors.

Table 1. Relational Mechanisms of Transnational Coordination

	M1 Ideological Alignment & Boundary Work	M2 Governance Through Intermediation	M3 Associational Coordination	M4 Cumulative Advantage
Process	Translation, classification, and enforcement of ideological fit in interorganizational partnerships	Monitoring, evaluation, and stabilization of interorganizational partnerships	Horizontal regional association without hierarchical integration	Cumulative reinforcement of resources and opportunities through repeated partnering decisions
Scale	Dyadic interorganizational partnerships between foundations and think tanks	Bureaucratic intermediaries linking global foundations and local partners	Meta-organizational arena linking multiple think tanks across nations	Cumulative effect of dyadic funding decisions and regional / local leadership
Temporality	Episodic and recursive: initial assessment re-evaluated in moments of controversy or political change	Continuous and iterative: ongoing oversight punctuated by review, renewal, or withdrawal	Intermittent: low-intensity ongoing cooperation punctuated by regional events or campaigns	Cumulative and path-dependent: repeated interactions produce durable organizational trajectories

These four mechanisms (Table 1) provide an analytical vocabulary for examining how coordination is imagined, enacted, negotiated, and unevenly realized within inhabited transnational organizational forms. Importantly, these relational mechanisms are analytically distinct, but they become empirically interdependent: they operate simultaneously and condition one another across levels and temporal horizons, such that their combined effects become visible only over repeated interactions. In the sections that follow, I unpack how they operate through an

in-depth analysis of transnational neoliberal think tank networks in Latin America, revealing their uneven effect on organizational trajectories.

3. Data and Methods

To capture both the structure of transnational neoliberal advocacy networks and the ways actors interpret and govern these relationships, I draw on four sources of data: an original database of transnational partnerships, in-depth interviews, archival materials, and participant observation. This section first describes the sampling strategy and construction of the network dataset, then outlines the qualitative data collection, and finally the analytical strategy.

3.1. Case Selection and Database of Organizations

Because no comprehensive and reliable dataset of free-market think tanks exists, I assembled an original dataset focused on Latin America. The region is a theoretically strategic site for examining these mechanisms because it combines long-standing neoliberal experimentation with fragmented and unstable political fields and a dense—but uneven—terrain of international partnerships. The dataset was constructed through a combination of existing directories and systematic manual searches of organizational websites, which allowed me to identify previously unlisted organizations and code their affiliations with international philanthropic foundations (see Appendix A). The first version of the dataset was created in May 2020 and updated iteratively through December 2023. The resulting database includes 159 think tanks distributed across 22 Latin American countries, with data evidencing a sharp post-2000

expansion (Figure A1, Appendix A). This dataset maps ties among Latin American organizations as well as their partnerships with conservative philanthropic foundations headquartered primarily in the United States and Western Europe.

Given the conceptual ambiguity surrounding what counts as “neoliberal” or “free-market,” I relied on two sampling criteria. First, I included organizations that explicitly identified with ideological traditions commonly associated with neoliberalism in the literature. Second, I incorporated organizations without explicit ideological labels whose stated missions aligned with core neoliberal tenets, such as the promotion of market-based solutions, limited state intervention, and competition as a principle of social ordering. Organizations maintaining active ties with political actors explicitly opposed to neoliberal agendas were excluded, as determined through public affiliations, organizational materials, and the triangulation of interview data.

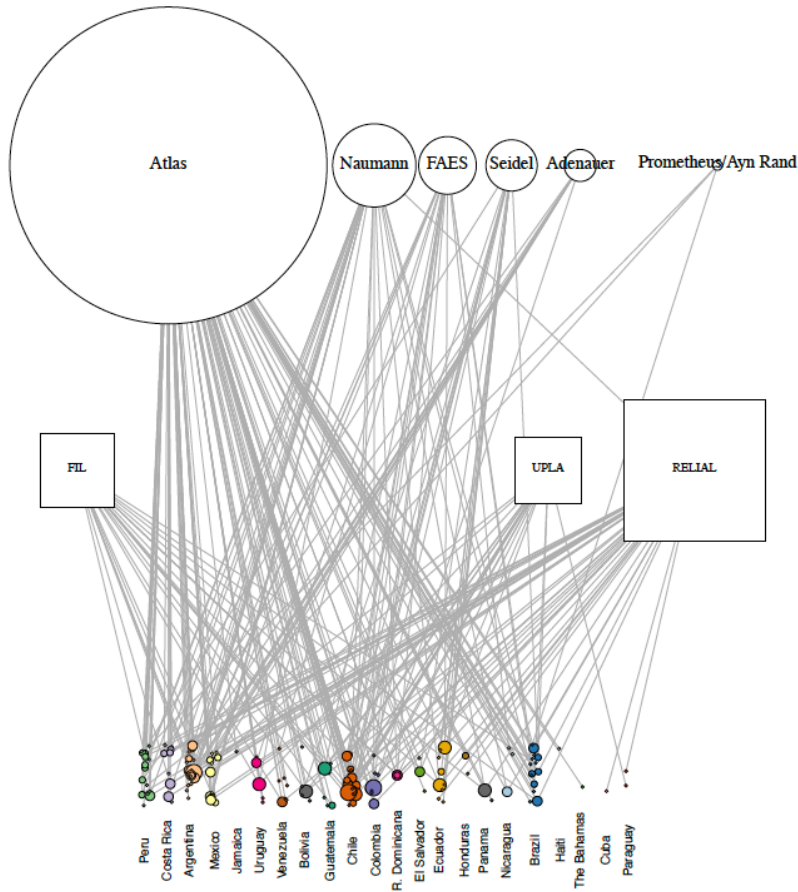
As a result, the think tanks examined here occupy positions on the right of the political spectrum in their respective countries, even when they do not explicitly acknowledge such an orientation. More precisely, they fall within what I term the “free-market right,” an ideological stance that treats market competition as the primary and most legitimate mechanism for ordering social hierarchies and determining the role of the state (Mudge 2008; Fourcade and Healy 2007). This classification is ideological rather than policy-specific. While the organizations sampled vary widely in their policy emphases and professional expertise, they share a normative and moral commitment to market-based solutions to political issues. Additional details on classification decisions are provided in Appendix A.

Because the analysis focuses on the stability and durability of transnational coordination, I restricted attention to philanthropic foundations that maintain stable, multi-year partnerships with Latin American think tanks, rather than foundations that provide only short-term or project-

based grants without aiming at further cooperation. To operationalize this distinction, I coded two types of interorganizational ties: partnerships and projects. This strategy narrowed the analysis to nine international philanthropic foundations that sustain enduring relationships with Latin American organizations and constitute the core of the regional network. Consistent with prior research (Plehwe and Fischer 2019), these foundations account for the overwhelming majority of ties (98%) referenced by interviewees. As such, the networks examined here represent most-likely cases of successful transnational coordination in terms of the sustained length of their cooperation.

Figure 1 represents the resulting multi-layered structural nature of neoliberal networks. At the global level are philanthropic foundations headquartered in the Global North. At the regional level are federations led by Latin American think tank directors. At the national level are country-based think tanks operating within domestic political arenas. Node size reflects the number of transnational partnerships. The figure highlights the hierarchical yet complex and densely interconnected architecture through which multiple organizations are linked within neoliberal advocacy networks.

Figure 1. Hierarchical Affiliation Network of Neoliberal Think Tanks in Latin America



Source: Author's elaboration. White circled nodes represent foundations from the Global North, white squared nodes represent regional think tanks, and circled nodes in other colors represent think tanks working in Latin American countries. Nodes are weighted by the number of transnational partnerships.

3.2. Qualitative Data Collection

To understand how philanthropic foundations develop and sustain partnerships with think tanks across Latin America, I conducted semi-structured interviews with key professionals across organizational positions and countries. These included: senior staff of philanthropic foundations active in the region (N = 16); the universe of local think tank directors in Chile and Argentina, along with selected staff, donors, and legislators engaged with their work (N = 129); and

directors of prominent think tanks in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Venezuela (N = 7). The largest share of interviews was carried out in Chile and Argentina—cases that exemplify, respectively, long-standing neoliberal resilience and pronounced organizational instability (Madariaga 2020)—which enabled systematic comparison of how international partnerships are perceived and enacted across distinct national contexts. Participants were selected to capture organizational variation across scale, role, and national setting, prioritizing actors positioned to speak authoritatively about partnership formation and evaluation.

I supplemented interviews with archival research and participant observation. At the Hoover Institution Archives, I consulted the recently donated Atlas Network Records collection, examining organizational documents and partnership materials that shed light on long-term coordination strategies (1981-2015). During fourteen months of fieldwork in Chile and Argentina, I collected organizational documents from active and inactive think tanks, and conducted participant observation at public and private events, including conferences, seminars, and organizational meetings (see Appendix Table A2). These complementary sources provided contextual depth and helped triangulate how professionals perceive and negotiate partnerships in practice.

3.3. Analytical Strategy

My analytical strategy combines network data with qualitative evidence to examine how interorganizational coordination is produced in practice within transnational think tank networks. Rather than treating network ties as static indicators of collaboration, I approach them as relational accomplishments whose meaning and durability must be assessed empirically

(Emirbayer 1997; Mische 2008). The partnership database provides a map of the structural architecture of transnational networks, identifying formal ties, node centrality, and multi-level patterns of affiliation. Qualitative materials—interviews, archival documents, and participant observation—are instead used to reconstruct how actors interpret, negotiate, and sustain these ties over time. This combination makes it possible to move from structural description to processual explanation, identifying the relational mechanisms through which coordination is built across organizational levels (Parkinson 2021). By iteratively comparing network patterns with actors’ accounts and observed practices, the analysis captures variation in how organizational trajectories diverge within apparently coherent networks.

4. Analysis

4.1. Ideological Alignment and Boundary Work

Establishing durable partnerships is central to the construction of transnational advocacy networks. For philanthropic foundations, partnership decisions hinge on whether a think tank demonstrates sufficient alignment with their market-oriented position. A key step in unpacking these dynamics is therefore recognizing that philanthropic foundations do not approach partnerships through a single template. They differ in their partisan affiliations, ideological orientations and normative commitments, which shape how “ideological fit” is evaluated across national contexts. Table 2 summarizes these distinctions, serving as an analytic reference point for the mechanisms examined below (see Appendix for additional information on these foundations).

Table 2. Main characteristics of Global Neoliberal Philanthropic Foundations

Foundation	Country	Explicit Partisan affiliation	Ideological Orientation	Presence in Latin America	Type of Support
Friedrich Naumann Foundation	Germany	Free Democratic Party (FDP)	Classical Liberal / Ordoliberal	Local offices by country / sub-region	Long-term partnerships; financial and logistical resources
Hanns Seidel Foundation	Germany	Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU)	Conservative / Christian-Social	Local offices by country / sub-region	Long-term partnerships; financial and logistical resources
Konrad Adenauer Foundation	Germany	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	Liberal-Conservative	Local offices by country / sub-region	Long-term partnerships; financial and logistical resources
Prometheus Foundation & Ayn Rand Institute (ARI)	United States	N/A	Objectivist	Alumni and training networks	Long-term partnerships; financial and training resources
Foundation for Social Analysis and Studies (FAES)	Spain	People's Party (PP)	Liberal-Conservative	Alumni chapters and training programs	Training of young cadres; coalition-building
Atlas Network	United States	N/A	Libertarian / Libertarian-Conservative	Regional centers; alumni networks	Multi-year project grants; professional training; coalition-building spaces

Source: own elaboration. Ideological orientations correspond to self-ascriptions expressed by organizational documents and interviewees.

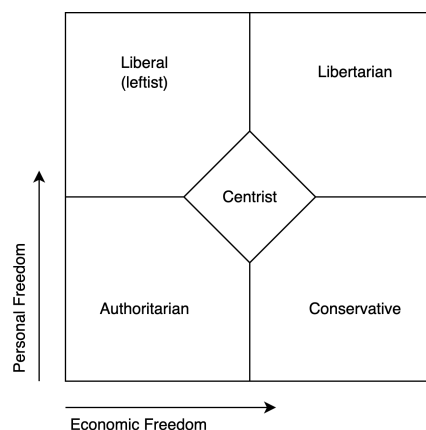
These differences reflect long-standing ideological cleavages in Western conservative and neoliberal traditions (Mudge 2008: 716–18). Whereas U.S.-based foundations tend to embody libertarian or Objectivist currents, the German partisan foundations combine market-oriented commitments with sharply divergent positions on personal freedom and social values.

Naumann is often associated with a libertarian stance on civil liberties, Seidel with socially conservative Catholic traditions, and Adenauer with Christian Democratic values closer to a moderate center-right.

For local think tanks, this heterogeneity in donors' orientations complicates partnership formation: identifying the closest equivalent to a German liberal-conservative party within fragmented and shifting political systems such as Peru's or Argentina's requires continual interpretation and reassessment, making ideological alignment a recursive and unstable accomplishment rather than a settled condition.

Many Latin American professionals I interviewed relied on the Nolan Chart (Figure 2)—originally developed by libertarian activist David F. Nolan—as a practical tool for rendering these ideological differences legible across national contexts. The chart maps political positions along two axes—economic freedom and personal freedom—allowing actors to distinguish among libertarians, classical liberals or center-right actors, and conservatives. While these currents share strong commitments to market freedom, they diverge sharply on issues of personal morality and state authority.

Figure 2. The Nolan Chart



Source: Own elaboration

In practice, these categories function as cultural shorthand rather than fixed ideological positions, and their translation into Latin American political contexts is often fuzzy and contested. As María Clara, director of a prominent Colombian conservative think tank, explained, radical libertarianism or “anarcho-capitalism” may be a coherent ideology in the U.S. context, but is politically impractical for organizations seeking to influence state policy in Colombia given their strong rejection of the state. However, if a leader such as Argentine President Javier Milei is suddenly elected on a libertarian-oriented platform, it might be useful for local think tanks to frame their work differently in order to receive international support. To do so, local think tanks must continually interpret—and periodically reassess—where philanthropic foundations fall within these ideological boundaries if they want to make their projects legible.

Perhaps most relevantly, philanthropic foundations also need to engage in constant classificatory work as political conditions and leadership positions rapidly shift in Latin America, which makes ideological alignment a recurrent source of tension within transnational partnerships. When unresolved, such tensions can harden into judgments that reshape partnership opportunities and reputational standing over time. A telling example is the trajectory of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Chile. While Adenauer partners with center-right think tanks in countries such as Argentina and Colombia, its historical alliances in Chile have been anchored on the center-left, reflecting the progressive orientation of the Christian Democratic Party since the transition to democracy. For decades, Adenauer financed projects associated with *Democracia y Comunidad*, a think tank embedded in policy coalitions that included Socialist and Communist parties. This positioning has generated persistent resentment among right-wing

professionals, who view Adenauer's Chilean partnerships as ideologically misplaced. As the director of a leading conservative think tank in the country explained:

... if we were in another country, the Adenauer would probably fund our work. In fact, there are similar organizations to ours in other Latin American countries that receive funds from them. [...] Normally, in other countries, the Christian Democracy is right-leaning, or center-right. Here in Chile it has always been a party of the center-left since 1990 ... That's why they have so many problems nowadays... [laughs]

Over time, these misalignments produced durable consequences. Right-wing think tanks increasingly turned to the Hanns Seidel Foundation—a socially-conservative German counterpart—while the Adenauer struggled to partner with the Chilean center-right after the decline of Christian Democracy in the 2000s. As the regional coordinator of the Seidel Foundation noted, ideological misclassification can easily foreclose future partnerships: “The Adenauer lost their counterparts, and they are informally poaching ours. But if you lose them, you probably lose them in the long term.”

Moments of political crisis can further intensify these dynamics by forcing foundations to actively police ideological classifications through boundary work. A particularly salient episode occurred in 2020 with the publication of the “Madrid Letter,” a manifesto promoted by Dissensus, a think tank affiliated with Spain's far-right Vox party (Figure A3, Appendix). Although many Latin American organizations initially signed the letter, the association with Vox generated acute tensions for the Naumann Foundation because its position on immigration and LGBTQ rights were widely seen as incompatible with the liberal commitments of Germany's FDP—Naumann's sponsor party. According to multiple interviewees, Naumann's regional office intervened directly, warning partners not to associate with the Madrid Letter or with European far-right movements under threat of losing funding. This intervention was frequently described

as producing a climate of caution: professionals circulated the document only privately, often showing it on their phones rather than sharing it digitally with me, for fear of reputational or financial retaliation.

For Latin American counterparts, this episode underscored how ideological alignment is not merely assessed but actively enforced—and how northern categorizations of “liberal” and “illiberal” politics can clash with local strategic priorities. What destabilizes partnerships, in other words, is less disagreement itself than the uneven translation of ideological categories into nationally salient political conflicts. Pointing to the difficulties involved in enforcing such boundary work, the director of the Naumann Foundation in Buenos Aires explained that on issues such as gun possession or environmentalism, President Javier Milei’s government openly contradicts the Foundation’s values. As some organizations previously aligned with the center-right shifted toward supporting the government, this became a major “challenge” for the Foundation. Conversely, this selective distancing was interpreted by local partners as a lack of commitment; as one Argentine director put it, foundations “do not really understand our priorities.”

Taken together, these cases illustrate how ideological alignment operates as an ongoing process of translation and boundary work rather than a settled prerequisite for cooperation. Foundations rely on broad classificatory categories—libertarian, liberal, conservative—to evaluate partners, but volatile political contexts and shifting coalitions repeatedly destabilize these assessments. Even well-resourced and long-standing partnerships remain fragile, as ideological mismatches can escalate into reputational sanctions and partner substitution.

4.2. Governance through Intermediation

To stabilize partnerships once ideological fit has been provisionally established, conservative philanthropic foundations have developed two distinct bureaucratic strategies of vertical “network governance” (Provan and Kenis 2007), which are captured in Table 2 above. One strategy—most clearly institutionalized by the German partisan foundations—relies on the creation of regional offices in Latin America staffed by rotating expatriate directors and locally hired personnel. These offices function as everyday intermediaries, monitoring compliance and managing relationships on behalf of headquarters. A second strategy, more common among FAES, ARI, and the Atlas Network, eschews permanent offices in favor of governance through alumni networks and episodic monitoring. Rather than embedding authority territorially, this model governs partnerships through relational oversight and reputational signals. This section examines how each strategy renders partnerships accountable while also generating distinctive tensions that limit coordination.

4.2.1. Governing Through Regional Offices

The Adenauer, Naumann, and Seidel foundations govern their partnerships through regional offices staffed by project directors trained in Germany and rotated across countries every three to five years. These directors hold formal authority over funding decisions and strategic priorities, but their frequent rotation limits their capacity to build durable relationships with local partners.

To compensate, foundations rely heavily on locally hired staff who sustain day-to-day communication, oversee project implementation, and identify potential partners. These

intermediaries do not operate as neutral administrators. Local staff are typically recruited from the same partisan, intellectual, and think tank milieus they are tasked with managing, and they bring with them political commitments and interpretive frameworks shaped by domestic debates. As a result, governance through regional offices does not merely monitor partnerships; it actively reproduces ideological translation and boundary work (M1) by filtering which positions are legible, acceptable, or risky within a given national context—and providing opportunities and resources based on such interpretations.

In practice, this mode of governance generates informal alignments that reshape partnerships over time. In Argentina, for example, a local Naumann coordinator closely aligned with a moderate faction of the center-right PRO party was succeeded by an officer sympathetic to Javier Milei's far-right agenda. Although the foundation formally maintained partnerships with the same think tanks, interviewees reported that attention and discretionary resources shifted with each staff change—sometimes in ways that conflicted with the stated priorities of the rotating German director. These dynamics foster competition and mistrust among local think tanks, which often perceive regional offices as promoting insular and politicized networks. As one interviewee described it, partnerships could come to resemble “a group of friends,” with local staff “becoming a puppet” of particular political factions rather than impartial brokers of transnational support.

Yet foundation leadership frequently interpreted the same patterns as indicators of success. Strong personal ties were taken as evidence that trust had been consolidated, occasionally justifying ad hoc extensions of officers' tenures. This was the case for long-serving Seidel and Naumann officers in both Chile and Argentina, whose deep local embeddedness—facilitated by family ties and long residence—enabled unusually durable relationships with

emergent conservative coalitions. While these extensions stabilized particular partnerships, they also intensified perceptions of favoritism and exclusion among local organizations.

These cases reveal a central paradox of governance through intermediation. Rotation rules are designed to prevent capture and politicization, yet in practice foundations reward precisely those intermediaries whose local embeddedness allows them to perform ideological translation most effectively. In doing so, bureaucratic governance often amplifies rather than resolves the classificatory tensions involved in boundary work, indirectly reinforcing competition and mistrust among Southern think tanks even as partnerships appear institutionally stabilized.

4.2.2. Governing Through Informal Networks

FAES, ARI, and the Atlas Network rely less on permanent bureaucracies and more on interpersonal intermediation through alumni and trusted personal networks. Rather than establishing local offices, these organizations use former trainees as information brokers who identify potential partners, vouch for ideological reliability, and reduce uncertainty about local political dynamics.

At FAES, this model emerged organically. After years of training young conservative cadres in Spain, alumni returning to Latin America began organizing national chapters that quickly became informal gateways for partnership selection. As FAES' international coordinator explained, alumni leaders started playing a central role in nominating candidates for grants and programs, thus effectively outsourcing preliminary screening to trusted insiders. Yet this strategy also generated vulnerabilities. In Mexico, alumni networks were dominated by figures drawn

from the hegemonic National Action Party (PAN), whose centralized recruitment practices limited the pool of nominees. FAES staff reported receiving candidate lists curated by party elites, which included politically connected relatives such as “the son of the Party’s President.” To counter this risk of capture, FAES was eventually forced to diversify its recruitment channels and invest additional resources in reaching conservative actors outside established party hierarchies.

The limits of alumni-based governance were even more pronounced where trust networks failed to materialize. As a prominent board member explained to me during the Ayn Rand Conference in Buenos Aires, ARI struggled for decades to expand in Latin America due to the absence of reliable intermediaries capable of translating Objectivist commitments locally. The central obstacle, she noted, was “finding someone capable of understanding local culture” and making Rand’s ideas politically legible within it—as they had successfully achieved in Eastern Europe during the 1990s. Only in 2019, when an ARI-trained alumnus returned from the United States and founded a local institute in Buenos Aires, did the organization establish a stable foothold in the region. Relevantly, interviews with Catholic neoliberal professionals revealed that similar alumni-based experiments by other foundations—such as the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty—were abandoned after a few years, retreating to short-term events and forums that avoided the risks of investing in partnerships characterized by loose or unstable ideological commitments.

Finally, the Atlas Network adopted the most flexible model of partnership governance, combining short-term grants with ongoing informal assessment. Historically, partnership decisions relied heavily on personal ties cultivated by senior staff, most notably its long-serving president Alejandro Chafuen (Hoover Archives, Atlas Network Collection, Box 7, Folder 1). As

a senior associate explained, Atlas routinely complemented formal applications by asking trusted partners within a country “who the new people are that we should be looking out for”—a practice he described as “proactive scouting.” As Atlas expanded, however, this personalized system proved insufficient. From 2010 onward, the organization introduced consultancy-style evaluation tools to formalize partner assessments and enable faster disengagement when affiliates deviated from expected ideological or strategic orientations (Hoover Archives, Atlas Network Collection, Box 3, Folder 11).³

4.3. Associational Coordination

A third mechanism shaping transnational coordination operates at the regional level, through the creation of federations linking multiple Southern think tanks across nations (see Figure 1). Funded by philanthropic foundations but formally directed by Latin American think tank leaders, these federations were created in the early 2000s to mitigate the recurring tensions identified in the previous sections: ideological misalignment at the dyadic level (M1) and instability in vertical governance arrangements (M2). Rather than stabilizing partnerships through monitoring or enforcement, federations aim to produce coordination through association—by increasing communication and unity among think tanks that otherwise compete for international attention and resources.

³ The rupture with Peru’s famous Institute for Liberty and Democracy—following economist Hernando de Soto’s association with Alberto Fujimori’s authoritarian regime—illustrates how governance through intermediation allows foundations to sever ties swiftly, while also exposing them to high organizational turnover. After receiving an internal report from another partner documenting his association with the regime as a case of ideological deviation, Atlas’ leadership terminated IDL’s funding (Hoover Archives, Atlas Network Collection, Box 183, Folder 4).

Three federations stand out as particularly prominent: UPLA (Union of Latin American Parties), RELIAL (Liberal Network of Latin America), and FIL (International Foundation for Liberty). UPLA and RELIAL originated with Latin American think tank entrepreneurs supported by the Hanns Seidel and Naumann foundations, respectively, while FIL was launched by intellectuals and business elites close to Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa. Despite differences in origin and ideological emphasis, all three share a similar organizational design: governance by boards composed of think tank directors from multiple countries and low levels of centralized authority.

Interviewees consistently acknowledged that federations improved communication among directors and facilitated episodic collective action. In moments of perceived political threat, they enabled coordinated statements or joint public interventions—such as backing conservative candidates in Mexico,⁴ stalling Colombia’s Peace Accords,⁵ or expressing concern over policy reversals in Honduras.⁶ Yet these gains in visibility were not matched by durable forms of cooperation. Federations rarely redistribute resources or discipline members. As a result, their role remains peripheral to the everyday organizational work of most think tanks.

This limitation reflects not a failure of implementation, but the logic of associational coordination itself. UPLA illustrates this clearly. Membership is restricted to think tanks aligned with conservative parties connected to the Hanns Seidel Foundation, and its activities revolve around annual meetings and working groups to boost their political appeal. As UPLA’s regional director acknowledged, “think tanks *do not receive support* through UPLA; they rather

⁴ FIL. “Comunicado de la Fundación Internacional sobre las próximas elecciones de México.” February 13, 2024.

⁵ UPLA. “Declaración de la Asamblea de la Unión de Partidos Latinoamericanos (UPLA) respecto del proceso de paz en Colombia” November 4, 2023.

⁶ RELIAL. “Los males y errores de alinear a Honduras con los intereses del Foro de Sao Paulo, el Grupo de Puebla y la Progresista Internacional” June 28, 2024.

participate as a way of *offering support*” to conservative parties; no director in my sample considered UPLA consequential for strengthening their organizational capacity. RELIAL initially aspired to a broader and more horizontal model. Founded in 2004 with the aim of formalizing cooperation and advancing common strategies between roughly forty affiliated think tanks and local political parties. However, following corruption scandals involving a key Costa Rican affiliate in 2014, RELIAL retrenched. Substantive collaboration gave way to synchronization of public statements and information exchange, leading one Mexican co-founder to describe it simply as “a networking platform.”

From the perspective of participants, this outcome was unsurprising. As the director of a major Chilean think tank put it, regional coordination rarely competes with national priorities: “Most countries look at their own belly button. People care about national politics. Regional networking is useful to know how others deal with similar problems, or to invite speakers—but that’s all. Funding is very low, and coordination doesn’t really go anywhere.” A senior officer from the Atlas Network offered a similar diagnosis, framing limited coordination as an endemic feature of international philanthropy:

“Collaboration is often difficult—even within a single country. There are many good organizations, but also many personalities. What we tried to always provide was a coordinating role: bringing people together informally, so they could share what they were doing, avoid duplicating efforts, and occasionally think more strategically together.”

This account clarifies why federations remain largely symbolic. Rather than overcoming ideological fragmentation or competition, the mechanism of associational coordination manages it by lowering the costs of interaction without imposing obligations. FIL represents an ambitious attempt to escape these limits, yet ultimately reproduces them in a different register. Founded by free-market entrepreneurs close to Vargas Llosa, FIL combines public forums endorsing

conservative party candidates with efforts to engage regional business elites through a Business Advisory Council coordinated by Vargas Llosa's son. But despite its expanding apparatus and elite visibility, FIL provides little tangible support to local think tanks. Interviewees repeatedly characterized it as a "closed circle of friends" revolving around personal networks, with few entry points for outsiders. Archival searches confirmed the absence of sustained financing for think tanks, underscoring the weakness of business-based coordination in the region—as explained below.

Taken together, these cases show that associational coordination offers a partial response to the instability of transnational partnerships. Federations mitigate some of the tensions generated by ideological ambiguity (M1) and uneven governance (M2) by creating spaces of horizontal communication and symbolic unity. Yet precisely because they avoid hierarchy and redistribution, they fail to generate the incentives required for sustained cooperation. In this sense, federations institutionalize what von Bülow (2010: 26-7) describes as the "yo-yo" dynamics of transnational advocacy: episodic convergence around moments of urgency, followed by retreat into nationally bounded priorities.

4.4. Cumulative Advantage

Shifting the analysis from global philanthropic foundations to the local operation of think tanks reveals how the limits of network governance accumulate over time. Across Latin America, two structural conditions have consistently shaped organizational outcomes: chronic fundraising constraints and weak party systems. Together, these conditions magnify small

differences in access to transnational partnerships into local, durable inequalities between organizations.

Fundraising emerged as the most frequently cited challenge across interviews. Because international grants are typically restricted to multi-year projects, local think tanks must cover overhead costs through domestic donors. Yet private philanthropy remains extremely limited in the region, accounting for less than 10 percent of third-sector revenues, while fewer than 3 percent of wealthy individuals report making regular nonprofit contributions (Layton 2010). Unlike left-leaning organizations, which often rely on state support (Levy 1996: 92-112), free-market think tanks largely reject government funding on ideological grounds, leaving them structurally dependent on scarce private and international resources.

This vulnerability is reflected in the organizational landscape. Analysis of financial reports and interview data from the universe of think tank directors in Chile and Argentina shows that roughly half of the organizations active during my fieldwork (2020-2023) either disappeared or operated on annual budgets below USD 15,000. Among the remaining organizations, budgets ranged widely—from approximately USD 20,000 to over USD 600,000 (Figure A6, Appendix). For smaller organizations, international grants—typically between USD 1,500 and 6,000 per year—often constituted more than half of total income, making them critical for survival rather than expansion or advocacy.

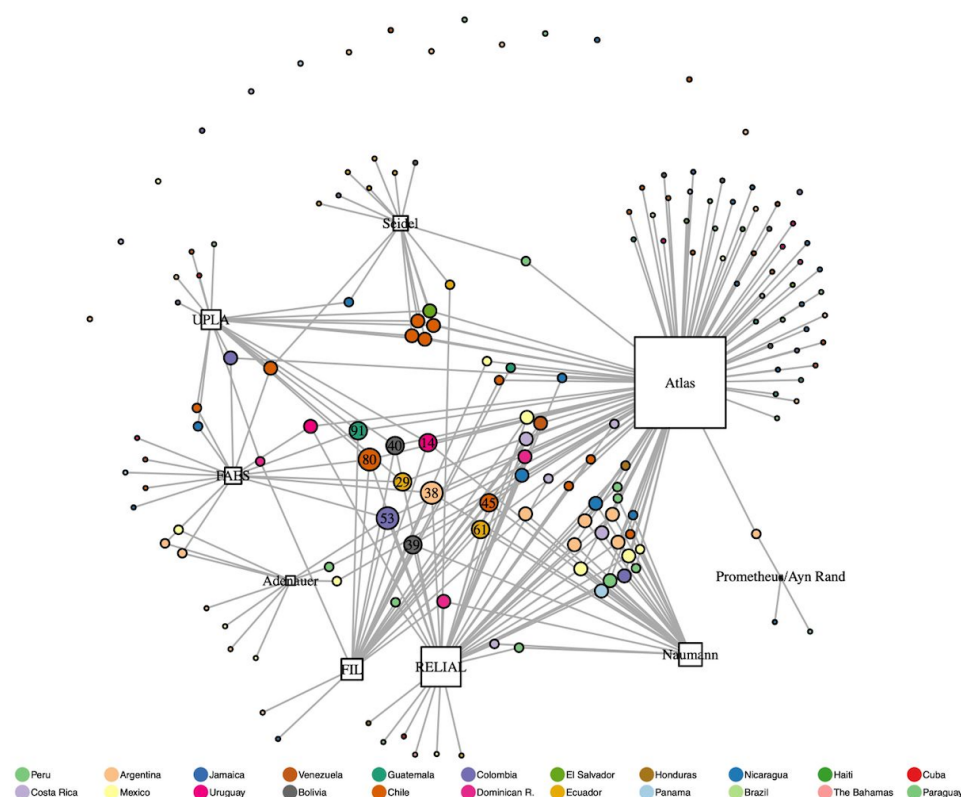
Archival data underscore this dynamic. While global foundations such as the Atlas Network are widely described as powerful “breeders” of new think tanks (Djelic and Mousavi 2020) and its consistent investment in Latin America has made it the most prominent conduit of philanthropic support for free-market think tanks in the region (Figure A2, Appendix), archival data reveals the uneven impact of such funding. Manual coding of data on partnerships from

Atlas in the region shows that roughly half of Atlas' partners supported between 1983 and 2005 failed to renew funding beyond the first year, with only a small minority securing consecutive multi-year support (Figure A4, Appendix).

These constraints are reinforced by regional political instability. Weak and highly personalized party systems discourage long-term investment by business elites, who frequently view policy advocacy as ineffective in Latin American contexts where parties collapse, fragment, or realign (Middlebrook 2000; Roberts 2014; Levitsky et al 2016). As one Argentine businessman explained after abandoning efforts to support a new think tank: "Building something like this is perceived as throwing your money away." Under these conditions, both domestic donors and international foundations gravitate toward organizations that already signal stability and reputational safety.

As a result of repeated partnering decisions, a small group of long-established think tanks remains disproportionately favored. Although the average founding year of neoliberal think tanks in Latin America is 2004, the ten most central organizations in transnational networks were founded nearly a decade earlier, on average in 1995, with several tracing their origins to the 1970s (Figure A1, Appendix). These organizations benefit not only from longevity but from symbolic authority: their directors are widely regarded as "pioneers" who sustained free-market advocacy through earlier periods of crisis, with most think tanks securing local funders years prior to developing the first transnational partnerships. This status attracts prominent business leaders and intellectuals to their boards, further reinforcing their capacity to secure resources.

Figure 5. Bimodal Affiliation Network of Free-Market Think Tank Advocacy Networks in Latin America



Source: own elaboration. The numbered nodes represent the ten think tanks with higher degree centrality (Table A1, Appendix).

This pattern produces a bifurcated organizational field. Well-established think tanks convert reputational capital and accumulated success in project allocation into further funding and leadership roles within regional coalitions, occupying the center of the multiple networks fostered by global philanthropic foundations (see Figure 5). For these actors, transnational grants typically accounted for only a marginal share of total budgets—in between 1 and 15%—and were frequently described as “incidental” to ongoing operations. Newer and weaker organizations, by contrast, remain peripheral and depend heavily on a single source of international philanthropy, facing high turnover, limited professionalization, and frequent exit.

Paradoxically, then, the most established and centrally positioned think tanks within their own organizational fields are precisely those least dependent on international funding.

Cumulative advantage emerges not from intentional exclusion but from the interaction of local resource scarcity and organizational instability, and selective stabilization through multiple mechanisms (M1-M3). Over time, the same mechanisms designed to coordinate and sustain transnational advocacy instead consolidate resources and influence among a narrow set of organizations, facilitating opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998) within networks that appear expansive and inclusive from a structural perspective.

5. Discussion and Conclusion [*To be written*]

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