Signaling Anti-Western Positioning: Regime Type, Alignment, and the Demand to Join the BRICS

Giuseppe Peressotti*, Kelvin Chun-Man Chan*, Minh Dao*,

Sadman Shafiq*, Charles Alexander Weimer*, and Tiziano Cecconato*

*The University of Texas at Dallas, USA

Corresponding author: Giuseppe Peressotti, School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, The University of Texas at Dallas, 800 W Campbell Rd, Richardson, TX 75080, USA.

Email: Giuseppe.Peressotti@utdallas.edu

Abstract

The recent expansion of the BRICS has been met with an unprecedented wave of governments publicly expressing interest in joining the organization. Rather than treating these expressions simply as precursors to membership, we conceptualize them as a form of international political signaling through which governments publicly position themselves relative to the Western-led international order. To evaluate this argument, we build a novel dataset covering 195 states, recording whether and when governments publicly expressed interest in joining the BRICS from its founding through the end of 2024. We find that interest in BRICS is concentrated among less democratic governments, those aligned with its founders, and oil-rich states, while aid-dependent governments are less likely to express interest. By contrast, trade and investment ties with the BRICS and exposure to Western conditionality do not seem to explain interest in the organization. This descriptive analysis suggests that governments seek closer association with BRICS when it matches their political orientation and when fiscal autonomy lowers the cost of signaling distance from the West. More broadly, these findings show how governments position themselves within the international order through the institutions and political coalitions they

publicly seek to join.

Keywords: *BRICS; international organizations; foreign-policy alignment; signaling; regime type*

1 Introduction

In August 2023, the Johannesburg summit announced the first BRICS enlargement since 2010. Six states were invited; four joined on 1 January 2024, while Argentina declined and Saudi Arabia deferred.[1] Within eighteen months the coalition had drawn a queue of applicants across Southeast Asia, the Gulf, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. A grouping that much of the field had treated as ineffective and akin to an investor's label with summit communiqués attached, faced a wave of governments asking to join (Hopewell 2017; Laïdi 2012).

This behaviour goes against the most recent records of international integration. Projects with explicit agendas for political-economic harmonization, from ALBA and UNASUR in Latin America to deeper integration in Central Asia and the European Union, have lost momentum as governments turned reluctant to bind their policies to one another (Cusack 2018; Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020; Riggirozzi and Grugel 2015; Rosamond 2016). Those projects asked their members to harmonize policy and offered no great-power anchor, and the interest they attracted rarely translated into actual membership. BRICS differs under both these aspects: it sets no policy conditions on its members and ties them to a bloc of large non-Western powers, and the demand it has drawn has increased compared to the 2010s.

What kind of government publicly asks to join, and what does asking communicate? The states that express interest do not appear to be the archetypical countries engaging in the international system. Most sit below the global median on liberal democracy, and the cohort that surfaced between 2022 and 2024 sits lower still.[2] These same governments vote close to the BRICS-5 (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) in the UN General Assembly, and that proximity is sharpest as a positioning toward China and away from the United States. From this perspective, a coalition whose founders view themselves as architects of a multipolar order has drawn a pool of interested governments with relatively homogeneous views.

[1] Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates joined on 1 January 2024. Indonesia acceded on 6 January 2025.

[2] Roughly four in five states with publicly expressed interest through 2024, 47 of 60, score below the global median on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) liberal democracy index.

We read a public expression of interest in BRICS as a signal of anti-Western positioning, and we argue that the demand for this coalition concentrates on one dimension that holds steady over time: regime type. Governments that have moved against constitutional constraints, judicial independence, and electoral oversight are drawn to a forum that de-emphasizes the governance standards the Western-led order enforces. Alignment represents another face of the same medal: the governments that moved toward China and away from the United States in their UN voting are the governments that expressed interest in those same years. We treat the act of expressing interest as cheap, public, and addressed first to the BRICS founders and other non-Western governments, and only second to the West it positions against. The act separates governments by type because it carries a different price for each: close to nothing for a government already at odds with the Western order, real reputational cost for one embedded in Western relationships, where the same words read as a break with partners it depends on (Spence 1973).

How governments select into alignment with such a coalition has drawn less attention than the benefits of membership or the consequences of expansion. Work on treaty commitment shows that any account of who joins has to take selection seriously: states tend to comply with the commitments they were already disposed to keep (Simmons 2000; Von Stein 2005). We interpret the demand for BRICS as the entry-side counterpart to that problem, effectively the demand-side mirror of Pevehouse's (2002) account of institutional accession. We build a 195-country dataset that records, for every state, the year it first publicly expressed interest in joining BRICS, whether a formal application followed, and whether partnership or membership followed. A cross-section anchored on 2024 shows that lower liberal democracy and closer alignment with the BRICS core predict interest, while commercial exposure to the BRICS-5 does not.

We also showcase how two contrasting, alternative relationships are not as obvious as we might expect. The first holds that governments turn to BRICS to escape Western conditionality, with states carrying International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs, heavy debt, or external fragility seeking options that come without policy strings. In our data, realized exposure to Western conditionality

does not raise interest in joining the group. The second holds that commerce drives the demand, with governments more entrenched with BRICS economies being the ones expected to be more likely to show interest in joining this club. We find that bilateral trade and inward foreign direct investment (FDI) from the BRICS-5 carry no predictive weight once we account for positioning and political confounders. To complete the fiscal-autonomy profile, compliant with our expectations, we find that governments funded by fuel rents, which owe little to Western official finance, are more likely to express interest, while aid-dependent governments are less likely to do so.

The paper describes who lines up behind the BRICS before any admission decision is taken, and what lining up communicates. We thus provide a demand-side account of selection into international organizations, asking how middle powers and peripheral states decide whether to position toward a non-Western coalition, against a literature that has mostly asked which governments such institutions choose to admit. The timing and reversibility of these announcements fit this interpretation: expressions of interest cluster during summit years, Argentina plainly reversed its accepted invitation within weeks at little cost, and the correlates of expressing interest differ from those of advancing toward membership (Online Appendix A1).

Following, Section 2 develops the theory and the expectations it yields. Section 3 describes the data, Section 4 reports the analysis, and Sections 5 and 6 discuss the findings and conclude.

2 Anti-Western Positioning and the Demand for BRICS

2.1 Third-wave of autocratization and the demand for non-Western institutions

Over the past two decades, democratic decline has taken a form that earlier accounts of regime change, built around coups and revolutions, did not anticipate. Incumbents who reach office through elections then hollow out the institutions that constrain them: they pack or sideline the courts, rewrite electoral rules in their own favour, and starve independent media and opposition

parties of resources, all while leaving the outward machinery of elections in place. Hungary under Orbán and Venezuela under Chávez and Maduro are the textbook cases, and the pattern now reaches a wide set of middle-income states with active foreign policies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Bermeo 2016). Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) name this the third wave of autocratization, and the count of states in active episodes has climbed steadily since the early 2000s.

For a government seeking to pursue this path, staying embedded in the American-led international order grows more expensive. The conditionality attached to IMF lending, the governance benchmarks of the World Bank, election monitoring, UN human-rights scrutiny, and targeted sanctions all run through institutions the Western powers built and still dominate (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Donno 2013; McDowell 2021). Through the 1990s these constraints bound tightly because borrowers had nowhere else to turn: a state that wanted external finance or diplomatic backing accepted the political conditions that came with it. This form of monopoly has since loosened. China and other large non-Western states began supplying alternatives that carry no comparable conditions, and the standing cost of friction with the Western order fell for any government willing to look elsewhere (Cooley and Nexon 2020).

This development carries two clear results. On the supply side, institutions friendly to authoritarian governments have increased, and they provide members the services a backsliding regime needs: development finance that carries no Western conditionality, diplomatic cover during moments of domestic crisis, and an in-group at the antithesis of liberal-led governance (Cottiero and Haggard 2023; Debre 2022). Regimes with denser ties to other autocracies survive longer, which gives membership a real payoff (Tansey et al. 2017). On the demand side, governments increasingly eye institutions whose existing members share their regime type, a tendency that persists after accounting for trade, security ties, and geography (Tallberg and Vikberg 2025; Cottiero and Haggard 2023). Here the demand for BRICS parts ways with the familiar expectation that international organizations (IOs) draw their members toward liberal reform. Pevehouse (2005) showed that leaders in nascent democracies join regional organizations to lock in liberal commitments, accepting external

constraints precisely because the constraints raise the cost of backsliding, and those organizations enforce the bargain through pressure, suspension, and the threat of expulsion (Pevehouse 2002). However, an autocratizing government has the reverse need: it looks for an institution that imposes no such constraints, one that accommodates parting ways with the post-WW II global order.

Since contemporary backsliding usually advances through continuous changes, a sequence of legal and administrative steps that each look ordinary even where some episodes still turn abrupt (Bermeo 2016), each move against the courts, the electoral process, or the opposition has to be absorbed and made to pass as ordinary as it occurs. What an autocratizing government wants from an institution is therefore standing accommodation: a forum that keeps treating each step as unremarkable and supplies cover as both domestic and international orders shift. That is the institution the next section describes.

2.2 BRICS as a non-conditional club

Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill grouped four large emerging economies as the *BRICs* in 2001 to flag their growth potential, and the governments themselves took up the term years later. BRIC as a political body dates to 2006, when the foreign ministers of Brazil, Russia, India, and China met on the margins of the UN General Assembly, and it consolidated into a coalition across a sequence of summits (Stuenkel 2020). The 2009 Yekaterinburg summit established an annual communiqué; South Africa's accession in late 2010 (joining at the 2011 summit) fixed the five-founder core that still controls admission and that for most of the life of the IO defined its policies. The 2014 Fortaleza summit created the coalition's two standing financial institutions, the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA).[3] The 2017 Xiamen summit opened the BRICS+ outreach format, and the 2022 Beijing summit, about four months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, paired a renewed enlargement push with discussion of settling trade outside the dollar (Liu and Papa 2022). Johannesburg in 2023 produced the first admissions since 2010, and

[3]The New Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai, lends for infrastructure and development projects, a partial alternative to the World Bank; the Contingent Reserve Arrangement is a reserve pool that members can draw on for balance-of-payments support, a partial alternative to the IMF.

the 2024 Kazan summit created a second tier of *partner* states, that drew more than thirty further governments into public expressions of interest (De Carvalho et al. 2025). Indonesia acceded in January 2025, the first Southeast Asian member. The label that began as a bet on emerging-market growth can be seen as an actual, structured group: governments invoke it to place themselves relative to the Western-led order.

In its current form BRICS is an informal club (Buchanan 1965). Part of what it provides is excludable, gated by the founders' rule of admission by consensus: formal membership status and access to the NDB and CRA facilities. The rest is a positional good that anyone associated with the coalition shares, recognition as part of a bloc that styles itself an alternative to the Western-led order (Larson and Shevchenko 2010). Four components (goods) make up what a member gets access to. The first is public identity, great-power-adjacent and less dependent on Western patronage (Papa and Han 2025). The second is development finance and a balance-of-payments backstop, through the NDB and CRA, without the policy conditions the IMF and World Bank attach to assistance (Würdemann 2018; Kaplan 2016). The third is partial insulation from dollar-system sanctions, through bilateral currency swaps and intermittent non-dollar invoicing, with Russia the clearest case (Liu and Papa 2022; Petry and Nölke 2024). The fourth is collective diplomatic cover, the joint statements that keep a member from standing alone on a contested issue. What the club mostly supplies is positional and sovereignty-protecting, which makes it worth most to a government that expects friction with the West and comparatively little to one that does not. What BRICS delivers is thus not just material, and indeed members and partner countries may receive less than formal meetings and statements promise. However, we argue that the governments treat associating with it as a meaningful statement of where they stand under rising external pressure.

This profile separates BRICS from the institutions governments usually join. Most multilateral bodies are treaty-based, regionally bounded, made up of similar regimes, and built to enforce conditions, whether they govern the economy or organize defence. BRICS is instead informal, cross-regional, mixed in regime type, and attaches no policy conditions to cooperation (Stone 2013; Stephen 2014).

It contests the prevailing order without confronting it following "standard rules" of the global world order, the soft-balancing posture of a coalition that builds alongside the Western institutions rather than working inside them (Papa and Han 2025). In Morse and Keohane's (2014) terms, this is competitive regime creation: the founders stand up a parallel club rather than capturing or redirecting authority within the existing ones.

The founders' own diversity sits comfortably with the regime-sorted demand we present, because the two belong to different sides of the club. The five founders run different political systems and economic models, so the coalition is not an alliance of perfectly-alike regimes (Stephen 2014; Laïdi 2012). What defines the pool of interested states is not just pure resemblance to any one founder, but each government's position relative to the West, and because the goods the club supplies are positional, the governments that value them most gather at the anti-Western end.

2.3 Signaling at the interest stage: audience and cost

A public expression of interest in BRICS is a relatively low-commitment statement: a government says it wants in, and in doing so takes a side in the contest between the Western-led order and its challengers. Two features give the statement its meaning, what it costs the sender and whom it is meant to reach.

A non-binding public statement is cheap talk, and cheap talk carries information only when the sender's and the receiver's interests line up (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Farrell and Rabin 1996). A cheap message still separates senders when it costs different types different amounts (Spence 1973): the act is affordable for a regime and expensive for another one, meaning that only the first kind ends up sending it. Expressing interest in BRICS is close to costless for a government already positioned against the West, low on liberal democracy and distant from Western alignment, and reputationally expensive for one embedded in Western relationships, where the same statement strains ties with donors, partners, and aligned publics.[4] Iran or Belarus expressing interest surprises

[4]We use anti-Western positioning to name the sender's own type: its combined regime-type and alignment position.

no one; Uruguay or Colombia doing so would be costly and surprising.

The price is paid in reputation and type-dependent in Spence's sense: a government already at odds with the Western order pays almost nothing to confirm where it stands, while one enmeshed in Western ties puts standing it values at risk (Spence 1973). This is what sets the act apart from a costly signal in Fearon's (1997) case: it burns no resource when sent and carries no automatic penalty when withdrawn, so a government whose orientation shifts can drop the position at little to no cost. A pure-preference account, on which aligned governments simply prefer an aligned club, predicts the same concentration of interest. The cheap-signal account predicts that concentration too, but adds a type-dependent cost: close to free for a government already at odds with the West, reputationally expensive for one embedded in Western ties.

The recognition that gives the cheap act its value comes first from the in-group: the BRICS founders and the like-minded Global-South and autocratic states whose acknowledgment confers the standing the sender is after (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Ward 2017). Governments tend to be drawn to join organizations whose members already resemble them (Kinne and Mineo-Marinello 2017). The West is viewed as a second audience: to it, the same statement reads as a step back from deference, a reading that fits the sanctioned and resource-autonomous senders more than the rest of the pool. A third, domestic audience reads the move in terms of local political direction.

In this context, commitment is screened twice, because the sender decides whether to send the signal and the founders decide whether to grant a seat. Any government positioned against the West can afford the cheap signal, meaning that expressed interest should track positioning. Advancement past that stage is the founders' decision, taken by consensus; the logic of club goods gives them reason to weigh the economic importance a candidate would add to the coalition (Buchanan 1965).

2.4 Expectations: who signals interest in the BRICS

We read the public expression of interest as a cheap signal of anti-Western positioning, and the sender's type has two faces: regime standing and alignment. Two further accounts root the demand

in what a government faces materially, its exposure to Western conditionality and its commercial ties to the BRICS-5, and we state each as a positive prediction before testing it. A last consideration would be fiscal in nature: whether a government can afford to position against the West at all, given where its revenue comes from.

Positioning: regime type and alignment. Regime type would be the sender's most consequential trait. A government that has moved against constitutional constraints, judicial independence, and electoral oversight has already shifted onto a path less compliant with the Western-led consensus. A forum that attaches no governance conditions and treats each such step as unremarkable is worth most to exactly that government. The non-conditional, sovereignty-protecting goods the club supplies accommodate the moves the Western-led order penalizes, which makes lower standing on liberal democracy the structural marker of the governments for whom that accommodation is most valuable, yielding our first hypothesis:

> **H1a.** Governments lower on liberal democracy are more likely to express interest in BRICS.

Where regime type shows how far a government has moved against its own liberal constraints, alignment shows where it places itself in the contest between the Western-led order and its challengers. A government whose UN General Assembly (UNGA) voting moves toward the BRICS founders voices the anti-Western stance that the club's positional goods reward. As such, our second hypothesis in the group would be:

> **H1b.** Governments whose UNGA voting sits closer to the BRICS founders are more likely to express interest in BRICS.

The argument that explains why nascent democracies enter regional organizations does not carry over here. Leaders in new democracies accept external constraints to raise the cost of their own backsliding (Pevehouse 2005), and the organizations they join enforce that bargain through pressure and the threat of suspension. An autocratizing government has no use for commitments of that kind and looks instead for a forum that imposes none, so the demand for BRICS runs almost opposite to

the pattern Pevehouse traced. This phenomenon concentrates among governments whose regime type and alignment already place them at the anti-Western end of the field(Tallberg and Vikberg 2025; Cottiero and Haggard 2023).

Conditionality The first material channel is conditionality. An autocratizing government finds several Western-led channels costly: IMF lending and its conditions, World Bank governance benchmarks, and entrenchment with the dollar system. All press on any government carrying external obligations, whatever its regime. Through the 1990s that exposure left little room to maneuver, because a state needing external finance had nowhere to turn but the institutions that attached political conditions to it (Cooley and Nexon 2020). The growth of Chinese and other non-Western lending increased the choices states faced, putting finance without governance conditions within reach (Kaplan 2016), and the NDB and CRA extend that option to development finance and balance-of-payments support inside the array of goods provided by the BRICS. A government already carrying IMF programs, heavy external debt, or the balance-of-payments distress that forces recourse to Western finance has a material reason to want the alternative, and a public expression of interest opens the relationship at little immediate cost. As such we expect that:

> **H2.** Governments more exposed to Western conditionality, through IMF programs, heavy external debt, or acute external fragility, are more likely to express interest in BRICS.

Economic Component. The second material channel is economic. States formalize their most important trade relationships through agreements and institutions that lock in market access and lower the risk that a partner defects (Mansfield et al. 2002). The financial machinery BRICS has stood up extends that logic to this club. The NDB and CRA, with the apparatus for settling trade outside the dollar, give association concrete commercial returns: project finance, currency-risk mitigation, and access on terms a non-member cannot reproduce bilaterally (Liu and Papa 2022). Dense integration into the BRICS-5 economies also builds domestic constituencies, among exporters and firms reliant on Chinese (or Russian, or Indian, etc.) capital, that favour closer institutional ties (Stephen 2014).

A government heavily traded into the BRICS-5 has both a state-level and a domestic-political reason to position toward the club its largest partners are building. Our third expectation is thus:

> **H3.** Governments with denser trade and investment ties to the BRICS-5 economies are more likely to express interest in BRICS.

Fiscal Autonomy. While the conditionality and commercial accounts give reasons a government might want to position toward BRICS, fiscal structure speaks to whether it can afford to. The cost of the signal is reputational and denominated in Western financial leverage: a public turn toward BRICS puts at risk whatever a government draws from Western donors, creditors, and the international financial institutions (IFIs). How tight that relationship is depends on where a government's revenue comes from. Fuel rents loosen the accountability that domestic taxation and external credit otherwise impose, letting resource-rich governments fund themselves without bargaining with domestic constituencies or outside creditors (Beblawi and Luciani 2015; Karl 1997; Ross 2001). They substitute for the external Western finance, donor flows, IFI lending, and creditor access, whose withdrawal would be the signal's cost. For such a government, positioning publicly against the Western order costs relatively little. As such, we have the following expectation:

> **H4a.** Greater reliance on fuel rents raises the probability that a government expresses interest in BRICS.

Dependence on Western official aid would run in the opposite way: the most aid-dependent governments have the most to lose from a public turn against the Western order, yielding our last hypothesis:

> **H4b.** Greater dependence on Western official aid lowers the probability that a government expresses interest in BRICS.

Testing these expectations requires country-level information on who expressed interest, at what stage, and when. Section 3 describes the dataset built for that purpose.

3 Data: The BRICS Accession Dataset

To address our questions, we build a 195-country dataset recording whether and when a government publicly expressed interest in BRICS accession and the country's status in terms of membership. Each row has: a binary interest indicator, formal application and invitation status, partner-tier status, full membership status, and the earliest dated source for the closest status to BRICS member.[5] The evidence collection window runs from 2006 to early 2026 (January); no BRICS interest onsets are observed before 2006, and the most recent documented onset is Madagascar in January 2026. The analytical cross-section is anchored at end-2024, the last year for which all covariate sources (V-Dem v14, GSDB v4, IMF FDI) are complete. Two cases with onset dates in 2025 are right-censored and coded interest = 0 in the main specification.[6] The coding unit is confirmation of interest through sources citing the public government (or a reasonable direct member of the state's government) instead of private-source reference or analyst inference.

The dataset yields 60 countries that showed interest in joining BRICS, distributed across four mutually exclusive tiers. Ten hold full membership: the five founders (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), the four states that joined in January 2024 (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates), and Indonesia, which acceded in January 2025. Ten hold partner status under the 2024 Kazan tier. Three additional countries received formal invitations without advancing to member or partner status. The remaining 37 expressed public interest without securing membership, partner status, or an invitation; of these, 15 filed a formal membership application that drew no invitation, while 22 went no further than a public statement. Across these four tiers, 19 countries in total carry a formal invitation on record, spanning the member and partner cohorts and the three invitation-only cases. The remaining 135 show no documented interest through the end of 2024.[7] Throughout the data collection process, we applied a conservative coding standard: a

[5] Table 1 presents all coded variables in the BRICS accession dataset.

[6] The right-censored cases are Suriname (February 2025) and Chile (May 2025); Madagascar's January 2026 statement is coded interest = 1 in the dataset but postdates the analytical window.

[7] Argentina and Saudi Arabia, which declined or deferred their invitations, are coded as invited in the end-2024 snapshot; Indonesia is a member in the final ledger but right-censored at the interest stage.

country is coded interest = 1 only when a head of state, foreign minister, or designated government spokesperson made a public statement of engagement with BRICS accession, or when bloc-side communications name the country as an engagement partner from credible sources. We assign later interest dates to minimize false positives, defined as cases where a country is coded interested without a clear public government statement. These errors are theoretically relevant because the argument relies on interest as an observable signal. Coding interest from analyst speculation or third-party reporting would undermine the dependent variable. False negatives, where private or unexpressed interest is missed, do not threaten to a similar extent because the theory concerns public signaling rather than latent preferences.[8] Several analyst lists circulating in 2024 include candidate countries whose own governments have made no public statement; those are coded zero here. Coding for each country underwent three layers of checks. First, authors coded the cases using a structured codebook with a four-tier source hierarchy. Tier A includes official government sources such as ministry press releases, presidential statements, official BRICS communications, and state news agencies. Tier B includes major wire services and established national media such as Reuters, AP, AFP, BBC, and Al Jazeera reporting a government's stated position. Tier C includes analyst commentary from recognized think tanks, academic work, and major regional newspapers. Tier D includes opinion pieces and partisan commentary. Tier D sources alone cannot generate a positive interest code, which avoids false positives based on unsupported claims. Coders recorded up to two government sources and two independent press sources per country, including URLs and notes. Second, we conducted a systematic corpus analysis using the NexisUni Academic database. Queries of the form `"BRICS" AND ("member" OR "application" OR "join" OR "partner" OR "interest") AND "[country name]"` were run across English-language full-text news and wire-service archives for 2006 to 2025, and a complementary exact-phrase query (`[Country] "applied for BRICS"`) was used for targeted confirmation. The corpus yielded 80 articles, from which 297 sentences containing application or membership language were extracted and hand-coded for country-specific confirmation. Third, we used Large Language Model clas-

[8] This follows a standard measurement trade-off. When interest is defined as a public signal, avoiding over-coding is more important than capturing all latent cases.

sification with Claude Opus 4.6 as a structured reliability coder, running a mandatory five-step search protocol for all 195 countries: cross-reference against known applicant and interest compilations, government-source search including foreign ministry and head-of-state websites, wire-service and major-outlet search, think-tank and academic source search, and non-English regional source search. A documented rationale was required before coding any country as interest = 0. Claude Opus 4.6 served as the primary structured coder while results were cross-checked against Gemini 3.1 Pro to assess convergence. The author team reviewed all disagreements across the three streams and made final coding decisions. Inter-coder agreement between human coding and the structured LLM coder was relatively high: Krippendorff's alpha is 0.753 for interest and 0.840 for membership, both consistent with substantial reliability for binary coding. Country-by-country status for all 195 coded cases appears in Online Appendix A2.

We extracted covariates from nine sources. V-Dem provides the liberal democracy index (v2x_libdem) and the polyarchy index (v2x_polyarchy) (Coppedge et al. 2021). Polity5 and Freedom House Freedom in the World serve as cross-source robustness checks. UNGA ideal-point estimates come from Voeten's United Nations General Assembly Voting Data (Voeten 2024); the BRICS-core centroid is the unweighted mean of ideal points for the five founders in each year, and distance is their absolute difference. The World Bank World Development Indicators provide GDP per capita, population, a four-category income-group classification, resource-rent shares, aid dependence (official development assistance as a share of gross national income, ODA/GNI), and per-capita growth. Bilateral trade shares with the BRICS-5 come from Comtrade, lagged one year; bilateral FDI shares from the IMF Direct Investment Positions survey, which ends in 2023; year-by-year Western-sender sanctions exposure from the Global Sanctions Data Base (GSDB) v4 (Felbermayr et al. 2020); and IMF arrangement counts and program-intensity measures from the IMF Monitoring of Fund Arrangements (MONA) database. The main specification has a sample of 152 non-founder states with complete data on V-Dem liberal democracy, UNGA ideal points, and WDI income covariates.[9]

[9]The 36 countries excluded for missing covariates include 7 coded interest = 1 (Afghanistan, Cuba, Ethiopia, Pales-

Table 1: Coded variables in the 195-country BRICS accession dataset (evidence window 2006–early 2026).

Variable	Definition
iso3c	ISO 3166-1 alpha-3 country code.
country	Common-use country name.
interest	1 if the government expressed formal BRICS interest; 0 otherwise.
interest_level	Among interest = 1: 1 if a formal membership application was submitted; 0 if interest was expressed through invitation, stated desire, or partner pathway (NA for interest = 0).
member	1 if full member (founders, 2024 entrants, Indonesia 2025); 0 otherwise.
partner	1 if partner under the 2024 Kazan tier; 0 otherwise.
invited	1 if formally invited by BRICS or submitted a formal application; 0 otherwise.
date_member	Date of formal membership accession (YYYY-MM-DD).
date_partner	Date of partner-tier entry (YYYY-MM-DD).
date_invited	Date of formal BRICS invitation (YYYY-MM-DD).
source1_govt, date1_govt	Primary government source URL and event date (YYYY-MM-DD).
source2_govt, date2_govt	Secondary government source URL and date, where available (YYYY-MM-DD; YYYY-01-01 when only year known).
source1_pvt, date1_pvt	Primary press or wire-service source URL and event date (YYYY-MM-DD).
source2_pvt, date2_pvt	Secondary press source URL and date, where available (YYYY-MM-DD; YYYY-01-01 when only year known).
notes	Free-text coding notes and caveats.

Interest onsets by year are shown in Figure 1: most countries signaled interest in 2023, the year of the Johannesburg summit and the first membership expansion since 2010.

tine, South Sudan, Syria, Venezuela), predominantly conflict-affected or heavily sanctioned states lacking WDI or UNGA data. All sit well below the global V-Dem median with strongly anti-Western UNGA positions, so their exclusion is conservative for H1a. Two additional observations drop as fixed-effect singletons, producing the reported N of 152.

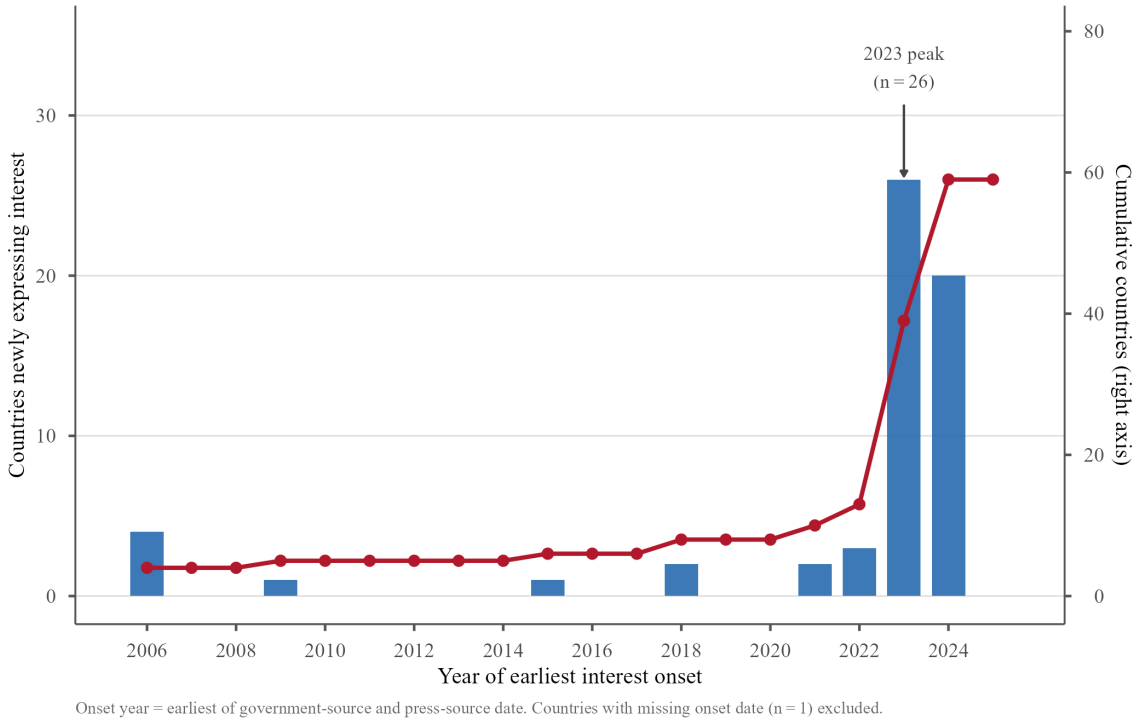


Figure 1: BRICS interest onsets by year, 2006–2024.

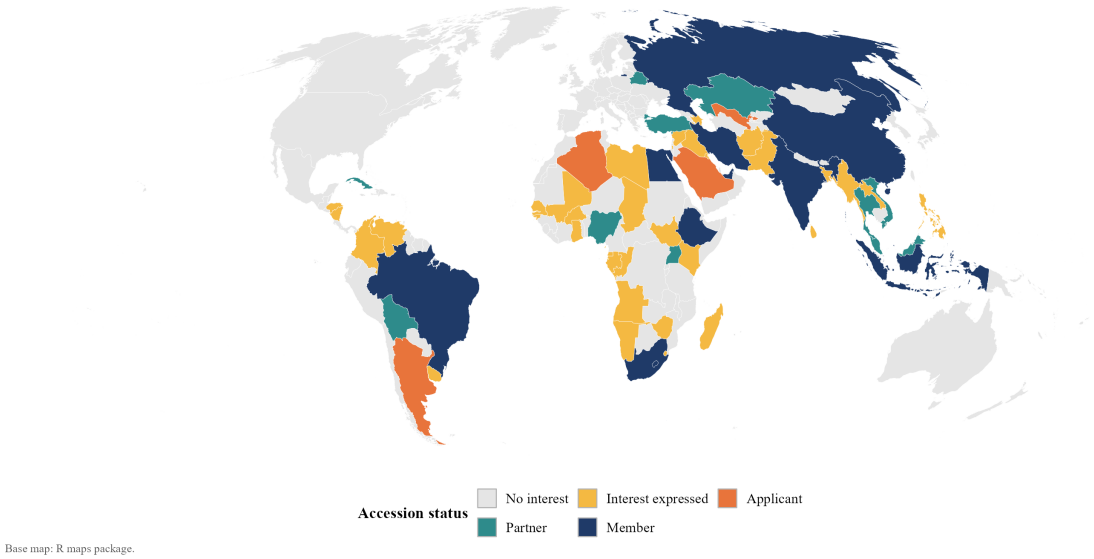


Figure 2: Global distribution of BRICS accession status, January 2025.

Figure 2 maps status through January 2025 at five levels: member (the five founders, the four 2024 entrants, and Indonesia after its January 2025 accession), partner (Kazan tier), applicant, interest-only, and no-interest. The regional pattern shows two loose clusters, a post-Soviet and Middle Eastern area and a sub-Saharan African area, with a smaller Southeast Asian presence. Latin America is sparser, and the traditional Western alliance core is absent.

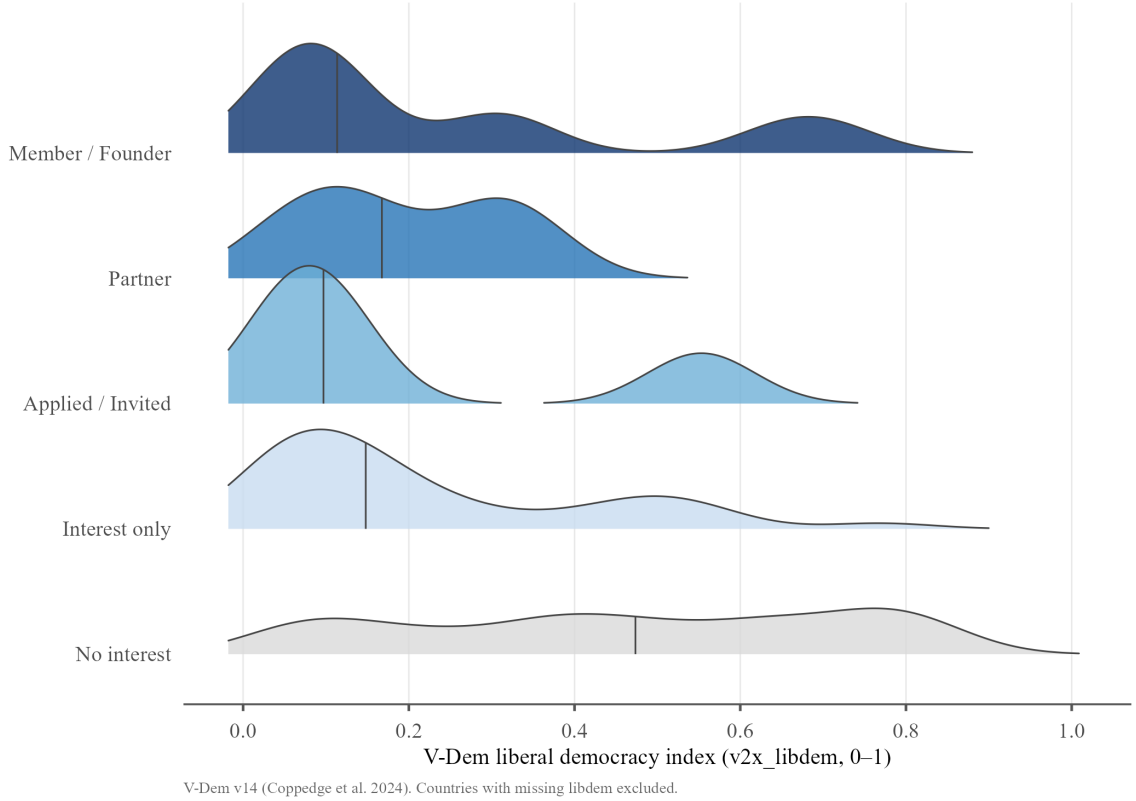


Figure 3: V-Dem liberal democracy scores by January 2025 BRICS status. Line shows median point.

Figure 3 plots the distribution of V-Dem liberal democracy scores by January 2025 BRICS status. Brazil and India pull the member distribution rightward, producing the visible right tail. The three main tiers (members, partners, interest-only) cluster in the near-zero range, while the remaining states sit at a median close to 0.5.

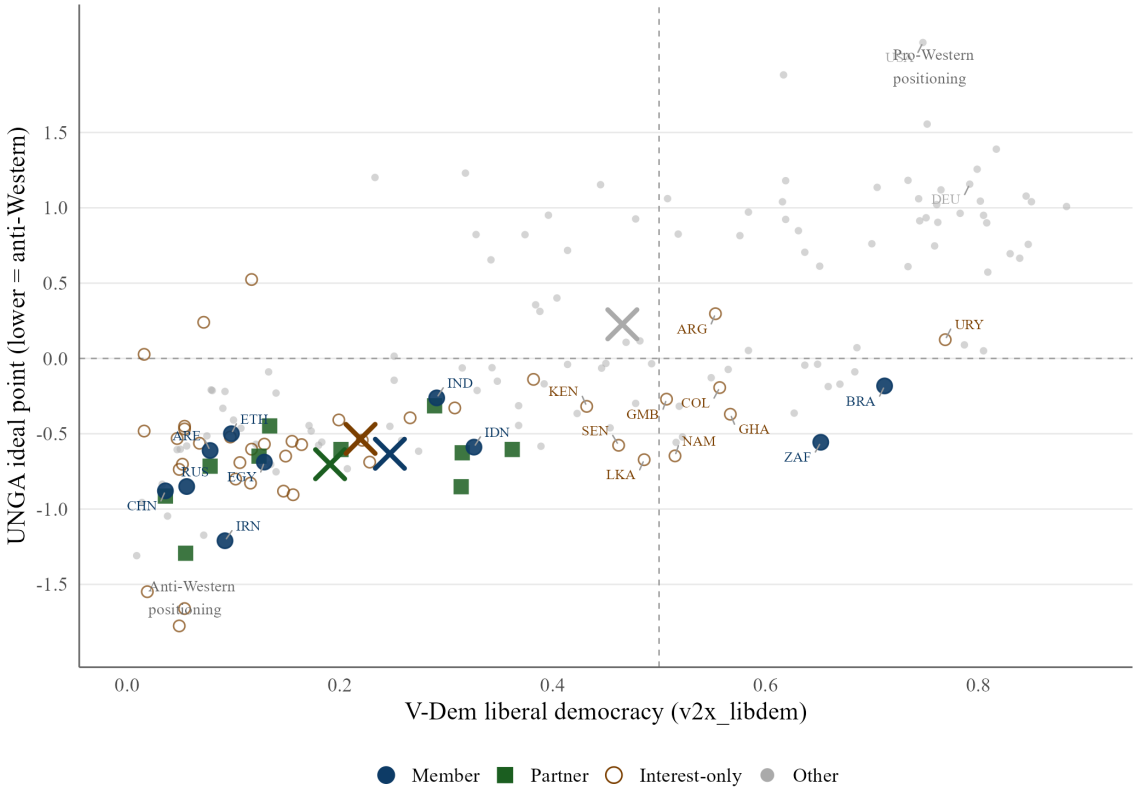


Figure 4: V-Dem liberal democracy and UNGA ideal point, 2024 cross-section.

Figure 4 maps all 195 states in the joint space of liberal democracy and UNGA alignment, with BRICS engagement encoded by group. Countries that have moved toward BRICS, whether as members, partners, or interest-only cases, occupy a relatively focused area characterized by lower liberal democracy scores and more anti-Western voting positions. Partners are the most tightly clustered group, combining low liberal democracy with consistently anti-Western alignment. Members and interest-only states are part of a similar region with greater spread. A small set of countries does not seem to fit the same mold: relatively high-democracy states that nevertheless signal interest, including Uruguay, Ghana, Colombia, Argentina, and Kenya. This descriptive representation shows that BRICS engagement is not random across the international system, and that the pattern is consistent with our main positioning theory.

4 Analysis

We now put the positioning account and its rivals to a descriptive, empirical test, asking which governments express interest once regime type, alignment, and the material channels compete as part of a model. We estimate a cross-sectional logit anchored on 2024, with log GDP per capita, log population, and region fixed effects, and standard errors clustered by country:

$$\Pr(\text{interest}_{i,t} = 1) = \Lambda(\alpha + \beta_1 \text{libdem}_{i,t} + \beta_2 \text{unga_dist}_{i,t} + \mathbf{X}_{i,t}\gamma + \delta_r).$$

In this model, we do not include country fixed effects due to the fact that countries, once interested, maintain those characteristics. This is a constraint on what the design can allow us to claim, and we read the estimates as a description of how the 2024 pool of interested governments differs from the rest. The five founders are excluded across specifications.

4.1 Positioning: regime type and alignment

Table 2 reports the positioning result. Column 1 fits liberal democracy with the controls alone; column 2 adds the government's UNGA distance from the BRICS founders. Both place a government at the anti-Western end of the field, and both predict interest, which is what the table is built to show. Columns 3 and 4 then ask whether each indicator marks something durable about a government or only something that shifted with the most recent 2023–24 surge. Column 3 re-measures alignment in 2021, before the surge, while holding regime type at its 2024 value. Column 4 keeps only the governments that asked to join on their own, setting aside those BRICS invited, so the pattern reflects who chose to ask rather than those the founders sought out.

Table 2: Regime type and alignment, BRICS interest (cross-sectional logit, 2024)

	(1) Regime	(2) + UNGA (2024)	(3) UNGA pre-surge	(4) Self-nominators
Regime type (V-Dem lib. dem.)	−5.087***	−3.073.	−5.048***	−2.682
	(1.456)	(1.806)	(1.480)	(1.845)
UNGA distance (2024)		−2.801**		−2.387*
		(0.945)		(1.181)
UNGA distance (2021, pre-surge)			−0.150	
			(0.555)	
Log GDP per capita	0.479.	0.685*	0.482.	0.556.
	(0.281)	(0.341)	(0.284)	(0.329)
Log population	0.585**	0.699**	0.588**	0.460*
	(0.180)	(0.213)	(0.182)	(0.211)
N	152	152	152	136

. p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Standard errors clustered by country.

In column 1, lower liberal democracy is what sets the interested governments apart: the coefficient is large and significant (−5.09). Column 2 adds UNGA distance, and both indicators stay negative, regime type now close to the 10 percent level and alignment significant at 1 percent. They move together, so each coefficient is smaller once they share the model, but neither changes sign. Holding the other covariates at their observed values, a government at the tenth percentile of liberal democracy, around where the United Arab Emirates sat in 2024, has a predicted probability of expressing interest near 0.42, against roughly 0.28 at the sample median and a base rate of about 0.31. Alignment works the same way: a government voting with the BRICS founders is markedly likelier to ask in than one voting against them.

The next two columns ask which part of positioning is durable and which moved with the surge. We expected regime type to be the durable part and alignment to shift, and the data appears to bear this out. In column 3, where alignment is measured in 2021 rather than 2024, it no longer predicts

interest, while regime type is as strong as in column 1. UNGA positions are persistent from year to year, so what the 2024 measure adds is the 2022–24 movement itself: governments that turned toward the BRICS founders in those years tend to be the ones that asked to join in those years. This is what we mean by alignment as a contemporaneous expression of positioning, and it is the endogeneity we flagged earlier, votes and interest shifting together. Instead, regime type behaves differently: it predicts interest whether we measure it in 2021 or 2024, and that stability over time underlines why we treat regime type as the stable component of anti-Western positioning.

Column 4 checks whether the pattern just reflects whom BRICS chose to invite. Keeping only the 136 governments that asked on their own, and setting aside the 16 already invited or admitted, alignment stays significant and regime type keeps its negative sign, weaker on the smaller sample. The result does not appear to be an artifact of the founders' invitations: the governments that asked on their own look much like the full interested pool. Across the models, population is positive and significant, and income is positive, showcasing an interested pool concentrated among middle-income states. The alternative democracy measures, V-Dem polyarchy, Polity5, and Freedom House, return the substantially similar results (Online Appendix A3).

We also note how the alignment effect seems to run in a specific direction: toward China and away from the United States. We measure this with distance from the United States minus distance from China, a "net tilt" that predicts interest strongly. The tilt is so closely bound to regime type that when we substitute it the liberal-democracy coefficient falls to near zero, which is exactly why our main specification keeps regime type and bloc distance as separate indicators rather than the single, better-fitting tilt (Online Appendix A4).

Further, it has to be noted that proximity matters only to the anti-Western founders. While voting close to China and Russia predicts interest; closeness to India and Brazil, the two democracies among the five, does not (Online Appendix A4).

4.2 Conditionality and material need

One more concrete account would assume that governments turn to BRICS to escape Western conditionality: those carrying IMF programs, heavy debt, or acute external fragility have the strongest reason to want an alternative that comes without policy strings. We stated this as a positive expectation (H2), and Table 3 tests it against the previous positioning baseline. Column 1 is that baseline; columns 2 through 6 add, one at a time, cumulative IMF arrangements, program intensity, government debt, a composite vulnerability index, and aid dependence.

Table 3: Conditionality and macro-vulnerability do not predict BRICS interest

	(1) Baseline	(2) + IMF recidiv.	(3) + IMF intensity	(4) + Govt debt	(5) + Vulnerability	(6) + Aid dep.
Regime type (V-Dem lib. dem.)	−3.073.	−3.187.	−2.987	−2.963.	−3.112.	−2.920
	(1.806)	(1.796)	(1.824)	(1.771)	(1.803)	(1.849)
UNGA distance (2024)	−2.801**	−2.778**	−2.855**	−2.694**	−2.593**	−2.211*
	(0.945)	(0.942)	(0.983)	(0.936)	(0.929)	(0.951)
IMF recidivism (count)		0.034				
		(0.076)				
IMF conditions (intensity)			0.000			
			(0.001)			
Govt gross debt %GDP				−0.008		
				(0.008)		
Macro-vulnerability index					−0.596	
					(0.417)	
Aid dependence (ODA/GNI)						−0.346**
						(0.132)
Log GDP per capita	0.685*	0.727*	0.634.	0.700*	0.617.	−0.191
	(0.341)	(0.351)	(0.358)	(0.332)	(0.337)	(0.378)
Log population	0.699**	0.677**	0.711***	0.712**	0.690**	0.445*
	(0.213)	(0.218)	(0.214)	(0.217)	(0.214)	(0.217)
N	152	152	152	150	151	152

. p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Standard errors clustered by country.

Findings run against our expectations: cumulative IMF arrangements, program intensity, govern-

ment debt, and the vulnerability index are each indistinguishable from zero, while regime type and alignment hold their sign and significance in every column.

Aid dependence is, instead, relevant: the most aid-dependent governments are significantly less likely to express interest. The governments most exposed to Western official finance, those with the most to lose from Western disapproval, are the ones that stay out, while the interested pool concentrates among middle-income autocratizing states. That aid dependence runs the other way is the first trace of a fiscal-autonomy dimension: what a government risks by positioning against the West depends on how much Western official finance it draws, which is the subject of the next subsection.

4.3 Economic ties and fiscal autonomy

BRICS interest might be linked to two different economic directions. One is commercial integration: a government heavily traded into the BRICS-5 economies might be expected to want closer institutional ties (H3). The other is the government's fiscal structure, which relates to whether it can afford to signal interest (H4a, H4b).

If this economic component affects the sorting mechanism among countries, denser BRICS-5 trade and inward FDI should raise interest (H3). In our analysis, we do not find proof of this. Trade dependence and inward FDI are not distinguishable from zero, individually or jointly, once positioning, income, size, and region are accounted for, and the null holds when the missing commercial figures are imputed across the full non-founder sample. Online Appendix A5 reports the full trade, FDI, and imputation results.

A government's ability to position itself against the West depends in part on its fiscal autonomy. Fuel rents reduce dependence on Western donors and creditors, making such positioning less costly, whereas reliance on Western aid creates the opposite incentive. Accordingly, we expected oil rents and aid dependence to define opposite ends of a common fiscal-autonomy dimension (H4a, H4b). We regard this mechanism as secondary to geopolitical positioning, however, because resource

rents and regime type appear to be tightly intertwined, as Table 4 shows

Table 4: Fiscal autonomy: fuel rents raise, aid dependence lowers, BRICS interest

	(1) + Fuel rents	(2) + Fuel rents + Aid (joint)	(3) Fuel rents, ex-MENA	(4) Fuel rents x Regime
Regime type (V-Dem lib. dem.)	−2.122	−2.209	−1.956	−1.344
	(1.828)	(1.880)	(1.897)	(2.139)
UNGA distance (2024)	−2.482*	−1.966*	−2.623*	−2.533*
	(0.967)	(0.987)	(1.062)	(1.008)
Aid dependence (ODA/GNI)		−0.295*		
		(0.126)		
Fuel rents %GDP	0.146***	0.127**	0.137**	0.233**
	(0.042)	(0.041)	(0.048)	(0.087)
Regime x Fuel rents				−0.435
				(0.317)
Log GDP per capita	0.386	−0.334	0.434	0.260
	(0.299)	(0.354)	(0.329)	(0.352)
Log population	0.680**	0.454*	0.637**	0.660**
	(0.209)	(0.216)	(0.210)	(0.216)
N	152	152	135	152

. p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Standard errors clustered by country.

Resource rents predict interest net of positioning, as H4a anticipated: the oil-rents coefficient is positive and significant. Once oil is included in the model, the regime coefficient declines and loses statistical significance while alignment remains robust. In other words, oil rents provide a more precise measure of the same petro-autocratic cohort that regime type partly captures.

The relationship is not driven solely by the Gulf states; it remains statistically significant when the MENA region is excluded (column 3). Moreover, the relationship appears specific to oil rents rather than natural resources more broadly. Total natural-resource rents[10] weaken and lose significance under the same exclusion, and the interaction between oil rents and regime type is not statistically

[10]The World Bank's total natural-resource-rents measure aggregates oil, gas, coal, mineral, and forest rents as a share of GDP; fuel rents are the petroleum component. Substituting the aggregate for fuel rents leaves the resource coefficient small and insignificant in the ex-MENA sample.

significant (column 4). The key result, however, is the joint specification (column 2). When oil rents and aid dependence are included together, both retain their sign and statistical significance, suggesting that they capture opposite ends of the same underlying cost dimension. Resource autonomy increases the likelihood of taking the position, whereas aid dependence reduces it.

The fact that the relationship does not extend to total natural-resource rents suggests that, in this scenario, fiscal autonomy derived from oil matters for the most part. Governments financed by petroleum revenues rather than by Western official finance have less to lose from positioning themselves against the Western order because they depend less on the donors and creditors whose withdrawal would constitute the cost of their signal. The oil-rents coefficient is therefore consistent with a lower cost of adopting a public, pro-BRICS position.

5 Discussion

Our findings suggest that the demand for BRICS is better understood as a problem of political positioning than one of institutional or economic utility. Expressing interest publicly is consistent with signaling a government's geopolitical orientation, and the correlates of interest track the domestic political institutions and fiscal autonomy associated with a lower-cost signal. Indeed, less democratic governments are consistently more likely to express interest, and alignment captures the contemporaneous diplomatic expression of the same underlying orientation. Fiscal autonomy marks a separate dimension, consistent with differences in the cost of adopting such a position.

Entry into that pool does not represent accession itself, however. Advancement remains a separate political process governed by the founders' unanimity rule, so the factors that explain who asks need not be those that decide who is admitted.[11] Online Appendix A1 tackles this distinction and three further signatures of a cheap signal, the cost asymmetry across senders, the ease of reversal, and the clustering of onsets on summit years.

[11] With only a handful of members and partners admitted since 2023, any cross-sectional test of advancement lacks the power to discriminate between competing explanations.

5.1 The pool of interested countries

In our 2024 cross-section the states with no expressed interest sit near the median of the V-Dem liberal-democracy scale, while every interested tier clusters far below it. UN voting separates them the same way: each interested tier sits at a median distance of about 1.6 from the Western centroid, against about 1.0 for the uninterested party. Geography and income differentiate members of the pool as well, with sub-Saharan Africa supplying about a third of them and the Middle East and North Africa about a fifth. Full members are concentrated in the Gulf and the wider Middle East. Governments that expressed interest but did not advance are less wealthy and concentrated in Africa, while partner states occupy an intermediate position and extend from Central Asia to Southeast Asia. Upper-middle- and high-income economies are more common among the governments that expressed no interest.

Interest in BRICS remained thin and scattered for several years, carried by early movers such as Argentina under Cristina Fernández in 2015, Turkey and Angola in 2018, and the United Arab Emirates in 2021. After Russia invaded Ukraine, a small 2022 cohort comprising Algeria, Iran, and Pakistan came forward, and the Johannesburg summit of 2023 opened the gates to a surge of twenty-six non-founder declarations in a single year, drawn from the regions already positioned against the Western order rather than from those with the densest commercial ties. This timing is consistent with a low-cost public signal that governments can make when circumstances allow.

5.2 Positioning and the cost of signaling

Declaring interest functions mainly as a public statement of geopolitical orientation, and governments differ in the political value of sending that signal and the cost of sending it. Of the two positioning dimensions, regime type is the more stable one. It predicts interest whether measured before the 2023 enlargement wave or during it, with a government's V-Dem score in 2021 forecasting its later expressions of interest almost as well as a contemporaneous measure does. Alignment works on a different timescale, carrying little independent explanatory power before the enlarge-

ment accelerated yet becoming strongly predictive afterward, because it captures the diplomatic repositioning that governments undertook in the very years they sought closer association with BRICS. We therefore read regime type as the durable disposition governments bring to the international order, and alignment as the contemporaneous expression of that disposition in foreign policy.

Governments expressing interest in BRICS move closer to China and further from the United States (Hopewell 2025), while affinity with India and Brazil, the two more democratic founders, does not predict interest. The attraction runs to the China-centered, Western-distant identity the coalition has increasingly come to represent. Publicly aligning with an explicitly non-Western coalition risks straining Western relationships, a cost that is small for governments already distant from liberal democratic norms and considerable for those still embedded in liberal institutions (Spence 1973; Larson and Shevchenko 2010). Regime type therefore marks the predicted low-cost pool of senders, and interest concentrates there.

Fiscal structure relates to a complementary question, whether a government can afford the external costs the signal carries. Governments financed through oil rents stay comparatively insulated from Western financial leverage (Beblawi and Luciani 2015; McDowell 2021), and thus face fewer constraints when they reposition themselves publicly. Governments dependent on development assistance remain more exposed to donor preferences and pay a higher price for signaling political distance. Consistent with this, oil rents raise the probability of expressing interest while aid dependence lowers it.

5.3 Why the material accounts come up short

Neither of the two material explanations, escape from Western conditionality or commercial integration with BRICS economies, distinguishes interested governments from uninterested ones once regime type, alignment, and fiscal autonomy are taken into account.

The reason might lie in the nature of BRICS itself, which offers relatively limited exclusive material

benefits (Helleiner and Wang 2018). The New Development Bank lends on a modest scale beside the established multilateral development banks, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement has remained largely unused, and de-dollarization has advanced only incrementally (Liu and Papa 2022; Petry and Nölke 2024). Few governments plausibly seek membership in expectation of substantial and immediate economic returns.

BRICS may instead matter for what membership communicates. Association publicly identifies a government with a bloc that presents itself as an alternative to the Western-led order (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Papa and Han 2025). Where organizations built around trade liberalization or financial cooperation attract governments according to their economic interests (Mansfield et al. 2002), BRICS draws them according to political identity and foreign-policy orientation.

5.4 Illustrative trajectories

Three cases illustrate how regime type, alignment, and fiscal autonomy interact in practice, and how governments respond when these factors point in different directions.

The United Arab Emirates represents the archetypical low-cost pathway to membership. Already closely aligned with the BRICS founders, largely insulated from Western financial leverage, and a member of the New Development Bank well before formal accession, it joined a coalition that did little more than ratify a trajectory it had long since adopted (Huwaidin 2025).

Argentina offers the closest approximation to a within-country test. The Fernández administration accepted BRICS membership after the Johannesburg summit, only for the newly elected Milei government to reverse that decision before accession took effect (Merke and Pereyra Doval 2024). Over the same months Argentina's UN voting shifted sharply toward Western powers while its trade and investment ties with China stayed largely unchanged, which illustrates both the symbolic nature of the signal and how cheaply it can be withdrawn.

Finally, Saudi Arabia satisfies nearly every material condition associated with joining and yet has not completed accession. An oil-rich authoritarian monarchy with little Western official finance at

risk, it faces few fiscal obstacles to membership, but its security relationship with the United States and its rivalry with Iran complicate the signal that formal membership would send (Stuenkel and Treadwell 2024). Fiscal autonomy is permissive without being sufficient, and in this case whether the signal is sent tracks alignment.

6 Conclusion

This paper set out to identify which governments publicly sought to join the BRICS and what those expressions of interest (deemed an anti-West signal) reveal about the states making them. To answer these questions, we assembled an accession dataset covering all 195 sovereign states; it identifies sixty governments that had publicly expressed interest by the end of 2024. The resulting picture is one of a demand pool sorted primarily by political positioning, reflected in both domestic institutions and international alignment. Less democratic governments are consistently more likely to seek closer association with BRICS, and diplomatic alignment captures a more contemporaneous repositioning, most clearly in movements toward China and away from the United States. Fiscal autonomy tracks who can afford to send this signal, with oil rents positively predicting interest and aid dependence negatively predicting it. By contrast, existing economic linkages to the BRICS and Western conditionality do little to explain who enters the demand pool once political positioning is taken into account.

These findings speak to questions extending beyond BRICS itself. Where Pevehouse argues that young democracies join regional organizations to lock in liberal reforms (2005), the governments seeking BRICS appear to follow the opposite logic, moving toward an organization that imposes few institutional obligations while signaling distance from the liberal international order. In this sense, the paper identifies one of the demand sides of the contemporary wave of autocratization, tracing the regime-type sorting previously observed among BRICS members back to the earlier moment when governments first express interest (Cottiero and Haggard 2023). It also speaks to how states select into international organizations, and to the contested-multilateralism literature,

by shifting attention from which governments existing members choose to admit to which governments come forward (Morse and Keohane 2014).

Our conclusions should nonetheless be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. Because expressions of interest are observed in a single cross-section, our analysis characterizes the governments that make up the BRICS demand pool as of 2024 rather than how that pool evolves over time. Moreover, the recent acceleration of BRICS enlargement leaves too few post-accession cases to examine systematically what happens after governments decide to join the organization. As such, we view our findings as a descriptive assessment of competing theoretical expectations. Future research should therefore adopt a longitudinal perspective, following governments from initial expressions of interest through formal application and eventual membership.

Ultimately, the post-Johannesburg surge in interest concentrated among governments already positioned furthest from the Western-led order, while attracting comparatively little enthusiasm from states aligned with India and Brazil, the two democratic founders. A coalition originally conceived as a label for fast-growing emerging markets has thus acquired a different political identity. Beyond any material benefits it may eventually provide, BRICS now offers governments a relatively inexpensive way to communicate geopolitical orientation and publicly signal distance from the existing international order. Admission remains a decision controlled by the founders and governed by consensus. The decision to seek membership, however, belongs to governments themselves. In our models, this demand tracks the political value of expressing that signal and the domestic and international costs of doing so more closely than it tracks existing economic ties.

Data availability statement

The 195-country BRICS accession dataset that supports the findings of this study, together with the full replication package, including the analysis code and the covariate-construction scripts that reproduce every table and figure in this article, is deposited in the Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZFGHF6 (Peressotti et al. 2026, *Replication Data for: Signaling Anti-Western Positioning: Regime Type, Alignment, and the Demand to Join the BRICS*). The deposit will be made public upon publication, in line with the journal's replication policy.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no competing interests.

AI usage disclosure

The authors utilized the AI models Opus 4.6 and Gemini Pro 3.1 as fundamental coding tools in the construction of the dataset, supplementing the authors' own coding effort by retrieving alternative source material from the web (verified by the authors) and by suggesting coding evaluations based on a pre-specified rubric and workflow. Details of this workflow are provided as part of the replication package. The authors further utilized a range of AI tools throughout the development of the project, including GPT-4o, Claude Sonnet 4.5-4.6, Claude Opus 4.5 through 4.8, and Gemini 2.0 through 3.1 Pro, for copyediting (correction of grammar and typos) and coding assistance (table generation, debugging, modeling). All output was checked by the authors, and any remaining errors are our own.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Giuseppe Peressotti: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Kelvin Chun-Man Chan: Data curation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Minh Dao: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Sadman Shafiq: Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Charles Alexander Weimer: Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

Tiziano Cecconato: Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

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Online Appendix: Signaling Anti-Western Positioning: Regime Type, Alignment, and the Demand to Join the BRICS

A1. The interest signal as cheap talk

The four probes below test whether the demand to join BRICS behaves like a cheap signal on margins beyond entry. Each is a small-N cross-sectional probe on an absorbing-state outcome, so together they offer a consistency test with the cheap-signal mechanism rather than a decisive one.

Entry versus advancement. 22 of the 55 interested non-founders go no further than expressing interest, neither applying formally nor securing an invitation. An entry logit still shows a result akin to our signaling account, with liberal democracy and UNGA distance both negative and alignment significant. Advancement looks different once the founders are considered: among the interested only, alignment no longer tracks who moves up, and what carries the margin instead is economic size, with log total GDP positive and significant alongside its per-capita and population alternatives.

Table A1: Entry and advancement stages, BRICS interest (logit)

	(1) Entry (all non-founders)	(2) Advance: positioning+size	(3) Advance: economic weight	(4) Advance: +oil
Regime type (V-Dem lib. dem.)	−2.310.	−3.657.		−6.119*
	(1.252)	(2.159)		(2.790)
UNGA distance	−2.856***	0.684		−1.060
	(0.795)	(1.673)		(1.922)
Economic weight (log total GDP)	0.461*		1.380**	
	(0.211)		(0.451)	
Log GDP per capita		1.551**		2.365**
		(0.505)		(0.780)
Log population	0.185	0.994**	−0.499	1.166**
	(0.224)	(0.346)	(0.404)	(0.419)
Resource rents %GDP				−0.107*
				(0.053)
N	154	48	48	48

. p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Logit; plain SEs. Advancement columns: N=48.

Cost asymmetry. The senders come disproportionately from the low-cost pool, governments with little Western official finance to put at risk. The pre-onset asymmetry fits: aid dependence in the 2015–2019 window runs at 2.16% of GNI among the governments that go on to express interest, against 5.34% for those that do not, with the Western-sanction share moving the same way. We cannot test whether signaling later draws Western retaliation: only four early signalers predate the onset bunching, and the 2022 sanctions wave confounds the post-onset window.

Reversibility. Two in five of the interested non-founders never move past expressing interest, with two salient cases: Argentina accepted the 2023 Johannesburg invitation and reversed its decision within weeks under the incoming Milei government, while Saudi Arabia, invited in August 2023, has deferred rather than joining. In each, the external relationships held even as the position was reversed or suspended.

Focal clustering. Onsets bunch on the two visible enlargement events: 46 of the 60 interested states (77%) record their onset in the 2023 Johannesburg or 2024 Kazan summit year. We stop

short of confirmation, since summit years also widen the opportunity to express interest.

A2. Country status

Table A2 reports the country-by-country ledger (status category, interest onset year, partner-tier entry year, and membership year) for all 195 states. Through end-2024 it records 60 states with publicly expressed interest: 10 full members, 10 partners under the 2024 Kazan tier, 3 invitation-only cases, 15 applicants without an invitation, and 22 statement-only cases. The remaining 135 states show no documented interest. The full ledger with per-country source documentation is part of the replication package deposited in the journal's Dataverse.

Table A2: Country-by-country BRICS accession status, all 195 states (evidence window 2006–early 2026). Years give interest onset, partner-tier entry, and membership accession; "–" = not applicable.

Country	Status	Interest onset	Partner	Member
Afghanistan	Interest	2024	–	–
Albania	No interest	–	–	–
Algeria	Applied/Invited	2022	–	–
Andorra	No interest	–	–	–
Angola	Interest	2018	–	–
Antigua and Barbuda	No interest	–	–	–
Argentina	Applied/Invited	2015	–	–
Armenia	No interest	2024	–	–
Australia	No interest	–	–	–
Austria	No interest	–	–	–
Azerbaijan	Interest	2024	–	–
Bahamas	No interest	–	–	–
Bahrain	Interest	2023	–	–
Bangladesh	Interest	2023	–	–
Barbados	No interest	–	–	–
Belarus	Partner	2024	2025	–
Belgium	No interest	–	–	–
Belize	No interest	–	–	–
Benin	No interest	–	–	–
Bhutan	No interest	–	–	–

Table A2: Country-by-country BRICS accession status, all 195 states (evidence window 2006–early 2026). Years give interest onset, partner-tier entry, and membership accession; ”–” = not applicable. *(continued)*

Country	Status	Interest onset	Partner	Member
Bolivia	Partner	2023	2025	–
Bosnia and Herzegovina	No interest	–	–	–
Botswana	No interest	–	–	–
Brazil	Founder	2006	–	2009
Brunei Darussalam	No interest	–	–	–
Bulgaria	No interest	–	–	–
Burkina Faso	Interest	2024	–	–
Burundi	No interest	–	–	–
Cabo Verde	No interest	–	–	–
Cambodia	No interest	2014	–	–
Cameroon	No interest	–	–	–
Canada	No interest	–	–	–
Central African Republic	No interest	–	–	–
Chad	Interest	2023	–	–
Chile	No interest	–	–	–
China	Founder	2006	–	2009
Colombia	Applied/Invited	2024	–	–
Comoros	No interest	2023	–	–
Congo, Dem. Rep.	No interest	2023	–	–
Congo, Rep.	Interest	2024	–	–
Costa Rica	No interest	–	–	–
Cote d’Ivoire	No interest	–	–	–
Croatia	No interest	–	–	–
Cuba	Partner	2024	2025	–
Cyprus	No interest	–	–	–
Czechia	No interest	–	–	–
Denmark	No interest	–	–	–
Djibouti	No interest	–	–	–
Dominica	No interest	–	–	–
Dominican Republic	No interest	–	–	–
Ecuador	No interest	–	–	–
Egypt	Member (post-2024)	2023	–	2024
El Salvador	No interest	2024	–	–

Table A2: Country-by-country BRICS accession status, all 195 states (evidence window 2006–early 2026). Years give interest onset, partner-tier entry, and membership accession; "–" = not applicable. *(continued)*

Country	Status	Interest onset	Partner	Member
Equatorial Guinea	Interest	2023	–	–
Eritrea	No interest	2023	–	–
Estonia	No interest	–	–	–
Eswatini	Interest	2024	–	–
Ethiopia	Member (post-2024)	2023	–	2024
Fiji	No interest	–	–	–
Finland	No interest	–	–	–
France	No interest	–	–	–
Gabon	Interest	2023	–	–
Gambia, The	Interest	2023	–	–
Georgia	No interest	–	–	–
Germany	No interest	–	–	–
Ghana	Interest	2023	–	–
Greece	No interest	–	–	–
Grenada	No interest	–	–	–
Guatemala	No interest	–	–	–
Guinea	No interest	–	–	–
Guinea-Bissau	Interest	2023	–	–
Guyana	No interest	–	–	–
Haiti	No interest	–	–	–
Honduras	Interest	2023	–	–
Hungary	No interest	–	–	–
Iceland	No interest	–	–	–
India	Founder	2006	–	2009
Indonesia	Member (post-2024)	2024	–	2025
Iran	Member (post-2024)	2022	–	2024
Iraq	Interest	2023	–	–
Ireland	No interest	–	–	–
Israel	No interest	–	–	–
Italy	No interest	–	–	–
Jamaica	No interest	–	–	–
Japan	No interest	–	–	–
Jordan	No interest	–	–	–

Table A2: Country-by-country BRICS accession status, all 195 states (evidence window 2006–early 2026). Years give interest onset, partner-tier entry, and membership accession; ”–” = not applicable. *(continued)*

Country	Status	Interest onset	Partner	Member
Kazakhstan	Partner	2023	2025	–
Kenya	Interest	2024	–	–
Kiribati	No interest	–	–	–
Korea, Dem. People’s Rep.	No interest	–	–	–
Korea, Rep.	No interest	–	–	–
Kuwait	Interest	2023	–	–
Kyrgyz Republic	No interest	2024	–	–
Lao PDR	Interest	2024	–	–
Latvia	No interest	–	–	–
Lebanon	No interest	–	–	–
Lesotho	No interest	–	–	–
Liberia	No interest	–	–	–
Libya	Interest	2024	–	–
Liechtenstein	No interest	–	–	–
Lithuania	No interest	–	–	–
Luxembourg	No interest	–	–	–
Madagascar	Interest	2026	–	–
Malawi	No interest	–	–	–
Malaysia	Partner	2024	2025	–
Maldives	No interest	–	–	–
Mali	Interest	2024	–	–
Malta	No interest	–	–	–
Marshall Islands	No interest	–	–	–
Mauritania	No interest	–	–	–
Mauritius	No interest	–	–	–
Mexico	No interest	–	–	–
Micronesia, Fed. Sts.	No interest	–	–	–
Moldova	No interest	–	–	–
Monaco	No interest	–	–	–
Mongolia	No interest	–	–	–
Montenegro	No interest	–	–	–
Morocco	No interest	2023	–	–
Mozambique	No interest	2023	–	–

Table A2: Country-by-country BRICS accession status, all 195 states (evidence window 2006–early 2026). Years give interest onset, partner-tier entry, and membership accession; ”–” = not applicable. *(continued)*

Country	Status	Interest onset	Partner	Member
Myanmar	Interest	2024	–	–
Namibia	Interest	2023	–	–
Nauru	No interest	–	–	–
Nepal	No interest	–	–	–
Netherlands	No interest	–	–	–
New Zealand	No interest	–	–	–
Nicaragua	Interest	2023	–	–
Niger	No interest	–	–	–
Nigeria	Partner	2023	2025	–
North Macedonia	No interest	–	–	–
Norway	No interest	–	–	–
Oman	No interest	–	–	–
Pakistan	Interest	2022	–	–
Palau	No interest	–	–	–
Palestine	Interest	2023	–	–
Panama	No interest	2023	–	–
Papua New Guinea	No interest	–	–	–
Paraguay	No interest	–	–	–
Peru	No interest	2023	–	–
Philippines	Interest	2024	–	–
Poland	No interest	–	–	–
Portugal	No interest	–	–	–
Qatar	No interest	–	–	–
Romania	No interest	–	–	–
Russian Federation	Founder	2006	–	2009
Rwanda	No interest	–	–	–
Samoa	No interest	–	–	–
San Marino	No interest	–	–	–
Sao Tome and Principe	No interest	–	–	–
Saudi Arabia	Applied/Invited	2023	–	–
Senegal	Interest	2023	–	–
Serbia	No interest	2023	–	–
Seychelles	No interest	–	–	–

Table A2: Country-by-country BRICS accession status, all 195 states (evidence window 2006–early 2026). Years give interest onset, partner-tier entry, and membership accession; ”–” = not applicable. *(continued)*

Country	Status	Interest onset	Partner	Member
Sierra Leone	No interest	–	–	–
Singapore	No interest	–	–	–
Slovak Republic	No interest	–	–	–
Slovenia	No interest	–	–	–
Solomon Islands	No interest	–	–	–
Somalia, Fed. Rep.	No interest	–	–	–
South Africa	Founder	2009	–	2010
South Sudan	Interest	2023	–	–
Spain	No interest	–	–	–
Sri Lanka	Interest	2024	–	–
St. Kitts and Nevis	No interest	–	–	–
St. Lucia	No interest	–	–	–
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	No interest	–	–	–
Sudan	No interest	–	–	–
Suriname	No interest	2025	–	–
Sweden	No interest	–	–	–
Switzerland	No interest	–	–	–
Syrian Arab Republic	Interest	2023	–	–
Taiwan	No interest	–	–	–
Tajikistan	No interest	–	–	–
Tanzania	No interest	–	–	–
Thailand	Partner	2023	2025	–
Timor-Leste	No interest	–	–	–
Togo	No interest	–	–	–
Tonga	No interest	–	–	–
Trinidad and Tobago	No interest	–	–	–
Tunisia	No interest	–	–	–
Turkiye	Interest	2018	–	–
Turkmenistan	No interest	–	–	–
Tuvalu	No interest	–	–	–
Uganda	Partner	2024	2025	–
Ukraine	No interest	–	–	–
United Arab Emirates	Member (post-2024)	2021	–	2024

Table A2: Country-by-country BRICS accession status, all 195 states (evidence window 2006–early 2026). Years give interest onset, partner-tier entry, and membership accession; ”–” = not applicable. *(continued)*

Country	Status	Interest onset	Partner	Member
United Kingdom	No interest	–	–	–
United States	No interest	–	–	–
Uruguay	Interest	2021	–	–
Uzbekistan	Partner	2024	2025	–
Vanuatu	No interest	–	–	–
Venezuela	Interest	2023	–	–
Vietnam	Partner	2024	2025	–
Yemen	No interest	–	–	–
Zambia	No interest	–	–	–
Zimbabwe	Interest	2023	–	–

A3. Regime type across four democracy measures

The positioning logit across four democracy measures (V-Dem liberal democracy, V-Dem polyarchy, Polity5, Freedom House), each under the base specification plus a Western-sanctions control (GSDB) and a lagged BRICS-5 trade control.

Table A3: H1 robustness: BRICS interest and democracy across four measures and control sets (cross-sectional logit, 2024).

	Lib. dem. (base)	Lib. dem. (+sanctions)	Lib. dem. (+trade)	Polyarchy (base)	Polyarchy (+sanctions)	Polyarchy (+trade)	Polity5 (base)	Polity5 (+sanctions)	Polity5 (+trade)	Fr. House (base)	Fr. House (+sanctions)	Fr. House (+trade)
Liberal democracy (V-Dem)	−4.715***	−4.459**	−2.911									
	(1.354)	(1.383)	(1.836)									
Electoral democracy (V-Dem)				−4.800***	−4.533***	−3.504.						
				(1.317)	(1.346)	(1.837)						
Polity5 score							−0.147***	−0.144***	−0.169**			
							(0.041)	(0.043)	(0.058)			
Freedom House (1–100)										−0.046***	−0.044***	−0.043**
										(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.016)
Western sanctions (binary)		0.475			0.449			0.897.			0.270	
		(0.505)			(0.510)			(0.535)			(0.506)	
BRICS5 trade share (lagged)			2.519			2.514			1.497			2.567
			(2.056)			(2.102)			(2.157)			(2.180)
Log GDP per capita	0.477.	0.498.	−0.271	0.429	0.451.	−0.229	0.111	0.215	−0.456	0.564*	0.574*	0.032
	(0.279)	(0.276)	(0.443)	(0.272)	(0.269)	(0.415)	(0.222)	(0.238)	(0.330)	(0.259)	(0.262)	(0.399)
Log population	0.657***	0.629***	0.817**	0.652***	0.624***	0.811**	0.629***	0.562**	0.765**	0.697***	0.679***	0.846**
	(0.171)	(0.172)	(0.277)	(0.165)	(0.166)	(0.276)	(0.166)	(0.171)	(0.258)	(0.162)	(0.164)	(0.277)
N	159	159	111	159	159	111	150	150	102	172	172	117

. p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Standard errors clustered by country. The (+trade) column adds BRICS-5 trade dependence (lagged one year); N falls by roughly 48 on missing trade data.

A4. Just China? The anti-Western pole of the alignment channel

Panel A reports the net tilt, distance from the United States minus distance from China, which fits better than the alternative distance measures, and every West-anchored measure absorbs the regime coefficient. Panel B gives proximity to each founder.

Table A4.1: Panel A. Alignment operationalizations: China-vs-US proximity

Alignment term	Alignment coef.	Lib. dem. coef.	Lib. dem. p
Distance to BRICS-core centroid (headline)	-2.801**	-3.073.	0.089
Distance to China only	-3.944***	-1.297	0.487
Distance to United States only	3.737***	-0.896	0.621
Net tilt (US − China)	2.055***	-0.772	0.676

. $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Controls: log GDP p.c., log population. Standard errors clustered by country

Table A4.2: Panel B. Per-founder UNGA proximity

Founder (distance to)	Distance coef.	Distance p	Lib. dem. p
China	-3.944***	<0.001	0.487
Russia	-3.933***	<0.001	0.469
South Africa	-2.881**	0.003	0.097
India	-0.568	0.415	0.002
Brazil	-0.021	0.975	<0.001

. $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Controls: log GDP p.c., log population. Standard errors clustered by country

A5. The commercial-gravity rival: BRICS-5 trade and FDI

Neither BRICS-5 trade dependence (Panel A) nor BRICS-5 inward FDI share (Panel B) predicts interest once positioning, income, size, and region are controlled; the null holds under multiple imputation of the commercial covariates, which are missing not at random with respect to BRICS exposure (Panel C).

Table A5.1: Panel A. BRICS interest on BRICS5 bilateral trade dependence, 2024 cross-section. Model (1) reports the trade-share coefficient; model (2) reports V-Dem liberal democracy from the same specification. Region fixed effects; standard errors clustered at the country level.

	Model	Variable	N	Coef.	(SE)	p
1	(1) Trade dependence	BRICS5 trade share (lag 1)	113	330.652	(225.534)	0.143
4	(2) Liberal democracy	V-Dem liberal democracy	113	-3.105.	(1.709)	0.069

Table A5.2: Panel B. BRICS interest on bilateral inward FDI share from BRICS5 (IMF Direct Investment Positions). Models (1)–(2): 2010–2023 panel with year fixed effects; model (2) limits outlier influence by capping FDI shares at the 99th percentile. Model (3): 2019 cross-section with region fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the country level.

Model	Variable	N	Coef.	(SE)	p
(1) Panel, year FE, 2010–2023	BRICS5 FDI share (lag 1)	1404	-2.893	(2.149)	0.178
(2) Panel, outliers capped, year FE	BRICS5 FDI share, outliers capped (lag 1)	1404	-2.922	(2.210)	0.186
(3) Cross-section, 2019	BRICS5 FDI share	109	-2.028	(2.857)	0.478

Table A5.3: BRICS-5 commercial ties under multiple imputation (190 non-founder states)

Term	Estimate	SE	p	FMI (λ)
V-Dem liberal democracy	-3.482	1.253	0.006	0.10
UNGA distance (BRICS core)	-2.145	0.681	0.002	0.08
Log GDP per capita	0.146	0.253	0.565	0.31
Log population	0.587	0.168	0.001	0.08
Trade dependence on BRICS-5	211.321	185.688	0.259	0.34
FDI share from BRICS-5	-3.983	2.688	0.147	0.57
Joint test, commercial channel (trade + FDI), Rubin D_1: $F = 1.71$, $p = 0.187$.				

Notes: Pooled estimates across $m = 25$ imputations of the 190 non-founder states (55 interest events), Rubin's rules. FMI is the fraction of missing information per term.