

# Refugee Urban Shelters and Electoral Outcomes: Evidence from the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis in Northern Brazil

Carlos Brito

Phd Candidate - Econ Dept.  
University of California, Davis

ASSA 2025 - San Francisco



# Venezuelan Crisis and Brazil's Response

- Since 2014, **7.7m Venezuelans emigrated**, mostly to neighboring countries

# Venezuelan Crisis and Brazil's Response

- Since 2014, **7.7m Venezuelans emigrated**, mostly to neighboring countries
- Brazil (4th main destination in South America - 500,000 Venezuelans):
  - Flow concentrated (80%) at the border region (Roraima state)
  - Indigenous Venezuelans also migrated (main ethnicity: Warao)

# Venezuelan Crisis and Brazil's Response

- Since 2014, **7.7m Venezuelans emigrated**, mostly to neighboring countries
- Brazil (4th main destination in South America - 500,000 Venezuelans):
  - Flow concentrated (80%) at the border region (Roraima state)
  - Indigenous Venezuelans also migrated (main ethnicity: Warao)
  - Open borders + **11 Shelters in a urban area** + extensive rights



Tancredo Neves Shelter



Rondon 1 Shelter

# Venezuelan Crisis and Brazil's Response

- Since 2014, **7.7m Venezuelans emigrated**, mostly to neighboring countries
- Brazil (4th main destination in South America - 500,000 Venezuelans):
  - Flow concentrated (80%) at the border region (Roraima state)
  - Indigenous Venezuelans also migrated (main ethnicity: Warao)
  - Open borders + **11 Shelters in a urban area** + extensive rights



Tancredo Neves Shelter



Rondon 1 Shelter

↪ **"Improved" version of secluded/rural refugee camps** in Africa and Asia  
↪ 78% of refugees live in cities - UNHCR.

# Political Backlash

- Literature: migrant exposure → ↑ far-right and anti-migration  
Steinmayr (2021); Edo et al. (2019); Moriconi, Peri, and Turati (2022).

# Political Backlash

- Literature: migrant exposure  $\rightarrow$   $\uparrow$  far-right and anti-migration  
Steinmayr (2021); Edo et al. (2019); Moriconi, Peri, and Turati (2022).
- Urban Shelters:  
 $\uparrow$  locals' exposure +  $\uparrow$  resource competition + neighborhood changes

# Political Backlash

- Literature: migrant exposure → ↑ far-right and anti-migration  
Steinmayr (2021); Edo et al. (2019); Moriconi, Peri, and Turati (2022).
- Urban Shelters:  
↑ locals' exposure + ↑ resource competition + neighborhood changes

## **Newspaper Headlines:**

*"Migration Crisis become the main topic in Roraima's election"*

*"In Roraima's election, what really matters is Venezuela"*



# Political Backlash

- Literature: migrant exposure → ↑ far-right and anti-migration  
Steinmayr (2021); Edo et al. (2019); Moriconi, Peri, and Turati (2022).
- Urban Shelters:  
↑ locals' exposure + ↑ resource competition + neighborhood changes

## **Newspaper Headlines:**

*"Migration Crisis become the main topic in Roraima's election"*

*"In Roraima's election, what really matters is Venezuela"*

- 2018 Elected Governor:  
*"... all these NGOs that are here should go to Venezuela and serve these people there, preventing them from entering Brazil."*
- 2018 Far-right presidential candidate (Bolsonaro): 80% of the votes.

## Research Question, Literature and Contributions

- **Research Question:** What are (if any) the electoral consequences (vote for incumbent and far-right populist candidates) of urban refugee shelters?

# Research Question, Literature and Contributions

- **Research Question:** What are (if any) the electoral consequences (vote for incumbent and far-right populist candidates) of urban refugee shelters?
  - Setting: Venezuelan refugee shelters in Boa Vista (set up mar-oct 2018)

# Research Question, Literature and Contributions

- **Research Question:** What are (if any) the electoral consequences (vote for incumbent and far-right populist candidates) of urban refugee shelters?
  - Setting: Venezuelan refugee shelters in Boa Vista (set up mar-oct 2018)
  - Elections (October): (pre-treatment: 2006, 2010, 2014) (post: 2018, 2022).

# Research Question, Literature and Contributions

- **Research Question:** What are (if any) the electoral consequences (vote for incumbent and far-right populist candidates) of urban refugee shelters?
  - Setting: Venezuelan refugee shelters in Boa Vista (set up mar-oct 2018)
  - Elections (October): (pre-treatment: 2006, 2010, 2014) (post: 2018, 2022).
- **Related Literature:**
  - Presence of Immigrants and Voting Outcomes: Steinmayr (2021); Edo et al. (2019); Moriconi, Peri, and Turati (2022).
  - Impacts of Refugee Camps and Shelters: Hennig (2021); Sanghi, Onder, and Vemuru (2016); Alix-Garcia et al. (2018).
  - Electoral Accountability: Ferraz and Finan (2008); Ajzenman and Durante (2023).

# Research Question, Literature and Contributions

- **Research Question:** What are (if any) the electoral consequences (vote for incumbent and far-right populist candidates) of urban refugee shelters?
  - Setting: Venezuelan refugee shelters in Boa Vista (set up mar-oct 2018)
  - Elections (October): (pre-treatment: 2006, 2010, 2014) (post: 2018, 2022).
- **Related Literature:**
  - Presence of Immigrants and Voting Outcomes: Steinmayr (2021); Edo et al. (2019); Moriconi, Peri, and Turati (2022).
  - Impacts of Refugee Camps and Shelters: Hennig (2021); Sanghi, Onder, and Vemuru (2016); Alix-Garcia et al. (2018).
  - Electoral Accountability: Ferraz and Finan (2008); Ajzenman and Durante (2023).
- **Contributions:**
  - Political consequences of **urban shelters** in a **new hosting developing region**;
  - **Shelters' features heterogeneity** (Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Shelters).

## **Political Outcomes (TSE - Superior Electoral Court):**

- Election Results (2006-2022)
- Characteristics of the registered voters: age, sex, marital status, education (2014-2022)

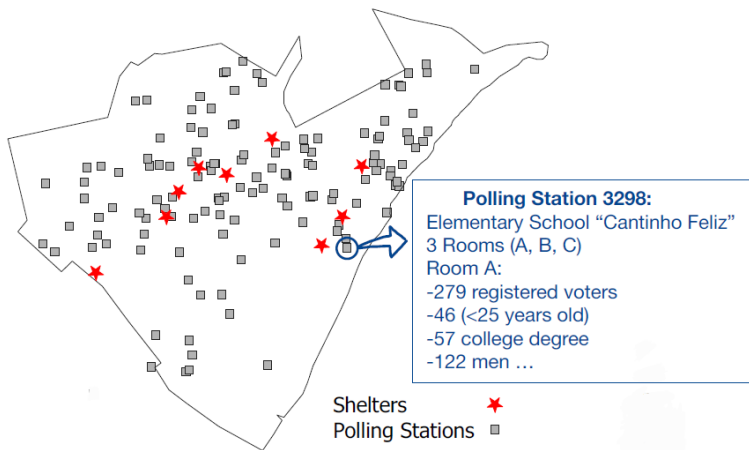
## **Shelters (UNHCR Reports):**

- Location, opening/close dates, total capacity, monthly number sheltered, refugees' socioeconomic/demographic data.

## **Others:**

- Polling Station Coordinates (from Hidalgo's code output). [Details](#)

## Boa Vista Map - Shelters and Polling Stations



### Brazilian Electoral Code:

- Voters assigned permanently to a room in a Polling Station closest to residence.



## Empirical Strategy: Diff-in-Diff

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta \text{Treated}_j * I(t = 2018/2022) + \text{Controls} + \gamma_i + \mu_t + \nu_{ijt}$$

- $Y_{ijt}$  = Vote outcome of room "i" in polling station "j" for year "t"
- $\text{Treated}_j$  = Dummy (Distance to the closest shelter < 1 Km) or  $\frac{1}{\text{Distance}_j}$
- $\mu_t$  = Time FE;  $\gamma_i$  = Room FE.
- *Controls*:
  - Geographic: Distance to Downtown (Km) x Time Dummies
  - Demographic: 23 variables for voters' education, age, and gender
- Clustered errors at the polling station level.

## Empirical Strategy: Diff-in-Diff

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta \text{Treated}_j * I(t = 2018/2022) + \text{Controls} + \gamma_i + \mu_t + \nu_{ijt}$$

- $Y_{ijt}$  = Vote outcome of room "i" in polling station "j" for year "t"
- $\text{Treated}_j$  = Dummy (Distance to the closest shelter < 1 Km) or  $\frac{1}{\text{Distance}_j}$
- $\mu_t$  = Time FE;  $\gamma_i$  = Room FE.
- *Controls*:
  - Geographic: Distance to Downtown (Km) x Time Dummies
  - Demographic: 23 variables for voters' education, age, and gender
- Clustered errors at the polling station level.
- **Identification Assumption:** no differential voting trends
  - The military was responsible for shelters' location;
  - Emergency operation with limited time for locals to lobby;
  - Event Study pre-trends ✓

# Empirical Strategy: Diff-in-Diff

$$Y_{ijt} = \beta \text{Treated}_j * I(t = 2018/2022) + \text{Controls} + \gamma_i + \mu_t + \nu_{ijt}$$

- $Y_{ijt}$  = Vote outcome of room "i" in polling station "j" for year "t"
- $\text{Treated}_j$  = Dummy (Distance to the closest shelter < 1 Km) or  $\frac{1}{\text{Distance}_j}$
- $\mu_t$  = Time FE;  $\gamma_i$  = Room FE.
- **Controls:**
  - Geographic: Distance to Downtown (Km) x Time Dummies
  - Demographic: 23 variables for voters' education, age, and gender
- Clustered errors at the polling station level.
- **Identification Assumption:** no differential voting trends
  - The military was responsible for shelters' location;
  - Emergency operation with limited time for locals to lobby;
  - Event Study pre-trends ✓
- **Panel 2006-2022:**
  - 238 balanced rooms
  - 34% treated
  - 326 registered voters per room on average

# Summary of Results

- **Governor Election:**

- ↓ **Incumbent** (2 to 5 p.p)
- ↑ **Far-right candidate** (2 to 5 p.p)
- Effect is no longer observed in the 2022 election

# Summary of Results

- **Governor Election:**

- ↓ **Incumbent** (2 to 5 p.p)
- ↑ **Far-right candidate** (2 to 5 p.p)
- Effect is no longer observed in the 2022 election

- **President Election:**

- There was no Incumbent to be voted for
- ↑ **Far-right candidate (Bolsonaro)** in the 2nd round (2 to 4 p.p)
- ↓ **Left party** in the 2nd round (2 to 4 p.p)
- Effect persisted for the 2022 election

# Summary of Results

- **Governor Election:**

- ↓ **Incumbent** (2 to 5 p.p)
- ↑ **Far-right candidate** (2 to 5 p.p)
- Effect is no longer observed in the 2022 election

- **President Election:**

- There was no Incumbent to be voted for
- ↑ **Far-right candidate (Bolsonaro)** in the 2nd round (2 to 4 p.p)
- ↓ **Left party** in the 2nd round (2 to 4 p.p)
- Effect persisted for the 2022 election

## Mechanism:

- **Turnout:** no effect
  
- **Non-valid votes:** no effect

# Summary of Results

- **Governor Election:**

- ↓ **Incumbent** (2 to 5 p.p)
- ↑ **Far-right candidate** (2 to 5 p.p)
- Effect is no longer observed in the 2022 election

- **President Election:**

- There was no Incumbent to be voted for
- ↑ **Far-right candidate (Bolsonaro)** in the 2nd round (2 to 4 p.p)
- ↓ **Left party** in the 2nd round (2 to 4 p.p)
- Effect persisted for the 2022 election

## Mechanism:

- **Turnout:** no effect
- **Non-valid votes:** no effect
- **Indigenous shelters** are driving the results:
  - **Culture** (Spanish is not the main language)
  - **Resource competition** (Indigenous less educated, more children/teen)

# Conclusion

- Urban shelters: incumbent effect + shift towards the far-right
  - Incumbent effect relevant for public policy sustainability!
- Sheltered population features matter!
  - Indigenous vs Non-Indigenous: culture and competition for public services are likely jointly playing a role (next steps)
- Effects not big enough to change who was elected
  - General migration flow could be more relevant for this (next steps)
- Robust to different specifications, data aggregations, and treatment definitions
- Robust to alternative stories:
  - Voters composition change
  - Election logistics manipulation



Thank You  
([cgbrito@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cgbrito@ucdavis.edu))



# Appendix

## “Traditional” Refugee Policy

- **Low- and middle-income countries host 75%** of the world’s refugees and people in need of international protection.
- International displaced pop. will continue to increase (48 million in 2023) - UNHCR Global Report 2022
- **Refugee camps/shelters** remain the **dominant contemporary mode of refugee aid** (>6.6 million refugees live in camps):
  - Largest Camps (Africa and Asia): Kutupalong (Bangladesh, >600,000 refugees); Dadaab (Kenya, 240,000); Kakuma (Kenya, 200,000).
  - Most humanitarian assistance delivered within camps.
  - Common in **rural areas** (sometimes combined with property, movement, and work rights restrictions);
- However, **the vast majority of refugees (78%) live in cities** - UNHCR
- Unlike a camp, **cities allow refugees to live autonomously**, make money, and build a better future - UNHCR.
- “Offering **urban refuge is central** for sustainable refugee system” - Betts (2021).

# The Venezuelan Refugee Crisis in Brazil

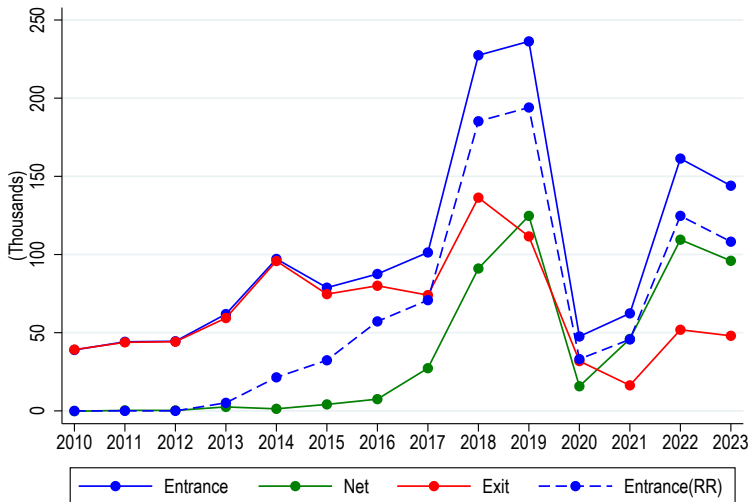
UNHCR estimates that 7.7 million citizens have left Venezuela since 2014



↪ From January 2017 to September 2023:

- 980,625 Venezuelans entered Brazil
- 510,499 stayed (427,534 left)
  - ↪ 429,888 got residency
  - ↪ 103,713 got refugee status
  - ↪ 37,245 waiting for refugee status
- 52% Male, 48% Female
- 71% ( $\leq 29$ )

# The Venezuelan Refugee Crisis in Brazil



Source: STI. For 2023 data includes January to September.

# Operação Acolhida

- Operation launched by the Brazilian Government in February 2018.
- Coordination between federal, state, and local Governments, International Organizations, NGOs, and civil society.
- It consists of three foundations:
  - ① Border Planning;
  - ② Dispersal Policy (started on April 2018);
  - ③ **Shelter and Reception** (11 Shelters operating in 2018)



Tancredo Neves Shelter



Rondon 1 Shelter

# Shelters Info

Table: Shelters Statistics

Name	Opening Date	Capacity (September or October* 2018)	Sheltered Population (September or October* 2018)	Capacity (August 2020)	Sheltered Population (September 2020)	Average Length of Stay - days (September 2020)
Pintolândia	March 2018	448	754	640	536	470
Tancredo Neves	March 2018	232	324	280	217	270
Hélio Campos	December 2017	no info	252*	closed	closed	closed
Jardim Floresta	March 2018	594	693	550	368	293
São Vicente	April 2018	378	353	300	251	270
Nova Canaã	April 2018	390	436	350	235	265
Rondon 1	July 2018	600	715	810	559	240
Latife Salomão	April 2018	no info	514*	300	195	248
Santa Tereza	May 2018	no info	531*	320	255	191
Rondon 2	September 2018	no info	453*	645	340	223
Rondon 3	October 2018	1086*	344*	1386	844	245
São Vicente 2	July 2019	did not exist	did not exist	250	110	177

# Robustness Tests

1. **Unbalanced Panel** ✓
2. **Other unit of observations:** polling stations and mock voting districts ✓
3. **Keep only likely not treated controls** (far away from any shelter) ✓
4. **Weighted Regressions** (room's number of registered voters) ✓
5. **Standard Errors Geographically Clustered** (neighborhood level) ✓