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Pioneering Anti-Poverty Policies in Brazil and Mexico: Ambiguities and Disagreements on Conditional Cash Transfer Programs

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, Latin America's welfare system has undergone a major transformation with the rise of large-scale anti-poverty transfer programs, which are becoming the fastest-growing social policy in the developing world (Zucco, 2013). These programs have reached a large portion of the population to the extent of 58.1 million people in Brazil, 32.2 million in Mexico, and 13.6 million in Colombia (ECLAC, 2018; World Bank, 2018). The pioneering and most famous federal-level programs are Brazil's Bolsa-Família and Mexico's Progres-a-Oportunidades-Prospera (POP), which by 2018 provided benefits to approximately a quarter of each national population¹. Prior to these policies, a large part of the population had no access to social assistance because they were either under-covered or living in a "no man's land" devoid of any protection and assistance services.

The current widespread coverage is puzzling, as several features of Mexico's and Brazil's previous social assistance system should logically have impeded this, because different programs and allocations were unstable and highly fragmented among the different bureaucratic and civic agencies in these governments. In other words, despite social assistance budgets being earmarked for poverty alleviation, they were often used towards other ends. For instance, Brazil's previous national strategy for fighting poverty ("Comunidade Solidária") combined various initiatives that involved the participation of civil society, business, and third sector actors. Specifically, the government prioritized a set of twenty programs run by nine different ministries. In Mexico, the expenditures of the previous national strategy for fighting poverty (the national solidarity program known as PRONASOL) targeted the geographical areas where the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) had encountered electoral opposition (Diaz-Cayeros *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, up to 22 percent of PRONASOL's budget was

directed toward basic infrastructure development (Zedillo, 1997). On the whole, social assistance in the 1990s remained small-scale, residual, fragmented, and often clientelist in both countries (Barrientos, 2014, p. 10), with the political barriers to expanding social assistance seeming to be insurmountable. For this reason, one may reasonably wonder how Mexico and Brazil managed to first create large-scale innovative anti-poverty programs during the mid-1990s. These gradually expanded their reach after important political transitions in the early 2000s, despite the prior institutional evolution the social assistance system. The aim of this article is to shed new light on the factors facilitating the emergence of these innovative policies by drawing attention to the advocacy coalitions and types of ambiguities involved in developing social policies. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the debate on the roles that institutional and ideational forces play in shaping anti-poverty policy.

2. Literature review

Most scholars distinguish between two analytical dichotomies regarding conditional cash transfers (CCTs): the continuity versus discontinuity of changes; and the exogenous versus endogenous factors in the social assistance systems. Figure 1 graphically represents these four varieties of analyses by aligning them along two central continuums.

From an exogenous-oriented continuity approach, anti-poverty policies are embedded in the political and historical processes that have enabled the expansion of the welfare state². These scholars stress continuity over change, and above all they view CCTs as being in line with some historical political legacies, such as: processes for administrative and financial decentralization (Lindert *et al.*, 2007; Neri, 2003; Sátyro and Soares, 2009); economic and political liberalization (Dion, 2010); and democratization through increased political competition (Franco, 2008; Hunter and Sugiyama, 2009; Garay, 2016). Alternatively, most scholars who take the exogenous-oriented and discontinuity approach invoke a critical-juncture explanation for how CCT policies have originated, specifically by identifying exogenous breakpoints that loosened the institutional constraints embedded in the previous social assistance system. One of the most relevant examples of this is the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 (Barrientos, 2013), which inaugurated an exceptional political period for pursuing major changes that were considered worthwhile. Another kind of exogenous discontinuity can be found in the Mexican economic crisis of 1995 (Levy, 2004; Levy and Rodríguez,

2005; Ordóñez, 2012) that subjected the country to external influence from international institutions (Heimo, 2019; Teichman, 2007; Yaschine, 1999), thus revamping the old system and opening the door to CCTs. Finally, ideological and political arguments point to the impact of strong-left parties, as well as social movements and union mobilizations (Dion, 2010; Garay, 2016; Huber and Stephens, 2012) particularly in Brazil.

Scholars who take the endogenous–continuity perspective view CCTs as an extension of some previous anti-poverty policies forged in the wake of non-contributory social assistance mechanisms, such as rural pensions in Brazil (Rocha, 2013) or certain small-scale programs like the *Programa de Atención de Servicios de Salud para la Población Abierta* (PASSPA) in Mexico. In this sense, CCTs represent development of existing programs and thus exemplify an evolving path of dependency. Finally, from an endogenous–discontinuity approach, some scholars posit that CCTs characterize radical change and a paradigmatic shift within the welfare system in the form of a completely new model that ruptures existing patterns, namely by shifting toward a strategy that focuses on human capital and shared norms (Rawlings, 2004; Sugiyama, 2008).

Figure 1. Two analytical dichotomies about CCT origins (exogenous versus endogenous factors and continuity versus discontinuity).

| | | Exogenous-oriented social assistance systems | |
|---------------------|--|---|--|
| | | Political and historical circumstances | Macro-political contexts and dominant values |
| Continuity approach | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administrative-financial decentralization - Democratization process and political content - Economic and political liberalization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brazilian Constitution of 1988 - Economic crises - Left-wing forces, social movements and union mobilizations - Influence of international financial institutions and organizations |
| | | <p>Non-contributory social assistance policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - e.g., PRONASOL (Mexico) - e.g., Rural pensions (Brazil) | <p>Productive conditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ideas of human capital - The paradigmatic change |
| | | Endogenous-oriented social assistance systems | |
| | | | Discontinuity approach |

While all these explanations may contribute to elucidating the aspects that led to the emergence of these programs, they are shortsighted because they do not clarify the processes involved or the nature of the policy changes in the two above mentioned pioneering countries. These social assistance changes cannot be understood simply in terms of the analytical dichotomies presented above, as those categories minimize the power of agency and relegate CCTs to a kind of fate. Although, some endogenous perspectives could also be based in the study of agency, they tend to assume consensus in adopting and implementing these anti-poverty policies while neglecting the motivations of political elites and other actors. Based on an actor-centered approach, this article seeks therefore to contribute to the literature on the institutional challenges for the expansion of social welfare programs. By examining ambiguities and contradiction as actors struggle over the meaning in the process of emergence of CCTs, this article addresses the question of institutional change that go beyond the dichotomies of small incremental steps and external shocks.

Our hypothesis is that CCTs are not automatic outputs or imputable to any self-perpetuating policy. In Mexico, from 2019, the educational components of Prospera were replaced by the *Becas para el Bienestar Benito Juárez* program by the current administration. A new and complex web of transfers has been created, although it is not yet clear how they would replace the CCT. Therefore, in order to understand the dynamic components upon which they were built, as well the various compromises and contested agreements involved, it is necessary to examine the coalitional dynamics that make CCTs vulnerable to changes. In light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and important governmental transitions after more than two decades of CCTs, this article can offer some insights into the future of CCTs and social assistance in developing countries.

3. Methodological framework

In order to grasp the mechanisms underlying changes in the CCTs that Brazil and Mexico pioneered, we must adopt a gradual institutional change view of their historical institutionalism, which in turn will allow us to correct for the dualist approach that separates periods of institutional stability and change (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010;

Palier, 2005; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Following this perspective, the origins and continuity of CCTs do not always reflect the objectives of specific actors, groups or coalitions, but are instead the result of coordination among actors with sometimes conflicting goals and often ambiguous commitments (Author 1). In order to shed light on the continuous struggles that take place in pioneering, formulating, and adopting of these anti-poverty policy, three types of ambiguities are analyzed: axiological, partisan, and electoral³. The axiological ambiguity results of the observation the goals and ideas mobilized. Our analysis is built on the premises of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 2007) that was useful in showing that CCTs policies are the result of conflicts between groups of actors who primarily support specific causes while viewing a problem through a shared set of beliefs and perceptions. Although the agents of change are differentiated here by their ideas, we do not neglect other ambiguities, originating from partisan cleavages and strategic electoral choices.

Table 1. Types of ambiguities surrounding CCTs

| Types of ambiguities | Types of actors | Object of ambiguity | Consensus/dissensus related |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Axiological ambiguity | Advocacy coalitions | Core beliefs concerning the causes of poverty (lack of investment in human capital, lack of entitlement to an unconditional basic income, and lack of food security) | Consensus on the creation and implementation of CCTs, disagreement on the purpose of conditionalities |
| Partisan ambiguity | Actors of Opposing Partisan Tendencies | The role of the State and the market | Consensus on the creation and implementation of CCTs, disagreement on the modalities of state intervention in the social field |
| Electoral ambiguity | Political actors | Ambivalent positions: agenda limitation, jumping on the bandwagon, taking credit. | Consensus on the creation and implementation of CCTs, disagreement on the <i>timing</i> of the implementation, credit claiming, etc. |

Source: Author 2.

Using qualitative data analysis software, we identified and analyzed several coalitions working on conditional transfer policies in Brazil and Mexico. The identification of actors was realized through document analysis and interviews to retrace the policy process. Then, the actors' beliefs were coding using a content analysis that revealed distinct positions marking the dividing line between the coalitions⁴. This work results from the triangulation of three main families of data collected since 2009: the positions expressed during semi-structured interviews (51) by a wide range of actors (20 high-ranking national and international civil servants, 2 senators, 7 ministers and national secretaries, and 3 NGO officials, among others)⁵; a review of official public administration archives (parliamentary commissions, administration reports, and conferences) and other sources of secondary literature (pamphlets, specialized journals, and essays)⁶; and an analysis of the main Brazilian and Mexican daily newspapers (approximately 170 and 350 articles on, respectively, the Brazilian and Mexican programs)⁷.

4. Axiological ambiguities: CCTs grounded in ideas and values

CCTs were introduced in Brazilian and Mexican social systems by means of three concomitant processes: 1) refuting previous policies, 2) proposing a new diagnosis for identifying the root causes of poverty, and 3) offering a new alternative to eradicate this poverty. If the first and second processes were endorsed by the agents of change (reforming outmoded policies and implementing CCT), the diagnoses of the root causes of poverty were not the object of consensus.

At the beginning of the 1990s, social assistance in these countries was largely perceived as not only a fragmented and inadequate implementation of welfare policies, but also dominated by endemic clientelism. The old national poverty strategies served as a negative model of how things should not be done. For instance, the Mexican PRONASOL Program was relentlessly accused of electoral manipulation for political ends; and claims spread throughout many political spheres that the Brazilian Legion of Assistance was an obsolete structure and source of political clientelism.

Reformists who advocated for CCTs thus took advantage of the growing dissatisfaction with the previous policies. However, it was not sufficient that these

agents of change merely agreed on the need to reform assistance policies and additionally advocate for a cash transfer policy, as they were unable to agree on the precise objectives to pursue. Questions abounded, such as “What do poor citizens need?” and “How can cash transfers transform their lives?” As we will see, the actors involved are unable to agree on the purpose of conditionalities, even if the idea of implementing a cash transfer scheme has progressively gained support. Previous research has identified three types of coalitions with distinct objectives: human capital, universal basic income, and food security. The first coalition advocates for CCTs as an investment in human capital (including conditionalities to ensure school attendance and visits to health centers). Their primary goal is to establish individual autonomy, with education serving as a means for poor people to escape poverty. Thus, in their view, the deprivation of scholarly knowledge and medical assistance would make poor people economically less productive (Becker, 1964). The universal basic income coalition defends the unconditional cash program as a way to fight poverty and social inequalities on the basis of liberty and the universal provision of aid. The food security coalition is observed only in the Brazilian case, and it believes that conditionalities should impose that food be purchased from small rural producers. The core belief of these advocates for the food security principle is that access should be given to food with all the dignity, regularity, quality, and quantity that is necessary for maintaining physical and mental health. All, these coalitions rely on national and international actors. For example, the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank have been active supporters of CCTs (Hall, 2008; Teichman, 2007), as well as advocates for human capital while also providing loans and technical assistance to such anti-poverty programs.

Tackling poverty and proposing new alternatives: Coalition dynamics

In Mexico, two large opposing forces feuded over the anti-poverty policies that were in place throughout the Gortari government (1988–1994) and up until halfway through the Zedillo government (1994–2000) (Dresser, 1997; Valencia Lomelí and Reveles Aguirre, 1998). On one side were those holding positions in public rural sector institutions and in previous national programs for fighting poverty. This group fought for preservation of the status quo. On the other side were a group proposing the new solution of fighting poverty by transferring cash in order to improve the human capital of the poor population. This one was heterogenous as they comprehend technocrats related to the Ministry of the Economy and certain actors from Conapo (National

Population Council) such as José Gómez de León “who shared the same visions and maintained an informal coordination at the beginning that became systematic”⁸. The differences between these groups were made glaringly evident by the teams of Santiago Levy (Sub-secretary of the Ministry of Finance) and Carlos Rojas (Secretary of SEDESOL [Spanish: Secretaría de Desarrollo Social]) (Valencia Lomelí and Aguirre Reveles, 1998).

CCTs were initiated particularly in opposition to anti-poverty policies based on food subsidies. Numerous reports and assessments denounced the generalized subsidies’ failure to prevent increases in poverty. One of these studies was written for the World Bank in 1991 by the Mexican economist Santiago Levy,⁹ who looked at the behavior of people experiencing poverty. According to his report, poor people had a propensity to have many children; not purchase nutritious food; neglect personal hygiene; and distribute scarce resources unequally within households to favor the less vulnerable.

To begin, the report questioned the justifications for subsidy programs. Since they were directed to poor rural producers, these subsidies were supposed to assist them as farmers, not because of their poverty. It is important to note that for the fifty years between 1940 and 1991, agrarian reforms had transferred a significant part of the land to the *ejidos* (collective properties allocated to a group of peasants), and that the constitutional reform of 1992 put an end to this policy by authorizing the division and sale of ejido land.

Second, Levy's calculations for the World Bank attributed a rural character to poverty, which some researchers questioned (Boltvinik, 2004). In fact, he did not agree with the government's earlier estimates on the dimension of poverty, which he believed to be overestimated and thus forming an obstacle to objectively targeting the population really in need—i.e., the rural population—thereby preventing aid from reaching them. The arguments put forward by Levy are highly questionable, but we will not discuss them here. Nevertheless, they placed the rural characteristics of poverty in direct contrast with the urban poor, who were the main recipients of generalized subsidies. Levy claimed that policies providing in-kind support (food, school materials, plants, and animals) were economically inefficient, and therefore in-kind food subsidies became for him and others a *sine qua non* argument for changes to anti-poverty policies.

In concrete terms, Levy’s ostensible mere identification of technical problems was in fact an attempt to impose a particular conception of the problem, meaning that his diagnosis was based a priori on solutions that included proposing new measures for

correcting the errors of the past. Thus, the “solution” redefined the problem of poverty by judging poor urban tortilla consumers to be “privileged”, thanks to the subsidies. Later in 1995, along with Evelyne Rodríguez, Levy was in charge of a program that promoted opening the economy (Programa de Acción para Reforzar el Acuerdo de Unidad para Superar la Emergencia Económica; PARAUSEE). Among other things, their roles were to assess the possible effects of economic reform on agricultural markets and subsidies (mainly tortillas and milk).

The new alternative policy was based on an underlying idea that poor people needed to invest in their own human capital, based on microeconomic concepts that led actors to advocate for an infusion of cash to incite behavioral changes. In this sense, they sought to reinforce behaviors that can change the fate of poor people because, otherwise, they would theoretically have no incentives to keep their children in school or seek access to healthcare.

At the beginning of these reforms, the actors seeking to integrate the human capital concept into social assistance encountered negative public opinion and political resistance. For example, with the help of a World Bank loan, the Mexican government sought in 1994 to develop a pilot policy that obligated families to assume mutual responsibility for their wellbeing in order for beneficiaries to be eligible for free bank debit cards. The press and opposition in the Chamber of Deputies named this card "pobremático" (a portmanteau combining the Spanish words for “poor”, “problematic”, and “*automated* teller machine”), and it fueled rumors of the World Bank possibly intervening in the reorganization of subsidies and the use of public finances. This partially explains why another pilot project named Programa de Canasta Básica Alimentaria para el Bienestar de la Familia was set up in October 1995 to serve three cities in the south of the state of Campeche. The choice in geography was in fact determined by: the distance between these cities and the capital, Mexico City; the weak opposition in that state; and the fact that this region was unlike its neighbors in having remained relatively isolated from the political conflicts of the period.

Santiago Levy’s privileged position in the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit led to his Progresa project prevailing within the government (Valencia Lomelí and Aguirre Reveles, 1998), with President Zedillo himself being an acknowledged enthusiast of the human capital theory (Valencia Lomelí and Reveles Aguirre, 1998). To a large extent, the Progresa program was guided by the Ministry of Finance, which not only set social program budgets and replaced generalized subsidies with a cash transfer

program, but they also shifted the focus of social policy to rural communities in order to embrace their new model for opening the economy. At this stage, they relied on the resources of legal and formal authority (prestigious positions), finances, and technical expertise.

As stated by Daniel Hernández Franco, one of Progresas's architects and its national director between 1999 and 2001: "To make this avant-garde idea of human capital more acceptable, scholarships seemed to be the most legitimate type of policy".¹⁰ As Mexico faced its economic crisis and sought to continue opening up trade, the idea of human capital appeared to be a solution that would decrease expenditures and promote investment in future generations. A change of direction thus took place in the form of reducing income inequalities and regional disparities while encouraging small-scale local food and handicraft production. Direct provisions of primary school services were no longer the main aims of policies for eradicating poverty as the objectives now focused primarily on the individual by reducing child mortality, morbidity, and undernourishment while improving fertility control, primary health, and hygiene behaviors. Hence, reforming social policy was not only to conform to the new model of economic openness in the wake of Mexico entering the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994), but also a way to reassess the causes of poverty. A high-level official who participated in the design and implementation of the Progresas explain the policy change: "In other countries, CCTs were usually created by the addition of another program. Much is said about institutional design and evaluations, but in hardly any country have they been able to eliminate a basic product without problems and in a peaceful way, without revolt or insubordination... We quickly eliminated all the subsidies of the wheat flour chain... pan bolillo, and tortilla chain (...). It was a change of strategy and a reassessment of resources"¹¹.

In the context of Brazil's intense institutional reforms following the 1988 Constituent Assembly, the reform of state social assistance was considered imperative. However, following the failure of social assistance policies, no consensus was reached on these policy goals. The Brazilian case was similar to Mexico's in that previous anti-poverty policies were refuted and a new alternative was proposed. Still, three major differences existed between the two countries.

First, while Mexico's CCT was designed with conditionalities oriented towards human capital, in Brazil's CCT was created in a response to the coalition that advocated

unconditional cash transfer programs toward fighting poverty. Senator Eduardo Suplicy presented a bill in 1991¹² proposing gradual implementation of universal and unconditional cash transfers, starting with people over the age of 60. The original goal was to eliminate some social assistance programs that were considered inefficient and wasteful. The project was approved unanimously by the Senate in December 1991, although it was not voted on in the Chamber of Deputies. Even though it was blocked by the lower house of Parliament, the proposal generated much debate on the feasibility of CCTs. Despite having a skilled leader in Senator Suplicy, who had the legal authority to introduce bills in the Senate, this coalition lacked the financial resources to actually carry out the project.

Many actors that we categorize here as the human capital coalition criticized the unconditional character of financial aid and the program's initial focus on elderly people. They suggested initiating the transfers with families who had school-age children, since children are more susceptible to breaking the poverty cycle. This option received nationwide attention in particular through the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper articles by José Márcio Camargo, an economist at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. It gained further prominence from the debates led by the University of Brasília's Cristovam Buarque, who later implemented a CCT program (*Bolsa-Escola*) upon becoming governor of the Federal District of Brasília and its satellite cities in 1995.

Second, while Mexico's federal government took a top-down approach in implementing *Progres*a, CCTs in Brazil were implemented from the bottom down by starting with the municipalities and states, which had to accept conditionalities linked to education and health. Cities governed by mayors of different partisan affiliations have embraced the idea of establishing municipal CCT programs oriented towards investment in human capital without federal government support, Campinas (state of São Paulo) and Brasília being the pioneers.

After a wave of CCT deployment in the cities and states, the Congress sought to reintroduce CCTs as a national policy. Between 1995 and 1996, Congress discussed several initiatives aligning with various partisan trends, and programs linking conditional cash transfers to education were proposed. The next session of Congress saw various proposals, most notably a bill by Congressman Nelson Marchezan of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), which President Cardoso signed in 1997¹³ and was later approved by the House of Representatives, with some amendments. This

bill authorized the federal government to finance 50% of municipal CCT spending, with certain conditions imposed for education. It was only in 2001 that the federal government finally created its own fully federally funded program, which is best known as Bolsa-Escola¹⁴. Local experience was thereby assimilated into the federal government and extended nationwide.

In our previous research, CCTs in both Brazil and Mexico proved to be mainly the result of efforts by the human capital coalition, which managed to gradually implement important changes in accordance with the principles of human capital investment. However, these gradual changes took different forms in the two countries, which brings us to the third major difference between them. Mexico implemented CCTs as a *displacement* process that removed existing programs (mostly PRONASOL and food subsidies), although none of this occurred abruptly. In the middle of Zedillo's presidential term, those who advocated for new institutions struggled to gradually dismantle previous anti-poverty programs as they competed with the defenders of the old institutions. Meanwhile, the Brazilian case was closer to a *layering* process in which change occurred at the system's margins, meaning that CCTs popped up at municipal and state levels only to become solely a federal policy some years later. Another example of this layering process of change can be found in the way that different CCTs multiplied sectorally at the federal level after having first spread at the sub-national level. The second Cardoso government (1999–2002) witnessed a proliferation of federal CCTs, each with different conditionalities and managed by different ministries such as the Ministries of Education, of Health, of Mines and Energy, as well as some others. Small changes accumulated at the top and at the edges of existing assistance policies, which then contributed to major long-term changes to the rationale behind the old anti-poverty programs (Author 1).

5. Partisan ambiguities: grasp the subtleties of ideological cleavages

The geneses of Brazilian and Mexican CCTs in the early 90s are jointly characterized by one prominent feature: coalitions of actors orbiting around a central axis of conditionalities. As we have seen, the dynamics of these coalitions demonstrate certain ambiguities in values (axiological ambiguities), which were present at the very origins of these policies. Yet, other ambiguities also abound within their structures, such as those that emerged as a result of partisan divisions uncoupled from the coalition

ideologies mentioned here. In other words, these programs are subject not only to left–right divisions, but also to divergence within the parties regarding the modalities of how the state should intervene in social assistance.

Contrary to any reasonable a priori assumptions about the fate of CCTs during the government transitions of Lula da Silva in Brazil (2003–2011) and Vicente Fox in Mexico (2000–2006), these leaders did not break from their predecessors’ policies or goals. What makes this all the more striking is that Lula and Fox both incarnated major democratic transitions toward opposing political principles, with Lula rising from the center-left¹⁵ (the first president to do so in Brazil) and Fox governing as a right-wing¹⁶. From the moment he came to power, Lula committed himself specifically to fighting hunger by means of the Zero Hunger Program, which initially focused mainly on the principle of food security and aroused immense expectations and hope for change among the population. Similarly, Fox embodied hope for change—but via the liberal-right—as his election marked the end of a seventy-one-year era of PRI hegemony.

Once CCTs were implemented at the federal level in Brazil and Mexico, anti-poverty policies were guided by how poverty was defined through the filter of human capital theory. Yet, despite the sudden ubiquity of CCTs, it would nevertheless be overly simplistic to categorize any of the contributing actors as mere winners or losers. As described by Mahoney and Thelen (2010, p. 22): “The ambiguities inherent in institutions and the uncertainties concerning institutional enactment complicate assessments about which actors are advantaged and disadvantaged. And the fact that actors are simultaneously embedded in multiple institutions often leaves them winners in some arenas but losers in others”.

Governmental transitions, coalition agreements and disagreements

Despite the historical government transition in Mexico when Vicente Fox rose to the presidency in the year 2000, the Progresa program not only continued to endure, but the pool of beneficiaries also dramatically expanded both qualitatively and quantitatively, due to the considerable efforts of the human capital coalition.” Progresa was renamed Oportunidades in March 2002 and extended to urban areas, which led to a series of operational changes in the application and selection process (Hevia de la Jara, 2007). This stands as one of the major changes to the program, since until then it covered almost exclusively rural areas.

The continuity of the CCT program in Mexico persevered throughout the PAN and PRI governments, although partisan divisions occurred among the left wing of the ideological spectrum. Unconditional CCTs were championed by some left-wing groups such as the Party of the Revolution Democracy (PRD) and the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA). For instance, the Andrés Manuel López Obrador Government of the Federal District implemented the *Pensión Universal Ciudadana*, which was alimony for the elderly, regardless of their income. Not only did this serve to launch him onto the national political scene (Combes, 2005), but the program's popularity led to governors from different parties seeking to replicate his model of income transfers to the elderly (Combes, 2007). As Pablo Yanes, director of the Council for the Evaluation of Policies for Social Development of the D.F. from 2008-2012, states: "While D.F. government constructed its CCT from the perspective of the right to income, Progresa-Oportunidades is formed from the perspective of human capital. What we have to propose is to convert the CCT into a basic income"¹⁷.

In the Brazilian case, it is not possible to determine a clear partisan correlation between CCTs and the advocacy coalitions involved there. Initially, both the PT and other parties like the PDSB launched programs for establishing CCTs in municipalities and states, and until 1997 these two parties introduced the most bills in that regard. Nevertheless, these programs notably complied with frameworks defined by the PT (Rocha, 2014, p. 45).

With Lula's rise to power in 2003, disagreements surfaced within his party in regard to CCTs. The first year of the Lula government was marked by intense disputes over the objectives of CCTs. The food security coalition openly challenged the hegemonic human capital coalition over its access to more political resources, and this coalition played a central role in Lula's election campaign as the architects of the Zero Hunger Program. The food security cause came to acquire its own ministry, the Special Ministry for Food Security (MESA), with a substantial budget of 1.8 billion reais in 2003. In addition, other important actors advocating for this cause also gained more relevance in this period, like the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA) and the social mobilization office linked to the presidency.

The growing influence of the food security coalition then caused an imbalance in the CCT system as they tried to implement food security with a much higher budget than other existing programs. The Food Card money was limited to spending in specific shops in order to support local economies and promote small- and medium-sized

producers¹⁸. This policy received harsh criticism from many sides, such as the Minister of Education (C. Buarque), the Minister of Economy (A. Palocci), and Senator E. Suplicy. A participant in the human capital coalition named C. Buarque proposed raising the federal Bolsa-Escola¹⁹ budget instead of creating a program focused on food security, while E. Suplicy criticized obliging program beneficiaries to spend the cash on specific purchases, referring to it as “espionage” in the fight against hunger.

The political influence of the food security coalition diminished after all the federal CCTs were unified. In mid-2003, a working group coordinated by the Presidential Cabinet was established with the goal of formulating a large CCT, thus giving rise to Bolsa-Família. This process posed a political conflict, since the Food Card accounted for about 70% of MESA’s budget in 2003 and this ministry proposed implementing cash transfer programs according to the Food Card model (Takagi, 2006). A notorious conflict of ideas has raged at the very heart of this group, brought out by the opposition between Ana Fonseca, in charge of the integration of conditional cash transfer programs, and José Graziano, Minister in charge of food and nutritional security. In summary, the first envisaged a major reform to unify programs, targeting beneficiaries to reduce costs and achieve greater efficiency in the system. José Graziano insisted on the need for the CCT to create mechanisms for social participation and to encourage local food production. Graziano, member of the food security coalition explained “There was a political battle in which the conception of the Fome Zero program and the idea of social participation was put aside for the sake of fast implementation and centralized management of the CCT”²⁰.

The conflict emerged not over unifying the programs, but in regard to the ideas and goals behind this unification. Key actors within the government took positions that were contrary to Fome Zero principles; they had more political resources; and they had a decisive influence in shaping opinions and goals, which the interviews indicate occurred mainly within the Ministry of Finance and the Presidential Cabinet. The human capital coalition then managed to implement the large-scale Bolsa-Família program, which became known worldwide in tandem with the Progres-a-Oportunidades program.

If unifying the different CCTs adheres to human capital investment principles and largely constitutes a victory for this coalition, the universal basic income coalition also won a battle in this war. In January 2004, the Citizenship Income law (No. 10,835) authored by E. Suplicy was approved in the Brazilian Congress and established a

universal basic income for all legal citizens. The program was to be implemented in stages and at the discretion of the Executive power, with priority given to the neediest segments of the population while taking into consideration the country's potential level of development and budgetary constraints. Actors from the universal basic income coalition still consider the 2004 law to be an important step in gradually converting Bolsa-Família into an unconditional program²¹. However, the law is still not in effect, and the possibilities of moving from CCTs to unconditional and universal coverage are not clear, as these policies are based on different paths and opposite premises (Lavinás, 2013).

Although the actors may have had divergent interests, the universal basic income coalition adopted a cooperative attitude and supported the human capital coalition, who established the Bolsa-Família. This shows that divergent interests do not preclude one or the other from playing in the same game. The universal basic income coalition thrived and benefited from the expansion of CCTs, and though they could not change the rules due mainly to obstacles in financing a universal transfer program, they nevertheless were able to find strategic long-term solutions for transforming Bolsa-Família into an unconditioned program.

If governmental transitions from left to right in Latin America do not seem to jeopardize CCTs (Niedzwiecki and Pribble, 2017), it remains important to apprehend how actors of different political cleavages, agreeing on the existence of CCTs, have different views on their purposes.

6. Electoral ambiguities: Hesitant attitudes towards CCTs

As CCTs emerge as a new recipe for social policy, the goals remain a source of conflict due to the beliefs that determine the conditionalities. The underlying idea is a necessary but insufficient justification for adopting a new social policy. Our analyses concomitantly uncover the ambiguity resulting from political bargaining and contributing to some actors opting for alternative goals for the CCTs.

Electoral ambiguities concern political actors that change their behavior toward CCT policies as they attempt to avoid taking any position and/or act ambivalently. Three types of strategies in particular were observed: agenda limitation, jumping on the bandwagon, and taking credit (Weaver, 1986).

The first strategy, agenda limitation, consists of limiting or even blocking CCT issues from being included in the political agenda in order to prevent even consideration

of this potentially costly policy. For example, seven years elapsed in Brazil between the first proposal of an unconditional and universal cash transfer program and the 1997 approval of a law for financing municipal conditional transfer programs. Indeed, certain government ministers expressed some resistance to the idea (*Folha de São Paulo*, 1996), which President F. H. Cardoso would have instructed his parliamentary base to block any votes on (Suplicy, 1996). When the government finally adopted the law for co-financing municipal programs, it was widely criticized by public opinion as well as by researchers and specialists in the field of social policies, who reproached it for: not reaching the poorest municipalities; its reduced size and funding; and its political timing, as it was suddenly and rapidly approved just before the 1998 elections (Caccia-Bava, 1998). The federal program thus resulted from ambiguous consensus between coalitions on one side who eventually advocated for linking a conditional cash policy to education, and political actors on the other side jockeying for electoral gains from the first wave of the municipal programs.

The second notable strategy, jumping on the bandwagon, was exemplified by some politicians discreetly changing their position to support popular political actions and adapt to public opinion after having openly criticized CCTs. In Mexico for instance, much criticism was directed at the universal and unconditional coverage of the Federal District food alimony program for the elderly, with accusations of it being populist and clientelist (Combes, 2007).

In a speech during his radio program, President Vicente Fox frontally attacked the Federal District program with emphasis on its “unfairness”, as he believed it would be funded by current workers (Boltvinik, 2005; Ramirez, 2005). Despite his criticisms, President Fox ultimately put in place a similar measure in 2006 in the form of financial aid for people who were over 70 years old, living in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, and members of families already receiving Oportunidades benefits. This new element in the program was never intended or advocated in Oportunidades’ objectives, strategies and lines of action, nor was it ever recommended by specialists (Hevia de la Jara, 2007). The new Oportunidades component (*70 y Más*) combined aspects of the federal program and the Federal District program; its rationale had little or nothing to do with the human capital theory; and it may even have been nothing more than part of a political strategy.

Finally, we arrive at the third strategy of taking credit. Because of their redistributive and targeted nature, CCTs made it tempting for those in power to claim them as their own accomplishment. One example of this strategy can be observed in the presidential campaigns of Brazil, where every candidate from the two main parties (PSDB and PT) since the program's creation has claimed authorship of the program and fought for the political gains it brings. This occurred in the candidate electoral debates of 2006, 2010, and 2014 (Amorim, 2010; Fernandes and Galvão, 2014; Guibu, 2006), where PSDB candidates insisted that Bolsa-Família simply unified pre-existing programs created under the government of Cardoso, while those from the PT invalidate any comparison with previous programs due to their own party vastly increasing the scale of CCTs. The other parties were equally vocal and demanded some if not all credit. For example, the Liberal Front Party (PFL, now the Democrats) also claimed credit for the Anti-Poverty Fund that made it possible to expand the CCTs (Zimmermann, 2001).

Conclusion: Gradual change in social assistance and the persistence of fundamental disagreements

This article has aimed to draw attention to the axiological, partisan and electoral ambiguities that have persisted since the beginnings of the CCT programs that were pioneered in Brazil and Mexico throughout the 1990s. These programs are the product of neither major breakthroughs nor critical political or economic junctures, nor are they simply a result of incremental policy changes in the 1990s and 2000s. They cannot be considered mere outcomes of internal forces or exogenous factors.

For more than a decade, the effectiveness and efficiency of CCTs in Brazil and Mexico have been discussed and assessed. S. Levy himself commented on their nuanced results in his 2018 book, *Under-Rewarded Efforts* (Levy, 2018), where he insists that human capital is not sufficient for lifting the poor out of poverty. In his view, a child growing up with CCTs may acquire more human capital but will ultimately work for the same employer as his or her parents. For this reason, S. Levy advocates for reforming labor laws, taxation, and access to credit, although the success of these reforms presupposes that poor children already benefit from incomes that allow investing in their human capital. This is unfortunately not the case, and thus society fails

to tackle the problems of quality education and public investment in health, which are the top priorities of the human capital coalition.

The two countries in this study serve as laboratories for implementing and extending CCTs. Furthermore, they also inform us of the dynamics that operate in parallel with important changes during new government transitions, as exemplified in Jair Bolsonaro (far-right ideology) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (leftist) coming to power. Making this issue even more pertinent to our present times, the debate on a minimum income has reemerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In reconstructing the original axiological, partisan, and electoral ambiguities underlying CCTs, as well as their different forms, we can better understand how such ambiguities promote consensus building. What is more, studying them also sheds light on the tensions that compel actors to perpetually seek to reform minimum income policies. The Bolsa-Família and POP provide emblematic examples of the complex processes involved in setting up CCTs by allowing us to look in detail at how governments acted in anticipation of electoral gains while accommodating the goals of the advocacy coalitions for human capital, basic income, and food security. In a more general sense, these coalitions and the ambiguous consensus they arrive at enlighten our view by providing a more detailed understanding of the chaotic processes involved in developing social policies.

Abstract

Purpose. Focusing on the conditional cash transfers (CCTs) first created and implemented in Brazil and Mexico, this article takes a new look at the factors facilitating the creation of these innovative policies. In order to shed light on the continuous struggles that take place in pioneering, formulating, and adopting of these anti-poverty policy, three types of ambiguities are analyzed: axiological, partisan, and electoral. **Methodology and approach.** Based on a gradual institutional change approach within the advocacy coalition framework, we conduct a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, official public administration archives, and newspapers. **Findings.** This article demonstrates that advocacy coalitions (for human capital, basic income, and food security) and the quest for electoral gains are viable contexts for exploring the complex processes involved in setting up CCTs, of which Brazil's Bolsa-Família and Mexico's Progres-Oportunidades-Prospera (POP) provide emblematic examples. **Originality/value.** Our findings contribute to comparative social policy research and institutional change analysis. The coalitions and ambiguous consensus

studied here expand our perspectives with a more detailed understanding of the chaotic processes involved in developing social policies.

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¹ Respectively 26.8% in Brazil and 24.1% in Mexico, for a total of 88 million people. Cf. Base de datos de programas de protección social no contributiva en América Latina y el Caribe (2020), División de Desarrollo Social, CEPAL, available at: <https://dds.cepal.org/bpsnc/inicio>, (accessed 24 September 2020).

² For general review of the literature on the major explanatory variables in the expansion of social policies in developing countries see Dorlach (2020).

³ The selection of these three dimensions came from an inductive approach from my fieldwork and my previous work (Autor 2).

⁴ For more details of the coding process see Autor 2, 3.

⁵ The interviews were conducted by the author between April 2009 and April 2014 in Spanish and Portuguese.

⁶ The archives consulted were mainly found in the electronic databases of the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) in Brazil and Sedesol in Mexico. Official archives of the respective national congresses were also consulted, particularly with the proceedings of the debates regarding the laws on these programs. Other materials consulted were provided by the actors interviewed (mainly pamphlets and institutional materials).

⁷ I analyze newspaper articles from until 1979 until 2014 in Brazil, from 1989 through 2014 in Mexico. I specially surveyed one national newspaper in Brazil and Mexico, *Folha de São Paulo* and *La Jornada*, respectively. In Brazil, I worked with an index of newspaper clipping of different national newspapers built by the Library of the Brazilian Senate, and in Mexico I surveyed electronic archives including *Reforma* and *El Universal*. A few articles from major international newspapers (the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and *El País*) were also analyzed when referenced by the actors interviewed or by the material consulted. A content analysis of newspaper articles (news articles, but also included editorials, comments, interviews) was conducted using Nvivo. The text of the articles and the identified characteristics were coded in order to build the database that was cross-referenced with the other sources mentioned.

⁸ Interview with Daniel Hernández Franco, former civil servant of Conapo and National Director of Progresía between 1999 and 2001, Mexico City, 23 February 2013.

⁹ A former director of the Center for Development at Boston University, Levy joined the Ministry of Economics in 1991.

¹⁰ Interview with the author, Mexico City, February 23, 2013.

¹¹ Mexico City, February 25, 2013.

¹² Bill no. 80/1991, known as the Guaranteed Minimum Income Program.

¹³ Statutory law No. 9533 of 1997.

¹⁴ National Minimum Income related to Education Law No. 10.219 of April 11, 2001, regulated by Decree No. 3823 of May 28, 2001.

¹⁵ From the Workers' Party (PT).

¹⁶ From the National Action Party (PAN).

¹⁷ Interview with the author, Mexico City, February 8, 2010.

¹⁸ The amount of aid, 50 reais, was equivalent to a basic basket of quality food, as established by the National Supply Company (Conab). The aid could eventually be granted in the form of food, but only in an emergency or in the absence of local infrastructure.

¹⁹ More specifically, he proposed an increase in the Bolsa-Escola from 15 to 50 reais (Cf. *Folha de São Paulo*, 2003).

²⁰ Interview recorded by audio and received by email, June 17, 2009.

²¹ Interview with Senator Eduardo Suplicy, Brasília, April 13, 2011.