

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Populism Trumps Ideology: Poverty Relief Policy under Mexico's López Obrador and Brazil's Bolsonaro

Fabián A. Borges 

Associate Professor, Political Science, California State University San Bernardino, San Bernardino, CA,  
United States of America  
Email: [fabian.borges@csusb.edu](mailto:fabian.borges@csusb.edu)

(Received 10 October 2023; revised 14 November 2024; accepted 24 November 2024)

## Abstract

Understanding how policy design and implementation differ under populist and non-populist governments is complicated by the fact that populism never exists in a pure form and is always attached to a more developed ideology. Leveraging the near-simultaneous election of left-wing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico and right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, this article analyses populism's effect on cash transfer programmes. Despite the diametrically opposed ideologies of their presidents, rather than diverging, Mexican and Brazilian cash transfer policies converged under populism. Both leaders rebranded the programmes they inherited and moved policy in an improvised, politicised and clientelistic direction.

**Keywords:** populism; AMLO; Bolsonaro; CCT; cash transfer; Bolsa Familia; poverty relief

The world's democracies are undergoing a populist turn. The election of Donald Trump (2017–21; 2024–) to the US presidency and the approval via referendum of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union in 2016, as well as the 2018 elections of left-wing firebrand Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) (2018–24) in Mexico and far-right former army captain Jair Bolsonaro (2019–22) in Brazil, are emblematic of a broader populist wave sweeping across the world's democracies. More generally, the average vote share of populist politicians doubled over the past two decades.<sup>1</sup>

The fast-growing body of research on populism has made significant progress in explaining populist electoral success<sup>2</sup> and the political consequences of populist

<sup>1</sup>Sergei Guriev and Elias Papaioannou, 'The Political Economy of Populism', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 60: 3 (2022), p. 817.

<sup>2</sup>Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39: 4 (2004), pp. 541–63; Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Explaining the Emergence of Populism in Europe and the Americas', in Carlos de la Torre

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

rule, particularly the tense relationship populism has with liberal democracy.<sup>3</sup> Comparatively little attention has been dedicated to populism's policy consequences or how public policy under populism differs from policy under non-populists.<sup>4</sup> Assessing the policy consequences of populism is complicated by the fact that populism cannot exist in a pure form. It is always attached to a more developed ideology. Thus, studies of populist policy-making need to distinguish the effects of populism from those of its host ideologies.<sup>5</sup>

Populism and ideology are best understood as two separate dimensions of politics that operate independently from one another. Populism is a strategy for obtaining political power centred on personalism and an antagonistic relationship toward opponents and institutional constraints.<sup>6</sup> Ideology, in contrast, is a coherent set of beliefs about government's ideal role in society. Because populism is a political strategy rather than a cohesive political ideology with a concrete governing agenda, there are no inherently 'populist' policies. Populism can be combined with different ideologies and should therefore be compatible with a wide range of specific policies. Nevertheless, populism's distinctive features should influence policy and policy-making in predictable and identifiable ways.

Through an analysis of the evolution of cash transfer policy in Mexico and Brazil under left-wing AMLO and right-wing Bolsonaro, this article assesses the consequences of populist rule on social policy as a lens through which to study populist policy-making more broadly. Specifically, the article analyses populism's role in the demise of Mexico's Prospera (To Prosper) and the overhaul of Brazil's Bolsa Família (Family Scholarship), two of the world's largest, most studied and most widely emulated programmatic anti-poverty policies.<sup>7</sup> Tracing the evolution of similar programmes during the same time period under both left- and right-wing populist

---

(ed.), *The Promise and Perils of Populism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), pp. 189–228; Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) and Guriev and Papaioannou, 'The Political Economy of Populism'.

<sup>3</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Robert A. Huber and Christian H. Schimpf, 'Friend or Foe? Testing the Influence of Populism on Democratic Quality in Latin America', *Political Studies*, 64: 4 (2016), pp. 872–89; Christian Houle and Paul D. Kenny, 'The Political and Economic Consequences of Populist Rule in Latin America', *Government and Opposition*, 53: 2 (2018), pp. 256–87; Saskia Pauline Ruth, 'Populism and the Erosion of Horizontal Accountability in Latin America', *Political Studies*, 66: 2 (2018), pp. 356–75; and Kurt Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat: Countering Global Alarmism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Michael W. Bauer and Stefan Becker, 'Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Public Administration', *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, 3: 1 (2020), pp. 19–31; B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre, 'Populism and Public Administration: Confronting the Administrative State', *Administration & Society*, 51: 10 (2019), pp. 1521–45; and Attila Bartha, Zsolt Boda and Dorottya Szikra, 'When Populist Leaders Govern: Conceptualising Populism in Policy Making', *Politics and Governance*, 8: 3 (2020), pp. 71–81.

<sup>5</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda', *Comparative Political Studies*, 51: 13 (2018), pp. 1667–93.

<sup>6</sup> Julio F. Carrión, *A Dynamic Theory of Populism in Power: The Andes in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Mexico's programme is referred to as Prospera. Called Progresá (To Make Progress) at its launch in 1997, it was renamed Oportunidades (Opportunities) in 2002 and Prospera in 2012 following presidential alternation. The programme remained largely unchanged until AMLO replaced it.

governments offers a means of distinguishing the effects of populism from those of traditional Left/Right ideology.

Both programmes are examples of conditional cash transfer programmes; policies that award regular stipends to poor families, conditional upon their children attending school. These programmes relieve poverty in the short term by boosting beneficiaries' incomes. In the long term, by keeping children in school, they aim to improve beneficiaries' economic prospects. On the eve of populist takeover, Prospera and Bolsa Família covered roughly a quarter of the populations of their respective countries.<sup>8</sup> Direct cash transfers have been touted as a path-breaking development for Latin American social policy because of their progressivity and transparent operating rules.<sup>9</sup>

Case studies of the evolution of cash transfer policy in both countries reveal the existence of a distinct and coherent *populist style of policy-making*. Despite AMLO and Bolsonaro's sharp ideological differences, transfer policy in both countries converged in identifiable ways. Both populists pursued a more improvised, politicised and clientelistic approach to policy. This stands in sharp contrast with the careful and technocratic approach to transfer policy pursued by both countries under multiple non-populist administrations over roughly two decades.

Keenly aware of the power of transfers to boost support for incumbent presidents,<sup>10</sup> both populist leaders worked to rebrand their countries' cash transfer policy and associate it with themselves. Both criticised the internationally lauded programmes they inherited, claiming (without evidence) that they were used to buy votes and reached 'the wrong' people. AMLO fully scrapped Prospera, replacing it with a series of untested and opaque unconditional programmes. Bolsonaro reformed and rebranded Bolsa Família and used questionable legislative manoeuvres to massively boost benefits in a failed attempt to secure re-election. Similarly, AMLO massively increased spending and boosted coverage in the run up to the successful election of his chosen successor, Claudia Sheinbaum (2024–).

Both presidents personalised and increased the discretionality of anti-poverty policy. AMLO's programmes reduced coverage among the poorest while increasing it for the better off and reduced benefits for poor children while extending benefits to voting-age young adults. More worryingly, Bolsonaro used cash transfer policy early in his administration to punish residents of the north-east, Brazil's poorest region and a bastion of support for his opposition. Furthermore, policy under both populists became more erratic, for example, both programmes were modified suddenly with little technical justification. Beneficiaries were frequently left in the dark about changes to eligibility requirements and benefit levels.

<sup>8</sup> Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, CEPAL), Non-Contributory Social Protection Programmes Database: Latin America and the Caribbean, <https://dds.cepal.org/bpsnc/cct>.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Lorena De La O, *Crafting Policies to End Poverty in Latin America: The Quiet Transformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and Candelaria Garay, *Social Policy Expansion in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Cesar Zucco, 'When Payouts Pay Off: Conditional Cash Transfers and Voting Behavior in Brazil 2002–10', *American Journal of Political Science*, 57: 4 (2013), pp. 810–22; De La O, *Crafting Policies*, chap. 5.

The next section derives a series of predictions about populism's consequences for social policy. This is followed by a justification of the cases studied. The subsequent section provides a baseline for the study by contrasting Mexican and Brazilian transfer policy prior to the election of populist leaders. This is followed by two case studies tracing the evolution of transfer policy under populism, first in Mexico and then in Brazil. The article concludes by contrasting the case study findings and discussing their broader implications.

### Social Policy-Making under Populism

Social policy is one of the most visible policy areas and directly affects the pocketbooks of much of a country's population, particularly the poor. It constitutes a clear way for politicians to signal their priorities, expand their base and reward supporters. Social policy thus offers a particularly useful lens through which to analyse how governments wield power and make policy.

Populism is the textbook example of a quintessentially contested concept. Colloquially used to discredit politicians as opportunistic and policies as unsustainable, recent political science research has sought to build consensus around empirically verifiable definitions. Following Julio Carrión, populism is defined as 'a political strategy for seeking and exercising power that has three constitutive features: (1) it exhibits a personalistic style of leadership – meaning it seeks to establish direct and unmediated links with supporters, (2) it is anti-pluralistic and confrontational toward opponents, and (3) it has a general distrust of institutional checks and balances.'<sup>11</sup>

Because populism is a political strategy rather than a cohesive political ideology with a concrete governing agenda, there are no inherently 'populist' policies, social or otherwise. Populism is a practice, a 'means' of achieving policy, not an 'end' or a particular policy outcome.<sup>12</sup> As populism can be combined with other ideologies, it should be compatible with a wide range of specific policies. In practice, populists tend to be flexible in their beliefs and policy preferences, quickly adjusting them to better achieve their objectives.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, populism's distinctive features should be expected to influence in predictable and clearly identifiable ways how policies are designed and implemented.

Thus, there should exist a *populist style of making social policy* that is independent of ideology. This article follows Alan Knight in defining populism as a 'political style' or way of doing politics that is not unique 'to a specific ideology, period, or class alliance'.<sup>14</sup> However, in contrast to Knight's seminal work, it argues that this populist style extends beyond the realm of electoral politics into the policy-making process.

Based on prior research, the remainder of this section derives a series of predictions regarding the defining features of this populist style of social policy-making. Populism's

<sup>11</sup>Carrión, *A Dynamic Theory of Populism*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>Robert S. Jansen, 'Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism', *Sociological Theory*, 29: 2 (2011), p. 77.

<sup>13</sup>Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 'When Populist Leaders Govern', pp. 71–81.

<sup>14</sup>Alan Knight, 'Populism and Neo-populism in Latin America, especially Mexico', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 30: 2 (1998), p. 226.

predicted impact on social policy is then contrasted with the better-understood role of traditional Left/Right ideology.

### Rejection and Rebranding

Taking ownership of social policy is of particular importance to populist leaders. As their connection to voters is based on direct personalist appeals, rather than disciplined programmatic parties or long-standing patronage networks, populists run the risk of having their support evaporate early in their tenures.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore imperative for a populist to simultaneously deepen voters' connection to 'the leader' and further discredit the defeated establishment. Attacking existing programmes and claiming credit for replacing (or at least rebranding) them advances both objectives.

Thus, populists should be particularly prone to overhauling social policy and dismantling existing programmes, even popular and/or successful ones. Given their need to consolidate support, tendency to paint the situation they inherit as a 'crisis'<sup>16</sup> and frequent claims that their predecessors are corrupt and/or benefited 'undeserving' groups,<sup>17</sup> populists should be expected to reform social policy early in their terms.<sup>18</sup> As Kurt Weyland notes, 'when they [populists] have the requisite funds, there is little that can stop them.'<sup>19</sup> Further, as 'relative outsiders ... not beholden to established interest groups and better-off social constituencies',<sup>20</sup> populists find it easier to adopt sweeping reforms.<sup>21</sup>

These trends should be particularly relevant to transfer programmes because the latter are highly visible, closely associated with presidents<sup>22</sup> and the electoral benefits they provide to incumbents seem to decline over time.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it can be expected that:

**(1A)** Prior to being elected, populists will attack existing social programmes for being ineffective and clientelistic.

**(1B)** Once in office, populists will replace or at least rebrand social programmes.

<sup>15</sup>Paul Kenny, *Why Populism? Political Strategy from Ancient Greece to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience*.

<sup>16</sup>Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup>Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 'When Populist Leaders Govern', p. 71.

<sup>18</sup>Dorottya Szikra and Kerem Gabriel Öktem, 'An Illiberal Welfare State Emerging? Welfare Efforts and Trajectories under Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Turkey', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 33: 2 (2023), pp. 201–15.

<sup>19</sup>Kurt Weyland, 'Populism and Social Policy in Latin America', in Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia J. Arnson (eds.), *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 124–5.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>21</sup>Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 'When Populist Leaders Govern', p. 75.

<sup>22</sup>Sara Niedzwiecki, *Uneven Social Policies: The Politics of Subnational Variation in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 30–1.

<sup>23</sup>Zucco, 'When Payouts Pay', p. 816; Alberto Díaz-Cayeros, Federico Estévez and Beatriz Magaloni, *The Political Logic of Poverty Relief: Electoral Strategies and Social Policy in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 179.

## Design and Implementation

Social policy-making under populism ‘tends to have a significantly faster tempo and a shorter duration with frequent episodes of accelerations and an unpredictable timing’.<sup>24</sup> This, however, ‘comes at the expense of good policy design, careful implementation, and fiscal and political consolidation’.<sup>25</sup> Decisions tend to be centralised around the chief executive, circumvent established institutions and ignore the views of the opposition and civil society.<sup>26</sup> As Benjamin Moffitt notes, ‘consensus, deliberation and negotiation’ are anathema to populist policy-making.<sup>27</sup>

This approach centred on ‘powering through’ rather than ‘carefully sequenced incremental changes’ increases the likelihood of performance problems, backlash and reversibility under future governments.<sup>28</sup> As outsiders sceptical of expertise, populists distrust career civil servants and technocrats, dismissing them as representatives of ‘the old, corrupt system’ that ‘must be side-lined or replaced’ with ‘true believers’.<sup>29</sup> Those loyalists, however, tend to be inexperienced. Reflexive rejection of existing policies and disdain for expertise result in policy-making that strays ‘significantly and systematically’ from ‘technical rationality, evidence-informed, and pluralistic standards’.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, redistributive policy under Latin America’s classical populists was defined by its ‘improvisation’.<sup>31</sup> New programmes and reforms to existing programmes are often enacted before crucial details are hammered out. Dorottya Szikra and Kerem Gabriel Öktem describe social policy decision-making under Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as ‘chaotic’, with policies requiring multiple amendments to correct their initial problems.<sup>32</sup>

Latin American populists have an equally worrisome history of failing to ensure the long-term sustainability of their policies. Classical populists, such as Argentina’s Juan Perón (1946–55; 1973–4) pursued redistribution at the cost of unsustainably high inflation and deficits. During the 1990s, Peruvian neoliberal populist Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) relied on windfall profits from privatisation and loans from multilateral banks to fund anti-poverty programmes. In the 2000s, left-wing populists Hugo Chávez (2002–13) of Venezuela and Rafael Correa (2007–17) of Ecuador relied on oil rents. Eventually debts had to be repaid, funds from privatisation were exhausted and oil windfalls evaporated, making painful retrenchment necessary. From this, the second set of predictions can be derived:

<sup>24</sup>Bartha, Boda and Szikra, ‘When Populist Leaders Govern’, pp. 74–5.

<sup>25</sup>Weyland, ‘Populism and Social Policy’, p. 124.

<sup>26</sup>Peters and Pierre, ‘Populism and Public Administration’, p. 1528; Szikra and Öktem, ‘Illiberal Welfare State’, p. 212; Bartha, Boda and Szikra, ‘When Populist Leaders Govern’, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup>Moffitt, *Global Rise of Populism*, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup>Katherine Bersch, *When Democracies Deliver: Governance Reform in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>29</sup>Peters and Pierre, ‘Populism and Public Administration’, p. 1528.

<sup>30</sup>Mauricio Dussauge-Laguna, ‘The Promises and Perils of Populism for Democratic Policymaking: The Case of Mexico’, *Policy Sciences*, 55: 4 (2022), p. 779; see also Bersch, *When Democracies Deliver*.

<sup>31</sup>William Ascher, *Scheming for the Poor: The Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 15.

<sup>32</sup>Szikra and Öktem, ‘Illiberal Welfare State’, p. 212.

(2A) Social programmes under populist presidents will be enacted suddenly with little consultation.

(2B) Social programmes under populist presidents will, at least initially, suffer from serious design problems compared to the programmes they replace.

### Clientelism and Personalisation

Whereas inefficiency and corruption are unintended consequences of populist policy-making, clientelism is a feature, not a bug.<sup>33</sup> As Jan-Werner Müller puts it, populists 'can engage in such practices openly and with public moral justifications, since for them only some people are really *the* people and hence deserving of the support by what is rightfully their state'.<sup>34</sup> Clientelism is central to populist strategies to consolidate power. Populists often rise to power seemingly out of nowhere amid crises that discredit the political establishment. Given the urgent need to expand their base, populists will seek to 'personalise' social policy by presenting benefits as products of their personal largesse. Other examples of clientelistic practices include politicised (rather than rules-based) selection of beneficiaries, purposeful exclusion of groups opposed to the government and even conditioning of benefits on supporting the government. There is well-documented evidence of Latin American and Eastern European populists targeting beneficiaries on political, rather than programmatic, grounds.<sup>35</sup>

Populists also tend to ramp up social policy prior to elections. Chávez launched the clientelistic *misiones* (missions) to cement his popularity among the poor in the run up to a 2004 recall referendum.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Orbán and Erdoğan tended to enact major social policy expansions before facing re-election.<sup>37</sup> Thus, it can be expected that:

(3A) Under populist presidents, social programmes will be directly linked to the figure of the president (as opposed to the state).

(3B) Under populist presidents, the targeting of beneficiaries of social programmes will evolve in a clientelistic and politicised direction.

(3C) Under populist presidents, the coverage and generosity of social programmes will ramp up significantly prior to elections.

### Populism versus Ideology

As a political strategy, populism is compatible with different political ideologies and governing agendas. Traditional ideology can thus be conceptualised as a dimension of

<sup>33</sup>Weyland, 'Populism and Social Policy', p. 137.

<sup>34</sup>Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup>Norbert R. Schady, 'The Political Economy of Expenditures by the Peruvian Social Fund (FONCODES), 1991–95', *American Political Science Review*, 94: 2 (2000), pp. 289–304; Michael Penfold-Becerra, 'Clientelism and Social Funds: Evidence from Chávez's Misiones', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 49: 4 (2007), pp. 63–84; Isabela Mares and Lauren E. Young, 'The Core Voter's Curse: Clientelistic Threats and Promises in Hungarian Elections', *Comparative Political Studies*, 51: 11 (2018), pp. 1441–71; and Mitchell A. Orenstein and Bojan Bugarič, 'Work, Family, Fatherland: The Political Economy of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29: 2 (2022), pp. 176–95.

<sup>36</sup>Penfold-Becerra, 'Clientelism and Social Funds'.

<sup>37</sup>Szikra and Öktem, 'Illiberal Welfare State', pp. 211–12.



policy priorities and design that runs parallel to populism. Right-wing populist leaders should enact right-wing policies but in a populist manner. Left-wing populists will enact left-wing policies in a similar manner to their right-wing counterparts.

Left-wing governments, both populist and otherwise, have played a decisive role in the adoption and expansion of social policy worldwide. In line with power resource theory, the relative strength of the Left and organised labour constitutes the dominant explanation for the adoption of and cross-national variation in social policy in Latin America.<sup>38</sup> Focusing on cash transfers, Fabián Borges finds that left-wing governments adopt more generous and universalistic programmes with more permissive conditionality enforcement. Left-wing presidents also tend to reform the programmes they inherit in line with the goals mentioned above.<sup>39</sup> Most research on the influence of ideology over social policy, however, has not distinguished between the effects of populist and non-populist governments.<sup>40</sup> From this, a final set of predictions can be derived:

(4A) Government ideology will have an impact on social policy independently of populism. Left-wing presidents, populist or not, will reform social programmes in the direction of broader targeting, more generous benefits and more permissive conditionality.

(4B) Right-wing presidents, populist or not, will reform social programmes in the direction of narrower targeting, less generous benefits and more rigorous conditionality.

The next section explains the choice of cases that will be analysed in the empirical section.

### Case Selection and Methodology

The predictions presented in the previous section will be assessed through in-depth case studies tracing the evolution of cash transfer policy in Mexico under left-wing populist AMLO and Brazil under right-wing populist Bolsonaro, from the moment both presidents assumed office until the end of their terms. The case studies engage in both within-country comparison (prior to versus under populism) and comparison between the two countries (Mexico versus Brazil).

Assessing the consequences of populism on policy design and implementation is complicated by the fact that populism never exists in a pure form and is always

<sup>38</sup>Alex Segura-Ubiergo, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State in Latin America: Globalization, Democracy, and Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *Development, Democracy, and Welfare States: Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) and Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens, *Democracy and the Left: Social Policy and Inequality in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup>Fabián A. Borges, *Human Capital versus Basic Income: Ideology and Models for Anti-Poverty Programs in Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

<sup>40</sup>Notable exceptions include Jennifer Pribble, *Welfare and Party Politics in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and Nancy Birdsall, Nora Lustig and Darryl McLeod, 'Declining Inequality in Latin America: Some Economics, Some Politics', in Peter Kingstone and Deborah J. Yashar (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Latin American Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 158–80.



attached to a more cohesive ideology.<sup>41</sup> The consequences of populism, however, can be teased out through careful comparisons that allow for variation in 'host' ideologies. Most research on populism and social policy has focused on Western European radical right-wing parties. Given their primarily working-class bases and hostility toward immigration, these parties typically espouse welfare chauvinism. This stance, however, is not inherently populist.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, analyses of the effects of populism based on such cases are complicated by the fact that these parties have mostly been limited to serving as partners in broader coalitions. Latin American and Eastern European countries where populists have won full control of government offer 'unfiltered' examples of populist policy-making. However, because the single-party populist governments of Poland (2014–23) and Hungary (2010–) shared a right-wing and nativist agenda, it is difficult to disentangle populism from ideology in those cases. Research comparing left-wing Latin American populist governments suffers from the same problem. Cross-regional research raises the challenge of comparing countries with very different histories and political systems.

Cash transfer policy under AMLO and Bolsonaro offers a particularly useful lens through which to tease out the consequences of populism. Within a month of each other, at the end of 2018, populist presidents from opposite ends of the political spectrum took office in two large Latin American federal democracies with similar levels of income and human development.

Both leaders meet the definition of populism. They exhibited personalistic political styles that sought to establish direct and unmediated links to their supporters. Bolsonaro relied heavily on social media to communicate with supporters. AMLO spoke directly to the voters and sought to control the media narrative through his daily morning press conferences (*mañaneras*). Both exhibited anti-pluralistic rhetoric, framing rival political forces as corrupt enemies who actively conspire against 'the people'. Both also resisted checks and balances, clashing with their countries' Supreme Courts and questioning the validity of elections they lost. This behaviour elicited concern from several scholars and pundits, who warned that populism would severely damage Mexican and Brazilian democracy.<sup>43</sup>

With regard to ideology, there is a general consensus on Bolsonaro being coded as right-wing. His disdain for the political left and progressive causes as well as his social conservatism leave few doubts about his ideological orientation. AMLO's leftism is more open to debate. Citing his combination of social conservatism and statism, Rodrigo Castro Cornejo classifies AMLO's politics as 'leftism without progressivism'.<sup>44</sup> Cognisant of these idiosyncrasies, AMLO is coded as a leftist because he promised statist economic policies, especially in the natural resource sector, promised to expand

<sup>41</sup> Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Studying Populism', p. 1673.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Denise Dresser, 'Mexico's Dying Democracy: AMLO and the Toll of Authoritarian Populism', *Foreign Affairs*, 101: 6 (2022), pp. 74–90 and Marcus André Melo and Carlos Pereira, 'Why Didn't Brazilian Democracy Die?', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 66: 4 (2024), pp. 133–52.

<sup>44</sup> Rodrigo Castro Cornejo, 'La ultraderecha en México: ausencia de backlash por el izquierdismo (no progresista) de AMLO', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Nov. 2023.

social policy in a universalist direction, constantly criticised neoliberalism and showed affinity toward other left-wing presidents, even undemocratic ones.<sup>45</sup>

In Prospera and Bolsa Família, AMLO and Bolsonaro inherited comparable programmes covering similar shares of their respective countries' populations. In 2018, these programmes covered 24.8 per cent of Mexicans (31.2 million) and 26.8 per cent of Brazilians (57.1 million).<sup>46</sup> Both were long established, having persisted largely unchanged for nearly two decades through multiple non-populist administrations from across the ideological spectrum. The next section compares the design of these programmes prior to the election of populist leaders.

### The Baseline: Pre-Populist Mexican and Brazilian programmes

Mexico's Prospera and Brazil's Bolsa Família were the product of technocratic policy design processes and subject to carefully sequenced incremental refinement during their roughly two decades of operation under multiple non-populist administrations.

The blueprint for Prospera was a 1991 World Bank research paper by economist Santiago Levy.<sup>47</sup> A pilot version of the programme was launched in randomly selected rural municipalities in 1995 under Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), a centre-right member of the hegemonic Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI). Findings from experimental evaluations were incorporated into a national version of the programme in 1997. Positive evaluations led Vicente Fox (2000–6) of the right-wing Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) to continue the programme and expand it to urban areas in 2002.<sup>48</sup> The programme later survived the PRI's return to power under Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–18) with only minor modifications.

Bolsa Família's origins date back to policy proposals made by Brazilian academics in the early 1990s.<sup>49</sup> The first local-level transfer programmes were adopted in 1995 before spreading across the country.<sup>50</sup> The success of these programmes led centrist Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Brazilian Social Democracy Party, PSDB) to adopt a series of national-level programmes in 2001. Originally dismissive of these programmes, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) (2003–10; 2023–) of the left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, PT) merged and significantly expanded those programmes under the name Bolsa

<sup>45</sup> Arturo McFields Yescas, 'México y los grandes fracasos de la política exterior de AMLO', *La Prensa*, 29 May 2024.

<sup>46</sup> CEPAL, 'Non-Contributory Social Protection'.

<sup>47</sup> Santiago Levy, 'Poverty Alleviation in Mexico', World Bank Policy, Research and External Affairs Working Papers, no. WPS 679, 31 May 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Nora Lustig, 'Scholars Who Became Practitioners: The Influence of Research on the Design, Evaluation, and Political Survival of Mexico's Antipoverty programme', in Abraham F. Lowenthal and Mariano E. Bertucci (eds.), *Scholars, Policymakers, and International Affairs: Finding Common Cause* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 105–18.

<sup>49</sup> Eduardo Matarazzo Suplicy, *Renda de cidadania: a saída é pela porta*, 3rd ed. (São Paulo: Cortez Editora and Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2004) and Cristovam Buarque, *Bolsa-Escola, History, Theory and Utopia*, trans. Linda Jerome (Brasília: Thesaurus Editora, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Natasha Borges Sugiyama, *Diffusion of Good Government: Social Sector Reforms in Brazil* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

Familia.<sup>51</sup> Following the impeachment of Lula's hand-picked successor Dilma Rousseff (2010–16), the centre-right administration of Michel Temer (2016–20) continued the programme.

Both programmes adhered to strict rules limiting political discretion and clientelism.<sup>52</sup> To minimise the involvement of potentially corrupt subnational politicians, management was centralised at the federal level with stipends deposited electronically to beneficiaries' accounts. Clear eligibility rules all but eliminated the need for local intermediaries.<sup>53</sup> Despite this, there is robust evidence from both countries that these programmes increased electoral support for presidential candidates from the incumbent parties.<sup>54</sup>

Despite their similarities, these programmes were not identical. There is an 'inherent tension between the twin goals of reducing poverty in the short term and increasing human capital over the long run.'<sup>55</sup> Design can be tailored to prioritise one goal over the other. Borges argues that whereas Prospera emphasised human capital, Bolsa Família emphasised poverty reduction and that government ideology explains those design choices.<sup>56</sup> Brazil's programme was more expensive as a share of GDP than Mexico's and had broader targeting. Whereas Mexico's Right-controlled programme relied on a stringent means test to determine eligibility, Brazil's Left-controlled programme relied on self-reported incomes. Where Mexico adopted a strict (critics would say punitive) approach to conditionality enforcement where non-compliance led to immediate loss of benefits,<sup>57</sup> noncompliance in Brazil was treated as a sign of family vulnerability and met with warnings and intervention from social workers.<sup>58</sup> The next section analyses Mexico's cash transfer programme experience under AMLO.

### Mexican Cash Transfers under AMLO

AMLO had long alleged that Prospera did not reach the poor, was used to buy votes and had been used to illegally deprive him of the presidency in 2006. In early 2019, two months into his presidency, AMLO replaced Prospera with a series of unconditional transfer programmes. The changes were enacted in a rushed manner without evidence-based justification.<sup>59</sup> Cash transfer policy has since become

<sup>51</sup> Borges, *Human Capital*, pp. 38–9.

<sup>52</sup> De La O, *Crafting Policies*, pp. 41.

<sup>53</sup> Aline Gazola Hellman, 'How Does Bolsa Familia Work? Best Practices in the Implementation of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs in Latin America and the Caribbean', Inter-American Development Bank, Technical note no. IDB-TN-856, Sep. 2015, pp. 29–31 and Laura G. Dávila Lárraga, 'How Does Prospera Work? Best Practices in the Implementation of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs in Latin America and the Caribbean', Inter-American Development Bank, Technical note no. IDB-TN-971, April 2016, pp. 42–4.

<sup>54</sup> Zucco, 'When Payouts Pay' and De La O, *Crafting Policies*, chap. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Borges, *Human Capital*, p. 84.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Dávila Lárraga, 'How Does Prospera Work?', p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Hellman, 'How Does Bolsa Familia Work?', pp. 18–20.

<sup>59</sup> Luis David Ramírez Benítez, 'Efectos de un contexto de erosión democrática en las estrategias de reforma a las instituciones de la administración pública: el caso de la Secretaría de Bienestar, 2018–2020', unpubl. MA diss., Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, Mexico City, 2020 and Mauricio I.

significantly more discretionary and moved away from Prospera's technocratic rules-based approach.

### Rejection and Rebranding

AMLO long claimed (without evidence) that Prospera was used to buy votes during the 2006 presidential election, which he lost by a razor-thin margin and never conceded. While occupying Mexico City's Zócalo square in protest, AMLO asked 'how is it anything other than fraud if they used all the social programmes, including the beneficiary rolls of Oportunidades [later renamed Prospera] and the scholarships, to benefit the candidate of the Right [Felipe Calderón (2006–12)] ...?'<sup>60</sup>

Beyond his personal grievances, AMLO's critiques of Prospera were left-coded – the programme did not reach those who needed it. Once in office, he justified dismantling Prospera by claiming (also without evidence) that its rolls were inflated by half and that three quarters of stipends were stolen. In February 2019, he claimed that his administration had 'found ghost beneficiaries in the programme ... They falsified signatures and stole the money, or they [beneficiaries] were supposed to receive MX\$1,000 and were given MX\$250'.<sup>61</sup> AMLO later claimed that the previous administration 'was supposedly providing support to six, seven million families but the censuses showed that only half that number actually received benefits'. He said he would send a report to the Prosecutor's Office.<sup>62</sup> No report was sent.

AMLO replaced Prospera with the unconditional *Becas para el Bienestar Benito Juárez* (Benito Juárez Wellbeing Scholarships). The new programmes increased the share of students eligible for transfers. Prospera only covered children in extreme poverty but paid individual transfers to each eligible child. *Becas* targets poor households with children in basic education (up to grade nine) and all children in upper secondary education (grades 10–12). The former receive a single bimonthly stipend, regardless of number of children. The latter is paid per child.

Actual programme coverage is less impressive. Whereas Prospera targeted students across the country based on household conditions, *Becas* targets students based on their *community's* socioeconomic conditions. Transfers are guaranteed to eligible students from schools in 'priority areas' – communities that are indigenous, have less than 50 people and/or have high marginalisation.<sup>63</sup> Benefits for qualifying students from non-priority schools are subject to budget availability. Thus, needy students from better-off areas may be excluded.<sup>64</sup> The scholarships for upper secondary students,

---

Dussauge-Laguna, "'Doublespeak Populism' and Public Administration: The Case of Mexico', in Michael W. Bauer *et al.* (eds.), *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 178–99.

<sup>60</sup>Quoted in 'AMLO desconoce recuento parcial y, advierte que no aceptará imposición', *La Jornada*, 10 Aug. 2006.

<sup>61</sup>Andrés Manuel López Obrador, 'Conferencia de prensa del Presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador', 27 Feb. 2019.

<sup>62</sup>Andrés Manuel López Obrador, 'Conferencia de prensa matutina del Presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador', 25 April 2019.

<sup>63</sup>Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo (CONEVAL), 'Evaluación de procesos del programa Becas de Educación Básica para el Bienestar Benito Juárez', Dec. 2024, p. 33.

<sup>64</sup>'Niños de primaria de Jassos están sin recibir beca 'Benito Juárez', *El Heraldo de San Luis Potosí*, 5 May 2023.

which the government touts as ‘universal’, do cover all students in a given school, but only if that school is in a priority community. This has been a major source of confusion among parents and administrators.<sup>65</sup>

In practice, the new programmes cover significantly fewer students. Whereas in 2018 Prospera covered 17.6 per cent of households, Becas reached only 12.1 per cent of households in 2022. And, whereas 52 per cent of households in the bottom decile received Prospera in 2018, less than a third received Becas in 2022. In fact, Prospera in 2018 reached a larger share of the poorest tenth of households than all of AMLO’s programmes combined in 2022.<sup>66</sup> Further, in 2022 Becas transfers were on average 45 per cent smaller than the average 2017 Prospera stipend.<sup>67</sup> Families with multiple children in basic education were particularly hard hit. Upper secondary school stipends decreased significantly, especially for girls, who used to receive more money than boys.

## Reform Process

Luis David Ramírez Benítez argues that ‘the substitution of the Prospera programme was not a public policy decision based on evidence; there was no study suggesting that such actions would benefit society.’<sup>68</sup> Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina, a long-time Prospera critic, argues that, faced with a choice between continuing a programme whose failings were understood and correcting those failings, AMLO opted for a third, and worse, option – cancelling the programme altogether and replacing it with one that failed to address its predecessor’s failings.<sup>69</sup> More broadly, Mauricio Dussauge-Laguna goes so far as to assert that, ‘all reform initiatives implemented by the López Obrador administration have shared one key feature: a lack of solid background studies, diagnoses, data, or evidence showing their adequacy or potential usefulness.’<sup>70</sup> The programmes, he adds, lack ‘basic elements of good policy design or monitoring and evaluation criteria.’<sup>71</sup>

The desire to move quickly ensured a chaotic transition.<sup>72</sup> Many Prospera households, particularly in urban areas, were excluded from the new programmes without justification.<sup>73</sup> Civil society groups have repeatedly criticised the programmes’ lack of transparency, warning of potential for corruption.<sup>74</sup> The programmes lack fixed

<sup>65</sup> CONEVAL, ‘Evaluación de procesos del programa Beca Universal Para Estudiantes de Educación Media Superior Benito Juárez’, Dec. 2022, pp. 93–4.

<sup>66</sup> Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina, ‘¿Primero los pobres?: efectos redistributivos e impacto en pobreza y desigualdad de los programas de transferencias monetarias en México, de 2016 a 2022’, Unpublished analysis, 1 Dec. 2023, p. 19.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> Ramírez Benítez, ‘Efectos de un contexto’, p. 24.

<sup>69</sup> Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina, ‘Después de Prospera’, *Nexos*, 1 Sep. 2020, p. 32.

<sup>70</sup> Dussauge-Laguna, ‘“Doublespeak Populism”’, p. 192.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>72</sup> CONEVAL, ‘Evaluación de diseño con trabajo de campo del programa Becas de Educación Básica para al Bienestar Benito Juárez 2019–2020’, 2020, pp. 21, 36–9.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Van 15 meses y el programa bienestar de AMLO aún no llega a las comunidades’, *Cuestione*, 25 Feb. 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231116022848/https://cuestione.com/nacional/van-15-meses-y-el-programa-bienestar-de-amlo-aun-no-llega-a-las-comunidades/> (all URLs last accessed 20 January 2025).

<sup>74</sup> ‘Alertan por riesgos de corrupción en programas sociales de la 4T’, *El Universal*, 13 April 2021 and ‘Invierten en becas pero olvidan programas de permanencia y aprendizaje: Mexicanos Primero’, *La Voz de Michoacán*, 25 July 2023.

payment schedules,<sup>75</sup> while AMLO used press conferences to personally announce payment dates. In the run up to the 2024 election, AMLO frequently handed out benefits during presidential trips.<sup>76</sup>

These and other problems have been detailed in evaluations conducted by the autonomous Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (National Social Development Policy Evaluation Council, CONEVAL).<sup>77</sup> AMLO has repeatedly clashed with the institution and a reform abolishing it was approved in the interregnum between Sheinbaum's election and the start of her presidency.<sup>78</sup> In 2021, AMLO vehemently rejected the agency's finding that poverty increased during his first two years in office, claiming he had 'other data'.<sup>79</sup>

### Discretionality and Politicisation

Transfer policy became more discretionary. Katya Rodríguez Gómez states it bluntly: 'the manner in which these new programmes have been operating recently is more clientelistic than technocratic'.<sup>80</sup> The programmes, informally known as Becas AMLO (AMLO Scholarships), are closely associated with the figure of the president, something that was explicitly avoided under Prospera.<sup>81</sup> Notably, by 2023, 55 per cent of survey respondents attributed transfers to AMLO himself, up from 32 per cent in 2020.<sup>82</sup>

The administration's difficulty in reaching the poorest households can be traced back to the 'Wellbeing Census', an opaque survey of the population's needs for social policy purposes, which was used to enrol beneficiaries. The 'census' was conducted by the so-called 'Servants of the Nation', volunteer political operatives from AMLO's Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (National Regeneration Movement, Morena) party. It was never explained why this was necessary – comprehensive registries existed – or why the unqualified Servants, rather than the well-regarded National Institute of Statistics and Geography, were tasked with the process. The Servants interviewed 24.1 million people,<sup>83</sup> far short of the 73.3 million

<sup>75</sup> CONEVAL, 'Evaluación de procesos del programa Becas', pp. 163–6.

<sup>76</sup> '38 mítines y 12 giras del Bienestar en un año: la campaña paralela de AMLO', *Animal Político*, 21 Feb. 2024.

<sup>77</sup> CONEVAL, 'Evaluación de diseño'; CONEVAL, 'Evaluación de procesos del programa Beca Universal'; and CONEVAL, 'Evaluación de procesos del programa Becas'.

<sup>78</sup> 'AMLO se lanza de nuevo contra el Coneval y difunde aumento de sus gastos', *Aristegui Noticias*, 26 July 2019.

<sup>79</sup> 'AMLO no acepta datos del Coneval y dice que más pobres son por pandemia', *Expansión Política*, 6 Aug. 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Katya Rodríguez Gómez, 'Las políticas sociales durante el cambio hacia la izquierda en México (2018): ¿reforzamiento de la ciudadanía o clientelismo político?', *Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanas*, 15: 15 (2020), p. 182.

<sup>81</sup> Mariano Sánchez Talanquer, 'Mexico 2019: Personalistic Politics and Neoliberalism from the Left', *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)*, 40: 2 (2020), pp. 420–2 and Rodríguez Gómez, 'Políticas sociales', p. 181.

<sup>82</sup> María Amparo Casar, 'El gran benefactor', *Nexos*, 1 April 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Auditoría Superior de la Federación (ASF), 'Censo del bienestar y padrón de beneficiarios de los programas de desarrollo social', Secretaría de Bienestar, Auditoría de Desempeño 2019-0-20100-07-1387-2020, 1387-DS, Feb. 2021, p. 31.

in existing registries.<sup>84</sup> Regardless, Becas launched months before the census concluded.

The census was criticised for being a public relations exercise meant to link the new programmes directly to AMLO and make Mexicans see him as ‘the great benefactor’.<sup>85</sup> In violation of Mexican law, the Servants wore clothing with AMLO’s likeness and stated that they had come ‘on behalf of the president of the republic, Licenciado Andrés Manuel López Obrador ... to provide support [to your family]’.<sup>86</sup> Although a court ruled that the Servants broke the law, AMLO and his ministers were not legally liable.

This began a pattern of politicising social policy. In 2021, the Servants, now government employees, asked COVID-19 vaccine recipients for their voting credentials and suggested that they write AMLO thank you letters.<sup>87</sup> And, in the run up to the April 2022 mid-term recall referendum, teachers and retirees reported receiving calls and even visits from Servants warning them that AMLO’s defeat would result in their benefits being revoked.<sup>88</sup>

The arbitrariness and politicisation of social policy under AMLO was also on display during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2024 election. Mexico stood out among Latin American countries for its refusal to increase the coverage and generosity of cash transfers, let alone extend emergency benefits to those excluded from existing policies.<sup>89</sup> This is explained by AMLO’s long-standing aversion to government borrowing and his personalistic control over Morena, which at the time had a legislative supermajority.<sup>90</sup> Morena legislators ignored proposals from the opposition and demands from the business community, civil society and the Catholic Church.<sup>91</sup> The result was a sharp increase in poverty compared to other Latin American countries.<sup>92</sup>

AMLO abandoned austerity during his final year in a successful bid to ensure the election of his chosen successor, Claudia Sheinbaum. The 2024 budget called for a 27

<sup>84</sup> Leonardo Núñez González and Katia Guzmán Martínez, ‘Ni censo ni de bienestar’, *Nexos*, 21 May 2020.

<sup>85</sup> Casar, ‘El gran benefactor’.

<sup>86</sup> Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación (TEPJF), Procedimiento especial sancionador, Expediente no. SRE-PSC-71/2019, 27 Dec. 2019, p. 76.

<sup>87</sup> María Amparo Casar and Leonardo Núñez González, ‘¿Primero los pobres? La política social: un barco a la deriva’, *Nexos*, 1 Feb. 2022.

<sup>88</sup> ‘Revocación de mandato: piden a adultos mayores y maestros “apoyar” a AMLO en la consulta del 10 de abril’, *Animal Político*, 21 March 2022. AMLO promised during the presidential campaign to subject himself to a recall referendum midway through his term. He won, but turnout was too low for it to be binding.

<sup>89</sup> Merike Blofield, Jennifer Pribble and Cecilia Giambruno, *The Politics of Social Protection During Times of Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

<sup>90</sup> On AMLO’s aversion to debt, see Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *La gran tentación: el petróleo de México* (Mexico City: Grijalbo Mondadori, 2008). On his control over Morena, see Blofield, Pribble and Giambruno, *The Politics of Social Protection*, p. 54 and Sánchez Talanquer, ‘Mexico 2019’, pp. 403–4. AMLO’s pet infrastructure projects were exempted from austerity.

<sup>91</sup> Ricardo Velázquez Leyer, ‘Mexico’s Social Policy Response to Covid-19: A Path of Minimal Action’, CRC 1342, Covid-19 Social Policy Response Series, no. 5, University of Bremen, 2021, p. 4 and Alberto Nájjar, ‘Por qué el plan de reactivación económica de AMLO para hacer frente a la pandemia de coronavirus en México fue tan criticado’, *BBC News Mundo*, 7 April 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Nora Lustig *et al.*, ‘The Impact of COVID-19 and Expanded Social Assistance on Inequality and Poverty in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico’, Commitment to Equity (CEQ) Working Paper Series no. 92, Tulane University, Department of Economics, Revised June 2021, p. 18.



per cent increase in social spending financed by the largest fiscal deficit since 1988.<sup>93</sup> The additional funds were used to more than double the number of schools covered by the Becas. This would allow 2.4 million students to join the programme in addition to the 5.6 million in basic education and the 5.8 million upper secondary students receiving benefits at the end of 2023.<sup>94</sup> This likely contributed to Sheinbaum's resounding victory. A February 2024 poll found that 67 per cent of people in benefit-receiving households and 72 per cent of direct beneficiaries supported AMLO, compared to just 38 per cent of non-beneficiaries.<sup>95</sup>

### A Leftist Social Policy?

AMLO promised to put the poor first (*primero los pobres*). As would be expected from a left-wing government, transfer policy saw a narrowly targeted programme with strict conditionality enforcement replaced by more broadly targeted, unconditional programmes. However, the push toward universality came at the cost of reduced progressivity. AMLO's Becas pay less generous stipends and are more likely to exclude the poorest households, including many previously covered by the 'neoliberal' Prospera.<sup>96</sup>

In line with the Left's more expansive social policy ambitions, the share of the population eligible for benefits increased. Whereas Prospera was limited to children in extreme poverty, Becas extended cash transfers to all upper secondary school students and, starting in 2020, to moderately poor households with students in basic education. Further, in line with a rights-based view of social policy, in March 2020 the government secured approval of a constitutional amendment enshrining the right of students to cash transfers (with priority given to the poor) and prohibiting future governments from reducing the real value of these stipends. The Becas were also complemented by comparatively generous cash transfers for young adults, including university scholarships for low-income and indigenous students and paid apprenticeships for the unemployed.

The new programmes represented a potential boon for those previously excluded, namely upper secondary students not in extreme poverty, moderately poor parents with children under 15 and young adults. However, the expansion of transfers to upper secondary students and the move to a single stipend per household with children in basic education marked a clear de-prioritisation of young children, who are disproportionately poor, in favour of older students, who tend to be better off. Notably, only 34 per cent of upper secondary students come from the bottom half of the income distribution and only 17 per cent are from rural areas.<sup>97</sup> Electoral motivations might explain

<sup>93</sup> Citibanamex, 'Presupuesto para 2024: el fin de la austeridad', Nota Oportuna, 11 Sep. 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), 'Se suman 1.5 millones de jóvenes al programa Beca Universal de Educación Media Superior: SEP', Boletín 244, 26 Nov. 2023 and SEP, 'En 2024, Becas Benito Juárez y la Escuela es Nuestra aumentarán cobertura: SEP', Boletín 259, 13 Dec. 2023.

<sup>95</sup> Alejandro Moreno, 'Electorado dividido: programas sociales', *El Financiero*, 15 March 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Jaramillo-Molina, '¿Primero los pobres?', p. 25 and Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina, 'Sin Prospera, menos dinero a los más pobres', *Letras Libres*, 1 Jan. 2023, p. 19.

<sup>97</sup> Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo Molina, '¿Una nueva política social?: cambios y continuidades en los programas sociales de la 4T', PI - Revista Análisis Plural, ITESO, Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara, Nov. 2020, p. 152.

the prioritisation of upper secondary students, who are close to voting age, and the creation of benefits for voting-eligible young adults.

AMLO's transfer policy was the victim of two contradictions: one between universality and progressivity and another between expanding eligibility and pursuing fiscal austerity. Without significantly increasing spending levels, expanding eligibility would naturally lead to less generous benefits and rationing of benefits. Although by 2022 both total social spending and the share of the population covered by social programmes had reached record levels, relative to Prospera the average cash transfer was half as generous, coverage among the poorest 30 per cent was lower and coverage among the poorest 10 per cent had declined by almost a quarter.<sup>98</sup> This persistent inability to reach the neediest is also likely a consequence of the shoddy methodology of the Wellbeing Census.<sup>99</sup> Discussion now turns to the Brazilian case.

### Brazilian Cash Transfers under Bolsonaro

Cash transfer policy under Bolsonaro can be divided into two phases: before and after COVID-19. A long-time critic of Bolsa Família, during his first year Bolsonaro considered replacing the programme and enacted cuts that were politically targeted against the north-east, the country's poorest region and a bastion of support for the opposition.<sup>100</sup> Surging approval ratings following the country's generous social policy response to the pandemic convinced Bolsonaro that expanding cash transfers offered his clearest path to re-election.<sup>101</sup> Circumventing a constitutionally mandated spending cap and a ban on election-year reforms to social policy, he significantly expanded the coverage and generosity of cash transfers in a failed bid to secure re-election.

### Rejection and Rebranding

In contrast to AMLO, Bolsonaro's long-standing critiques of Bolsa Família were right-coded: cash transfers made beneficiaries idle, beneficiaries remained in the programme indefinitely and the PT used it to buy votes, particularly in the north-east. As a congressional backbencher in 2010, Bolsonaro claimed that 'if nowadays I give Reais\$10 to someone and I am accused of those R\$10 being used to buy a vote, I will be impeached. Now, the Federal Government ... gives 12 million families around R\$500 per month, under the name Bolsa Família, and comes out ahead 30 million votes.'<sup>102</sup> The following year, Bolsonaro called for ending the programme because it damaged beneficiaries'

<sup>98</sup> Jaramillo-Molina, '¿Primero los pobres?', p. 25 and Jaramillo-Molina, 'Sin Prospera', pp. 19–20, 25.

<sup>99</sup> Núñez González and Guzmán Martínez, 'Ni censo ni de bienestar'.

<sup>100</sup> 'Bolsonaro trava Bolsa Família em cidades pobres e fila chega a 1 milhão', *Folha de S. Paulo*, 10 Feb. 2020; 'Governo corta 158 mil do Bolsa Família em meio a COVID-19; 61% são do NE', *Universo Online (UOL)*, 20 March 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Frederico Batista Pereira, Guilherme Russo and Felipe Nunes, 'Who is Responsible for the Emergency Aid? Cash Transfer and Presidential Approval During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 65: 4 (2023), pp. 76–98.

<sup>102</sup> Jair Bolsonaro, 'Diário da Câmara dos Deputados', 18 Aug. 2010, p. 509.

'work ethic'.<sup>103</sup> While running for office in 2018, Bolsonaro claimed, without evidence, that 30 per cent of beneficiaries underreported their incomes and should be expelled.<sup>104</sup>

However, after it became clear that he had a real chance of becoming president, Bolsonaro promised to continue Bolsa Família, claiming that reports of his opposition to the programme were 'fake news'.<sup>105</sup> This change was confirmed on October 7, when, after winning the first round of voting, Bolsonaro uploaded a video directed at north-eastern voters promising a thirteenth monthly payment in 2019. After winning the second round comfortably, Bolsonaro announced the bonus would be paid in lieu of a pending inflation adjustment with savings obtained from a crackdown on Bolsa Família fraud. When this failed to free up sufficient resources, funds were secured at the last minute via legally dubious delays in the approval of new pension applications.<sup>106</sup> The bonus turned out to be a one-off electoral ploy and was not paid in subsequent years.

During this time, Bolsonaro's economic team, led by Minister of the Economy Paulo Guedes (2019–22), a technocratic free-market economist, proposed streamlining Brazilian anti-poverty policy without increasing the deficit by simultaneously increasing Bolsa Família's stipends and coverage and eliminating several smaller programmes. During the administration's first two years, the economic team carried out studies and simulations aimed at determining what to cut.<sup>107</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed Bolsonaro into a strong backer of cash transfers. In contrast to Bolsonaro's dismal federal public health response, Brazil's social policy response was exemplary.<sup>108</sup> Under the name Auxílio Emergencial (Emergency Aid), Bolsa Família benefits were increased and extended to all informal and unemployed workers. Conditionality enforcement also temporarily stopped. At its peak in mid-2020, 66 million people were enrolled and half of all households had at least one beneficiary. The cash transfers, which equalled 78 per cent of the average monthly income of self-employed workers, cut poverty by 60 per cent to its lowest recorded level.<sup>109</sup>

Bolsonaro deserves, at most, partial credit for this. His administration initially proposed transfers of R\$200 per person per month for three months. Congress raised that amount to R\$600 and R\$1,200 for single parents. With the end of the pandemic nowhere in sight, the administration later proposed two additional months at R\$200. Congress again tripled it. Benefits were subsequently extended for four additional instalments of R\$300 per month until December. After a hiatus, benefits for non-Bolsa Família households resumed at a lower level between April and October 2021.

<sup>103</sup> Jair Bolsonaro, 'Diário da Câmara dos Deputados', 11 Feb. 2011, p. 59.

<sup>104</sup> 'Bolsonaro diz que há fraude em 30% do Bolsa Família', *Folha de S. Paulo*, 8 Oct. 2018.

<sup>105</sup> 'Após criticar, Bolsonaro agora defende Bolsa Família', *O Globo*, 7 June 2018.

<sup>106</sup> 'Governo usa verba de aposentadoria e pensões para pagar 13º do Bolsa Família', *Folha de S. Paulo*, 7 Jan. 2020.

<sup>107</sup> 'Por que Bolsonaro desautorizou equipe de Guedes e desistiu do Renda Brasil?', *UOL*, 15 Sep. 2020.

<sup>108</sup> Blofeld, Pribble and Giambruno, *The Politics of Social Protection*.

<sup>109</sup> Maria Andreia Parente Lameiras and Marco Antônio F. de H. Cavalcanti, 'PNAD-Covid – Divulgação de 24/6/2020 – Principais Destaques', Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, Carta de Cojuntura, 24 June 2020, p. 1; Marcelo Neri and Marcos Hecksher, 'A montanha-russa da pobreza', Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV Social), June 2022, p. 6.

Auxílio Emergencial significantly boosted Bolsonaro's popularity among the poor at a time when his mishandling of the pandemic and corruption scandals had cost him middle-class support.<sup>110</sup> His approval rating peaked in December 2020 with support among the poor having seen a 70 per cent year-on-year increase.<sup>111</sup> This further convinced Bolsonaro that cash transfers held the key to his re-election. Bolsonaro publicly disavowed Guedes's plans to fund the expansion of cash transfers for the poor by cutting other social programmes in late 2020.<sup>112</sup> Expanding transfers, however, would require the circumvention of a constitutionally mandated spending cap before an election-year ban on social policy reforms came into effect.<sup>113</sup>

## Reform Process

Under the new name Auxílio Brasil (Aid Brazil), Bolsonaro substantially increased the coverage and generosity of cash transfers. By election day, the new programme was two and a half times more generous in real terms and covered nearly 50 per cent more households than Bolsa Família when Bolsonaro took office.<sup>114</sup> Auxílio and its subsequent updates, however, were highly improvised and paid little regard to technical criteria.<sup>115</sup> They were also rolled out suddenly with minimal consultation, sparking public confusion.<sup>116</sup>

The pandemic changed Bolsonaro's political strategy. Facing multiple impeachment motions for his mismanagement of the pandemic, and mired in corruption scandals, in 2020 Bolsonaro made an alliance with the *Centrão* (big centre), a loose block of legislative parties whose defining characteristic is its willingness to back whoever holds the presidency in exchange for pork and patronage opportunities.<sup>117</sup> In exchange for protection from impeachment, the executive branch delegated much of its control over spending priorities to the *Centrão*-controlled Congress through rapporteur's amendments to the federal budget, a process colloquially known as the 'secret budget' (*orçamento secreto*). This opaque but legal mechanism grants

<sup>110</sup>Pereira, Russo and Nunes, 'Who is Responsible', p. 80.

<sup>111</sup>Datafolha, 'Avaliação do presidente Jair Bolsonaro', 24 Dec. 2019; Datafolha, 'Pesquisa Nacional', 21 Dec. 2020.

<sup>112</sup>'Por que Bolsonaro desautorizou', *UOL*.

<sup>113</sup>Enacted in 2016, the Fiscal Responsibility Law froze most public spending in real terms for 20 years. The ban on election-year social policy reforms was enacted in 1997.

<sup>114</sup>Author's calculations based on Ministério da Cidadania (MC), 'VIS DATA 3 database', <https://aplicacoes.cidadania.gov.br/vis/data3/data-explorer.php>.

<sup>115</sup>'Pobres levam 'goleada' e Bolsonaro faz 'pegadinha eleitoral' com Auxílio Brasil, diz economista', *Folha de S. Paulo*, 4 Oct. 2021; 'Economia discutiu novo Bolsa Família com dados incertos, mostram documentos', *Folha de S. Paulo*, 31 Oct. 2021.

<sup>116</sup>'Auxílio Brasil: funcionários da assistência social do rio reclamam de desinformação; postos voltam a ter noite de filas', *G1*, 16 Nov. 2021.

<sup>117</sup>'Pork' refers to spending on projects that benefit a legislator's district; 'patronage' the custom of rewarding individuals for their electoral support using state resources, generally by the allocation of jobs or contracts. See: Melo and Pereira, 'Why Didn't Brazilian Democracy Die?', pp. 8–9; Pedro Fernando Nery and Bernardo Mueller, 'Co-Sponsorship Networks in the Brazilian Congress: An Exploratory Analysis of Caucus Influence', *Estudos Econômicos* (São Paulo), 52: 1 (2022), p. 102.

legislators funding for local projects with minimal oversight. Although a long-standing feature of Brazilian politics, this type of behaviour became supercharged under Bolsonaro.<sup>118</sup>

With pandemic relief set to expire and elections approaching, in August 2021 Bolsonaro announced Auxílio Brasil. The new programme was to award each household at least R\$300 a month – 50 per cent more than the average Bolsa Família stipend at the time – and would be extended to everyone on the waiting list for the programme.<sup>119</sup> In October, to the surprise of congressional allies, Bolsonaro announced a R\$400 minimum. Programme design decisions were made without access to up-to-date budget data.<sup>120</sup> Social policy experts derided the process as ‘improvised’, ‘irresponsible’ and ‘embarrassing’.<sup>121</sup>

Auxílio Brasil ‘launched’ in November, six weeks before funding was secured. As a result, Bolsa Família continued unchanged under the new name.<sup>122</sup> This caused chaos at welfare agencies, with confused beneficiaries camping out overnight to get information. As one official noted, ‘people are uninformed, and even we, employees, don’t know either. There is no information from the federal government’.<sup>123</sup> Funds were secured two weeks before the year-end deadline, allowing per-household stipends to start in January. The amount secured was significantly larger than what was needed for Auxílio with the rest going toward ‘secret budget’ initiatives.<sup>124</sup> During the first seven months of 2022, an additional 3.6 million households were enrolled, representing a 25 per cent increase.<sup>125</sup>

The introduction of a flat minimum for per-household cash transfers was widely seen as a step backward from the carefully designed Bolsa Família. Marcelo Neri, an authority on Brazilian poverty, went as far as to argue that ‘the country unlearned the basic lesson, which is to give more to those who have less’.<sup>126</sup> A single, easy-to-calculate household payment made sense during the pandemic when the imperative was to quickly get money to the most people possible. But during normal times it made stipends less progressive – larger households, which tend to be poorer, received less money per capita. This also incentivised two-parent households to register as separate households, something single-parent households, which tend to be poorer, could not do.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Orçamento secreto de Bolsonaro: entenda o passo a passo do esquema’, *Estadão*, 8 May 2021; ‘Como Bolsonaro desfigurou o orçamento federal para tentar se manter no poder’, *Brasil de Fato*, 11 July 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Households are waitlisted if they are deemed eligible for the programme but the number of beneficiaries surpasses the number budgeted. Waitlisted households must wait until other households exit the programme.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Economia discutiu novo Bolsa Família’, *Folha de S. Paulo*.

<sup>121</sup> ‘Pobres levam “goleada”’, *Folha de S. Paulo*.

<sup>122</sup> Leticia Bartholo, Rogério da Veiga and Rogério Jerônimo Barbosa, ‘O que muda no “novo Bolsa Família”’, *Revista Piauí*, 17 Aug. 2021.

<sup>123</sup> ‘Auxílio Brasil’, *GI*.

<sup>124</sup> ‘Bolsonaro quer pagar o Auxílio Centrão, não o Auxílio Brasil’, *CartaCapital*, 22 Nov. 2021.

<sup>125</sup> Own calculations based on MC, ‘VIS DATA 3’.

<sup>126</sup> Cited in ‘Especialistas defendem redesenho do Auxílio Brasil’, *Valor Econômico*, 18 July 2022.

## Discretionality and Politicisation

As in Mexico, Brazilian cash transfers became increasingly personalised and politicised. Bolsonaro bragged of being ‘the president who made the world’s largest social programme’.<sup>127</sup> This marked a complete U-turn relative to his original position on cash transfer policy and actions during the first months of his administration.

Upon coming to office, Bolsonaro’s administration launched a crackdown on supposed Bolsa Família fraud that disproportionately targeted the PT-backing north-east of the country. Between January and October 2019, an average of 5,400 households were enrolled in the programme each month. However, between January and May, each month only about 26 households from the 200 poorest municipalities were enrolled. Between June and October, only one household was enrolled in 37 of those municipalities, and in another 64 none were enrolled.<sup>128</sup> Discrimination continued after admissions picked up in January 2020. Of the 100,000 households enrolled that month, only 3,035 (3 per cent) were from the nine north-eastern states representing a quarter of Brazil’s population. The more prosperous south and south-east, which Bolsonaro conveniently won, received 75 per cent of the allocations.<sup>129</sup> North-easterners later made up 61 per cent of the 158,000 households expelled in March 2020.<sup>130</sup> North-eastern governors successfully appealed the cuts before the Supreme Court, but by then the pandemic had begun, making the cuts a moot point.<sup>131</sup>

Transfer policy took another discretionary turn during Bolsonaro’s re-election campaign. Having already bent budget rules to expand cash transfers, in 2022 Bolsonaro blatantly ignored rules preventing presidents from ramping up social spending prior to elections. In July 2022, down in the polls and facing high fuel prices following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Bolsonaro returned to Congress. Once more, in exchange for access to the ‘secret budget’, *Centrao* legislators reformed the constitution. By declaring a state of emergency, the reform, which was approved in less than a week, allowed Bolsonaro to increase stipends to an unprecedented R\$600 until the end of the year and further increase enrolment in the programme.<sup>132</sup>

In all, the administration injected close to US\$4 billion into the economy in after-budget expenditures during the three months before the election.<sup>133</sup> Between the programme launch and election day, Auxílio Brasil enrolled 6.6 million households, a 45.7 per cent increase on its predecessor Bolsa Família.<sup>134</sup> Bolsonaro outperformed the polls, finishing a strong second in the first round on 2 October 2022 against centre-left former president Lula. The following day, in a last-ditch effort, he moved up that

<sup>127</sup> ‘Para neutralizar Lula, Bolsonaro tenta criar marca social para 2022: criador do “maior programa do mundo”’, *O Globo*, 12 Dec. 2021.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Bolsonaro trava Bolsa Família’, *Folha de S. Paulo*.

<sup>129</sup> Idiana Tomazelli, ‘Nordeste fica só com 3% das concessões do Bolsa Família’, *UOL*, 5 March 2020.

<sup>130</sup> ‘Governo corta 158 mil do Bolsa Família’, *UOL*.

<sup>131</sup> Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF), Medida cautelar na ação cível originária: MC ACO 3359 DF - Distrito Federal XXXXX-32.2020.1.00.0000, 14 April 2021: <https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/jurisprudencia/stf/882701202>.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Como Bolsonaro desfigurou o orçamento’, *Brasil de Fato*, 11 July 2022.

<sup>133</sup> ‘Governo concedeu R\$21 bilhões extras a eleitores durante campanha’, *UOL*, 21 Oct. 2022.

<sup>134</sup> Own calculations based on MC, ‘VIS DATA 3’.

month's payments.<sup>135</sup> Bolsonaro narrowly lost in the second round on 30 October 2022. Lula restored the name Bolsa Família but kept the flat per-household stipend.

### A Right-Wing Social Policy?

As noted, Bolsonaro's cash transfer policy can be divided into pre- and post-pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the administration followed a right-wing strategy of retrenchment with the caveat that the cuts made disproportionately targeted the north-east. Post-pandemic, Bolsonaro carried out political manoeuvres to circumvent legal impediments to increasing the generosity and coverage of cash transfers before he faced the voters. Bolsonaro's populist instincts ultimately trumped his right-wing ideology.

Pre-pandemic, the administration aggressively monitored Bolsa Família's rolls with the intent of weeding out households with higher incomes and outdated or incomplete information. Between December 2018 and March 2020, 1.1 million families were removed from the programme's rolls, a 7.6 per cent decline.<sup>136</sup> New admissions were also restricted, causing the programme's waiting list to balloon.<sup>137</sup> Retrenchment was set to continue in 2020. The administration's budget called for an 8 per cent cut in Bolsa Família spending, projected that the number of beneficiaries would remain flat and did not fund a bonus payment.<sup>138</sup>

The pandemic changed everything. After Bolsonaro's popularity spiked amid the government's generous social policy response, retrenchment plans went out the window. In line with Weyland's predictions about social policy under populism, 'the opportunistic goal of self-perpetuation won out over programmatic commitments'.<sup>139</sup> It should, however, be noted that, unlike AMLO's *Becas*, *Auxílio* remained conditional. Enforcement, which was suspended during the pandemic, resumed in early 2022.

### Discussion and Findings

The near-simultaneous election of populist presidents from opposite ends of the political spectrum in Latin America's two biggest countries at the end of 2018 offered a unique opportunity to study how populists make public policy. Crucially, the fact that Mexican left-wing populist López Obrador and Brazilian right-wing populist Bolsonaro both inherited and sought to overhaul their respective countries' large and long-standing cash transfer programmes made it possible to isolate the impact of populism on policy and policy-making and to distinguish it from the impact of the host ideologies that accompanied each leader's distinctive brand of populism.

This article's main finding is that, despite AMLO and Bolsonaro's diametrically opposed ideologies, rather than diverging, Mexican and Brazilian cash transfer policy converged on multiple fronts. Populism led to more improvised, politicised and

<sup>135</sup> 'Bolsonaro antecipa calendário do Auxílio Brasil e conclui repasses de outubro antes do 2º turno', *Estadão*, 3 Oct. 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Own calculations based on MC, 'VIS DATA 3'.

<sup>137</sup> 'Bolsa Família já tem fila de 3,5 milhões de pessoas', *UOL*, 18 Feb. 2020.

<sup>138</sup> 'Bolsonaro reduz R\$2,5 bilhões do Bolsa Família', *Extra Classe*, 2 Dec. 2019.

<sup>139</sup> Kurt Weyland, 'Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach', in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 61.



clientelistic transfer policy in both countries. Ideology, though far from insignificant, played a secondary role in shaping the evolution of Mexican and Brazilian cash transfer policy relative to populism. In sum, the case studies reveal that *populism trumps ideology*.

The case studies demonstrate that there exists a distinct and coherent *populist style of policy-making*. Both populists were highly critical of existing programmes, accusing them (without evidence) of failing to reach ‘the right people’ and being used to buy votes. In office, both sought to put their own spin on transfer policy. AMLO fully scrapped Prospera two months into his term. Bolsonaro launched Auxílio Brasil during his third year, but only after concluding that generous and expansive transfers held the key to his re-election.

As predicted, policy-making became more erratic under populist rule. Auxílio changed repeatedly, often at the last minute and through legislative workarounds to circumvent laws ensuring fiscal prudence and preventing political manipulation of social policy during election years. Politics outweighed good governance as Bolsonaro sought to provide politically popular flat per-household benefits to the greatest possible number of households, to the detriment of ensuring the neediest received the most, as had been the case under Bolsa Família.

The transition to AMLO’s social programmes was more chaotic still. AMLO went further than Bolsonaro, completely replacing Prospera with untested programmes. Becas launched before their design was finalised and even before the politicised Wellbeing Census concluded. The rollout was opaque and saw some of the poorest Prospera beneficiaries being excluded from the new programmes without justification.<sup>140</sup> To the confusion of families and educators, upper secondary school scholarships are still trumpeted as ‘universal’ even though only certain locales are covered.<sup>141</sup> Cash transfers lack set payment schedules and have been subject to delays.<sup>142</sup> Today, although more Mexicans than ever benefit from cash transfers, these benefits reach a smaller share of those most in need.<sup>143</sup>

Policy shifted in a clientelistic direction, though there is no evidence in either country of benefits being explicitly conditioned on support for the government. Early on, Bolsonaro weaponised cash transfers to punish the north-east, an opposition stronghold.<sup>144</sup> He was forced to abandon this practice amid political backlash. And, after pandemic relief policies boosted his popularity, Bolsonaro’s strategy pivoted to finding legal workarounds to expand transfers prior to the 2022 election.

Though Bolsonaro’s motives were cynical, coverage and generosity increased to levels never before seen under prior administrations, including left-wing ones operating under more favourable economic conditions. Such an expansion required a bold and likely opportunistic politician. This offers an example of the positive potential of

<sup>140</sup> Ramírez Benítez, ‘Efectos de un contexto’ and ‘Van 15 meses’, *Cuestione*.

<sup>141</sup> CONEVAL, Evaluación de procesos del programa Beca Universal, pp. 93–4.

<sup>142</sup> CONEVAL, Evaluación de procesos del programa Beca Universal and CONEVAL, Evaluación de procesos del programa Becas.

<sup>143</sup> Jaramillo-Molina, ‘Primero los pobres?’

<sup>144</sup> STF, Medida cautelar.

populism.<sup>145</sup> Because of Bolsonaro's brazenness, left-wing Lula inherited cash transfer coverage and generosity levels he may not have been able to achieve otherwise. Lower-income Brazilians came out on top, though only if current spending levels remain sustainable.

Like Bolsonaro, AMLO dramatically ramped up spending and coverage in the run up to presidential elections.<sup>146</sup> But, in contrast to the Brazilian case, there is no evidence that AMLO's programmes sought to discriminate against opposition strongholds. Still, the so-called Servants of the Nation broke the law in trying to associate the new programmes with the president.<sup>147</sup> AMLO cut the value of benefits for non-voting school-age children while creating comparatively generous benefits for those of or close to voting age. Further, his Servants of the Nation personally threatened beneficiaries that their benefits could end if AMLO lost the recall vote.<sup>148</sup>

Despite this populist convergence, there is evidence of ideological divergence. Although both leaders had long derided their countries' programmes, their critiques differed along ideological lines. Left-wing AMLO claimed that much of Prospera's budget went to 'ghost' beneficiaries and 'intermediaries' and not to the poor.<sup>149</sup> In contrast, Bolsonaro claimed that many beneficiaries should be expelled for being too well off and that cash transfers made them lazy.<sup>150</sup> Once in power, AMLO created unconditional programmes targeting a broader segment of the population. This, however, came at the expense of less generous benefits for Prospera beneficiaries, who tended to be the poorest Mexicans. Prior to the pandemic, Bolsonaro retrenched cash transfers by cracking down on better-off beneficiaries and, more controversially, on the north-east. However, Bolsonaro completely jettisoned this agenda in favour of massively expanding transfers after his approval ratings spiked with the launch of generous pandemic relief policies. Still, in contrast to AMLO's programmes, Auxílio Brasil remained conditional on school attendance.

Beyond ideology, the seeming ease with which populist presidents were able to overhaul the programmes they inherited constitutes an empirical puzzle. Both programmes were internationally lauded and had persisted largely unchanged for two decades through multiple non-populist administrations from across the ideological spectrum. Loss aversion and status quo bias should have made beneficiaries leery of changes, even ones promising more generous benefits.<sup>151</sup> There was reason to believe that these were consolidated programmes whose beneficiaries would mobilise to defend their entitlements.

<sup>145</sup>Weyland, 'Populism and Social Policy' and Bartha, Boda and Szikra, 'When Populist Leaders Govern'.

<sup>146</sup>Citibanamex, Presupuesto para 2024.

<sup>147</sup>TEPJF, Procedimiento especial sancionador, pp. 160, 270.

<sup>148</sup>'Revocación de mandato', *Animal Político*.

<sup>149</sup>López Obrador, 'Conferencia de prensa' and López Obrador, 'Conferencia de prensa matutina'.

<sup>150</sup>'Bolsonaro diz que há fraude', *Folha de S. Paulo* and Bolsonaro, 'Diário da Câmara dos Deputados' (2011), p. 59.

<sup>151</sup>For example, during the 2010s, (non-populist) right-wing governments in the Southern Cone refrained from significantly retrenching social programmes enacted by their left-wing predecessors. See: Sara Niedzwiecki and Jennifer Pribble, 'Social Policies and Center-Right Governments in Argentina and Chile', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 59: 3 (2017), pp. 72–97.

On the political side, populist leaders were particularly determined to rebrand cash transfers. These are highly visible programmes, attributed to presidents, that have been widely shown to boost support for incumbents.<sup>152</sup> They are also cheap and easy to set up and expand compared to more contentious improvements to education and healthcare quality.<sup>153</sup> Further, cash transfers are a policy area where presidents have historically had significant unilateral authority. Regardless, at the time of the reforms, both leaders had working legislative majorities.

On the societal side, James E. Mahon Jr. posits that the potential for mobilisation in defence of these programmes may be limited by the heterogeneity of the informal sector (to which most beneficiaries belong) and the fact these programmes originated in government ministries rather than being the result of bottom-up mobilisation.<sup>154</sup> Another possible obstacle is that having children in school, unlike being elderly, is a transitory phase. Parents cycle in and out of eligibility depending on their children's age and enrolment status. Once their children exit the educational system, parents lose their reason to mobilise to defend these programmes.

The Mexican case is more puzzling than the Brazilian one. Mexico's policy changes were deeper and more sudden than Brazil's. Also, all Bolsa Família beneficiaries ended up better off under Auxílio, which was not the case for Prospera beneficiaries under Becas. Based on interviews, Viviana Ramírez and Ricardo Velázquez Leyer (2023) argue that strict conditionality enforcement made Prospera beneficiaries apathetic toward its demise and supportive of unconditional transfers, even if less generous.<sup>155</sup> These are intriguing findings, but they are derived from the opinions of just 20 women in a semi-rural community in Puebla.

Counter to the many attacks AMLO and Bolsonaro hurled at them, Prospera and Bolsa Família were highly effective policies that were largely shielded from political manipulation. It is concerning that, because of populist rule, the gold standards in the region's fight against poverty might degenerate into two more in the long line of clientelistic anti-poverty initiatives that used to come and go with each new president. Conditional cash transfers revolutionised social policy. These innovative, home-grown Mexican and Brazilian programmes diffused across Latin America and the world.<sup>156</sup> The possibility that the recent pernicious trends in Mexico and Brazil detailed in this article might also diffuse across the region is a major cause for concern.

<sup>152</sup>Zucco, 'When Payouts Pay'; De La O, *Crafting Policies*, chap. 5; Díaz-Cayeros, Estévez and Magaloni, *The Political Logic*; Niedzwiecki, *Uneven Social Policies*, chap. 5.

<sup>153</sup>Alisha C. Holland and Ben Ross Schneider, 'Easy and Hard Redistribution: The Political Economy of Welfare States in Latin America', *Perspectives on Politics*, 15: 4 (2017), pp. 988–1006.

<sup>154</sup>James E. Mahon, Jr., 'Can New Social Programs Bring about a New Period of Political Incorporation in Latin America?', Paper presented at American Political Science Association (APSA) Toronto Annual Meeting, 4 Sept. 2009; see also Holland and Schneider, 'Easy and Hard Redistribution', p. 992.

<sup>155</sup>Viviana Ramírez and Ricardo Velázquez Leyer, 'The Impact of Self-Reinforcing and Self-Undermining Policy Feedback on Mexican Social Policy: The End of the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme', *Policy and Politics*, 51: 3 (2023), pp. 508–29.

<sup>156</sup>See for example: Natasha Borges Sugiyama, 'The Diffusion of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs in the Americas', *Global Social Policy*, 11: 2–3 (2011), pp. 250–78; Sarah M. Brooks, 'Social Protection for the Poorest: The Adoption of Antipoverty Cash Transfer Programs in the Global South', *Politics & Society*, 43: 4 (2015), pp. 551–82; Borges, *Human Capital*, chap. 2 and chap. 6.

**Acknowledgements.** I am grateful to Juliana Martínez Franzoni, Lucas Perelló, the Inland Empire Latinamericanist Group and the anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

### **El populismo triunfa sobre la ideología: las políticas antipobreza bajo López Obrador en México y Bolsonaro en Brasil**

Comprender cómo el diseño y la implementación de políticas difieren bajo gobiernos populistas y no populistas es complicado por el hecho de que el populismo nunca existe en forma pura y siempre está vinculado a una ideología más desarrollada. Aprovechando la elección casi simultánea del populista de izquierda Andrés Manuel López Obrador en México y del populista de derecha Jair Bolsonaro en Brasil, este artículo analiza el efecto del populismo en los programas de transferencias monetarias condicionadas. A pesar de las ideologías diametralmente opuestas de estos presidentes, en lugar de divergir, las políticas de transferencias monetarias de México y Brasil convergieron bajo el populismo. Ambos líderes renombraron los programas que heredaron y reorientaron sus políticas de forma improvisada, politizada y clientelista.

**Palabras clave:** populismo; AMLO; Bolsonaro; TMC; transferencia de efectivo; Bolsa Familia; alivio de pobreza

### **Populismo supera ideologia: política de alívio da pobreza sob o governo de López Obrador no México e de Bolsonaro no Brasil**

Entender como a elaboração e a implementação de políticas diferem sob governos populistas e não populistas é complicado pelo fato de que o populismo nunca existe em sua forma pura e está sempre ligado a uma ideologia mais desenvolvida. Aproveitando a eleição quase simultânea do populista de esquerda Andrés Manuel López Obrador no México e do populista de direita Jair Bolsonaro no Brasil, este artigo analisa o efeito do populismo nos programas de transferência de renda. Apesar das ideologias diametralmente opostas de seus presidentes, em vez de divergirem, as políticas de transferência de dinheiro mexicanas e brasileiras convergiram sob o populismo. Ambos os líderes rebatizaram os programas que herdaram e moveram a política em uma direção improvisada, politizada e clientelista.

**Palavras-chave:** populismo; AMLO; Bolsonaro; TCR; transferência de renda; Bolsa Família; alívio da pobreza

**Cite this article:** Fabián A. Borges, 'Populism Trumps Ideology: Poverty Relief Policy under Mexico's López Obrador and Brazil's Bolsonaro', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, (2025), pp. 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X25000185>