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Party Systems and Social Policy Trajectories in Latin America

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Party Systems and Social Policy Trajectories in Latin America

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Abstract

Party Systems and Social Policy Trajectories in Latin America

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Since democracy took hold throughout the region of Latin America, the social reform strategies that these countries have used to mitigate long-standing inequalities is significantly varied. Some countries have consistently implemented progressive and gradual reforms while others have rapidly pursued expansive or transformative social policy changes. Through the analysis of thirteen Latin American countries finds that – rather than prevailing explanations focused on mass demands and the organization of the working class and political left – social policy trajectories are caused by dynamics between party systems and elections. In countries where party systems are institutionalized and elections become highly competitive, parties increase their competitiveness vis-à-vis other political opponents by seeking electoral rewards throughout the promotion of incremental and redistributive policies. In contrast, in countries where inchoate party systems and weakly contested elections are the norm, populism takes root and populist leaders will pursue expansive social reforms that rely on social spending in order to consolidate their fluid political coalitions once reaching office. Over time, countries with institutionalized party systems and competitive elections will implement gradual and progressive social policies while those with inchoate party systems and low electoral competition will enact dramatic reforms that can be progressive or regressive in nature.

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Dating as far back as Aristotle, inequality and redistribution have long been sources of deep theoretical and substantive interest to scholars of political science. Redistribution has become especially salient to those interested in studying the developing world, particularly regions that have traditionally suffered such high socioeconomic inequalities as Latin America. Recently many Latin American governments have attempted to curb inequality through the implementation of social policies and programs. Much of the scholarly focus on social reform has centered on bottom-up theoretical approaches that stress redistributive demands from the masses or the political organization of the working class and political left. Yet, major social reforms in Latin America are predominantly formulated and initiated by close networks of high-ranking politicians, ministers, and technocrats. Why are existing academic theories so disconnected from the empirical reality of social reform in the region? What incentives are really driving political elites towards implementing equity-enhancing reforms in Latin America?

This article shows that recent trajectories of social policy in Latin America are shaped by the institutionalization of party systems and the competitiveness of elections within countries. The main finding is that – since the advent of democracy throughout the region in the 1980s and 1990s – countries with stable party systems and competitive elections have consistently pursued gradual social reforms while those with inchoate party systems and weakly competitive elections have implemented expansive social policies. To substantiate this argument, this article draws on classical arguments of institutionalization that illuminate how the strength of institutions and their interactions with one another profoundly affect political behavior and result in disparate policy outcomes across cases.

The existing literature on the politics of redistribution and social reform has difficulty explaining recent social policy trajectories in Latin America. Social conflict theory argues that

the expansion of universal suffrage induces redistribution by allowing the newly enfranchised but less privileged lower and middle classes to vote for redistributive-seeking politicians (Meltzer and Richard 1981; Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; McGuire 2010). Pushing this reasoning one step further, advocates of power resource theory claim that only through the political organization of civil society and the formation of programmatic leftist parties can the balance of power shift towards the subordinate classes, which then results in greater redistribution and expansion of the welfare state (Stephens 1979; Huber and Stephens 2001; Huber and Stephens 2012). Implicit in both these approaches is a bottom-up causal process where underprivileged citizens and subordinate classes push for redistributive policies to improve their socioeconomic positions. However, the vast majority of equity-enhancing policies that have been implemented during the last two or three decades in Latin America have been designed and implemented in a decisively top-down and highly technocratic manner.¹ Furthermore, even governments controlled by the political left have varied significantly in how they have approached redistribution and social policy reforms.

This article builds upon literature that has shown how party systems influence the economic policy-making process (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring 1999; Flores-Macías 2012) and expands it into the realm of social policy. However, it deviates from this literature by embedding electoral competition within the party system institutionalization framework, arguing that both institutional and electoral dynamics shape political elites' behavior in the formulation and implementation of social policy. Recent social reforms in Latin American countries have been initiated by politicians that seek to gain electoral

1. Most reforms to Latin American health care and education programs have been initiated and formulated by ministers, technocrats, bureaucrats, and top-level politicians (see Grindle 2004; Kaufman and Nelson 2004). Similarly, the creation of conditional cash transfer programs has largely been top-down, technocratic, and outside the privity or demands of the masses (Franzoni and Voorend 2011).

advantages through ‘anticipated rewards.’ When institutionalized party systems spur more closely contested elections, party leaders and high-level politicians across the ideological spectrum propose incremental and progressive equity-enhancing policies to gain electoral rewards from unattached voters at the ballot box. In contrast, inchoate party systems that maintain low electoral competition allow space for the rise of populism. Because of the high degree of fluidity of populists’ electoral coalitions, these leaders seek to consolidate their followings through vast social spending projects and expansive social programs.

This article proceeds in the following manner. The next section defines social policy trajectories and presents the main empirical puzzle. Next, it shows how existing theories fail to account for recent patterns of social reform across Latin America. It then introduces the main theoretical contribution of the article, that dynamics between party systems and electoral competition create consistent paths of social policies. Then, the empirical section substantiates the argument through both cross-national patterns of social reforms and more detailed investigation of thirteen Latin American cases. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and discusses the broader implications of the theory.

Social Policy Trajectories in Latin America

There have been two overarching methodological approaches to the study of social reform and welfare states in Latin America. One approach seeks to explain the political determinants behind changes in social expenditure across a large number of cases (Brown and Hunter 1999; Kaufman and Segura-Ubiergo 2001; Avelino, Brown, and Hunter 2005; Huber, Mustillo, and Stephens 2008). Although these studies illuminate broader economic and political causes of variation in government spending, they typically fall short of providing deep theoretical and causal explanations for changes in social *policy*. Social spending – often

measured as total government expenditure on social programs as a percentage of GDP per capita – does not capture the complexities of the social reforms that countries enact over time. For example, countries may have similar levels and patterns of social expenditures but implement significantly different types of social reforms during this time period.² Another approach has sought to investigate how social reform – and particularly the extent of its movement towards ideals of ‘universalism’ – has occurred in smaller sets of countries or cases (Grindle 2004; Castiglioni 2005; Hunter and Sugiyama 2009; Pribble 2013). While this approach addresses the shortcoming of the previous by yielding deeper theoretical insights into how political actors and processes have directly shaped social reforms, it lacks the empirical breadth to generalize across greater sets of cases and connect with broader regional trends of policy reform.

This article takes a different approach to understanding changes in social policy. It occupies an empirical middle ground that utilizes in-depth analysis of social reforms across thirteen cases to understand both causal political relationships and larger patterns of reform throughout an entire region. Rather than investigating social spending or socioeconomic and policy outcomes (e.g. universalism of policies, poverty reduction), it investigates the scope of policy *inputs*. In other words, the primary focus of the investigation rests on why countries exhibit similar patterns in the type of social policies they pursue and implement.

Social policy trajectories are defined as patterns of social reform that are formulated and enacted by successive governments over a given period of time. Of particular importance is the scope – the extensiveness and pace – of social reforms. Reforms that continue to expand upon each other from previous iterations and are implemented over a number of years are considered

2. Among the countries where social expenditure data is available (all cases included in this study with the exceptions of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Honduras), all ten have incrementally increased social public expenditure as a percentage of GDP since 1990. Yet, these ten countries have followed vastly different approaches to social policy reform during this time period. Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPALSTAT/ECLAC).

gradual social policy trajectories. Conversely, expansive social policy trajectories entail sudden shifts in existing programs or the creation of new transformative programs within a short period of time. Examples of gradual trajectories would be the social assistance programs of *Bolsa Escola* and *Progresá* in Brazil and Mexico. Originally a set of unrelated and independent social fund initiatives created by previous administrations, these programs were later consolidated and expanded upon by successive governments over the course of several years. Alternatively, the major decentralization projects in education enacted in multiple countries in the early 1990s that fundamentally altered educational systems are examples of expansive reforms.

Since the dual waves of democracy and neoliberal economic reforms swept the region in the 80s and 90s, there have been two general and distinct paths for how countries have implemented equity-enhancing reforms: some countries have pursued piecemeal (and typically progressive) social reforms gradually and others have sought to implement transformative social programs rapidly. These two paths have been commonly referred to as the ‘two Latin America lefts.’ The Bolivarian populists – Chávez, Correa, and Morales – invested in large-scale shifts in policy, funnelling discretionary funds towards poorer segments of society while moderate leftist governments – such as those in Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay – implemented consistent but gradual reforms to healthcare, education, and social assistance programs. However, these trajectories are not limited to the political left. Right-wing populists such as Fujimori and Menem sought major changes to education while center-right administrations in Brazil, El Salvador, and Mexico have pursued progressive but incremental reforms to healthcare and social assistance. Why do we see such divergent trajectories of social policy reform since 1990 across Latin America? Why do certain countries repeatedly pursue expansive and rapid social reforms? Why do others implement policies that incrementally build off of each other over long periods of time?

The Politics of Redistribution and Policy Reform

There are two main theoretical approaches that have been put forth to explain how political dynamics shape redistribution and policy change: social conflict theory and power resource theory. Because neither of these two theories provides an encompassing explanation for recent social policy trajectories in Latin America, this article develops an alternative theory that highlights the role of party system institutionalization in shaping social policy reforms.

Social Conflict Theory

Social conflict theory argues that democracy creates inherent electoral incentives for redistribution (Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; McGuire 2010). Largely based on the Meltzer and Richard (1981) median voter model, the social conflict approach claims that the expansion of universal suffrage to the previously disenfranchised but more populous subordinate classes allows these groups to exert greater political clout than the numerically challenged elites. In unequal countries where lower and middle classes possess aggregate incomes lower than the national average, these voters will persistently vote for representatives that favor greater redistribution and expansion of the welfare state (Meltzer and Richard 1981). Considering the voting power of the subordinate classes, it then follows that the legislative and executive branches will represent these groups to a greater degree than the economically privileged. Therefore, over time democracy will cater to the economically disadvantaged causing increases in redistributive social policies and the expansion of the welfare state.

Although the establishment of democracy across the region has generally led to greater advances in social reform, the main assumptions behind social conflict theory do not explain why some countries pursue different approaches to social reform than others. Despite staggering levels of inequality, low income levels have not automatically transformed into strong

distributive demands among Latin Americans (Blofield and Luna 2011).³ Moreover, the mere presence of voting does not guarantee the adequate *representation* of subordinate political groups. Throughout the region, political representation is typically deficient (O'Donnell 1994), clientelism continues to hinder the organization of the socioeconomically fragmented lower classes (Weyland 1996), and political elites often restrict the growth of left-leaning political parties (Mainwaring 1999). Secondly, strength of democracy does not correlate to social policy trajectories among Latin American countries. Based on participatory and electoral measures,⁴ three of the weakest democracies in the region – El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico – have followed similar trends of progressive and gradual social reforms as highly democratic Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. At the same time, Argentina, despite being ranked as one of the strongest democracies in the region, has pursued a path of expansive social reforms similar to the much less democratic Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela.

Power Resource Theory

Overcoming the simplicity of the median voter model, power resource theory stresses the importance of political organization among subordinate classes for the effective advancement of redistributive demands. Derived mainly from the European experience, power resource theory argues that democracy allows for the organization of civil society, namely organized labor and programmatic political parties, to shift the balance of power towards the subordinate classes so that their demands can effectively influence the government (Stephens 1979; Huber and Stephens 2001). Only through working-class organization and the formation of programmatic

3. Blofield and Luna (2011) find that aggregate redistributive preferences are lower in Latin America than Europe despite significantly higher levels of inequality. Furthermore, although redistributive preferences have minimally increased in recent years, the region remains significantly polarized with portions of the population continuing to support *greater* levels of inequality.

4. The measures used here are aggregate measures – electoral democracy and participatory democracy – from the *Varieties of Democracy Project*. Taken together, the measures accurately account for the main causal mechanisms put forth by the median-voter model.

social democratic parties can underprivileged groups effectively influence the government to adopt more equitable economic and social policies. In the context of Latin America, Huber and Stephens (2012) argue that countries that have a strong presence of left-based political parties in government will achieve more redistributive policies and the reduction of poverty and inequality.

Like social conflict theory, the capacity of power resource theory to explain recent Latin American social policy trajectories is limited. The corporatist dominance by the state over organized labor and recent neoliberal reforms have significantly reduced the capacity of the working class to organize (Collier 1999; Avelino, Brown, and Hunter 2005). Consequently, labor remains fragmented and weakly organized as labor density continues to decline since the industrialization periods of the mid-20th century (Weyland 1996; Cook 2007; Schneider and Karcher 2010). Huber and Stephens (2012) shift the focus of power resource theory from unions to the strength of programmatic left parties as the key causal variable in explaining social reforms among Latin American countries. However, there is no clear linkage between the presence of leftist parties and social policy trajectories in Latin America. Among the gradual reformers, many of the first steps in the reform trajectory were implemented by center-right politicians in a highly technocratic fashion. Furthermore, perhaps the most expansive redistributive policies in the region – in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela – have been implemented by populist and fluid party organizations. In a region rife with fragmented classes, the bottom-up organization of civil society has faced a number of constraints that have limited the ability of the middle and lower classes to achieve redistributive social policy.

Party Systems and Policy Reform

Institutionalization has long been linked to the stability of policy outputs among developing countries (Huntington 1968; O'Donnell 1994). Although primarily focused on economic reform, dynamics within party systems have been theorized to greatly impact the policy-making process (Huntington 1968; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Mainwaring 1999; Flores-Macías 2012). For example, fragmented party systems reduce policy coherence among the legislative branch, preventing the executive from being able to build coalitions and pass their policy agendas (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Mainwaring 1999). Flores-Macías (2012) argues that greater party system institutionalization generates centripetal incentives towards moderate policy reforms. Regularity and repeated exposure among parties increases their negotiation and cooperation with one another allowing them to more efficiently coalesce and leading to more moderate policy outputs (Flores-Macías 2010, 421). Furthermore, institutionalized parties' strong roots in society and legitimacy, as well as their institutional barriers to entry for outside or inexperienced politicians, restricts the latitude in decision-making of party leaders (Flores-Macías 2010, 420-422). Therefore, governments that hail from institutionalized party systems will pursue moderate economic reforms while those from inchoate party systems implement more radical economic policies.

Although the party systems literature sheds light on understanding policy-making from an institutional and top-down approach, their causal mechanisms do not easily apply to recent social policy trajectories. Legislative coalitions have played a fairly limited role in the formulation and passage of social reforms. Rather, the crucial coalitions behind the initiation of policy reforms in Latin America have often been among high-level politicians, ministers, and technocrats (Schneider 2004; Franzoni and Voorend 2011). Indeed, countries that rely heavily on legislative coalitions – such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay – have pursued

widely divergent paths of social reform. Secondly, the relationship between party system institutionalization and strong roots in society among Latin American party systems is not as robust as previously thought.⁵ For example, electoral volatility in Brazil and Chile is exceptionally low but their parties do not exhibit particularly strong linkages or partisan identification with the electorate (Luna 2014a; Samuels and Zucco 2014). Yet, Brazil and Chile share nearly identical trajectories of gradual social reforms as other strongly rooted party systems such as El Salvador, Mexico, and Uruguay.

In conclusion, neither the bottom-up nor the party systems approach comprehensively explains social policy trajectories. Social conflict and power resource theories, despite highlighting different causal processes, emphasize the demands of the masses for inducing redistribution but do not provide an explanation for the elite-driven and technocratic nature of recent social reforms in Latin America. On the other hand, the institutional approaches can potentially shed light on top-down processes of policy formulation but undervalue the integral role that electoral incentives shape political behavior within party systems. This article seeks to bridge this theoretical divide. Electoral incentives – such as those put forth by the median-voter model – do matter, but their effects are distorted by the dynamics of existing political institutions such as party systems. However, the theory offered here breaks away from the party system literature by placing less emphasis on institutional and intra-party constraints on behavior and instead focuses on how both elections and competition *within* party systems shapes incentives for politicians to enact social reforms.

Party Systems and Social Policy Trajectories

5. Although strong roots in society was originally included as an integral component of party system institutionalization (Mainwaring and Scully 1995), Luna (2014b) found that measures of electoral volatility and roots in society were not strongly correlated with one another in Latin America.

In the developing world, many democracies continue to lack stable and well-functioning political parties capable of forging linkages between typically fragmented classes and social groups. However, among the countries that do possess a threshold of party system institutionalization, parties are well-organized and rooted in society and elections over time become more competitive. Amidst these environments of institutionalization and competition, major parties are incentivized to strengthen their relative electoral positions by aggressively capturing votes from new constituents. To outcompete their opponents, political leaders seek to gain ‘anticipated rewards’ by appealing to unattached voters through the promotion of progressive redistributive policy proposals. When parties are weak, ephemeral, and possess porous roots with the electorate, electoral competition becomes sporadic and less competitive. The low barriers of entry and competition of these party systems allows for the rise of populists to win elections. Once reaching office, populists seek to consolidate their fluid electoral coalitions through the implementation of transformative policy shifts and targeting key constituents through excessive social spending. In turn, countries with institutionalized party systems follow trajectories of gradual social reform while those with inchoate systems are placed on paths of expansive policy reforms.

Institutionalized Party Systems and Gradual Reforms

Party systems become institutionalized when their constituent parts meet a certain threshold of legitimacy, organization, and possessing roots in society (Mainwaring and Scully 1995). Over time, support among voters for parties crystallizes and parties embody certain ideological and symbolic values that represent their key constituencies. When multiple parties perform this task of becoming entrenched and developing linkages with portions of the electorate, the margin of victory reduces and elections become more competitive. Granted,

elections can be closely matched in weakly institutionalized party systems, but only in institutionalized party systems are large-scale electoral shifts elusive therefore spurring elections that are regularly contested among *similar* sets of parties. However, the key component of party system institutionalization – regularized competition among parties – does not necessarily imply that *all* segments of society are adequately represented. Even the most stable party systems host portions of the electorate that remain independent of staunch partisanship or party affiliation. Therefore, when competition between major parties is high and elections are consistently contested, parties will seek to augment their electoral support by reaching out to new and unattached constituents.

Within the context of stable party systems, highly competitive elections incentivize all major parties to pursue ‘anticipated rewards’ from voters by incorporating equity-enhancing policies in their electoral platforms and legislative agendas. Anticipated rewards are the electoral fruits that politicians and their parties receive after creating programs that successively alleviate socioeconomic problems. In a region rife with inequality and poverty, political actors that formulate technocratic and redistributive policy initiatives addressing socioeconomic issues are often handsomely rewarded at the ballot box (Cerda and Vergara 2008; De la O 2013; Zucco 2013). Thus, competition elections with small margins of victory entice both right- and left-wing parties to pursue progressive social policies in an attempt to outcompete one another. However, redistribution and social policy remain economically costly. Therefore, in order to compete in close elections political parties make calculated decisions to promote incremental and cost-effective social reforms. What results is the regularized implementation of gradual social reforms by successive governments over time. In turn, consistent with the median-voter model, democratic elections can spur redistributive outcomes. However, only when a threshold of party

system institutionalization is reached and contested elections are commonplace are political actors truly incentivized to provide public goods to the masses in a consistent fashion.

Inchoate Party Systems and Expansive Reforms

Inchoate party systems suffer from a lack (or complete absence) of parties with organization, legitimacy, and durable party-citizen linkages throughout society (Mainwaring and Scully 1995). The ephemeral and precarious nature of political parties and lack of crystallization of linkages in these party systems results in significant volatility in voting patterns and electoral competition becomes less robust. The likelihood of political outsiders and populists entering weakly institutionalized and uncompetitive party systems is significantly higher (Kaufman and Stallings 1991; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Weyland 1999). Where stable, well-financed, and organized parties prevail, populist leaders are extremely hard-pressed to form organizations capable of successfully competing in national elections. Furthermore, the party-citizen linkages and weak competition among parties allows transient outsiders to entice unattached followers with greater ease. Particularly in periods of governability or socioeconomic crisis, populists can entice swaths of disenchanting voters by appealing to anti-system sentiments.

While weak party systems and electoral competition allows populists to win elections, the high fluidity of their political support brings rise to incentives for the pursuit of expansive social reforms buttressed by massive social spending. Although populists are capable of rapidly garnering support, the lack of institutionalized organization of typically disparate social groupings with different interests makes these coalitions difficult to maintain post-election. Populists heavily rely on anti-system rhetoric and sentiment to drum up electoral support (Mayorga 2006), often making their political survival predicated on the delivery of sweeping changes to placate the disillusionment of their supporters. Furthermore, because of the loose

linkages between populists and voters, populists will seek to solidify their coalitions through large-scale social programs that especially reward their political kin. In turn, populist leaders make widespread use of discretionary social spending that targets heavily relied upon constituents – especially the urban and rural lower classes – during campaigns (Weyland 1999, 391-392).

In conclusion, the institutionalization of party systems and the subsequent level of electoral competition profoundly shape the social policy trajectories that countries follow. The theory advanced here expects that in countries with institutionalized party systems and competitive elections all major parties within the system will implement progressive and gradual social reforms. In contrast, countries with inchoate party systems and weak electoral competition will follow paths of consistent populism that imposes expansive social reforms that favor vast social spending.

Explaining Social Policy Trajectories

The two social policy trajectories identified in this article are distinguished through the in-depth investigation of social reforms – through primary sources, such as legislation and policy reforms, and secondary sources – of thirteen Latin American countries since 1990. These trajectories cover three domains of social policy: healthcare, education, and non-contributory social assistance. The time period, 1990 to 2015, allows for a long-term perspective on how social policies have evolved over multiple decades; moreover, nearly all (with the exception of Mexico's gradual democratization) the countries included in the dataset qualify as democracies with regular and fair elections. The extended time period and the medium-N design allows for a couple of distinct advantages. First, the qualitative analysis is not confined to one economic period – such as the 1990s when neoliberal reforms were implemented throughout the region –

that would constrain the variation in social reform trajectories. Secondly, the extension of cases away from paired comparisons or small-N designs allows for a much more controlled method of comparison (in terms of potential intervening causes).

At their core, social policy trajectories fundamentally differ by their degrees of extensiveness in reforms. Accordingly, the criteria that guide the coding of trajectories are: (1) do social reforms show a pattern of incremental changes that accumulate over successive administrations, or (2) are changes to social programs the result of one major reform that profoundly transforms how that particular social policy is administered? When taking into

Country	PSI ⁶	Level of Competition ⁷	Healthcare Reform	Education Reform	Social Assistance	Total
Argentina	Low (20.61)	Low (42.09)	0	1	1	2
Bolivia	Low (39.76)	Low (41.98)	0	1	1	2
Colombia	Low (31.99)	Low (35.02)	1	1	1	3
Ecuador	Low (29.22)	Low (32.17)	1	0	1	2
Peru	Low (46.70)	Low (29.98)	0	1	1	2
Venezuela	Low (40.85)	Low (27.96)	1	1	0	2
Brazil	High (14.50)	High (20.98)	0	1	0	1
Chile	High (15.12)	High (18.48)	0	0	0	0
Costa Rica	Low (21.42)	High (24.12)	0	0	0	0
El Salvador	High (14.73)	High (23.29)	0	0	0	0
Honduras	High (14.95)	High (19.62)	0	1	0	1
Mexico	High (15.94)	High (8.43)	0	0	0	0
Uruguay	High (13.21)	High (21.65)	0	0	0	0

Table 1: Party Systems and Social Policy Trajectories in Latin America

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6. Party system institutionalization is measured by legislative electoral volatility. The measure is the average of electoral volatility since 1990. Data graciously provided by Scott Mainwaring; see: Mainwaring, Gervasoni, and España-Najera 2016.
 7. Level of competition is measured by the margin of victory in both presidential and lower chamber elections (in countries that utilize run-off presidential elections, only first rounds were included in the calculation). Margin of victory is the percentage of the vote received by the winner minus the percentage of the vote received by the runner-up. The final score is the average margin of victory since 1990. Data collected by author. Source: Nohlen 2005 and various government election data sites.

account timeframes of twenty-five years, overarching patterns of social reform become relatively evident. Healthcare and education reforms typically fall into two categories: gradual reforms that targeted incremental changes in certain aspects (i.e. coverage, efficiency, or funding) or expansive reforms that made significant changes to either centralize or decentralize their healthcare or education programs. The one exception is Venezuela, which implemented two new programs (*Barrio Adentro* and *Robinson*), supplementing the existing health and education frameworks. Social assistance trajectories were coded as gradual if cash transfer programs were the result of initiatives by multiple administrations, their coverage rates increased incrementally, and were largely funded by mandatory and stable sources of income. In contrast, non-contributory programs that were created in a short period of government action, had coverage rates that were initially high or increased rapidly, and were funded by primarily discretionary funds were coded as expansive. In each of the three social reform categories a score of 0 (gradual) or 1 (expansive) is given. After simple arithmetic, a final score from 0 (lowest) to 3 (highest) is calculated.

Table 1 shows the variation of party system institutionalization, level of competition, and social policy trajectories among the thirteen cases. As predicted, party system institutionalization and the competitiveness of elections are strong related to one another ($\rho = .59$). The most stable party systems in Latin America – such as Brazil, Chile, Honduras, and Mexico – routinely experience extremely close elections in both the executive and legislative branches. Conversely, inchoate party systems in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, and Colombia regularly experience substantial margins of victories. More crucially to the theory advocated here, both party system institutionalization ($\rho = .74$) and electoral competition ($\rho = .77$) are positively and strongly correlated with social reform trajectories. The countries with the most gradual

trajectories of social reform (Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, and Uruguay) possess some of the lowest electoral volatility and margins of victory averages in the region. In contrast, countries that have pursued expansive reforms in more than one category (Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela) have the most volatile party systems and uncompetitive elections.

Alternative theories of social policy trajectories do not have much explanatory power. Economic growth is negatively and weakly associated with social reforms ($\rho = -.27$).⁸ This finding is not surprising considering that in many instances countries have implemented reforms due to poor socioeconomic conditions – for example, Argentina and Colombia both pursued expansive social assistance programs during deep economic recessions. Relative levels of economic development are not significant ($\rho = -.36$).⁹ Interestingly, the robustness of electoral democracy has a negative and weak association with social policy trajectories ($\rho = -.33$).¹⁰ This result, although somewhat surprising, is not disconnected from the empirical record. Some of the ‘weakest’ democracies among the sample – El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico – have followed similarly gradualist trajectories as many of the most democratic – Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile. Strength of left has no predictability with regards to the extensiveness of social reform ($\rho = .07$).¹¹ Governments from all political ideologies have pursued both gradual and expansive social reforms throughout Latin America.

Institutionalized, Competitive Party Systems and Gradual Reforms

Although there are degrees of differences in the institutionalization and competitiveness of party systems among the gradual reformers, all seven countries – Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, El

8. Economic growth is measured by total average GDP growth per capital since 1990. Source: World Bank.

9. Level of development is measured by total average GDP per capita since 1990. Source: World Bank.

10. Democracy is measured by total average scores of the ‘electoral democracy index’ since 1990. Source: Varieties of Democracy.

11. Strength of left is measured by percent of total executive administrations that were controlled by a leftist candidate since 1990. The ideology of presidents is coded based on an ideology scheme developed by Michael Coppedge. Source: Coppedge 1998.

Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Uruguay – have three commonalities: stable and institutionalized party systems, robust and competitive elections, and a consistent record of progressive and incremental social reform since 1990.

Throughout Latin America, CCT programs have brought significant rewards to the policy designers and political incumbents (Hunter and Power 2007; Cerda and Vergara 2008; Zucco 2013), providing opportunities for parties involved in highly competitive elections to increase their political support. It is not surprising then that the three countries that pioneered CCT programs in Latin America – Brazil, Honduras, and Mexico – implemented their programs under the auspices of stable party systems and tight competition among parties and political leaders. Brazil – once characterized as an inchoate party system (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring 1999) – has since significantly stabilized with the emergence of both the center-right *Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira* (PSDB) and the center-left *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT). In turn, the small margin of victories between the PSDB and PT in legislative and presidential elections has led to both parties competing against each other to increase their electoral support. Often heralded as a PT flagship program, *Bolsa Família* was actually born out of intense policy competition between the PSDB and the PT parties at both the local and federal levels (Melo 2008). The foundations of the program were first implemented by PSDB president Cardoso as *Bolsa Escola*, then consolidated and expanded by Lula after taking control of the presidency in 2003.

Similar contexts of electoral and policy competition between parties have led to the birth of CCTs in Mexico and Honduras. Despite the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI)'s political dominance for over seven decades, gradual democratization has led to a robust and competitive three-party system shared by the PRI, the center-right *Partido Acción Nacional*

(PAN) and the left-wing *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD). In an effort to draw increased electoral support for the PAN from political rival PRI, president Fox renamed, consolidated, and augmented *Progresas* to create *Oportunidades* (De la O 2013). The oligarchic and highly competitive two-party system in Honduras has led to initiatives by both major parties – the *Partido Nacional* and the *Partido Liberal* – to implement and build upon previous CCT programs. Regardless of which party had control of the executive branch, each new version of CCT (from PRAF-I, to PRAF-II, to *Bono 10,000*) continued to expand the coverage, eligibility, and increase the payment scheme (Linos 2013). In turn, Galiani et al. (2016) found that newer iterations of the CCT have increased incumbency advantage for politicians of the party in power.

Contested elections in the context of institutionalized party systems have also resulted in governments pursuing incremental and progressive healthcare and education reforms. The stable yet highly competitive elections of Chile between the *Concertación* and *Alianza* have provided incentives for center-right parties such as *Unión Demócrata Independiente* (UDI) and center-left *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (PDC) to propose social reforms from above that entice lower and middle classes to support them electorally (Luna 2014a, 329-332). For example, health care reform (AUGE) was made a significant component of the political platform of presidential candidate Lagos in a tightly contested election, primarily for its potential to spur support among large portions of the electorate (McGuire 2010, 118; Pribble 2013, 49). Under president Bachelet, the *Concertación* then built on the success of AUGE and expanded its coverage. Similarly in Costa Rica, amidst a razor-thin margin of victory by the PLN presidential candidate Figueres – in which he stressed healthcare reform while his political opponent Rodríguez did not – resulted in a number of reform initiatives once he reached office (McGuire 2010, 89). In Uruguay, the return to democracy brought increased competition from the electoral coalition of

Frente Amplio (FA) as a challenge to the stabilized competition of the traditional two-party system. A tightly contested election in 1994 and the saliency of education in the presidential campaign (Irazábal 2004) resulted in the implementation of universal preschool by the *Partido Colorado* under president Sanguinetti and minister Rama (Mancebo 1998; Priddle 2013, 107). Once in power, the FA continue to build on the foundation of health reforms established by the *Partido Colorado*, achieving gradual advances in healthcare that have increased coverage for the entire population (Borraz and González 2009; Castiglioni 2010).

Among countries that have followed the gradual path of reform, the progressive social policies that these countries have pursued are not the result of a monopoly from the left. Instead, the institutionalization of party systems and the development of contested elections have incentivized political parties across the ideological spectrum – including the right – to pursue equity-enhancing policies. Increased institutionalization and competition from the leftist *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* after the reinstallation of democracy in El Salvador induced the right-wing *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA) to pursue progressive policies to maintain electoral majorities. The education reforms enacted over a period of ten years by the ARENA administrations of Cristiani, Calderón Sol, and Flores focused on increasing spending, enrollment and coverage, improving teacher training, and carrying out decentralization (Cuéllar-Marchelli 2003; Guzmán 2005). Furthermore, ARENA candidate Saca promoted the implementation of a CCT, *Red Solidaria*, during the 2004 elections and later implemented it after taking power (Britto 2007). In Mexico, after the first electoral victory of a non-PRI presidential candidate in over seven decades, the right-win PAN implemented healthcare reforms that increased public expenditures and coverage among the uninsured (Gakidou et al. 2006). Furthermore, many other right-wing and centrist governments – such as

Cardoso in Brazil, Sanguinetti in Uruguay, and Menem in Argentina - laid the foundations for initial reforms that leftist governments would subsequently build upon. Recent social reforms have largely been driven by party and electoral competition, not by ideology, in Latin America.

Inchoate Party Systems and Expansive Reforms

Inchoate party systems and weakly competitive elections among six countries – Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela – have led to surges in populist governance resulting in the pursuit of highly visible and expansive social policies. Nowhere in Latin America has there been a more vivid connection between inchoate party systems, populism, and expansive social policy than in the so-called ‘Bolivarian Revolutions’ of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Once one of the most institutionalized and stable party systems in the region (Mainwaring and Scully 1995), Venezuela’s traditional parties fell into disarray in the late 1990s. Amidst this political vacuum and in the context of socioeconomic crisis, Hugo Chávez was able to effectively mobilize disenchanted voters and win the 1998 election. However, because of the fluid nature of Chávez’s electoral support, he sought to solidify his legitimacy by creating highly visible and massive social assistance programs. A series of programs – the *Misiones* – were rolled out largely funded by oil revenue windfalls that focused on redistributing wealth and improving socioeconomic standards in health, education, and social well-being (Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson 2011). Flagship programs such as *Barrio Adentro* and *Robinson* were supplemented with other *Misiones* to funnel substantial funds to low income populations, especially political supporters of Chávez (Penfold-Becerra 2007).

Although on a smaller scale than Venezuela, both Bolivia and Ecuador have followed similar paths of populist leaders emerging from inchoate party systems and implementing expansive social policies fuelled by discretionary funds. Capitalizing on Ecuador’s amorphous,

fragmented, and weak party system (Conaghan 1995), Correa was able to win the 2006 election despite running on a ticket (*Alianza PAIS*) that did not put forth any congressional candidates. Similarly to Chávez, Correa quickly funnelled discretionary funds from oil profits towards social spending projects designed to increase his popularity. Within months of taking office, Correa doubled welfare payments and energy subsidies to the poor and declared ‘emergencies’ in many socioeconomic sectors that allowed the executive branch to disburse over \$215 million to a number of ministries such as healthcare and education (Conaghan 2008, 55). Bolivia’s party system has long suffered instability, fragmentation, and a lack of coherency within political parties (Van Cott 2000). Rising up through an amalgamation of social movements and political activist groups – the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) – Evo Morales was able to secure an absolute majority in the 2005 general election. Since coming to power, Morales has followed the familiar path of extracting revenues from natural resources and channeling them towards transfers to school-age children (*Bono Juancito Pinto*) and unconditional funds for persons of old age (*Renta Dignidad*) (Gray Molina 2010, 66-67). Furthermore, MAS has enacted a law that proposes an expansive reformation of the Bolivian education system through the increased funding, expansion, and centralization of the primary and secondary levels.¹²

Although less ambitious and transformative than the Bolivarian cases, other countries with weak party systems and populist movements – namely Argentina, Colombia, and Peru – have also pursued highly visible and expansive social policies. The dominance of a heterogeneous and fluid *Partido Justicialista* (PJ) amidst an incoherent and uncompetitive opposition has undermined the institutionalization of Argentina’s party system (Levitsky and Murillo 2008). The lack of competition in Argentine elections and the dearth of institutional constraints on PJ leaders have allowed presidents significant latitude in decision-making. For

12. “La nueva Ley Educativa propone 10 cambios,” *La Razón*, January 29, 2013.

example, although Menem campaigned against neoliberal policies (Weyland 2003, 1102), he swiftly implemented the decentralization of education and enacted changes aiming to increase coverage competition among healthcare insurers (Huber and Stephens 2012, 164-165). The unpredictable ‘bait-and-switch’ tactics also occurred in the extremely inchoate party system of Peru. Fujimori, capitalizing in a political context devoid of any organized political parties, implemented a number of highly visible neoliberal reforms once taking power. Fujimori sought political support through the decentralization of the educational system and especially the construction of a large number of schools throughout the country (Ortiz de Zevallos et al. 1999).

Even among the more progressive populist leaders, such as the Kirchners of Argentina and Gaviria of Colombia, weakly institutionalized party systems can result in highly transformative shifts in social policy. Colombia’s long tradition of heterogeneous parties built upon clientelist and patronage networks (Leongómez 2006) has – similar to Argentina – led to the rise of populism from within major political parties such as the *Partido Liberal Colombiano* (PLC). During a period of political turmoil, Gaviria implemented two extensive social reform packages – *Ley 60* and *Ley 100* – aimed to radically transform the education and healthcare systems of the country. One of the most ambitious social reforms in recent Latin American history, *Ley 100* introduced obligatory health insurance to all Colombians and fundamentally shifted the administration of healthcare through decentralization (Ramírez 2004). Economic crises have spearheaded social assistance policy efforts in both Argentina and Colombia. In Colombia, economic downturn prompted the implementation and rapid coverage expansion of *Familias en Acción* by Pastrana (Villatoro 2005). In Argentina, the economic crisis of 2001 prompted Duhalde to create the *Plan Jefes y Jefas* that rapidly provided over two million people with cash transfers (Huber and Stephens 2012, 188). The Kirchners would continue to introduce

new social assistance programs – such as *Plan Familia* and a universal child allowance – to increase the political support of the PJ (Pribble 2013, 156-157). Many of these social funds are much more likely to be distributed to provinces and regions that are controlled by Peronist political leaders (Giraudy 2007). Unlike the gradual reformers, non-contributory social assistance programs in these countries have been implemented rapidly with significant initial coverage rates and primarily been funded through discretionary financial sources.

Conclusion

This article has shown how recent social policy trajectories in Latin America have been shaped by the institutionalization of party systems and subsequent competitiveness in elections. By introducing some degree of stability among major parties, party system institutionalization spurs greater competition during elections. These competitive elections incentivize major parties to expand their electoral shares by proposing incremental redistributive social reforms in the pursuit of anticipated rewards from voters. In contrast, when party systems are inchoate and elections become less competitive, the lack of barriers of entry allows populist leaders to win elections. Populists, who build electoral coalitions on fluid organization of a large array of groups, seek to consolidate their followings through the pursuit of expansive social policies focused on vast social spending.

The argument put forth in this article contributes to broader debates on how institutions and political competition shape redistribution. Simplistic models, such as those utilized by social conflict theory, have difficulty explaining complex political phenomena in the developing world on their own. Social conflict theory illuminates how electoral competition influences redistribution but the median-voter model does not function as straight-forwardly as suggested. In the contexts of weak societal organization and representation, along with fragmented social

classes, the mere presence of redistributive demands among subordinate groups does not automatically result in political actors adequately addressing them. This article has argued that a threshold of party system institutionalization needs to be present in order for redistributive demands to influence political elites. When party systems are institutionalized and electoral competition becomes robust, political actors will vie for electoral rewards by proposing redistributive policies as a method of gaining votes. However, in cases where party systems are inchoate, social reform can be unpredictable, sporadic, and not necessarily in a progressive direction regardless of high inequality or the degree of redistributive demands among the populace.

Although a number of theoretical approaches have made political parties integral to understanding policy-making, much greater attention needs to be placed on how competition *among* parties affects the process of redistribution and social reform. Recently, competition has been featured in theoretical accounts of the party literature (Flores-Macías 2012; Huber and Stephens 2012; Pribble 2013; Luna 2014a) but it often takes a backseat to arguments related to voter-party linkages, ideology, policy legacies, or intra-party dynamics. Recent social policy trajectories have not been driven by ideological or programmatic dimensions. Progressive policies have been pursued by both the left and the right. When policies have been implemented by the left, they have rarely been the result of concrete demands from the working class or popular masses. Rather, social reform has been formulated within tight technocratic and elite policy coalitions, who have sought anticipated electoral and political rewards by providing solutions to persistent socioeconomic problems.

Despite clear and differentiated social policy trajectories across Latin America in the last two decades, these paths of reform are not set in stone. Given the fluctuation of party system

institutionalization in Latin America (Roberts 2014), dynamics affecting party systems may have ripple effects on policy inputs throughout the region. Since 1990, many party systems once characterized as institutionalized underwent systematic decay or outright collapse (such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela) that ushered in periods of populism and significant shifts in economic and social policy. In addition, there remain countries – such as Honduras – that appear to be on a path towards volatility and collapse after years of remarkable party stability. Even so, among the gradual reformers – such as Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, and Uruguay – the party systems within these countries appear to remain relatively stable and electoral competition robust. Nonetheless, given the overarching trends of deinstitutionalization and decay throughout the region in the past two decades, it is likely that the all too familiar Latin American concoction of populism with unpredictable and sudden shifts in social reform will persist into the future.

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