

Experimenting on the Poor: The Politics of Social Policy Evaluations in Brazil and Mexico

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ABSTRACT

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In the 1990s, Brazil and Mexico were pioneers in the implementation of conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs), which since have benefitted an estimated one billion poor families around the world. However, the initial evaluation strategies pursued by each state were different: Mexican officials partnered with US economists to implement an RCT evaluation, while Brazilians used a combination of statistical simulations and qualitative studies and aimed to secure the generation of policy knowledge to domestic experts. Based on eighteen months of participant observation in Mexico City and Brasília, 100 interviews with political and academic elites, content analysis of 400 policy documents, and historical-process tracing methods, this dissertation explains why these two similar countries, implementing the same policy, took different routes to assess the merits of CCTs, and what unintended consequences followed from these choices. I demonstrate that a key factor to achieve the legitimacy and political viability of CCTs is the knowledge regimes that states create to implement and evaluate these programs. The dissertation shows that while knowledge regimes tend to be understood as technical or apolitical machineries, they are inherently shaped by the politics of legitimation of CCTs and they produce unanticipated consequences for the ways that states combat poverty in the long-run. Only by taking into consideration the role that knowledge production plays in securing the political viability of CCTs, I argue, we can assess the politics and consequences of these programs, and how they relate to poor families on the ground.

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PREFACE

In the mid-1990s, the Mexican and Brazilian states initiated new social experiments that aimed to fundamentally restructure how states conceptualized safety nets for the poor with the implementation of conditional cash transfer programs, or CCTs. The idea in CCTs is that instead of states providing services or goods to the poor, the state would combat poverty by directly transferring small amounts of cash just to poor families, but that it would condition receiving these transfers on families following certain requirements, such as taking their children to school and to the hospital. CCTs started timidly in 1995 with local-level pilots in Mexico and Brazil that culminated in the creation of the *Progresa*¹ and *Bolsa Familia* programs, respectively. Initially, CCTs were met with great skepticism. In the two contexts, there was a great fear that distributing money to the poor would be a new form of political clientelism, and that these programs would be used for electoral purposes. Besides, it was not clear whether the Mexican and Brazilian states would have the organizational capacity to reach poor individuals, distribute cash to them and monitor their behavior without succumbing to corrupt practices.

Fast forward to 2016. Building on what became considered very successful experiences with CCTs in Mexico and Brazil, 63 low-and-middle income countries had at least one CCT program in operation (ODI 2016, 6). In the same year, the World Bank (2018) calculated that over one billion individuals around the world benefitted from a CCT. The enthusiasm with CCTs has not been limited to countries from the Global South. In the United States, for example, New York City launched a CCT called “Opportunity NYC” in 2007 modeled after Mexico’s program, and since then many European countries followed suit (e.g. UK and Slovakia, see Medgyesi and

¹ *Progresa* was initially implemented in 1997, and it had its name changed to *Oportunidades* in 2000, and to *Prospera* in 2012. To avoid the extensive acronym of *Progresa-Oportunidades-Prospera*, I use simply *Progresa*.

Temesváry 2013).² As a result, the two pioneering programs *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* have garnered the attention of scholars and policymakers worldwide (De la O 2015), and have been credited with ushering in a “new generation” of “pro-poor” poverty policies by World Bank economists (Rawlings 2005) and critical development anthropologists alike (Ferguson 2015). Just to cite one reference, in 2004, the director of the Center for Global Development was quoted in the New York Times calling CCTs “as close as you can come to a magic bullet in development”³ (Adato and Hoddinott 2012, 4).

After 20 years of CCT implementation, we know a lot about these programs. Scholarly research has shown that CCTs have been effective in reducing the rate and, above all, the intensity of poverty (Medellin et al 2015). Although there is evidence of inclusion and exclusion errors, CCTs have reached the poorest people, achieving targeting levels greater than those of most (if not all) previous social programs (Grosh et al 2008, IPC 2015). In addition, CCTs have had positive impacts on health service use, have reduced child labor and increased school enrollment and attendance in many countries (Gaarder, Glassman, and Todd 2010; Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Saavedra and García 2012). As I heard over and over again during my fieldwork, “CCTs probably have been the most studied anti-poverty program by the international community in the last decade, so we know a lot about them.”

However, something that is often missed is how much CCTs and their impact on poverty are shaped by the challenges that states face to legitimate these programs, i.e. by how states

² As it will become clear in the dissertation, a few characteristics differentiate CCTs from other forms of welfare cash transfers in developed countries. First, in CCTs, the amount of cash transferred is very small (e.g. in Brazil families receive between US\$16-61 a month, which represents ~20% of poor families’ household income, and in Mexico US\$14-146 a month, representing ~40% of household income). Second, in CCTs, there are no work requirements (or job search and trainings), conditionalities are meant to stimulate that families invest in their education and health outcomes, regardless of their work status. Third, transfers are longer-term and non-contributory (rather than based on social security contributions or on insurance and disability schemes).

³ “To Help the Poor Be Pupils Not Wage Earners, Brazil Pays Parents,” New York Times, January 3, 2004.

justify “simply giving cash to the poor” to distinct audiences (Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme 2010). While CCTs have been celebrated by the international development community as “magic bullets,” in most national contexts in which they have been implemented, CCTs have initially been met with great suspicion (De La O 2015, Fiszbein and Schady 2009). Perhaps, this is not surprising, considering that CCTs are a form of non-contributory social transfer and hence they are likely to awaken historical battles over deserving and undeserving poor that have characterized the development of welfare policies in most states (Amenta 2003). Yet, scholars have paid little attention to how distinct legitimation strategies have shaped the implementation of CCTs and their effects on poverty.

This dissertation argues that to fully understand what is at stake in CCTs, and in poverty-alleviation programs more broadly, the analysis needs to focus on the *states* implementing these programs and on the context-specific challenges they face to legitimate them. I demonstrate that a key factor to achieve the legitimacy and political viability of CCTs is the knowledge regimes that states create to implement and evaluate these programs. I conceptualize knowledge regimes as the institutional arrangements and policy tools that states adopt to identify, reach, and monitor beneficiary families, as well as the apparatus they develop to evaluate these programs (Campbell and Pedersen 2014). The dissertation shows that while knowledge regimes tend to be understood as technical or apolitical machineries, they are inherently shaped by the politics of legitimation of CCTs and they produce unanticipated consequences for the ways that states combat poverty in the long-run. Only by taking into consideration the role that knowledge production plays in securing the political viability of CCTs, I argue, we can assess the politics and consequences of these programs, and how they relate to poor families on the ground.

To build this argument, I go back to the origins of CCTs, and focus on the two pioneering programs, *Progresa* in Mexico and *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil. I chose these two cases not only because they were the first ones and by 2017 were the two biggest CCTs in the world, but especially because they represented two different models of knowledge production about CCTs. As I will describe in detail in the dissertation, in Mexico, the state designed a knowledge regime that focused on identifying poor families in a very precise and rigid way, and partnered with US economists to implement an RCT evaluation to legitimate *Progresa*. In Brazil, the state adopted a much simpler and dynamic approach to identify and monitor beneficiary families, and aimed to secure the generation of policy knowledge to domestic experts by investing in statistical analysis about the impacts of *Bolsa Familia*. Marshaling a rich set of qualitative data and process-tracing methods, my dissertation explains why these two similar countries, adopting the same policy, took different routes to implement and assess the merits of CCTs, and what unintended consequences followed from these choices.

Research Questions and Main Arguments

Through the comparison of the knowledge regimes that were created to implement CCTs in Mexico and Brazil, this dissertation examines the distinct and dynamic ways in which legitimation challenges shape anti-poverty efforts across different national contexts. Two set of questions guide this research. First, what happens when two states that have different political histories initiate the same poverty-alleviation program? Do they face similar legitimation challenges? Second, how do knowledge production and measurement practices affect the outcomes of anti-poverty programs? To answer these questions, I develop an argument that builds on and contributes to debates in comparative-historical sociology, political sociology and

science and technology studies. Next, I briefly present the dissertation's main arguments by connecting them to the three stages of CCT adoption – their policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. In addition, I clarify the contributions of my findings to each of the scholarly fields mentioned above.

First, to trace the historical processes through which Mexico and Brazil independently decided to implement CCTs (i.e. the CCT policy-formulation process), I put comparative-historical sociology ideas in conversation with the political economy literature about welfare states in Latin America. While the latter has typically attributed the possibility of change in welfare structures to exogenous events, such as economic crises or transnational ideas (Weyland 2006, Mahoney 2000, Hirschman 1985), the former has focused on specifying the mechanisms of endogenous change typical of long-term social processes (Pierson 2004, Streeck and Thelen 2005, Barkey 2007). Similarly, in this research, I acknowledge political economists' explanations that the 1990's economic crisis opened a political window of opportunity for introducing CCTs in Latin America (De la O 2015, 10). However, building on historical-institutionalist insights, I connect the importance of economic crisis to the slowly-accumulating problem that the Mexican and Brazilian states faced in legitimating their poverty-alleviation efforts throughout their modern histories. Specifically, I depart from the focus on the 1990s' economic crisis as the main factor that led Mexico and Brazil to adopt CCTs (Díaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2009, Carnes and Marres 2014), to prioritize an explanation based on the politically-controversial history of welfare efforts in the two contexts and how they created distinct legitimation challenges for the two programs.

As such, I argue that the different styles of Mexican and Brazilian CCTs resulted from the distinct historical legacies that CCTs were expected to overcome in each context, as well as

from the specific political-institutional configurations of the two states in the initial years of *Progres*a and *Bolsa Familia*. In doing so, my research contributes to the literature on welfare states in Latin America by stressing the centrality that legitimation issues have in the design and impact of poverty-alleviation programs.

Second, to explain why Mexico and Brazil adopted distinct knowledge apparatus to operationalize the same policy (i.e. each CCT implementation), I build on the political sociology literature that explores the relationship between states, social knowledge, and the origins of social policies (Rueschmeyer and Skocpol 1996, Morgan and Orloff 2017). I show that variations in the organization of knowledge regimes and in the political needs of their respective leaderships explain national differences in how CCTs were implemented in Mexico and Brazil. Specifically, I focus on the data collection infrastructures for gathering information about poor families and their role in mediating political disputes over both programs. I demonstrate that each country developed policy tools to track the behavior of the poor that aimed to achieve distinct legitimation goals: while Mexico prioritized collecting a great amount of information about poor families to avoid inclusion mistakes, Brazil opted for a simpler approach, based solely on income per capita, meant to minimize exclusion errors. In both contexts, however, these choices changed the politics around CCTs in ways that were unanticipated by the main political actors, with long-term effects for the operation and legitimation of the two programs. This is because once databases about poor families were created, other actors could use this information to scrutinize policy decisions, requiring both states to frequently change CCTs' operations in response to external evaluations.

I connect this discussion on the knowledge infrastructure required to implement CCTs to research on what James Scott (1988) defined as state legibility – the strategies that states use to

see and govern their populations, to reveal how *seeing like a state* inevitably also *renders the state itself visible*. In doing so, this dissertation offers a novel conceptualization about variations in state legibility projects and their consequences. I show how Scott's account of high modernism, which contrasts top-down programs with local know-how, is insufficiently attentive to how bureaucratic rationalization is frequently produced by a symbiotic blending of the two. The main consequence of this two-ways relationship between *seeing* and *being seen*, I argue, is that even when legibility projects are accompanied by good intentions, intra-state politics can undermine the inclusive potential of these projects, as well as limit their future developments.

Finally, to explain why Mexico and Brazil took different routes to assess the merits of CCTs (i.e. their evaluations), I bridge political sociology and science and technology studies. Specifically, I show that Mexico's choice of adopting an RCT evaluation and Brazil's strong rejection to the experimental approach had less to do with the "intellectual preferences" of the key policymakers, and more to do with the distinct institutional and political environments in which they were operating. In doing so, the dissertation provides new lenses into how policymakers make sense of competing types of evidence and the political work involved in assessing the merits of social policy interventions. In addition, by juxtaposing a positive and a negative case of the use of RCTs, my work provides an in-depth account of the political economy surrounding this method. Considering the prominent role that these policy experiments currently play in determining "what works" in the development community, my findings are also relevant to envision the possibilities of creating more democratic methods of establishing the political viability of transferring money to the poor.

In sum, by looking at how legitimation issues shape the policy formulation, implementation and evaluation of CCTs, this dissertation reveals the key role that knowledge

regimes play in securing the political viability of poverty-alleviation programs. In doing so, I hope to stimulate a renewed attention to the *states* that implement distinct poverty-alleviation policies, for sociologists to gain further insights into how bureaucratic disputes over measurement have real consequences for poor families. As my dissertation shows, while technical debates about policy implementation and evaluation can be easily categorized as tedious and apolitical, they have direct consequences for the social distribution of power inside states, and hence to how policymakers handle anti-poverty programs.

Comparative Methodology and Data

This dissertation adopts a comparative-historical approach to explain differences in the knowledge production about CCTs in Mexico and Brazil between 1995 and 2017. Through an in-depth, interpretative lens (Geertz 1968; Barkey 2008; Fourcade 2009, 12-15), I juxtapose the experience of two similar countries, adopting two similar policies, but while Mexico developed a very rigorous and rigid way of conceptualizing and governing poverty, Brazil opted for a more loose and dynamic approach. I use what Skocpol and Sommers (1980, 178) call the “contrast of contexts” method of comparative historical analysis to analytically flesh out the causes and consequences of different poverty knowledge regimes.

The choice of Brazil and Mexico is particularly suitable for this type of comparison. First, as I mentioned earlier, they were the first two countries in the world to implement conditional cash transfer programs as their main instrument to combat poverty (Fiszbien and Schady 2009); Brazil initially experimented with municipal-level CCTs in 1995, and Mexico had its first pilot CCT in the same year. It is commonly acknowledged that Brazil and Mexico have the only two CCT programs to be considered locally rooted, in the sense that they were designed

independently of each other, and financed without the support of international organizations (Lindert et al 2007; Tomazini 2017). At the time of initial program formulation, therefore, these two countries did not have a blueprint for how to make CCTs work, so they had to implement the program by building on their previous experiences with poverty programs.

Second, these two countries have historically shared multiple socioeconomic characteristics, as well as comparable population size, regional diversity and economic development, which together allow for a considerable amount of control over other influences on the politics of legitimating CCTs. Table P.1 compiles three key indexes produced by international organizations, illustrating the initial comparison of the socioeconomic and state characteristics of both countries. Although these indexes have limitations (Ravallion 2012), they succinctly demonstrate that, in addition to Brazil and Mexico being the first and second biggest Latin American economies based on GDP, respectively, they also receive comparable scores and rankings in global indexes measuring social development (HDI), government effectiveness (GES) and corruption perception (CPI). Further, in Appendix 1, I present additional historical trends in socioeconomic indicators in the two countries (particularly Figures A.1- A.4) that show systematic similarities in the historical trajectories of the two countries.

Table P.1 Socioeconomic, Bureaucratic and Political Similarities between Brazil and Mexico

	Population (2000), millions	Human Development Index (2000) ⁴	Government Effectiveness Score (2000) ⁵	Corruption Perception Index (2000) ⁶
Brazil	194.95	0.68	58	3.9 (high)
Mexico	113.42	0.70	62	3.3 (high)

Third, and relatedly, Brazil and Mexico shared a history of state-led economic development, corporatism and political clientelism (Ferraro and Centeno 2018, Schneider 2000), which imposed similar organizational and political challenges for the legitimation of their CCTs. As I will elaborate further throughout the dissertation, in these two contexts there was a great fear that distributing cash to the poor would facilitate corruption and that CCTs would be used for electoral purposes. Likewise, both CCTs were implemented after the 1980s economic crisis that severely hit many Latin American countries (Ocampo 2014) and was accompanied by structural reforms that imposed severe fiscal adjustments and sought to reduce the size of the state (Fourcade and Babb 2002). When CCTs were implemented, therefore, Brazilian and Mexican policymakers also faced very similar fiscal constraints.

There were, of course, many differences between Brazil and Mexico, especially as it relates to the political trajectories and institution-building of these two states – differences that I

⁴ The Human Development Index (HDI) aggregates data from a number of socioeconomic indicators, ranging from 0 (very low HDI) to 100 (very high HDI). In 2000, Mexico ranked 77 and Brazil 79 out of 188 countries. See <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/trends>, accessed on June 15, 2018.

⁵ The Government Effectiveness Score (GES) captures perceptions of experts on the quality of public services and the degree of its independence from political pressures. It ranges from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest rank). In 2000, Brazil was ranked 61 while Mexico 64, out of 175 countries. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance>, accessed on July 23, 2018.

⁶ The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) aggregates data of experts' perception of the level of corruption in the public sector. The index ranges from 0 (high corruption) to 10 (low). In 2000, Brazil ranked 49 and Mexico 59, out of 90 countries. See https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/cpi_2000/0, accessed on June 15, 2018.

will present in detail in Chapter 1. For example, since 1930, Brazil has experienced great political discontinuities, alternating between democratic (1930-1937; 1945-1964; 1985-present) and dictatorial regimes (1937-1945; 1964-1985). In Mexico, on the other hand, a single political party—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—was in power for 71 consecutive years (1929-2000) (Ackerman 2016). Moreover, after 1988, Brazilian municipalities and states were granted more autonomy and resources (Arretche 1996); while in Mexico the federal system was still very centralized at the federal government, even after many attempts at decentralization (Díaz-Cayeros 2016). These differences inform my analysis, and are especially relevant to explaining the link between knowledge regimes and legitimation of each CCT.

To implement this comparative framework, I combine document analysis with interviews of bureaucratic and political elites, gathered during 14 months of fieldwork in Brasília and Mexico City.⁷ As part of the analysis, I examined and coded a rich set of policy documents, academic papers and legislation about social policies in general, and *Bolsa Familia* and *Progres* in particular (n=10,000 pages), in order to trace the institutional configurations and policy decisions that shaped Brazil and Mexico’s decisions regarding implementation and evaluation. My comparative analysis also relies on 100 in-depth interviews conducted with high-level bureaucrats, politicians, and academics in Brazil and in Mexico between 2015 and 2017. I used interviews to understand the political and epistemological rationale behind their policy choices, as well as to investigate their perceived consequences. To do so, I adopted a semi-structured interview schedule, with differential probes at specific moments of the interview, in accordance with previous publications or public statements about the programs made by each interviewee (see Table A.3 for a sample interview schedule). This strategy allowed me to “follow the

⁷ I spent a total of 6 months in Mexico (2017) and 8 months in Brazil (2015, 2016, 2017).

controversy” about these programs (Latour 1987) but also collect systematic data to reconstruct the rationale behind the political choices underlying the adoption of each CCT.

Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes. Sampling occurred in two steps. First, I selected those state officials that historically had occupied the highest position in the main state agencies involved in poverty management in the two countries (across a 15-year period for *Bolsa Familia* and a 20-year one for *Progresas*), which amounted to 16 individuals. I complemented this initial list with the authors of the most-cited scholarly publications about the two programs. Second, I asked these interviewees to point me to other officials and academics that had been or were involved in the debates and decision-making about poverty in each context. Through this snowball sampling method, I interviewed 100 members of the policy and academic elites of Brazil and Mexico. Descriptive statistics of my interviewees can be found in Appendix 3.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized in three parts, which follow the legitimacy problem in the three key moments of the social policy-making process: Part I – The New Poverty Agenda (or Policy Formulation); Part II – The Implementation; and Part III – The Evaluation. While the dissertation argues that these stages are not discrete and explains their interdependence, for analytical purposes, this division allows for an in-depth discussion of the politics of knowledge-making in the different moments of CCT implementation.

Part I – The New Poverty Agenda is composed of Chapter 1. Through a multilayered interpretation of Mexico and Brazil’s trajectories toward CCTs, the chapter shows how these two countries decided to implement the same policy, but they arrived at CCTs through different processes and facing distinct legitimation challenges and opportunities. The chapter provides the

necessary background to understand Parts II and III, where I provide the bulk of the empirical analysis of the causes and consequences of the distinct knowledge regimes that were created to implement and evaluate *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*. Specifically, Chapter 1 emphasizes how *Progresa* was created *prior* to Mexico's democratic transition and faced multiple legitimation challenges resulting from the 71-years legacy of the PRI-era, while *Bolsa Familia* was established *after* Brazil's democratic transition by a popular left-wing president – a context that created a distinct set of challenges. Besides, the chapter aims to provide a historical, process-oriented characterization of the adoption of CCTs, against universalist interpretations that tend to suggest that the same underlying forces lead different countries to adopt similar policies (Meyer et al 1992), or that suggest that institutional changes in mid-or-low developing countries result mostly from exogenous factors or transnational ideas (Weyland 2006).

Part II – The Implementation is composed of three chapters that together explain the initial targeting strategies of each CCT, as well as their long-term consequences. In Chapter 2, I conceptualize CCT targeting (i.e. the strategies that states adopt to identify and monitor poor families) as a form of state legibility to compare the differences and similarities in the knowledge regimes that Brazil and Mexico adopted to implement *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*. Through a critical revision of the literature on legibility and specifically of James Scott's conceptualization of the term (1998), Chapter 2 proposes an analytical framework to study legibility projects from a comparative perspective, which can also be used beyond the case of CCTs.

Chapters 3 and 4 empirically give substance to the comparative framework with an in-depth, interpretative analysis of how Mexico and Brazil made poor individuals legible in order to implement CCTs (Chapter 3), and by analyzing the long-term consequences of these initial choices on poverty governance (Chapter 4). In Chapter 3, I explain that creating instruments of

legibility to see and monitor poor families involved a trade-off between extending policy coverage and improving efficiency in targeting, and that the choices made by the Mexican and Brazilian states regarding this trade-off reflect their distinct legitimation strategies. Whereas Mexico prioritized refining the targeting instrument to minimize inclusion errors (or false positives), Brazil elected to expand its targeting broadly to reduce exclusion errors (or false negatives). However, in Chapter 4, I illustrate how the same information systems that were created to make the poor visible changed the ways that these programs were evaluated and scrutinized. In Brazil, multiple actors evaluated *Bolsa Familia*'s beneficiary dataset (its main legibility tool), while in Mexico, policymakers prioritized protecting their organizational data, although they were often blinded to poverty dynamics on the ground.

Part III – The Evaluation is composed of two chapters that together explain why Mexican and Brazilian policymakers chose different evaluation strategies to assess the impacts of CCTs (Chapter 5), as well as their long-term consequences (Chapter 6). In Chapter 5, I show how differences in the institutional, political and epistemic at the initial moment of CCT adoption impacted the legitimation challenges of each program, and hence the evaluation choices made by policymakers. In Mexico, the weak social policy regulatory environment coupled with great suspicions of the goals of anti-poverty programs and the majority of US-trained economist staff contributed to the perception that an RCT was the most “bullet-proof” method. In Brazil, the robust social policy regulatory environment coupled with the prestige of its state officials and the accumulated domestic expertise in poverty-line studies contributed to the perception that statistical analysis of the impacts of the BFP on poverty were enough to assess the program.

Chapter 6 investigates the consequences of these short-term evaluation strategies for the long-term legitimation of the two programs, as they could be observed in 2017. By reviewing the

main political-institutional changes that Mexico and Brazil experienced in the past 15-20 years, I show how policymakers adapted their evaluation strategies to the new scenarios. I suggest that while a return to democracy and a reenergized regulatory environment imposed new challenges to *Progresa*, its staff continued to build on the legacy of the initial RCT evaluation, and to benefit from an insulated administrative structure inside the state to shape the image of the program for domestic and international audiences. *Bolsa Familia* , in turn, continued to benefit from a period of reduction in poverty and inequality rates, as well as from political continuity at the federal government, which allowed the program to develop institutional resilience as a result of the constant scrutiny from other agencies in the Brazilian state.

Finally, I conclude with an epilogue connecting the findings of my dissertation to the unexpected fates of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* in light of the 2018 presidential elections of a left-wing candidate in Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and an extreme-right candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil. Even if more temporal distance would be needed to provide conclusive answers, I reveal how my findings help to explain why AMLO eliminated *Progresa*, while Bolsonaro chose to maintain *Bolsa Familia*.

PART I – THE NEW POVERTY AGENDA

CHAPTER 1: THE POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMS IN BRAZIL AND MEXICO

Introduction

Since Brazil and Mexico adopted conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) as their main anti-poverty strategies in the 1990s, many academic and non-academic accounts have emerged to narrate these efforts. The main political actors involved in the early days of Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* (BFP) and Mexico's *Progresa* (PP) have shared their perspectives (Levy 2006, Hernandez 2008, Campello and Neri 2013), as have numerous scholars in the fields of political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, history and beyond (e.g. Adato and Hoddinott 2010, Bischir 2011, Rocha and Escobar 2012, Fiszbien et al 2009). With so much ink already spilled over these two programs, an informed reader might wonder if there is anything new to say about them.

In this chapter, I will draw on that wide body of writing, synthesizing insights and explanatory variables to explain the institutional, political and epistemic contexts in which initial decisions about the two CCTs were made. In doing so, my goal is to depart from the political economy literature's focus on the role that economic crises have played in enacting the adoption of CCTs in Latin America (De La O 2015), to provide an account that centers on how Mexico and Brazil have historically differed in terms of their legitimation challenges surrounding poverty-alleviation efforts. By narrating the political origins of *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa* through the lenses of the distinct legitimacy legacies they faced, the chapter offers an original assessment of the orientations and intentions of policymakers who first implemented these programs. This analysis will provide the necessary background to understand the chapters that

follow, where I will trace the consequences of the initial decisions as they have played out over the last two decades.

As with any historical narrative, there are multiple possible entry points to the story of *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa*. Should we start with the political context in which these decisions were made, or the institutional one? Is it better to foreground the academic environment and professional training of policymakers, or to evaluate the policy tools that were available? Should the arc of the narrative prioritize chronological causality or break things down conceptually?

To complicate matters further, each of these strategies necessarily imply different historical periodizations. For example, if we prioritize the political trajectory of *Bolsa Familia*, the crucial moment seems to be President Lula's ascent to power in 2003; if we are guided by the social policy trajectory, however, we would have to go back to 1995 when the first municipal CCTs were implemented in Brazil. Similarly, in Mexico most popular narratives about *Progresa* give causal priority to the 1994 Peso Economic Crisis, while others that prioritize the political context sometimes go back as far as the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

In this chapter, my intention is not to argue that one or another variable is the most important in explaining the uptake of CCTs, or the implementation and evaluation decisions that were made in Brazil and Mexico. (I leave this task to political scientists and their regressions—see De La O 2015 and Maldonado 2012 for interesting examples.) As an interpretative historical sociologist, my analytical premise is that historical causalities are always multidimensional, and their explanatory emphases depend on the intellectual concerns and basic theoretical framework of the analyst in question. My goal, then, is to provide a rich description of the political, economic, academic and institutional contexts in which initial decisions were made, thereby helping readers to understand the legitimacy struggles that the BFP and PP originally faced,

which provide the bigger picture of my analysis in the rest of this dissertation. Specifically, I will outline why political actors in Brazil and Mexico chose the paths they did over other possibilities, and situate these decisions in the broader context of the two countries.

My analysis indicates similar “conditions of possibility” leading to the adoption of CCTs in Brazil and Mexico. In each instance, we can identify i) a political rupture accompanied by attempts at institution building; ii) an intense trial period of policy experimentation with anti-poverty efforts; iii) ideological and academic battles over the role of the state and society in reducing poverty; and iv) attempts to fight poverty under fiscal constraints. That is, it is possible to identify similar factors operating in the two contexts, but these factors interacted in distinct ways, resulting in different policy decisions in Brazil and Mexico.

Even with these underlying similarities, I will also argue that there were important differences in the legitimation challenges both in which the BFP and the PP started and in the paths their respective countries took in the years since their implementation. Throughout the dissertation, I will demonstrate that the political actors involved in the trajectories of *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresá* stayed true to certain aspects of the programs’ initial intent while also adapting their legitimation strategies to changes in the political, economic and international scenarios. Furthermore, poverty and society changed since the BFP and PP began, setting off a reiterative process of change in state and societal structures, which will also be investigated in this dissertation.

By adopting a comparative-interpretative approach to study the two programs, I also aim to shed light on a heated academic and political debate over which country was the *real* pioneer in implementing conditional cash transfer programs. The controversy emerges from the difficulty of establishing a date of origin. *Progresá* was officially implemented in 1997 and *Bolsa Familia*

in 2003, but each program resulted from experimentation with smaller CCTs dating back to 1995, and from academic debates about income policies that can be traced back to the 1980s. By reconstructing the origins of the two programs through a multifaceted perspective, I hope it will become clear that the controversy about who experimented with CCTs first reflects an analytical disagreement over when a new policy starts. The differences concern the object of analysis rather than the historical events that led to the creation of each CCT.⁸

This chapter begins with a description of the Mexican route toward *Progresa*, followed by the Brazilian trajectory toward *Bolsa Familia*. For each country, I present i) the main characteristics of the economic and political contexts; ii) the failures and legacies of previous anti-poverty efforts; iii) the institutional building around the two programs; and iv) the professional and academic habitus of experts and policymakers involved in the early years of the programs. I then conclude by summarizing the comparative findings. I relate this history by drawing on a very rich secondary literature about the BFP and PP. Whenever possible, I also include my own data, including analysis of policy documents and academic debates, and interviews with the main political actors and experts. Appendix 1 presents a series of socioeconomic indicators for Brazil and Mexico to provide a historical perspective of the development paths these countries experienced in the 20th century.

⁸ I take this question seriously because it could potentially impact the comparative argument of my dissertation. If it could be shown, for example, that Brazil did not implement a randomized controlled trial evaluation (RCT) in the early years of *Bolsa Familia* because Mexico had already performed one, and that somehow domestic experts in Brazil were convinced that this was enough to legitimate the BFP, then I would have to incorporate a transnational perspective to my analysis. There are many problems with this hypothesis (e.g. it neglects the main criticisms towards RCTs, i.e. that they do not provide external validity; and hence “findings” are not transportable between different contexts). Instead, I will explain that the two countries made their decisions regarding evaluation and implementation facing similar pressures from international organizations to adopt “best practices,” but domestic disputes and legitimation struggles in Brazil and in Mexico were more important for their decision-making regarding CCTs. As mentioned in the preface, I do so by building on an extensive literature which has shown that Brazil and Mexico’s CCTs are the only two CCT programs in the world that can be considered locally rooted, in the sense that they were originally designed in parallel and financed without the support of international organizations (Handa and Davis 2006; Sugiyama 2013; Tomazini 2017).

1.1 The Mexican Route to *Progres*

In his remarks during the official launch of *Progres* on August 6, 1997, President Ernesto Zedillo stated, “I am here today to tell all the people of Mexico, the people of Hidalgo, about PROGRESA, a Program of the Federal Government to make the fight against poverty more efficient, especially in rural communities.”⁹ One might wonder why a President would choose to emphasize efficiency in his announcement of a new poverty program, rather than, say, justice, equality or social rights. The answer reveals a lot about the context in which *Progres* was implemented and the multiple policy legacies that it was expected to replace. Regarding the economic-political context, the decisions regarding the adoption, implementation and legitimization of *Progres* were made in the midst of what some have called “the worst economic crisis in Mexico’s history” by a deeply unpopular President who was facing multiple political crises and rising societal pressure for democratic opening and transparency. By underlining efficiency, as I explain in detail below, President Zedillo revealed his belief in the technocratic legitimization of program, and aimed to differentiate *Progres* from previous anti-poverty programs in Mexico that were associated with political clientelism, inefficiency and corruption.

In this section, I explain the political, economic and academic contexts in which decisions about *Progres* were initially made. To do so, I start with a historical overview of anti-poverty programs in Mexico. Next, I focus specifically on Mexico’s first experimentation with conditional cash transfers, the 1995 pilot program PASE (el *Programa de Alimentación, Salud y Educación*). Here, I highlight the scholarly controversies, professional disputes and implementation dilemmas that PASE faced and that influenced the final shape of *Progres*.

⁹ Ernesto Zedillo, “Presentation of PROGRESA in Hidalgo, Mexico 1997” (Cardonal, Hidalgo, August 6, 1997), http://zedillo.presidencia.gob.mx/welcome/PAGES/library/sp_06aug97.html.

Third, I present the institutional arrangement and the relationship between the political and expert fields that characterized the early days of the program.

The Mexican State and Anti-Poverty Efforts

In the early 1920s, following the country's revolutionary triumph, successive Mexican administrations led by the PRI sought to achieve the promised goals of justice and equality through policies centered on institution building, economic development, industrialization, agricultural development and redistribution. Over the next five decades, social rights were legislated; land reform was implemented; social welfare institutions were created; social services in education, health, housing and social security were extended to reach a wider population; and new programs of social assistance for vulnerable groups were implemented (Valencia and Aguirre 1998). In the economic sphere, the federal government also invested heavily in the modernization of Mexico's economy via industrialization and urbanization efforts that, together with social welfare institutions, were expected to broadly improve living conditions. The combination of these state initiatives and favorable global economic conditions allowed Mexico to achieve impressive socioeconomic improvements between 1930 and 1970, transitioning from an agrarian rural society to a semi-industrialized and urban one. (See Appendix 1, Figures A.1-A.3 for socioeconomic indicators of Mexico's demographic transition over time.)

By the 1970s, however, it was clear that the economic growth and favorable social indicators obfuscated a great inequality in socioeconomic results. While urban and middle-class groups benefited greatly from the state's developmental project (Knight 2018), high poverty levels still existed throughout Mexico, particularly in rural areas (Yaschine and Orozco 2010, 58). Hence, after a fertile period of creation of social welfare institutions and legislation with

universal mandates, in the 1970s, the Mexican state started experimenting with social policies targeted specifically at the poor and rural populations. It was in this context that two presidents from the progressive fraction of the PRI (more about this below), Luis Echeverría (in office 1970-1976) and José López Portillo (1976-1982), implemented a series of comprehensive poverty-alleviation programs to stimulate rural development in Mexico: PIDER in 1973 (*Programa de Inversiones Públicas para el Desarrollo Rural*), COPLAMAR in 1976 (*Plan Nacional de Zonas Deprimidas y Grupos Marginados*), and SAM in 1980 (*Sistema Alimentario Mexicano*).

It is not my intention to offer a detailed review of the policy design, implementation challenges and performance of these three programs (see Grindle 1986; Gibson, Lustig and Taylor 1982), but it is important to stress two resulting lessons that would inform future targeted-poverty policies in Mexico. First, these programs diagnosed peasants and small rural communities as the losers of the previously employed developmental model in Mexico, and adopted an official language of marginality to refer to these areas. (The concept of marginality and attempts to measure it were emerging around this time and would influence greatly the targeting decisions of *Progresá* in the 1990s [Cortés and Rubavalca 2012].) Second, these were very comprehensive and expensive programs that involved infrastructure building, coordination between multiple government agencies, social service provisions, subsidies for food consumption and production that aimed to achieve rural development and peasant self-sufficiency (Yashine 1999). By the early 1980s, the consensus in Mexico was that these programs were falling far short of expectations, with critics pointing out their “duplication of functions, excessive spending, operational problems, and few results” (Yaschine and Orozco

2010, 59; see also World Bank 1979). This dissatisfaction sowed the seeds of the *Progresista* approach, which would be based on a simpler and less expensive policy design.

In 1982, Miguel de La Madrid was elected President in the midst of a severe economic crisis in Mexico. Although de La Madrid was a candidate from the PRI, his election marks an ideological shift in PRI leadership, with the baton being passed from the “social reformists” of the 1960s and 1970s to the “technocratic group” that would govern Mexico and the PRI until 2000 (Valencia and Aguirre 1998). This group had academic training in economics and public administration, often from Ivy League institutions in the US,¹⁰ and went on to lead the controversial IMF-backed structural adjustment and stabilization policies in Mexico (Centeno 1994). Importantly for our purposes, it was under the administration of the technocratic group that Mexico underwent a period of great reduction of public spending, resulting in a drastic change in the social policy model. For example, there was a 6.2% annual contraction in social spending from 1983 to 1988 (Yaschine 1999), and the three rural poverty programs cited above were dismantled.

Although the structural adjustment policies were successful in achieving macroeconomic stability and growth, health, nutrition and education indicators deteriorated, and the informal sector grew dramatically during the 1980s (Lustig 1992). It is in this context that President Carlos Salinas took office (1988-1994), a period that also saw rising demands for democratic opening and an end to the then-60 year stretch of single-party rule.¹¹ Although, the PRI was able to secure the (highly controversial) presidential election of Salinas, it fell for the first time below

¹⁰ To cite three prominent examples, President De La Madrid (1982-1988) had a master’s in public administration from Harvard; President Salinas (1988-1994) had a masters and a PhD in government from Harvard; and President Zedillo (1994-2000) had a masters and PhD in economics from Yale.

¹¹ The PRI was in power from 1929-2000. The party was originally christened the National Revolutionary Party in 1929 (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, PNR), then the Party of the Mexican Revolution in 1938 (*Partido de la Revolución Mexicana*, PRM), and finally renamed itself as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI) in 1946.

the two-thirds mark in Congress, the supermajority required to approve constitutional amendments which the PRI had often used to consolidate its power (Centeno 1994). Conscious that the times had changed in Mexico, Salinas would use his presidency to try to regain public support and loyalty for the PRI. To this end, he launched PRONASOL (*el Programa Nacional de Solidaridad*) in 1988 to demonstrate a renewed commitment to social policy and address the country's social and political crises.

As will become clear below, *Progesa* is a direct reaction to what policymakers in 1997 saw as the failure and political capture of PRONASOL, and also an indirect product of the policy knowledge accumulated through PRONASOL and the three earlier rural poverty programs (PIDER, COPLAMAR and SAM). PRONASOL itself was built on the experience of PIDER and COPLAMAR, in that it similarly employed a variety of targeting criteria, was demand-based, required community participation and decentralized the administration of funds to the level of the municipality (Yaschine 1999). However, PRONASOL went further, incorporating a wide range of food subsidies (mostly for milk and *tortillas*), which resulted in a speedy increase of its initial budget. The resources allocated to the program grew from 6.6% of total public expenditures in 1989 to 26.3% in 1994 (Guevara Sanguinés 1996). Moreover, in 1992, the Ministry of Social Development (Sedesol) was created to administer the program, further institutionalizing PRONASOL and the food subsidy programs.

Despite the World Bank considering the program a success at its height, scholars and policy analysts ultimately deemed PRONASOL highly clientelistic and less than effective at reducing poverty (Cornelius, Craig and Fox 1994). Critics mocked it as “PRInasol,” for its focus on generating loyalty to the PRI (Rocha Menocal 2001, 515). Many studies convincingly showed that the funding from PRONASOL was strategically distributed based on electoral goals of the

PRI, rewarding families who were loyal to the party and disbursing more funds to municipalities where the PRI had lost its dominance (Díaz-Cayeros and Magolini 2003). Many civil society actors and social movements also connected PRONASOL and Sedesol to the PRI's clientelistic strategies. For example, Subcomandante Marcos,¹² spokesman of the Zapatista insurgency, referred pointedly to the "government office of alms, Sedesol."

Given the widespread perception that the program was operating in the service of PRI's interests, it became clear that the next step in Mexican poverty-alleviation efforts would need to attempt to move away from PRONASOL in order to gain political and social legitimacy, while at the same time learning from its mistakes. Among the policy design aspects that made PRONASOL susceptible to political capture were: i) allocation of funds at the municipality level (perceived as perpetuating PRI's clientelistic network at the local level); ii) beneficiary buy-in and community participation (perceived as excluding the extremely poor, who were the least likely to organize and to present proposals; and also the "solidarity committees" were perceived not as autonomous representative entities, but subject to clientelistic relations¹³); and iii) a multiplicity of subprograms prone to inefficiency and duplicated efforts. However, PRONASOL was not exclusively a cautionary tale. Among the positive lessons, PRONASOL showed that it was possible to implement a broad anti-poverty agenda in congruence with neoliberal economic policies, and to employ geographical targeting for policy implementation purposes, which would also be used by *Progresá*, albeit with significant modifications (Yaschine 1999).

¹² See "Letters to Ernesto Zedillo", in *Ya Basta!: Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising* (AK Press, 2004), 74.

¹³ Initially, the policy idea in PRONASOL was that "solidarity committees," composed of grass-roots level community organizations would give input into the selection of projects and beneficiaries as a means to stimulate popular participation in the program, but the overall perception is that these committees were used to broker support for the PRI (Kaufman and Trejo 1997).

Early Mexican experimentation with CCT: The origins of the technocratic commitment during the Zedillo administration

In December 1994, President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) took office in a context of great economic and political instability due to the financial crisis that broke out that month (known as the Peso or Tequila Crisis), the indigenous Zapatista rebellion that had launched earlier that year in the state of Chiapas and widespread dissatisfaction with what was considered an undemocratic political regime (Yaschine and Orozco 2010). As the last President of the PRI's seven-decade stranglehold on power, Zedillo attempted to quell the PRI's legitimacy crisis through considerable, explicit efforts to differentiate his administration from his predecessor's. A first step in this direction was the dismantling of PRONASOL, even if some of its programs (notably the food subsidies) continued to operate through Sedesol.

Zedillo was also the first president to enter office after the inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994. This represented a continuation of the orthodox economic policies implemented since 1982, but it dramatically changed the conditions for the design and management of social policies because of a perceived necessity to promote competitiveness through human capital development, legitimating the fight against poverty in explicitly macroeconomic terms. (For an explanation of the link between the macroeconomic changes brought by NAFTA and anti-poverty policies, see Cortés and Rubalcava 2012).

As part of the PRI's technocratic group, Zedillo formed a cabinet whose views were congruent with his own academic training in economics at Yale. This was especially true of his Finance Ministry (*Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público*, SHCP), the agency that would be responsible for leading the Mexican economy out of the 1994 Peso Crisis. As part of this team,

Santiago Levy, an economist trained at Boston University, was nominated the Undersecretary of Expenditures at the Finance Ministry. Levy came to the federal government after writing an influential World Bank report in 1991, calling for drastic changes in Mexico's anti-poverty policy, including the elimination of food subsidies, and endorsing the need for human capital development, better policy targeting and increased attention to the extreme poor (Levy 1991). In this report, Levy did not directly advocate for a CCT anti-poverty design, but he planted the initial seed of giving extremely poor families food coupons instead of in-kind goods or food. He also articulated the link between human capital and governmental transfers that would be crucial to *Progresas*:

Policies for the extremely-poor need to exploit the complementarities among nutrition, health and education. More food by itself will only give transitory benefits to the extremely-poor; it will not allow them to eventually get on their feet and work their way out of poverty. Directly targeted benefits for the extremely-poor must consist of a basic package that simultaneously delivers selected foods, preventive health and education about hygiene, birth control, food preparation and conservation and the like... Food pricing policies should be divorced from poverty considerations. (ibid, 85)

Under Levy's leadership and with the support of President Zedillo, a pilot-project of a conditional cash transfer, named PASE (*Programa de Alimentación, Salud y Educación*) was implemented in 1995 to test these ideas. Not much has been written about PASE because according to Cortés and Rubavalca (2012, 34) "there is no official documentation, there is no official decree published about the program, or a publication about its rule of operations." The decision to conceal the pilot CCT with 31,000 families in the state of Campeche was deliberate, as Levy (1996, 35) admitted: "the pilot was unannounced and implemented in Campeche, which is relatively far from Mexico City, in order not to attract too much political attention." Even so, among the high-level political, bureaucratic and academic elites in Mexico, the implementation

of PASE generated a heated, if short-lived, debate about what a full-scale CCT would, should and could look like.

As would happen with *Progresa*, PASE was accompanied by a policy evaluation that helped to reveal both the successes and shortcomings of the program. On the positive side, PASE was considered the first real break from Mexico's tradition of failed anti-poverty programs by providing cash rather than food transfers, and by requiring beneficiaries to have regular medical check-ups to receive these cash transfers (Bates 2004). However, there were many problems. PASE did not involve education or nutrition conditionalities, making it unclear exactly how human capital would accumulate. Because it built on the existing infrastructure of the regressive food subsidies program, PASE could not reach the extreme poor. Cash was distributed through debit cards, but a lack of ATMs in most regions of Campeche made it difficult for beneficiaries to obtain their money. Finally, there were multiple operational problems deriving from the “modernist hubris” diagnosed by James Scott (1998)—to cite just one example, families were expected to buy their health services despite the absence of such markets in poor municipalities (Hernandez 2008).

At this point, crucially for the history of *Progresa*, the Finance Ministry team responsible for PASE joined forces with staff from the National Population Council of Mexico, CONAPO (*Consejo Nacional de Población*), to grapple with the problems found in the pilot CCT program (Bates 2004). In contrast to the technocratic group from the Finance Ministry, which was composed mostly of US-trained economists, CONAPO was led by José Gomez de León, who, while himself Harvard-trained, had a background in demography, sociology and statistics and whose multi-disciplinary team consisted mostly of Mexico-trained staff (Yaschine and Orozco 2010). As I will explain in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3, at that time, none of

Mexico's federal agencies (including the Defense Ministry, Sedena; Pemex, the powerful public oil company; or Diconsa, which distributed milk throughout Mexico's national territory) possessed a data system for accurately cataloging demographic information about the communities they served. CONAPO, however, had such information since at least the early 1990s, when it started producing a poverty map of Mexico containing information about its population, distribution and marginality levels.¹⁴ When President Zedillo and his advisers in the Finance Ministry invited CONAPO to participate in the decision-making process regarding the shape of Zedillo's anti-poverty program, they also invited in the tools and considerations of demographic analysis that would become central to *Progresas*'s design. This would be especially crucial in the attempt to solve the puzzle of locating the country's extreme poor, which had haunted Mexican anti-poverty initiatives since the 1970s.

Between 1996 and 1997, this team discussed the operational and policy design aspects of the program that would become *Progresas*, and together with the Ministries of Health (*Secretaría de Salud*, SS), Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*, SEP) and Social Development (Sedesol), it articulated a plan to ensure viability, particularly in relation to an accurate targeting mechanism and a system to monitor beneficiaries' conditionalities. Based on interviews with multiple actors involved in these discussions, Cortés and Rubalvaca (2012, 34-49) point to four main differences between the initial formulation of PASE and the program that would become *Progresas* that resulted from this short-period of negotiations.

First, there was a change from targeting individuals to targeting households (*unidades domiciliarias*) – a change that the economists at the Finance Ministry resisted, but that the

¹⁴ In 1996, when CONAPO was invited to participate in the Technical Group responsible for designing *Progresas*, the Council had produced this information for all 31 of Mexico's states, and 2,600 municipalities. For *Progresas*, CONAPO expanded this work, creating marginality indexes for 94,394 localities (Levy 2006, 91).

CONAPO team insisted it was crucial to the success of *Progresa* for both conceptual and practical reasons. On the conceptual side, sociological and demographic studies in Mexico had produced knowledge about households that linked socioeconomic status to multiple family-level dynamics, thereby better accounting for the complexities of poverty than individual-level data. Practically—and relatedly—government surveys in Mexico collected information about expenditures at the household level, making it impossible to calculate individual consumption like the Finance Ministry initially planned.

Second, it was decided that CONAPO's marginality index would be used to recalibrate the level of geographical targeting from the municipality to the much more precise category of the locality. While the change provided more granular data for policy targeting purposes, localities that lacked or that were far from schools or health clinics were left out of the program since there was no reliable means to monitor whether families followed conditionalities in these places (more about this in Chapter 3). Third, there was a conceptual shift in the relationship between cash transfers and the market. Rather than understand CCTs as a means to create demand for a private market for health and education, decision-makers preferred to guarantee buy-in from other government agencies by positioning cash transfer as a means to secure access to the public education and health systems.

Finally, the notion of poverty as a complex, multidimensional issue was further articulated and spread. While PASE only included health conditionalities, *Progresa* would include a comprehensive set of health, education and nutrition conditionalities, pleasing both the economists concerned with human capital accumulation and the demographers concerned with the negative complementarity in lacks of nutrition, education and health, especially in relation to women and children (CONAPO 1998). These emerging ideas about poverty traps and investment

in human capital were in line with the international consensus at the time, particularly with discussions happening at the World Bank, inspired by Amartya Sen's concept of "capabilities" (Yaschine 1999).

The final arrangements and concessions in the design of *Progresa* provoked heated disputes, as is to be expected with multiple agencies involved in the program's operations. Beyond the Finance Ministry and CONAPO, the ministries of Health, Education and Social Development (Sedesol) had to be brought on board. Particularly strong were the disagreements between the Finance Ministry team and Sedesol, which had implemented PRONASOL and was responsible for many food subsidies programs that were expected to be eliminated (Cortés and Rubalvaca 2010, 37, 43; Levy 2006, 35). How, then, were these different actors able, willingly or not, to move past their differences and successfully launch *Progresa* in the space of a year and a half?

Centralization, Bureaucratic Insulation and a Powerful Technocratic Alliance

At this point, it is worth remembering that while *Progresa* was being formulated, Mexico was enduring a harsh economic and fiscal crisis. In 1995, during the first year of Zedillo's government, the country's GDP abruptly fell by 6.5%, inflation rates soared to 35%, unemployment doubled and there was a general perception that poverty and other social indicators were worsening¹⁵ (Levy and Rodriguez 2004). Solving the Peso Crisis was therefore

¹⁵ Unlike in Brazil, there has historically been widespread distrust in Mexico regarding government measurements of poverty, which were seen as corrupted by party politics, and at that period in question (1995-1997) there was little consensus about the number of people living in poverty and the effect of the crisis on that population. This problem would be largely solved between 2002 and 2009, when a Technical Committee on Poverty Measurement and a National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policies (Coneval) were created, and an official methodology for studying poverty was proposed in 2009 – See Chapter 6 (Yaschine and Orozco 2010, 56; Graizbord 2016).

crucial for the new government, and those in the Finance Ministry enjoyed prestige and a privileged position to influence the direction of poverty efforts:

While it was commonly acknowledged that poverty alleviation required more budgetary resources, the difficult budgetary situation at that time contributed to strengthening the view of Finance Ministry officials and others who argued that the quality and effectiveness of public spending in general and poverty programs in particular should be a matter of greater concern. And the fact that the president himself had been the minister of budgeting and planning in the previous administrations – and an economist by training – helped immensely in dealing with these considerations. (Levy 2006, 15)

Together with the sense of urgency provided by the economic crisis, the privileged position of Santiago Levy at the Finance Ministry was crucial in determining the version of *Progresa* that would prevail within the government (Valencia and Aguirre 1998). The decision to provide cash transfers could be defended both on budgetary terms (it was much cheaper than previous programs) and as a short-term strategy for poverty-alleviation, while the conditionalities would attack the “causes of poverty” and guarantee investment in human capital. From the Finance Ministry, furthermore, Levy was ideally placed to reallocate resources from food subsidies to the funding of *Progresa*, since he “literally held the federal government purse strings at the time” (Bates 2004).

Other actors and factors were equally important. José Gomez de León—the director of CONAPO and, in 1997, the first National Coordinator for *Progresa*—provided charismatic and strategic leadership for the program. With his combination of academic and bureaucratic prestige, he was better received by other federal government agencies than Joaquin Levy. Both actors, however, had the confidence and support of President Zedillo, who intervened when necessary to settle controversies: “It was Zedillo who said [*Progresa*] was the guiding program, and that all other agencies had to conform to it, even if they were higher up in the political hierarchy” (Maria de La López, quoted in Bates 2004). The Cabinet of the President also played

a crucial role in the negotiations with the governors of the states in which *Progresa* would be initially launched, and, crucially, with their wives,¹⁶ who were comforted to learn that *Progresa* would not be implemented at the expense of other federal transfers to their states.

Moreover, opposition political parties, mindful of the long-ruling PRI's tradition of patronage, were wary of a federal program designed to hand out cash to the poor. In order to build a consensus in favor of the CCT and persuade holdouts, *Progresa* staff organized countless briefings with high-level politicians and bureaucrats, and “deployed vast amounts of technical information and statistical data,” to convince key stakeholders (Bates 2004). In other words, the legitimization strategy was made on technocratic grounds to an audience of academics and politicians, or as Levy (2006, 110) explained: “the information strategy was three-pronged: first, an unheard-of amount of information was made available to all. Second, information was directly communicated to key actors in Congress, subnational government, academia, and interested parties. Three, the public information campaign kept a low profile.” One crucial challenge was demonstrating that *Progresa* would not be used for electoral and partisan purposes. To this end, multiple deliberate actions were taken.

First, it was decided that the program would be run by a new decentralized agency, which would coordinate with Health, Education and Social Development ministries, each responsible for services that were part of the design of *Progresa*. This agency—called the National Coordination of *Progresa*—would be part of Sedesol, but would maintain legal and operational autonomy, a separate budget, and a headquarters distant from the main government offices in Mexico City. According to Levy (1996, 93), “creating a new unit was easier and faster than

¹⁶ Both in Mexico and in Brazil, wives of presidents and governors were expected to have their own poverty programs, which were commonly associated with social assistance and/or charity initiatives (this tradition is called *primeiro damismo*, see Torres 2002). *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* both broke from this tradition.

attempting to change the functioning and operation of the existing ministries and agencies.” As I explain in detail elsewhere,¹⁷ the strategy of bureaucratic insulation is recurrent in Latin American politics, particularly when a new agency with technical and administrative autonomy is created to implement high-profile policies supported by the president, or by the federal executive. The concept of insulation, rather than bureaucratic autonomy (Evans 1995), reflects the fact that these agencies do enjoy great level of technical autonomy (and are distinct from prevalent clientelistic agencies), but that their autonomy depends on the protection of the president. Hence, they are “insulated” from party politics, but not completely autonomous from political intervention: “in the case of *Progresa*, strong and direct presidential involvement was essential to achieve the administrative changes described” (Levy 1996, 96).

Second, decisions about *Progresa*’s budget would be made by Congress, and Operating Rules (*Reglas de Operación*) would be published annually, including the number of families that could be enrolled, the amounts of cash transfers that would be offered and the conditionalities for beneficiaries. The importance of the publication of the Operating Rules was emphasized in my interviews with *Progresa* officials, who saw it as evidence that the program could not be manipulated for political purposes, and as a means to “insulate the day-to-day running of the program from political pressures by state or municipal government to change eligibility criteria, operations, or the size of benefits” (ibid, 101). Also, it was provisioned that beneficiary enrollment would cease several months before national elections, and that no payments would be made in the weeks before voting days in any jurisdiction (Bates 2004).

¹⁷ See de Souza Leão (2018), “A Double-Edged Sword: The Institutional Foundations of the Brazilian Developmental State.” Also Nunes (1997); Centeno and Ferraro (2018, *Introduction*). As we will see later in this chapter, a similar new ministry strategy was also employed in Brazil, but bureaucratic insulation happened at an internal level, with the creation of an insulated unit responsible for implementing *Bolsa Familia* and to stack it with those it considered “the right people.”

Finally and crucially, it was determined that cash disbursements would be made directly by banks and the telegraph company, so *Progresa* staff “would not touch a single peso of beneficiaries’ money” (Bates 2004). However, and as I explain more thoroughly in Chapter 3, 30% of cash transfers in Mexico are still made in paper envelopes, which complicates both the operations and electoral shielding of the program. In Brazil, by contrast, all beneficiaries receive a debit card.

Summary of the Mexican Route to Progresa

When President Zedillo officially launched *Progresa* on August 6, 1997, Mexico was on the precipice of what is commonly referred to as the country’s “democratic opening.” In 2000, the PRI lost the presidential elections for the first time after 71 years, with Vicente Fox from PAN (*Partido de la Acción Nacional*) claiming the office. At that point, *Progresa* had been running for three years, and had expanded significantly. In 1997, the program covered around 300,000 families in 11,000 localities; by the end of the Zedillo administration, it reached nearly 2.5 million families in 53,000 localities. With a new president, the expectation (and fear) was that Fox would follow in the Mexican presidential tradition of eliminating predecessors’ emblematic social programs by dismantling *Progresa*. This did not happen. The original objectives and CCT design of *Progresa* continued for three additional presidential terms, though the program was rebranded as *Oportunidades* in 2002 by Vicente Fox (a name retained by his successor Felipe Calderón, also from PAN), and then again as *Prospera* in 2012 when the PRI returned to power with President Peña Nieto. Each administration made modifications, but the program’s broad strokes have endured.

When *Progresa* was taking shape from 1995 to 1997, the main actors involved in the creation and implementation of the CCT could not foresee the immense success that the program would have. At the time, they worked for a government that had very low popular support and that was in the midst of a huge economic crisis. In this context, combating poverty in fiscally-responsible and efficient ways was considered a priority, as was demonstrating that the program would not be used for electoral purposes. Strategically, however, the proponents of *Progresa* aimed to “use the crisis as a motivation for change” (Levy 2006: 15), and quickly introduced what were considered radical innovations in the fight against poverty. The challenges were great. The Social Development Ministry (Sedesol) was closely associated with PRI’s political clientelism and with the highly-controversial PRONASOL. There was very little reliable demographic and poverty data to draw on, and the efforts to secure buy-in from different ministries for the CCT concept would prove contentious.

PASE—the small-scale, semi-hidden pilot experiment with CCT running from 1995 to 1997—was crucial to demonstrating “that a program with these features [CCTs] was possible” (Levy 2006, 34), and to building a strong, diverse technocratic group inside the federal government that could overcome the multiple implementation and conceptual problems. Put differently, the pilot CCT was crucial for its demonstration, bureaucratic coordination and learning effects. The period for policy learning, however, was very short—less than two years—and the controversies and disputes surrounding the program were restricted to high-level decision-makers and academics, with civil society actors mostly absent.¹⁸ The fact that this small

¹⁸ Levy (2006, 110) explains “a decision was made to have the program maintain a low profile with respect to broad public opinion...because the program was initially questioned on political and ideological grounds, there seemed to be little to be gained from a large public information effort for what was then a small program that might not be continued.” As we will see in the Brazilian case, where *Bolsa Familia* was implemented after the democratic transition by a president with roots in the syndicalist movement, a similar strategy was neither possible nor considered desirable.

group of technocrats enjoyed the support of the President, on the one hand, and created an insulated administrative structure for *Progresa* outside of Sedesol, on the other, created the possibility of breaking away from the Mexican tradition of corrupt anti-poverty programs and a path to political legitimacy within Mexico and internationally.

As we will see next, there are many similarities between the Mexican and Brazilian experiences in CCT adoption, such as the crucial role played by the presidents; the importance of previous policy experimentation with CCTs; and the alliance between economists and other social scientists. Yet, the timing, institutional arrangement and the political and economic contexts of the Brazilian experience with CCTs were quite different. It is to these that I now turn.

1.2 The Brazilian Route to *Bolsa Família*

In his initial remarks at the official launch of *Bolsa Família* on October 20 2003, President Lula announced:

I would like to start by going off my speech script and refer to my comrade, Eduardo Suplicy, who since 1991 has acted like a real paladin, a Don Quixote, going around the country trying to convince the Brazilian society, the politicians and businessmen about the Universal Basic Income policy. This is still not the Universal Basic Income, but it is a good embryo of something that we will improve a lot in Brazil.¹⁹

Lula certainly differs in personality and political style from Mexican President Zedillo, but his speech also reveals much about the different context in which *Bolsa Família* was implemented. In Brazil, the CCT was implemented by a very popular president in a period of economic growth and societal optimism, after almost 10 years of policy experimentation with different versions of CCTs. Moreover, when Lula went off-script to thank Senator Suplicy, he

¹⁹ “Discurso do Presidente da República, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, na cerimônia de lançamento do Programa Bolsa Família, de transferência de renda.” Available in <http://www.biblioteca.presidencia.gov.br/presidencia/ex-presidentes/luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva/discursos/1o-mandato/2003/20-10-2003-discurso-do-pr-luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva-na-cerimonia-de-lancamento-do-programa-bolsa-familia.pdf/view>

also framed *Bolsa Familia* as but the first step toward a much more comprehensive social policy, an *unconditional* minimum income policy. Yet, the fact that Lula adopted a *conditional* cash transfer is evidence both of the skepticism—even fear—his leftist government faced, and of the accumulated knowledge about anti-poverty programs acquired from earlier experiences with CCTs since 1995.

In this section, I explain the political, economic and academic contexts in which decisions about *Bolsa Familia* were initially made, culminating in the official inauguration of the program by President Lula in 2003. To do so, I begin with a historical overview of social safety net systems in Brazil. Then I focus on Brazil's first experimentation with local-level CCTs in 1995, and on the three federal-level CCTs that were implemented in 1996 (PETI, *Programa de Eliminação do Trabalho Infantil*) and 2001 (*Programas Bolsa Escola and Bolsa Alimentação*). Here, I highlight the society-wide debate about poverty-alleviation programs that preceded *Bolsa Familia*, specifically as it relates to the Zero Hunger Program, a competing option to combat hunger that Lula proposed in his 2002 electoral campaign. Finally, I present the institutional arrangements and the relationships between the political and expert fields that characterized the early days of Brazil's CCT. Throughout these three sections, I make references to political and economic factors relevant to the program's development.

The Brazilian State and Anti-Poverty Efforts

After the 1930 Revolution,²⁰ Brazil initiated an ambitious state-led modernization project that transformed the country from a mostly rural society in the 1930s into an urban and

²⁰ While Mexico and Brazil's national state-building are similarly linked to critical junctures of so-called "revolutions," it is important to stress the different character of these events for each country's history. The 1910 Mexican Revolution had deep, restructuring effects, changing the composition of Mexico's political elite and was extremely violent (Knight 2018). Brazil's 1930 Revolution has been called by some historians as "The Revolution

industrialized one by the 1980s (de Souza Leão 2013). During this period, a diverse set of welfare institutions was created, and a progressive Labor Code was implemented in 1943, providing important social benefits and rights to a considerable portion of the Brazilian population. Yet, the social and labor legislation only guaranteed benefits to workers whose occupation was recognized by law, effectively excluding millions of Brazilians working in informal, rural and domestic labor from its provisions²¹ (Schmitter 1971). In contrast to Mexico's single-party rule, Brazil experienced many changes in its political regime until the 1980s. However, under both democratic (1930-1937 and 1945-1964) and dictatorial (1937-1945 and 1964-1985) regimes, the main governmental focus was on securing the economic modernization of the country, as the expectation was that poverty and inequality rates would be reduced in tandem with economic development (Evans 1979). Although Brazil did achieve impressive structural changes (see Appendix 1, Figures A.1- A.4 for relevant socioeconomic indicators), by the late 1970s, it was clear that the largest part of society had not benefited from this developmental model, and that there was a need to change the corporatist and clientelistic models of access to social security systems (de Souza Leão 2013).

In the early 1980s, the severe financial and fiscal crisis that Brazil endured, combined with an increase in the number of popular protests for a more democratic political arrangement, initiated a process of political liberalization that culminated in the end of two decades of Military Regime in 1985. During these years, a number of new collective actors (such as the Worker's Party, the landless, indigenous and black movements, among others) joined the political debates

that did not exist," as an allusion to the continuity of local oligarchies' power in rural areas and to the minimal armed conflict that happened during the revolution (CPDOC 1982).

²¹ Because of this exclusion, the system of social-policy provision implemented in the 1930s and continuing mostly without modification until the 1970s has been described as *cidadania regulada* (regulated citizenship), in reference to the fact that access to important gains that workers secured in this period (Santos 1979) – such as minimum wage, sick leaves, paid vacations and a social security system – was conditional on having a *carteira de trabalho* (formal employment contract). During the Military period (1964-1985), these rights would be expanded for rural workers.

about restructuring the country's social safety net system, culminating in the New Constitution in 1988. As Hunter described the situation (2014, 24), "the demand for social policy appears to have become embedded in improving democratic processes." The so-called "Citizen Constitution" was very ambitious. It introduced social-democratic guidelines to address Brazil's "social debt" (*divida social*) to the poor, stressing the universality of coverage and benefits. It also laid out a plan for political and fiscal decentralization, granting more fiscal autonomy and decision-making authority to states and municipalities (Arretche 1996). Importantly for our purposes, the 1988 Constitution also established that while resources for education, health and social assistance programs would be federal, their distribution would be the municipality's responsibility. Also notable was its use of a language of "social rights" to refer to social assistance programs, setting the tone for discussions about CCTs in the 1990s.

Unfortunately, the institution of the 1988 Constitution was quickly followed by economic and political turmoil. Between 1988 and 1994, the country experienced hyperinflation, fiscal problems, increasing poverty and inequality and the 1992 impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello, the first directly-elected President since 1964, who faced corruption charges in 1992 after fewer than three years in office (1990-1992). This means that, for both economic and political reasons, many social benefits that were provisioned in the Constitution were not immediately carried out and would be only put into effect gradually and partially (Hunter 2014). The legal foundations of social assistance, however, were formally established, and they stimulated a heated debate about how these newly acquired social rights would be implemented in Brazil.

In 1991, in the midst of this turmoil, Senator Eduardo Suplicy—the first senator elected by the recently created Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT)—introduced a bill to create a minimum-income program for all Brazilian adults with incomes below a specific

threshold²² (Britto and Soares 2011). The bill aimed to introduce a series of innovations to Brazil's social protection system, and it was the first proposal to offer cash transfers to the entire poor population above age 25, regardless of formal work status, corporatist affiliation or clientelistic ties (Pero and Szerman 2010, 83). The Minimum Income Bill was unanimously approved in the Senate and sent to the House of Representatives, but it was not voted on by the plenary at the time. Even so, the bill stimulated a series of policy-oriented academic debates around income policies in the 1990s. Although most academics tended to agree on the importance of cash transfers, there were disagreements about the focus on adults rather than on children, who were considered to be more vulnerable to poverty; about the potential negative consequences of such a policy on labor formality; and about how to operationalize such a broad targeting criteria. For critics on the political left, however, the minimum income program was considered insufficient because it did not deal with structural inequalities in Brazil; they advocated instead for investments in employment opportunities, which were thought to have longer-term effects (for a summary of the different proposals, see Urani 1996).

An enthusiasm for Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) emerged out of this debate, which was taking place in academia (Camargo and Ferreira 2001, Fonseca 2001), the media (Camargo 1991, 1993) and animated conversations in political circles (Buarque 1994, Suplicy 1992).²³ As a

²² Before becoming a politician, Senator Suplicy was an economics professor in São Paulo, with a PhD and MA in economics from Michigan State University. In his memoirs, Suplicy explains that his interest in income policies was inspired by the debates about Negative Income Taxes in the US in the 1970s, especially by Milton Friedman's conceptualization of the topic, which of course leads to the irony that a leftist Senator would propose this policy in Brazil, something that his opponents have been keen to point out.

²³ Similar to the controversy of whether Brazil or Mexico was the real pioneer in CCTs, the "paternity" of CCTs in Brazil has been hotly debated in the press over the past decade, especially around presidential elections, when political parties dispute who initiated the now-successful *Bolsa Família*. Contrary to Mexico, where Santiago Levy and José Gomez de León are generally considered the policy entrepreneurs of *Progresá*, there are many more possible "fathers" in Brazil, precisely because there was a wide society-debate about income policies in the 1990s. Among the most serious contenders, we can cite: José Marcio Camargo, an MIT-trained economist and a university professor, who published influential op-eds and academic papers proposing educational CCTs; Ricardo Paes de Barros, a University of Chicago-trained economist and a state researcher, who published reports about poverty and education in Brazil, and played a crucial role in building consensus around CCTs among the country's policy elite;

reaction to the 1991 Minimum Income Bill and the controversies it aroused, a greater consensus was slowly formed toward investing in families with children and linking cash assistance to school attendance. Although the need for educational conditionalities was defended in different terms by different groups—either i) as investment in human capital (similar to the Mexican approach); or ii) as a way of guaranteeing that the constitutional right of access to basic education would be granted—at the time, it was largely accepted that the combination of cash transfers and educational attainment was preferable over the universal basic income bill (Lavinás, Tourinho and Barbosa 2001). The question that emerged then was who would put these ideas into practice? And how?

Brazil's First Experimentations with CCTs: Municipal Activism and a Potpourri of Federal CCTs

In 1994, after a troubled rebirth of democracy in Brazil, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994 - 2002) of the PSDB (*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*) was elected after a successful two-year tenure as Minister of Finance. Although a sociologist by training, famous for his work on dependency theory (Cardoso and Faletto 1967), Cardoso adopted liberalizing measures such as privatization, commercial and financial deregulation, and deepened state administrative reforms that had started in 1988 (de Souza Leão 2013). During his first term, the much-awaited macro-level stability and inflation control were achieved in Brazil with the implementation of the *Plano Real*, opening the path for his reelection in 1998 (Pero and Szerman 2010). Yet, while the federal government was involved in negotiating state reforms and the

Cristovam Buarque, a Sorbonne-educated economist and a center-left politician, who published books about reprioritizing government expenditure towards education, and launched the first Brazilian CCT in Brasilia; and, of course, Eduardo Suplicy, the senator that introduced the Minimum Income Bill.

implementation of the full range of social rights prescribed in the 1988 Constitution, the most innovative experiments with social policy and democratic governance were happening at the municipality level, where cities were equipped with newly acquired flexibility, authority and funding (Sugiyama 2013, Baiocchi 2005).

The first two CCT programs in Brazil were launched in two municipalities by mayors from two different political parties during the same week of January 1995. The Bolsa-Escola program was inaugurated in the Federal District by a Worker's Party (PT) mayor, and the Guaranteed Minimum Family Income Policy was launched in Campinas by a mayor from PSDB. Following these pioneering experiences with local-level CCTs, 58 additional municipalities had implemented a CCT by the end of 1999, and by 2001, over 1,300 municipalities had done the same, covering around 800,000 families (Britto e Soares 2011, 4). Although these municipal CCTs differed in their specifics, they all: i) targeted poor families with children, using some sort of means-testing; ii) paid cash to families; and iii) required that children achieve at least 85% of monthly school attendance (World Bank 2001). In 1998, the federal government launched a program to co-fund local-level CCTs. Managed by the Ministry of Education, the effort sought to even the playing field for municipalities with fewer financial resources, especially in the north and northeast of country where a vast share of the population was still not benefitting from the transfers (Lavinias 1998). Finally in 1996, concurrent with the implementation of municipal CCTs, the federal government launched a smaller, very specifically targeted CCT, the Eradication of Child Labor Program (PETI), providing cash transfers to extremely poor families whose children worked in risky labor activities (charcoal mines, tobacco plantations, the sisal industry and others) (Britto and Soares 2011).

By 2001, several studies had shown the overall positive impact of municipal CCTs on educational indicators (e.g. attendance, enrollment and even academic achievement), and the general perception was that these programs were well targeted at the municipality-level, even if unequally distributed between municipalities, with the poorest communities lacking CCTs all together (Saboia and Rocha 2001; World Bank 2001; Lavinias, Tourinho e Barbosa 2001). The next step from the federal government, therefore, was to build on this academic, political and policy consensus²⁴ to launch its own CCT, and thereby standardize and expand the implementation of CCTs throughout the nation. In April 2001, President Cardoso launched the *Bolsa Escola* (School Grants) program, implemented by the Ministry of Education, and in September 2001, the *Bolsa Alimentação* (Nutrition Grant) program, managed by the Ministry of Health. These programs were seen as complementary to each other: The School Grant distributed monthly transfers to families with children from 6-15 years old, conditioned on school attendance, while the Nutrition Grant targeted families with children from 0-6 years old and pregnant women, conditioned on health care visits. Table 1.1 below summarizes the experimentation with CCTs between 1995 and 2002 in Brazil.

²⁴ In 1999, Congress set up a special joint committee to “study the structural and environmental causes of social inequalities and present legislative solutions to eradicate poverty and marginalization and reduce social and regional inequalities.” The committee crafted a constitutional amendment that led to the creation of the Fund for the Fight against and Eradication of Poverty. As Britto and Soares (2011, 3) explained: “The committee’s public debates and hearings were important in consolidating widespread political consensus around the idea of CCTs as the preferred policy option to combat poverty in Brazil.”

Table 1.1: CCT programs in Brazil in January 2003, before *Bolsa Familia*

	Year Created	Policy Focus	Responsible State Agency	Coverage²⁵
Local-Level CCTs (with or without federal funding)	1995	Education	Municipal Government	2001: ~880,000 families; 1,373 municipalities
Eradication of Child Labor Program (PETI)	1996	Eradication of Child Labor	Office of the President, Intl Labor Org (ILO)	2003: 809,000 children; 261 municipalities
<i>Bolsa-Escola</i> Program	2001	Education	Ministry of Education	2003: 5.6 million families; national coverage
<i>Bolsa-Alimentação</i> Program	2001	Nutrition and Health	Ministry of Health	2003: approx. 1 million families; national coverage

Consolidating CCTs, a New Ministry and an Unstable Bureaucratic-Academic Alliance

On October 27 2002, Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva from the Worker’s Party won the presidential elections after three failed attempts at the office. Considering Lula’s background as a syndicalist leader and an outspoken critic of neoliberalism, his election brought high expectations of great social progress and inclusion. Before Lula, Brazil had had only two leftist presidents, Getulio Vargas (1951-1954) and João Goulart (1961-1964), and neither served out their terms. Vargas killed himself in 1954 in the midst of a huge political crisis, and Goulart was deposed by the military in 1964. With these troubling precedents on the public’s mind, the return of leftist leadership brought with it both heightened hopes of social change and equally heightened fears of “socialism.”

²⁵ Source: Sposati (2010); Pero and Szerman (2012, 92); Britto and Soares (2011,4)

President Lula was elected on a platform that emphasized two main goals: i) fighting hunger through the comprehensive Zero Hunger Program, and ii) adopting orthodox economic policies, a commitment made public through a letter directed to all Brazilians, “*Carta ao Povo Brasileiro*,” in which Lula pledged to adhere to austerity and macroeconomic stabilization policies if elected. In other words, he was elected on a public commitment to simultaneously fight poverty and respect fiscal constraints. However, during the campaign, Lula rejected Cardoso’s relatively streamlined CCTs as a neoliberal form of fighting poverty, instead promoting his Zero Hunger Program which was both more expensive and more complex. Its underlying premise was that food insecurity was more a pressing concern for Brazilians than a lack of cash, and it aimed to coordinate the actions of 16 ministries to distribute food, reduce food prices, strengthen local food production and to involve civil society and local leaders in the execution of social policy (Hall 2006, Tomazini and Leite 2016). The end goal was clear, and continuously repeated during Lula’s campaign: “If, by the end of my term, every Brazilian has food to eat three times a day, I shall have fulfilled my mission in life.”

Accordingly, when President Lula rose to power in January 2003, he established two new ministries—the Ministry of Food Security and Eradication of Hunger (MESA, *Ministério Extraordinário de Segurança Alimentar e Combate à Fome*) and the Social Assistance Ministry (MAPS, *Ministério de Assistência e Promoção Social*)—to put the Zero Hunger Program into action. After his attempt to implement food stamps was beset by challenges, Lula created yet another cash transfer program, the Food Card, administered by MESA. However, during the first few months of the term, heated debates within his Social Policy Group²⁶ made it clear that his ambitious vision for the Zero Hunger Program would be very hard to implement.

²⁶ Much has been written about President Lula’s political leadership style, which involved the creation of very large discussion groups, sometimes formalized in councils, to debate the direction of multiple public policies [see Cardoso

At the time, the option of unifying Brazil's CCTs had been widely discussed in policy and academic circles, which had shown that "separate administrative structures and procedures created inefficiencies, resulted in considerable gaps and duplications in coverage, and missed important synergies from jointly promoting education and health" (Lindert et al 2007, 13; Barros 2003; Barros, Corseuil and Foguel 2001). Crucially for our purposes, researchers from the Institute of Applied Economics Research (IPEA, *Instituto de Pesquisa Economica Aplicada*), a public institute created in 1964 to "provide technical assistance for the federal government with regards to fiscal, social and economic public policies," were convinced that a unified CCT scheme was a better option than implementing programs centered on food security. IPEA was a very respected institution, considered an authority on poverty studies and home for researchers had been successfully mediating academic and policy debates for 40 years (see more about IPEA in Chapters 5 and 6). Through its representatives in the Social Policy Group and influential position among the Brazilian intelligentsia, IPEA advocated in favor of CCTs. Particularly influential was its argument that "only 4% of Brazilian population suffered from undernourishment, whereas 10% was obese, and another 30% was overweight," a point that was repeated frequently in the media (Pero and Szerman 2012, 94).

Of course, the leadership of the Worker's Party—especially those responsible for drafting the Zero Hunger Program—resisted a shift toward CCTs, which had been first implemented by Cardoso's government and were considered right-wing and neoliberal. Similar to the trajectory of *Progres*a in Mexico, however, the intervention of the president played a key role in politically articulating what would become *Bolsa Familia*:

Jr, dos Santos and Alencar 2011 for a summary of the literature]. For the Social Policy Group, participants were drawn from the President's Special Assistance Office; the Ministries of Education, Health, Food Security and Social Assistance; the Institute of Applied Economics (IPEA); and *Caixa Economica Federal*, the public bank responsible for distributing cash from previous CCTs (Campello 2013, 16).

[During those first months,] everybody was against the *Bolsa Familia*. The Ministry of Education was against it, the Ministry of Health was against it, ... Graziano [The Zero Hunger Minister] was radically against it... so many times there were attempts to undermine the program, to sabotage it. *Bolsa Familia* only exists because of two people: Lula and Palocci [the Minister of Finance]. If it wasn't for them, *Bolsa Familia* would not exist because the high-level staff of the government was against it, many times radically against it. (Interview with former IPEA staff)

The unification of the three existing CCTs (School Grant, Nutrition Grant and the Food Card) plus the Gas Assistance²⁷ (*Auxilio Gas*) program under a single umbrella, the *Bolsa Familia*, shaped the future of the program in three main ways. First, in terms of institution building, the powerful new Ministry of Social Development (MDS) was established in 2003, and the Ministries of Social Assistance and Food Security were extinguished. MDS was divided into four secretariats (or administrative units) responsible for different aspects of Lula's antipoverty efforts: i) The Secretariat of Citizenship Income, responsible for the *Bolsa Familia* Program, composed by federal managers with experience in previous CCTs, and operating in close partnership with IPEA; ii) The Secretariat of Social Assistance, composed by social scientists and social workers, who would be responsible for implementing a unified social assistance infrastructure in Brazil; iii) The Secretariat of Food Security, composed by former MESA staff; and iv) The Secretariat of Evaluation and Information Management, composed by a variety of social scientists, economists, epidemiologists and federal managers. This means that state officials with very different understandings of poverty and state politics coexisted within the same ministry and were required to coordinate their efforts to implement different social programs. Although these four secretariats had the same official bureaucratic ranking, it is

²⁷ Gas Assistance was a very large cash transfer adopted by the Ministry of Mines and Energy in 2002 as a compensatory measure for the phasing out of cooking gas subsidies. It used the School Grant beneficiary information to provide a small transfer to the poorest families in Brazil, allowing them to purchase fuel to cook.

commonly accepted that the secretariat responsible for *Bolsa Familia* enjoyed a privileged position inside the Ministry (*interviews and observation in fieldwork*).

Second, the legitimation of the program would come from differentiating the *approach* towards CCTs from the Cardoso government to Lula's. Hence, *Bolsa Familia* was not defended on the grounds of being efficient or technocratic as was the case with *Progresá* in Mexico, but as an initial step toward a more comprehensive social policy. Likewise, the program was constantly compared to Suplicy's 1991 Universal Income Bill, a strategic gambit to connect *Bolsa Familia* to the Worker's Party's historical demands. This explains why, especially during its first years, more attention was placed on expanding *Bolsa Familia* fast than on verifying if families were following conditionalities (more about this in Chapters 3 and 4). Hence, while previous CCTs had reached about 5 million families, the BFP was targeting 13 million. Likewise, since the beginning, federal managers responsible for the BFP aimed to create a governance infrastructure that would easily allow for complementary policies to reach BFP beneficiaries (Paiva, Falcão and Bartholo 2013). This created some tension with international organizations, since the Brazilian government was reluctant to prioritize "best international practices" in evaluation and targeting whenever they went against the quick expansion of *Bolsa Familia*.

Third, and similar to Mexico, there was the challenge of showing that *Bolsa Familia* would not be used for electoral purposes. However, the fear of using poverty-alleviation efforts as a vote-buying strategy had a different character in Brazil, since there the association between flagship antipoverty programs and specific presidents was much less salient than in Mexico. My understanding is that this happened for two main reasons: i) the historical continuity of PRI rule in Mexico vs. the discontinuity in political regimes in Brazil—with the latter's historical diversity of political parties and political actors, it is harder to connect social policies to one

specific person; and ii) the radically different way that federalism is organized in Brazil and Mexico, making clientelism in Brazil a bigger problem at the local level and populism at the federal level, whereas in Mexico these two phenomena are combined at the federal level.

Even if with a different character from Mexico's, in Brazil, the fear of electoral use of the BFP was particularly tricky to solve. President Lula had been elected on a platform of balancing fiscal austerity with social policies and the elimination of hunger, especially in the north and northeast of the country. On the one hand, it was "easier" to show that *Bolsa Familia* did not contradict austerity, since the program was considered much cheaper than the other available options. On the other hand, many were afraid that Lula would govern as a populist and saw *Bolsa Familia* as a means to secure votes. Since its inception, then, *Bolsa Familia* staff have walked the fine line of managing a program that was designed to be "popular" but that could be easily labeled as "populist." As in Mexico, measures were adopted to neutralize this fear: i) municipalities have quotas for the number of beneficiaries based on poverty rates measured by the Census, and are not involved in beneficiaries' selection, which are, rather, automated at the federal level; ii) transfers are made through debit cards by a public bank; iii) audit and control agencies closely supervise the work of *Bolsa Familia* staff, who in turn use a very transparent governance structure to reduce suspicions about the program.

Summary of the Brazilian Route Towards Bolsa Familia

When President Lula officially launched *Bolsa Familia* on October 20, 2003, Brazil was about to experience a period of economic growth and inequality reduction, a combination that would help the Worker's Party retain control of the government for 14 more years (President Lula, 2003-2010, and President Dilma Rouseff, 2011-2016). *Bolsa Familia* would continue

throughout this period with a very similar design and infrastructure. This success was the result of almost a decade of experimentation with different sizes and versions of CCTs, and of the 1988 Constitution's privileging of a decentralized provision of social policies based on "social rights," imposing both institutional legacies and legal rules that would ultimately shape Lula's approach to social policy efforts.

During the first year of Lula's government, however, the idea of CCT was still linked to neoliberalism and to the Cardoso government, who had implemented the first federal CCTs in Brazil. Lula's main political allies rejected the idea of the *Bolsa Familia* Program, and instead advocated for investments in a comprehensive food security system. The debates of how to move forward were contentious, with federal managers and IPEA economists suggesting that it "was not necessary to reinvent the wheel" (Neri 2005), while the food security group disagreed even among themselves about how to implement their own strategy. At one point, as a member of the IPEA staff recalls it, "Lula decides to sponsor it [the idea of a CCT]: [Lula then said], 'I get it, the Zero Hunger strategy will not allow for a structural change in the same way that a cash transfer can.' He then coordinated that these two things would happen together." The challenges were great: consolidating four existing CCTs and their bureaucracies into one program; combating media and societal suspicion of the possible populist use of *Bolsa Familia* to garner votes; and the coordination and buy-in of approximately 5,570 municipalities, governed by mayors from 35 different political parties.

These challenges were overcome through the accumulated experience of Brazil's bureaucratic elite in implementing CCTs and other social policies in a federalist context, and through the optimism evoked by Lula's government. Together, these dynamics combined to "overcome our internal differences to make Bolsa Familia work" (MDS staff, interview), and to

frame the BFP as a “first step towards something better” (Lula 2003) while not disturbing the interests of those worried with macroeconomic stability. Put differently, the nine years of policy experimentation with CCTs were crucial for policy learning and creating a consensus around CCT, and the symbolism and rhetoric of the Lula administration were key to securing bureaucratic coordination and framing *Bolsa Familia* as “something greater than a simple CCT” (MDS staff, interview).

1.3 Conclusion: Comparative Considerations

Popular accounts of the history of Latin American countries frequently use economic crises to explain pretty much everything, but especially political change (Ocampo 2002, Hirschman 1985). The region has indeed gone through major economic crises with long-lasting material effects (the 1980s being perhaps the most traumatic “lost decade”), but also significant is how these crises have shaped the public imaginary and political discourses, with intellectuals across the ideological spectrum emphasizing economic explanations, from Marxists and dependency theorists to neoliberals. Considering this legacy, narratives around the political origins of *Progresas* and *Bolsa Familia* follow a familiar pattern: An economic rupture (either a crisis or a boom) creates a political window of opportunity for introducing CCTs. Hence, through this economic lens, the Mexican Peso Crisis of 1994 increased poverty rates, which combined with the Zapatista insurgency and an unpopular presidency helped to create a sense of urgency that allowed for the implementation of a radical new means of combating poverty. In Brazil, the commodity boom of the 2000s allowed for the structural conditions to successfully create the *Bolsa Familia* program.

In this chapter, I have sought to complexify these explanations by highlighting how the historical trajectories of each state and their previous anti-poverty programs created distinct legitimacy challenges for the PP and BFP when they were launched. Although there is some truth in economic-based narratives, they are insufficient to determine how different political actors understood and experienced these different economic contexts, or to explain how institutional legacies and political goals shaped the decisions about these two important programs. In this chapter, I have provided an interpretative characterization of the legitimation challenges and political motives behind the adoption of CCTs in Brazil and in Mexico. To conclude, I would like to outline some comparative considerations about the historical trajectories that I have depicted.

Until the 1970s, Brazil and Mexico shared a (somewhat) similar trajectory, especially in the socioeconomic sphere. The two countries share a history of state-led economic development, with long eras under authoritarian regimes, where social concerns were not central to the governments' goals. In the 1980s, both Brazil and Mexico were severely hit by the global financial crisis, and both initiated a period of comprehensive structural reforms. At that time, neoliberalism was in vogue and influenced most of the state reforms in Latin America. This reality, combined with persistent criticism of state inefficiency, government failures and rent-seeking bureaucracies made the shrinking of the Brazilian and Mexican states seem a good option (de Souza Leão 2013). As Reis (2009) put it, "less state and more society became the prevailing ideology." Moreover, the modernization discourse had moved to elevating the value of markets, free enterprise and internationalism while disparaging state interventionism as outdated and ineffective (Diniz 2007). The two countries similarly privatized and liberalized their economies during this period, marking a shift in their developmental model.

However, Brazil and Mexico experienced very different democratic transitions. This is very important for the purposes of this dissertation, since each CCT have operated under different “shadows from the past” and were initiated in very different political contexts. Brazil experienced 20 years of military dictatorship, and the return to democracy in 1985 came with a real attempt to create institutional break from the past. This is best represented by the 1988 Constitution that, among other things, decentralized policy provision; made access to public education, health and social assistance a “social right”; and created many new agencies responsible for auditing, monitoring and controlling federal, state and municipal government actions. When *Bolsa Familia* was launched by President Lula in 2003, Brazil was in possession of a young but institutionalized democracy and a society that believed in checks and balances between the different spheres of the state. Moreover, civil society organizations were very active and participated in institutional forums to discuss public policies, even exercising voting rights in the decision-making process.

Mexico has never had an official dictatorship like Brazil, but PRI’s run in power from 1929 until 2000 has aptly been called a “perfect dictatorship” (*la dictadura perfecta*) because it did not require the explicit use of military force or coercion.²⁸ The country did undergo a democratic transition when the PRI lost its strong majority in Congress in 1997 and the Presidency in 2000, but this transition did not imply a forceful institutional rupture similar to what happened in Brazil. After the PRI was ousted, Mexico continued with the same constitution

²⁸ The notion that Mexico would be a perfect dictatorship is commonly associated to the Peruvian writer, Mario Vargas Llosa, who used the term in an interview with a Mexican television channel in 1990. While it raised a lot of controversy at the time, the term has been often used to signal that while the single-party rule of the PRI did include elections and was not formally backed by the army like other South American dictatorships, a *de facto* dictatorship was camouflaged under these rituals of democracy. This does not mean that the state did not use violent means to achieve its goals or undermine criticism, as the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre rests clear. In fact, as shown by Piccato (2017), crime, punishment and impunity have been tightly linked to the consolidation of the PRI’s political power in Mexico, even if this triad did not happen under a formal dictatorial regime.

and a very similar federal arrangement, even if more democratic institutions have since been implemented incrementally to enforce transparency and accountability (as we will see in Chapter 6, the Federal Auditing Agency was only created in 2003, and the Social Policy Evaluation Council in 2004). *Progresa* was initially implemented in 1997, right before the democratic transition which would considerably change the political game and the legitimation strategies around the program.

My intention has been to show that although *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa* are very similar in their policy conceptualization (i.e. giving small cash transfers to the poor conditioned on certain requirements), state officials had different understandings of this policy design and faced very different political and legitimation challenges. While there were similar fears of political clientelism and corruption, needs to fight poverty under fiscal constraints and implementation challenges in the two contexts, the political, societal and administrative climate were very different. As put by Tomazini (2017, 1), Brazil and Mexico arrived at the same policy, “despite having different strategies and patterns of change.” Table 1.2 below summarizes these differences.

Table 1.2: Differences and Similarities in National Trajectories Towards CCTs

	Mexico	Brazil
President implementing CCT (federal-level)	1997: Zedillo (PRI) 2000: Fox (PAN)	1996: Cardoso (PSDB) 2001: Cardoso (PSDB) 2003: Lula (PT)
Ideological Leaning of President	1997: Center-right 2000: Right	2001: Center-Right 2003: Left
First CCT	1995, PASE	1995, <i>Bolsa Escola</i>
Period of CCT Experimentation	2 years, 1 program (1995-1997)	9 years, 3 Fed. CCTs and thousands of municipal CCTs (1995-2003)
Political Rupture	1997: PRI loses majority in Congress; 2000: PRI loses presidential elections	1985: End of Military Regime; 2002: Lula is elected President
Institutional-Building	1992: Social Development Ministry (Sedesol) created; 1997: National Coordination of <i>Progresa</i> outside Sedesol.	1988: New Constitution; 2004: Social Development Ministry (MDS) created; SENARC as insulated secretariat inside MDS.
Economic Context Implementation	Stagnation with inflation	Growth and macro stability
Main Academic Debates in the 1990s	Centered on food subsidies	Centered on universal basic income
Main State Agencies Involved in Policy Design	Finance Ministry and Mexico's Population Council (CONAPO)	Multiple, but key role played by the Institute of Applied Economics Research (IPEA)
Academic Training of Main Actors	Economics, government and demography	Economics, sociology and Brazilian federalism
Domestic Audience for Legitimation Strategy	Key actors in Congress, state governments, and academia; civil society mostly absent	Social movements, academia, congress, and the media
International Audience	Domestically funded; support from World Bank and international academia	Domestically funded; skepticism from World Bank and mostly domestic academic attention
Relation between Political and Expert Fields	Mediated by CONAPO (Population Studies); researchers skeptical of reliance in official statistics	Mediated by IPEA (Economic Studies); researchers considered official statistics trustworthy

In the remainder of this dissertation, I will explain how these different policy formulation processes and historical contexts shaped the decisions regarding policy implementation (Part II) and policy evaluation (Part III) of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*. To interpret my findings, it will

be important to keep in my mind the analysis of this chapter and the very different historical moments that Mexico and Brazil were living when they first implemented CCTs. While Mexican policymakers were facing a 71-years legacy of the PRI-era and the multiple legitimation challenges that came from it; Brazilians were living an idiosyncratic moment of democracy and left-wing politics, and benefiting from the opportunities that this critical juncture brought for policy experimentation. Put differently, *Progres*a policymakers were attempting to navigate through what was the equivalent of a thunderstorm, while BFP staff was sailing in surprisingly good winds. In what follows, I will explain how these different initial conditions influenced the legitimation strategies of each program (or, to continue with the sailing metaphor, how they influenced the types of the sailing boats that were used) as well as the knowledge regimes that were created for implementation and evaluation purposes.

PART II – THE IMPLEMENTATION

CHAPTER 2: MAKING POVERTY VISIBLE IN BRAZIL AND MEXICO: A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Scholarship on modern statecraft typically assumes a positive correlation between information-gathering activities and state power. The more a state knows about its population, resources and land, the better equipped it is to intervene in social life (Tilly 1975, Foucault 1980, Mann 1984). Much of this discussion focuses on what James Scott terms “legibility,” or the process of transforming “complex, illegible, and local social practices” into “a legible and administratively more convenient format” (1998, 2-3). Projects of state legibility—such as censuses, cadastral surveys, maps, and standard units of measurement—are considered crucial for modern statecraft, because they allow state agents to *see* human activity largely through simplified, stylized facts that facilitate administrative, regulatory and extractive tasks (ibid, 77).

The notion of legibility has stimulated a prolific research agenda that examines the various ways that states *see* their populations and investigates the stratifying consequences and disputes over official categorization that accompany these projects of seeing (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999, Nobles 2000, Loveman 2014). These studies demonstrate that there is not a single, unique way in which states *see* society, since projects of legibility are inevitably shaped by nationally specific political struggles (Curtis 2001, Barkey 2008, Rodriguez-Muñiz 2017; Powell and Moraes Silva 2018). Relatedly, scholars that have analyzed official knowledge-making institutions in comparative perspective have shown that the ways states *see* society are closely coupled with the historical organization of the academic, political, and policymaking regimes in which projects of legibility take place (Rueschmeyer and Skocpol 1996, Fourcade 2009, Campbell and Pederson 2014).

Yet, we know less about why and how projects of legibility differ, or about the effects of these differing projects on the capacity of states to intervene in society (Wyrzten 2017, 207). What happens when two states that have different political histories initiate similarly-oriented projects of legibility? Do they *see* the same thing? How do different institutional and epistemic configurations of information-gathering activities affect the ability that states have to *see* and to intervene in social life?

To answer these questions, Part II of this dissertation builds on and challenges James Scott's argument about legibility (1998) by providing an in-depth, comparative analysis of how Brazil and Mexico made poor individuals visible in order to implement *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresas*, respectively. Although these two countries implemented the same policy around the same time (1995 in Brazil, and 1997 in Mexico) and faced similar organizational and legitimation challenges, they adopted different solutions to render poor individuals visible and CCTs governable. In Mexico, the federal government developed a system to identify the poor and implement *Progresas*, which aimed to define poverty status with accuracy and great effort was put into monitoring if poor families were following the conditionalities. The CCT was implemented through a highly centralized and insulated administrative structure located within the federal government. In Brazil, on the other hand, the federal government developed a targeting system that was less focused on verifying poverty status in precise terms, and it developed a loose approach towards monitoring conditionalities. *Bolsa Familia* was decentralized, with municipalities playing a key role in the CCT implementation.

Part II seeks to explain the differences in the Brazilian and Mexican projects of making poverty legible and governable, as well as their consequences. In doing so, I introduce two analytical dimensions to Scott's argument about legibility in order to outline a framework to

study projects of legibility from a comparative perspective. The first dimension is the relationship between projects of legibility and struggles over the organizational images that different agencies inside the state want to project both of themselves and of the state. Building on the work of Carpenter (2010) and Wyrzten (2015), I argue that the configuration of state information-gathering activities depends on the symbolic strategies that distinct state agencies adopt to politically legitimate their programs and achieve specific political goals inside the state. To demonstrate the importance of this symbolic dimension, in Chapter 3, I examine how Brazilian and Mexican officials conceived of the legitimation needs of *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresas*, and how these conceptions influenced the ways that the CCTs were implemented, as well as the type of information that was collected about poor individuals in each context.

The second analytical dimension has a relational character and directs attention toward the unanticipated effects that projects of legibility potentially have in making the state itself legible, and into an object of scrutiny. In the vast scholarship inspired by the work of Scott, the state *sees* but is rarely *seen*. The literature seldom takes into account the multiple ways in which projects of legibility may hinge or facilitate the creation of pathways for other domestic and international actors to question state action. To show the importance of this relational dimension of legibility, in Chapter 4, I investigate how the instruments created to render the Brazilian and Mexican poor legible changed the ways that intra-state bureaucratic disputes happened in each context, and became themselves subject to evaluation and scrutiny.

To anticipate, in Part II, I demonstrate that each country developed legibility tools to track the behavior of the poor that were shaped by distinct legitimation strategies. While Mexico aimed to project an image of *Progresas* as efficient and anti-political by prioritizing a precise targeting to avoid the inclusion of non-poor families into the program; Brazil aimed to portray an

image of *Bolsa Familia* as inclusive and politically neutral by adopting a simpler targeting strategy, meant to minimize exclusion errors. In both contexts, however, these choices changed the politics around CCTs in ways that were unanticipated by the main political actors, with long-term effects for the implementation of the two programs. In Mexico, similarly to what James Scott terms the “high modernist blindness,” the top-down legibility scheme implemented to find and monitor poor families resulted in an opaque system, where the state could not track the dynamic character of poverty on the ground. In Brazil, on the other hand, the bottom-up project of legibility was accompanied by a strategy of high visibility of state action, resulting in a more transparent and reflexive system, where the state generates information about poor families more frequently. Yet, this strategic transparency came at the price of greater vulnerability to criticism.

Looking comparatively at projects intended to make poverty visible and governable, Part II offers a novel conceptualization about variations in state legibility projects and their consequences. In contrast to Scott, I find that not all states prioritize creating a synoptic view of society, aimed at imposing order. Instead, depending on the logics of their legitimation strategies, some states prioritize legibility projects designed to capture the dynamic nature of local life on the ground – or *seeing* what Scott terms the *mètis*. Furthermore, by conceptualizing policy targeting as a form of state legibility, this analysis shows that even when legibility projects are accompanied by good intentions, intra-state politics can undermine the inclusive potential of these projects, as well as limit their future developments. Thus, I argue that the effects of legibility depend not only on state’s intentions and society’s reactions, but also on official information-gathering infrastructures and how they mediate intra-state politics.

Part II is composed of three chapters. The present Chapter 2 reviews the literature on state legibility and proposes an analytical framework to study legibility projects from a

comparative perspective. Chapters 3 and 4 empirically give substance to this framework with an in-depth, interpretative analysis of how Mexico and Brazil made poor individuals legible in order to implement CCTs (Chapter 3), and by analyzing the long-term consequences of these initial choices on poverty governance (Chapter 4). I conclude by considering future directions for research on state legibility projects, as well as the implications of my work for the sociological study of welfare programs.

2.1 State Projects of Legibility and The Question of Variation

In *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott aims to uncover the dynamics and consequences not only of state vision, but also of state blindness. On the one hand, Scott (1995, 42) suggests that state projects of legibility and simplification serve as powerful tools of modern statecraft by making “the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision far more legible, and hence, more susceptible to careful measurement, calculation and manipulation.” For Scott, this “narrowness of the field of vision” is consequential not solely because the top-down view of the state simplifies a complex reality, but mostly because state officials attempt to transform the population, space, and nature under their jurisdiction into predictable, standardized categories to facilitate tasks of observation and control. In Scott’s argument, therefore, legibility matters because these official categories become the “authoritative tune to which much of the population must dance” (ibid., 57).

However, as Tilly (1999, 331) correctly notes, for Scott, when projects of legibility succeed, they generally lead to social disasters and failure. Although Scott qualifies that these disasters are more likely to happen when four circumstances coincide—an authoritarian state, an administrative ordering of nature and society, a high modernist ideology, and a prostrate civil

society—he ultimately argues that, in the long run, local complexity subverts all official efforts to render life legible. This is because state abstract knowledge is never able to capture what he calls the *mètis* – the sort of practical and ever-changing knowledge required to understand local practices (Scott 1995, 74-79). In this sense, projects of legibility are, in Scott’s definition, always double-edged. They create both vision and blindness, allowing states to see and intervene in society through certain pre-defined categories, and to not-see the richness of local complexity, which can thus lead to failure in state intervention.

The notion of *seeing like a state* places knowledge production at the center of the analysis of modern statecraft, and has attracted great scholarly attention to the ways that state projects of legibility stratify societies (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017). Yet, the concept of legibility can be broader and more useful than the specific claims that James Scott makes about the pitfalls of *seeing* under a modernist hubris. In fact, state scholarship has long portrayed a more nuanced view of national states than Scott’s conceptualization of the state as a top-down force interested in manipulating social life, by illustrating how states can differ both in their capacity and in their willingness to intervene in society (Clemens and Cook 1999; Morgan and Orloff 2017). Scholars would agree that states may choose different strategies to balance synoptic visions of society and capturing the complexity of local dynamics (the *mètis*) in their legibility projects, but this variation has not been the focus of most studies on state knowledge-making.

It should be noted that some scholars have acknowledged that legibility projects may differ, contrasting specifically how nation-states construct census categories or the ways that certain categories become politically salient (e.g. O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999, Paschel 2016, Emigh, Riley and Ahmed 2016). Such research, however, typically focuses on differences in the political goals associated with efforts to make populations visible, rather than on the

reasons that legibility toolkits differ when states aim towards similar purposes. For example, Loveman (2014) demonstrates how the interplay of domestic and international politics determines when and why Latin American countries adopted, or not, racial and ethnic categories in their censuses. However, the question of variation remains: When states aim toward similar goals, such as targeting poor individuals (i.e., making poverty visible at the individual level), why do they choose to see and reach their populations in different ways? When do states prioritize capturing the local complexity (the *mètis*) or imposing categorical order in society? What analytical categories should we use to compare similarly-oriented legibility projects, considering that states have different political, cultural and policymaking histories and institutional arrangements?

The Problem of Legitimacy

One possible explanation for the question of variation relates to differences in the legitimation strategies that states adopt to implement similar political projects. In his work about the politics of identity in colonial Algeria and Morocco, Wyrzten (2015) explains how the formal legitimation framework adopted by the French Empire—the ruling of subjugated societies as either colonies or protectorates—directly affected how legibility was practiced in each case. Colonial rule imposed harsher categorical divisions on Algerian society, while protectorate rule aimed to respect Moroccan native categories. As summarized by Wyrzten, “How a colonial state wanted to be seen (how it justified colonial rule to these audiences) affected how it saw the social (indigenous and settler), the spatial (urban and rural), the territorial, and the temporal” (2017, 212).

The legibility-legitimation linkage proposed by Wyrzten (2017) provides a useful starting point for the comparative study of legibility, since it directs our analytical attention toward one source of variation—legitimation strategies, even when states have seemingly similar political goals. Conversely, attempts of legitimating legibility projects are not central to Scott’s analysis, perhaps because it is limited to cases marked by both authoritarian regimes and high modernist ideology. Nevertheless, from the vast literature on census-making, we know that whenever legibility projects are seen as illegitimate (Loveman 2005) or are associated to political risks (Choldin 1994), populations attempt to boycott them, and state officials adopt multiple measures to guarantee their implementation (Loveman 2007). The perceived necessity of on-going efforts of “consent-building” in orchestrating legibility projects even in 2010 in the United States (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017) attests to the relevance of examining how such legitimating efforts shape legibility projects in different contexts.

To address this question, we need to adopt a framework that takes into consideration that contemporary states are not composed of one unified bureaucratic apparatus; rather, they operate under complex modes of governance and need to coordinate many discrete state agencies that sometimes cooperate and other times compete with one another (Morgan and Orloff 2017). For the French Empire, for example, the relevant audiences for the legitimation strategies of colonial ruling were “the broader international community, the metropole, and the local populations ruled by the colonial power” (Wyrzten 2017, 212). But in contemporary states, such as Brazil and Mexico, state agencies responsible for implementation must address not only the broader international community and local populations, but also Congress, political parties, academia, social movements, and, crucially, other public agencies inside the state (e.g., auditing and budgeting agencies). In other words, to fully understand how legitimation strategies influence

legibility in contemporary national states, we have to examine what were the internal and external audiences that were relevant for the implementation of distinct public policies, as well as how policy-makers justified their policy choices to these multiple audiences. We have to ask: Legibility for whom?

To answer this question, it is useful to consider how different public agencies construct their organizational image and reputation to legitimate their actions and to attain certain political goals inside and outside of the state. Organizational reputation, as Carpenter (2010, 33) has explained, is a “multifaceted concept that comprises a set of beliefs about an organization’s capacities, intentions, history, and mission that is embedded in a network of multiple audiences.” Carpenter demonstrates how state agencies continuously cultivate their reputation to attain higher levels of autonomy and material and symbolic resources, and to differentiate themselves from other governmental stakeholders, especially in highly contested policy arenas, where the risks of hostile intervention are high. However, Carpenter also contends that attempting to manage a positive organizational image among different constituencies will always involve trade-offs, considering that the multiple audiences involved in any state project are likely to have contradicting interests and views.

Building on the concept of organizational reputation to investigate how different legitimation strategies shape legibility efforts is useful for understanding legibility projects in comparative perspective for two reasons. First, it entails mapping the organizational field involved in the implementation of a given policy to investigate which audiences matter the most for public managers in each context. As stated earlier, contemporary nation-states are formed by multiple, competing state agencies. To study a legibility project initiated by one public agency, we have to understand how intra-state disputes over resources, prestige, and jurisdiction, and the

influence of these disputes on legibility, may or may not differ across national contexts. Second, this perspective involves examining the different levels of transparency and ambiguity that characterize how each agency is viewed by their multiple audiences, because, although state officials aim to cultivate a particular organizational reputation, different constituencies will interpret this image in diverse ways, imposing distinct reputational rewards or penalties on an agency's behavior.

Thus, for comparative purposes, the examination of how state agencies responsible for implementing legibility projects attempt to legitimate their actions and cultivate a favorable reputation among multiple audiences is important because it re-centers the analysis around the contrast between distinct political environments and state structures. And as I argue below, it is only by contextualizing legibility projects in their political and institutional settings that we can have a full picture of what is at stake in the relationship between official knowledge-making and state action.

The Consequences of Legibility

The analytical focus on how state agencies cultivate their reputations and on how they legitimate their legibility projects raises an additional point. If seeing like a state depends on how a state wants to be seen, how do the different audiences actually *see* the state and with what consequences? In Scott's work (1998, 342), legibility efforts, especially those implemented by what he calls "visionary, planning states," usually lead to failure and human suffering. The vast literature inspired by his work has also shown how the implementation of official categories can reorganize societies in unintended ways, by stimulating the emergence of new types of social movements (Paschel 2016, Loveman 2014) or politicizing notions of collective identity and

claim-making long after the initial legibility projects are over (Wyrzten 2015). In other words, scholars have focused on the consequences of legibility for the societies in which they are implemented and less for the states that implement them. As such, the influence of different models of legibility on the capacity of states to intervene in society is largely unexplored beyond a general assumption of a positive correlation between state power and information-gathering (Emigh et al 2016).

Yet, there is good reason to expect that the ways in which a legibility project is seen by different audiences will shape the state's ability to see and intervene in society in the long run. This is because the same knowledge infrastructure and political categories that are created for legibility purposes will shape and mediate the ways in which a policy will be known and evaluated by different audiences (Breslau 1998), creating a feedback loop between legibility, state action, and audience reactions. Put differently, the consequences of legibility are not a one-way road, in which the ways that a state sees solely affects the social object that is being seen. The same road (or legibility infrastructure) that is created to render populations legible can also be used to make the state itself legible to different audiences, which will then shape what this state can see and do.

This relational aspect of legibility has not received enough scholarly attention. Scott (1998, 11) correctly suggests that the great advantage of the narrowing of vision that characterizes state knowledge is that "it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise much more complex and unwieldy reality," making social phenomenon more available for careful examination. However, he fails to acknowledge the ways in which the effects of this narrowing can go both ways, since the same infrastructure, categories and instruments that are created to manipulate society can also shape the possibilities for viewing and evaluating state

policies, rendering them subject to careful examination as well. It is only by incorporating an analysis of whether and how state legibility projects create new possibilities, objects and metrics for seeing and assessing state policies that we can understand the consequences of these projects.

2.2 Conclusion: Towards a Comparative Legibility Framework

Building on the discussion above, I add two complementary dimensions to Scott's argument about legibility in order to outline a three-dimensional analytical framework to study projects of legibility in comparative perspective. Specifically, this framework seeks to connect legibility projects to their differing political, institutional and social arrangements to fully examine how legitimation strategies and their multiple audiences shape state action and vision. As Loveman (2014, 13) has explained, projects of state legibility do not occur on a "blank slate" but are embedded in existing social structures and political histories. These broader structures, I argue, shape the forms and consequences of legibility projects by making certain schemes and legitimation strategies seem more viable than others—especially at the initial definition stage of these projects—and constraining the range of possible actions taken by each state over time.

By focusing on structural and political differences, my goal is not to suggest that every project of legibility is idiosyncratic and thus incomparable. Instead, I propose that the study of legibility in comparative perspective should involve unveiling similarities and differences in three analytical categories that can be used to unpack the dynamics of legibility in distinct national contexts. In other words, I provide analytical categories that assist with contextualizing the relationship between legibility projects and state action.

The first dimension is categorical and builds directly on Scott (1998) and the literature inspired by his work to examine what each state *sees*. It involves asking questions such as: What

is the logic and organization of information-gathering projects? By prioritizing the *mètis* or the imposition of categorical order in society, which societal characteristics become visible or invisible in each context? Here, the existing literature provides fertile ground for investigation by highlighting the importance of looking at the infrastructural work (Bowker and Star 2000, Curtis 2001), the categories adopted (Alonso and Star 1985), and the techniques and tools that characterize legibility projects (Lascombes and Le Gales 2007; Eyal 2013).

The second dimension is symbolic and entails linking legibility projects to their legitimation strategies. It involves examining: What were the political challenges and organizational vulnerabilities of the state agencies initiating projects of legibility? How did they intend to be seen by multiple audiences, and which audiences mattered the most in each context? Answering these questions involves mapping the political environment and organizational structure of states in order to identify both the internal audiences (e.g., the auditing, regulatory and control agencies responsible for the oversight of public policies; political parties, the courts) and external audiences (e.g., international organizations, the media, academia, social movements). It also requires assessing how policymakers present and justify their policy choices to these different groups, especially in the early phases of implementation.

Finally, the third dimension is relational and shifts the longer-term consequences of schemes of legibility to the center of the analysis. It involves investigating: How do projects of legibility create new dimensions along which state action can be evaluated? How do legibility schemes inform the politics of state accountability, and how do these affect state capacity for intervention? Here, the goal is to examine how the legibility schemes that are used to render state subjects legible—already unpacked in the first categorical dimension— create or hinge new lines of vision into the state, which can potentially be used by different audiences to scrutinize public

policies. And, crucially, since reputational strategies are likely to differ in their levels of transparency (Carpenter and Krause 2012), the internal functioning of legibility projects will be more or less visible to outsiders, accordingly. The different degrees of opacity of state structures should also be uncovered by the analysis. Table 2.1 summarizes the comparative framework.

Table 2.1: The Three Dimensions of Legibility in Comparative Perspective

	Dimension	Trade-Offs	Key Concepts
Seeing Like a State	Categorical, Informational	Accuracy vs Breath	Official Classification Information Systems
Projecting an Image of the State	Symbolic, Reputational	Efficiency vs Inclusivity	Audience Legitimacy Strategies Organizational Reputation
Rendering the State Visible	Relational; Evaluative	Opacity vs Transparency	Accountability Intra-State Politics

In what follows, I build on this analytical framework to examine how Brazil and Mexico rendered poor individuals legible for the purposes of implementing conditional cash transfer programs. To do so, in Chapter 3, I empirically examine the relationship between the first two dimensions – *Seeing Like a State* and *Projecting an Image of the State* – or what Wyrzten (2017) called the legibility-legitimation link. Chapter 3, therefore, is centered around the initial years of *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresas*, i.e. 1997-2003. In Chapter 4, I focus on the long-term consequences of the initial legibility schemes adopted in Brazil and Mexico by investigating the different ways that they *Rendered the State Visible*. Chapter 4, therefore, will take us to an examination of the disputes around the two programs that took place between 2016-2017, when I did the great part of my fieldwork and document analysis.

CHAPTER 3: SEEING POVERTY LIKE A STATE – THE POLITICS OF TARGETING AND MONITORING POOR FAMILIES

Introduction

In 2018, the *Bolsa Familia* (BFP) and *Progresa* programs were the two largest conditional cash transfer (CCTs) programs in the world, benefiting 20 million families combined. They were both based on the same principle: 1) to reduce poverty through a provision of a minimum level of income (on average US\$50/month) *only* for extremely poor families, and 2) to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty by conditioning these transfers on meeting certain requirements, such as school attendance, vaccinations and pre-natal visits. See Appendix 2 for a comparative-descriptive analysis of the main features of each CCT.

As we saw in Chapter 1, however, in the mid-1990s, when Brazil and Mexico initiated what some have called a “development revolution from the Global South” by implementing the BFP and *Progresa* (Hulme, Hanlon and Barrientos 2012), these countries had neither a blueprint of how they would implement their CCTs nor official sources of information about poverty at the individual level, which was needed in order to identify beneficiaries. Until then, Brazil and Mexico estimated poverty rates by using the census or national household surveys; and poverty specialists used this information to calculate poverty lines, produce academic studies and monitor, at the aggregate level, the impact of social policies on poverty outcomes. Although this type of data made poverty visible for the goals of policy-making (e.g., it allowed state officials to know that “40% of the Mexican population is poor” or that “Brazil’s poverty levels have diminished in the last 10 years”), it did not help these states to answer the organizational and informational questions necessary to implement CCTs. Who were these 40% of Mexican (or

Brazilian) poor individuals? Where were they, and how would the state locate them? Once the state found these individuals, how would it distribute cash and monitor their behavior?

Considering that these two countries shared a history of local-level political clientelism (Hilgers 2012; Stokes et al 2014) and thus a similar fear that CCTs would be used for electoral purposes, determining how the poor would be identified and monitored was seen as a key aspect for the legitimation and successful implementation of both programs. Yet, in the two contexts, a large part of the target audience for these programs did not have an identity card and circulated mostly in the informal sector, making the task of “finding the poor” particularly challenging (Hunter and Sugiyama 2014). Hence, to implement the CCTs and render poor individuals visible for policy purposes meant that in practice the Brazilian and Mexican states had to: 1) create a targeting system to find poor families, 2) generate detailed information about these families at the individual level, and 3) create beneficiary datasets to monitor *both* the poverty status of families and if they were following with health, nutrition and education conditionalities. Faced with the same challenge, the Brazilian and Mexican states chose different solutions for targeting their policies and monitoring poor families’ behavior, and poverty became visible to policymakers in different ways across the two contexts.

This chapter examines how the different ways in which the Brazilian and Mexican policymakers made poverty visible and governable relate to the strategies of political legitimation of each program. Specifically, following the comparative framework developed in Chapter 2, I conceptualize what the policy literature terms “targeting and monitoring methods” as *poverty legibility projects* meant to identify and follow the behavior of poor families. I have two main goals. The first is to empirically substantiate the analytical framework I proposed in Chapter 2 to study projects of legibility from a comparative perspective. The second is to explain

the policy implications of a sociological analysis of CCTs. While the policy literature tends to place Brazil and Mexico as representing the “CCT model of anti-poverty policies”, and to treat variance in the operations of *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa* as “differences in design,” I argue that “the devil is on the details,” and the politics of implementation reflect very distinct understandings of i) the role of the state, ii) cash transfers, and iii) conditionalities in reducing poverty. In turn, these differences are extremely consequential for the broader institutionalization of a social welfare system for the poor in the long run.

This chapter draws primarily on the analysis of official documents, but I also use part of my interview data whenever relevant. As described in the Preface, I examined and coded a rich set of policy documents, academic papers and legislation about social policies in general, and *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa* in particular, in order to trace the institutional configurations and policy decisions that shaped Brazil and Mexico’s projects of legibility. From the 100 interviews with political and bureaucratic elites that I conducted during my fieldwork, in this chapter, I draw from 18 interviews that were done mostly in Portuguese or in Spanish with key actors involved in the initial decisions about the two CCTs.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I present Mexico’s poverty legibility project, followed by Brazil’s legibility system. For each country, I present i) the logics and ii) governance of their poverty targeting system (or methods to identify poor families); and iii) the informational system created to monitor poor families’ behavior (or the methods to follow compliance with conditionalities). In the third section, I provide a comparative analysis of the distinct projects of legibility. In the fourth section, I investigate how each legibility project was influenced by the legitimation needs of each CCT. I conclude by summarizing the argument.

3.1 Seeing Poverty Like the Mexican State: Accurate Targeting and Focus on Conditionalities

In a personal recollection of the history of *Progresa*, former manager Daniel Hernandez (2008, 82-83), explained well the challenges Mexican policymakers faced to identify poor families: “To implement a social policy [like *Progresa*], statistical data has to incorporate a concrete physical-spatial component...that is, we need to move from the relative abstraction of statistical data about the magnitude of poverty to the identification of the precise spaces in which people that we want to help are located.” In this section, I describe how the Mexican government turned poor families from “statistical abstractions” into concrete, identifiable, and reachable actors in order to implement its CCT – i.e., I explain how *seeing poverty like a state* looked like in the initial years of *Progresa*.

Geographical Targeting and Accuracy

In Mexico, the federal government developed an information system to find and monitor poor families, which allowed the state to see poverty through a geographical dimension and in great detail, but infrequently. To identify poor families, *Progresa*'s team first used existing census data to identify poor localities in Mexico, where the probability of making targeting mistakes (i.e., including non-poor individuals in *Progresa*) was lower. In other words, the Mexican state first created poverty maps that identified the places where, for example, there was a high rate of illiteracy or a high percentage of the population living without indoor toilets, electricity, or access to water, among other variables.²⁹ In 1997, when the program was launched,

²⁹ Mexico's Geographic Information System (SIG) was initially created by the National Council of Population (CONAPO), who defined poor localities as those that fell below an Index of Marginalization. CONAPO calculated the Index of Marginalization by “considering the % population age 15 and older who are illiterate; do not attend

6,344 poor localities were identified (3.15% of total localities in the country), and this number would increase to 86,091 localities by 2005 (42.8%) (Levy 2006, 26-28).

Second, *Progresa*'s staff traveled to these poor localities and implemented a census-like survey in all households, asking questions about household demographics and composition, quality of housing, access to public goods, schooling and educational levels, among others. With a comprehensive set of information in hand from all households in poor localities, 33 variables were used to run discriminant analysis (or proxy means testing) to predict which families fell under a poverty threshold. Only after this decision was made were the families categorized as poor offered to join *Progresa*. Families that joined the program were then entered into a database of beneficiaries, in which identifiable, individual-level data was collected to track their behavior and monitor their compliance with health and education conditionalities.

At first, the *Progresa* team decided that, as long as health, nutrition, and education requirements were met, all beneficiary families would remain in the program for three years without further verification of their economic status. After three years, all beneficiary families would be interviewed again, using the same initial survey questionnaire, after which either their poverty status would be recertified or they would be transitioned to a partial benefit scheme. However, after the initial challenges with family recertification in the early years of the program, it was decided that the economic status of families would be re-verified after six to eight years (Davila 2016). The result was that in Mexico, the state used *Progresa*'s beneficiary dataset on a regular basis to monitor beneficiaries' compliance with conditionalities, even though the federal government only re-verified poverty status every six to eight years (Medellin et al 2015).

elementary school; live without indoor toilets, electricity, or access to water; live with overcrowding, dirt floors, or in localities with less than 5,000 inhabitants; and have a household income lower than 2 minimum wages.”

In Search of a Close Monitoring of Conditionalities

Perhaps one of the most controversial decisions regarding Mexico's geographical targeting refers to the choice of excluding from the program the localities that did not have (or that were too far from) schools or health clinics, since families in these localities would not be able to follow conditionalities, and the Mexican government would not be able to monitor if they did so. In practice this means that, initially, *Progresa* chose to exclude from the implementation of the program precisely the extremely poor families that were in regions without schools or health clinics (Rocha and Escobar 2012).³⁰ Although most, but not all, of these localities would eventually be incorporated into the program, this choice reveals the centrality that was given to conditionalities (*co-responsibilidades* in Spanish) as a key feature of the Mexican CCT. Accordingly, a very complex system was put into place to verify if families were following through with their *co-responsibilidades* in health and education.

The process of following conditionalities was operationally connected to the enrollment of families into the program. After *Progresa* determined the eligibility of a poor family, and this family would join the program, it was required that beneficiaries register all family members with designated health clinics and schools in order to complete their enrollment in the program. Then, doctors and teachers recorded household attendance at clinics and schools, which was not such a trivial task, since health and education requirements varied according to gender and age of each family member, making the record-keeping quite complex for local educational and health staff (see Appendix 2, Table A.2). The information collected was then sent “every two months to

³⁰ In the initial years of *Progresa*, one of the most challenging operational questions was how to match geographic information from CONAPO to the Health and Education Ministries ones (which used their own georeferenced systems). Standardizing this geographical information was extremely challenging, with staff from these three agencies manually matching their data “in a hurry” to decide on the localities that *Progresa* would start (which, of course, incurred in many problems – one that was cited consistently in my interviews was the incapacity of the informational system to measure if there were any natural obstacles, such as big mountains or rivers, that would make it hard for policy beneficiaries to reach schools and hospitals).

Mexico City,” where *Progresa* staff verified whether the family was really in the program and whether it had complied with program requirements in the last two months. Depending on this information, the federal government decided on the level of payment for each family, which also varied according to household characteristics. This means that the poverty legibility system in Mexico was designed to follow closely the behavior of poor families in relation to their educational and health practices – checking, as an interviewee explained to me, “if beneficiaries were doing what they were supposed to do” every two months, but the government only recertified poverty status of poor families every 6-8 years.

Centralized Governance

Under this legibility scheme, municipalities had no formal role in the targeting or implementation of *Progresa*, and the program had a highly centralized and insulated structure located at the federal government. Since its inception, *Progresa*’s model of operation deliberately reduced the number of intermediaries between the federal government and poor households (Levy 2006), and thus it was *Progresa*’s staff, located mostly in the federal capital, Mexico City, that was responsible for all information-gathering activities related to the program. The centralization of *Progresa*’s governance at the federal level meant that the program did not have an official, state source of information about the poor that was collected at the local level. This top-down feature of Mexico’s project of legibility of the poor resembled Scott’s characterization of the synoptic, distant view of the state from “the full reality that [state] abstractions were made to capture.” (1995, 55).

3.2 Seeing Poverty Like the Brazilian State: Loose Targeting and Inattention to Conditionalities

As we saw in Chapter 1, the creation of *Bolsa Familia* resulted from 9 years of experimentation with CCTs, and from the unification of four distinct federal CCTs. As well put by Amelia Cohn (2012, 20), a former manager of *Bolsa Familia*, this means that decisions about the targeting of the program resembled “reconstructing a ship that was already in open ocean.” Contrary to Mexico that bet on a complex and accurate way to identify poor families and monitor their behavior, policymakers in Brazil bet on simplicity to sail the CCT ship in “open ocean.”

Targeting by Families and Simplicity

In Brazil, the state did not adopt such a comprehensive system to find the poor. Contrary to Mexico, the federal government used the census not to identify poor localities in the country, but to estimate how many poor families there were in Brazil, through a simple measure of income per capita. From this national target, the Ministry of Social Development (MDS)—responsible for implementing the BFP—estimated a target population at the municipal level to determine baseline quotas to be used for selecting beneficiaries in each municipality. Through this strategy, the state planned to find poor families even in localities that were not considered poor at an aggregate (or geographical) level. In contrast to Mexico, therefore, where only 14.5% of municipalities were part of *Progresá* in its first year, in Brazil 99.4% of municipalities joined the BFP already in its initial year (own calculations, using MDS 2016).

Second, MDS instructed municipalities to register all low-income families that fit a “broader poverty profile”³¹ in *Bolsa Familia*’s beneficiary dataset on an ongoing basis. In the

³¹ Measured as 50% of the minimum wage per capita, which is considerably higher than *Bolsa Familia*’s poverty threshold—around 25% of the minimum wage. See Appendix 2 - Table A.2 for details.

registration process, families self-reported their income and the numbers of individuals living in the same household. These numbers allowed the federal government to identify the potential audience for the BFP, since it would also include families with income above the poverty line (Soares, Ribas and Osorio 2010). Although more information was collected at the moment of registration, it was only income per capita that was used by the *Bolsa Familia* team to select eligible families that fell under the program's poverty line.

Since the *Bolsa Familia* targeting strategy increased the risk of patronage and fraud (Handa and Davis 2006), the federal government required that all data entered into the BFP database be updated every two years or whenever there was a change in income, family composition or address (Hellmann 2015), allowing the Brazilian state to recertify their poverty status with frequency. Moreover, the *Bolsa Familia* team constantly cross-checked BFP data with other federal databases in search for inconsistencies in declared income, in an effort to improve the income per capita variable as declared by the families.

Conditionalities are Secondary

In a radically different approach to conditionalities, in Brazil, the federal government did not limit the expansion of the program to municipalities that had schools and hospitals, nor it conditioned the final enrollment of families into *Bolsa Familia* on their registration with local education and health facilities, like is done in Mexico. In fact, in the early years of the BFP, many families became *Bolsa Familia* beneficiaries before the federal government had put an informational system in place to monitor their conditionalities. While by 2013, 100% of the municipalities had informational systems implemented, in the first four years of the program (2003-2006), municipalities and schools progressively entered the informational system. As can

be seen in Table 3.1, below, in 2004, 70% of municipalities reported beneficiaries attendance in education, and only 21.9% did so in Health. By 2006, while almost ~100% of municipalities reported compliance with educational conditionalities, 81.7% did the same for health.

Table 3.1: Monitoring of Compliance with Education and Health Conditionalities

Year	Education			Health		
	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006
% of municipalities reporting	70%	99.2%	99.8%	21.9%	70.4%	81.7%
% of schools reporting	55%	81%	93%	n/a	n/a	n/a
% of BFP children with full information	51%	66%	71%	6.8%	36%	43.1%
% of BFP pregnant women monitored	n/a	n/a	n/a	29.8%	31.6%	85.4%

Source: own calculation with MDS data. Also Lindert et al (2007)

Here, municipalities also play a key role in the data-gathering efforts of *Bolsa Familia*. First, schools and local health clinics sent the municipality the attendance records of beneficiary families. Then this information was organized and consolidated by the municipality, which was responsible for sending it to the Ministries of Education and Health. Finally, these two ministries prepared bi-monthly (education) and bi-annual (health) reports to *Bolsa Familia* administrative unit located in the federal government, who linked this information to the beneficiary dataset, in order to invoke consequences for non-compliance.

Decentralized Governance

Under this legibility scheme, the central government gave municipalities a key role in the implementation and targeting of the BFP, since the 5,570 Brazilian municipalities were

responsible for identifying, registering and monitoring poor families in the program. However, regarding opportunities for controversy and political clientelism (i.e., selecting who were the beneficiaries), municipalities were not formally involved in the decision-making process. Rather, decisions were made independently at the federal government level. Even so, compared to Mexico, the Brazilian federal government developed a looser strategy for avoiding political clientelism since it depended on municipalities' ability to register and monitor families. Nevertheless, this legibility arrangement did allow the Brazilian state to have a constant, official source of information about poverty at the local level. In this sense, Brazil's legibility scheme was designed to capture the dynamic, ever-changing economic status of families, hence prioritizing – to a certain degree—a closer look at the *métis* of poverty.

3.3 Different Pictures of Poverty: Distinct Filters and Levels of Resolution

Through these different strategies to identify poor individuals, the Brazilian and Mexican states generated official information that made poverty visible in different ways and with distinct frequency in each context. In Brazil, the state developed a bottom-up informational system that portrayed a very simple image of poverty, based solely on self-declared income per capita – in this sense, in low resolution. The Brazilian system, however, was designed to capture movements in and out of poverty frequently, by requiring that individuals constantly update their information in the BFP database. Yet the fact that income was self-declared necessitated the *Bolsa Familia* staff to regularly develop ways of identifying instances of manipulation by the beneficiaries. In Mexico, on the other hand, the state developed a top-down informational system that captured a comprehensive portrait of poverty at the initial moment of entry into the program – in this sense, in high resolution. However, it was harder to track changes in poverty status

because it required *Progresas*'s team to return to each poor locality to implement the same initial survey, which was organizationally complex and expensive. Instead, policymakers invested greater efforts in creating a close monitoring system of beneficiaries' compliance with educational and health conditionalities, which was not a central feature of the legibility system in Brazil.

The different projects of legibility of the Brazilian and Mexican poor reflect distinct choices regarding which criteria would determine poverty status and directly affected the amount and type of information to be collected from each individual beneficiary. The frequency of data collection about the socioeconomic conditions of families also reflected political and technical judgements about the rate of change in poverty and the value of up-to-date information. Whereas poverty in Mexico was measured primarily by household characteristics that fluctuate less, reflecting an understanding of poverty as something that is more permanent; in Brazil, poverty was measured by income per capita, which can oscillate much more, indicating an understanding of poverty as a condition that can be more transitory. Table 3.2 summarizes the differences between the two projects of legibility.

Table 3.2: Different Images and Governance of Poverty

	Mexico	Brazil
Implementation	Centralized	Decentralized
Initial Census Filter	Identification of Poor Localities	Estimation of number of Poor Families
Poverty Visualization	Top-down; High Resolution (33 variables); Static View	Bottom-up; Low Resolution (1 variable); Movement
Conditionalities Visualization	Top-down; Rigid	Bottom-up; Loose
Legibility Tools	1. Targeting Survey; 2. Beneficiary Dataset	1. Beneficiary Dataset
Poverty Targeting	Precise and Rigid	Loose and Dynamic

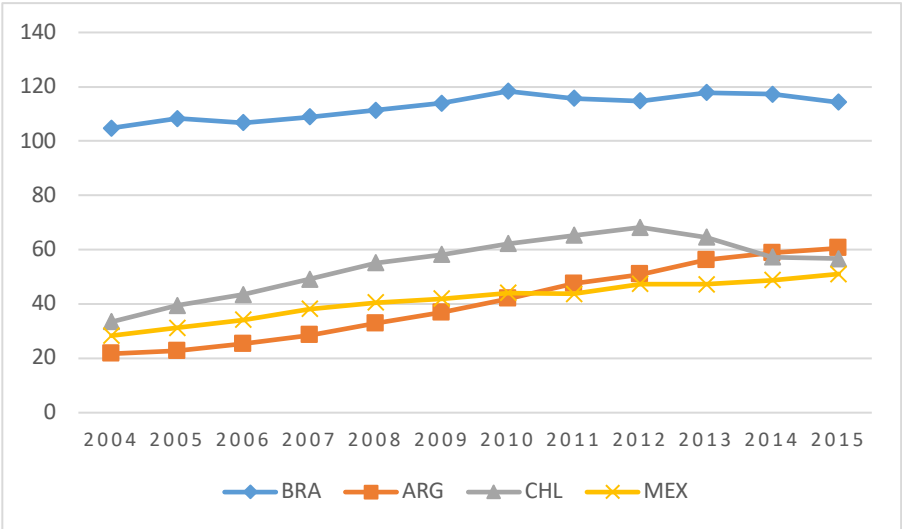
A Note on Cash Distribution: The Role of Envelopes and Debit Cards

Stricto sensu, cash transfer methods should not be considered a part of the poverty legibility system. Yet, considering that the massive effort put into the targeting of poor families happens because the federal government wants to transfer resources to the “right” families, it is worth noticing an important difference between the two CCTs. In the first 15 years of *Progresa* (1997-2011), transfers were made in cash by handing out envelopes, while since the first version of CCTs in Brazil (1995), families received their transfers through debit cards. This difference imposed different challenges for the legitimation of CCTs in each context.

There are multiple ways in which states transfer resources to their citizens. In both Mexico and Brazil, the federal government chose to use semi-independent public banks (autarchies) to operationalize CCTs. In Brazil, the federal government benefitted from an

installed public bank infrastructure with wide territorial reach throughout the country. Even compared to countries with higher or comparable socioeconomic indicators in Latin America, such as Chile and Argentina, Brazil had a very high number of ATMs, per capita, making it comparatively easy for *Bolsa Familia* to partner with public banks to deliver cash through debit cards. In Mexico, conversely, not only both public and private banks had a limited territorial reach throughout the country, but the lack of installed financial capacity also meant that families were unfamiliar or suspicious of banks where they existed. For this reason, cash transfers were made by a public bank but through envelopes or telegrams in the early days of the program (in 2017, 30% of beneficiaries still used this method).

Figure 3.1: ATM by 100,000 inhabitants in Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Mexico (2004-2015)



Source: World Bank Data, own calculations.

As explained by Lindert et al (2007), the use of a banking system has potential benefits for the functioning of a CCT, by: i) supporting transparency; ii) promoting efficiency (no lines,

fewer staff needed); iii) reducing the scope for clientelism, since public authorities (federal or local) are not involved in handing out benefits directly to beneficiaries; iv) connecting beneficiaries to the official banking system, and I would include v) reducing safety problems of transferring great amounts of cash by trucks to poor localities. Importantly for our purposes, distributing cash transfers by debit cards versus envelopes also imposed different symbolic challenges and opportunities for the legitimation of the CCTs. It is to these that I now turn.

3.4 Projecting an Image of the State: Interplay between Reputation and Legibility

Why did Brazil and Mexico develop such different systems to make poverty legible and governable? To answer this question, in this section, I introduce the first additional dimension to Scott's concept of legibility by showing how the choices regarding poverty information systems were shaped, to an extent, by the legitimation needs perceived by state agencies responsible for implementing these programs. Or, to borrow Scott's conceptual toolkit, I explain how *seeing like a state* depended on the disputes over *how the state would be seen*.

In a much-cited paper, Amartya Sen (1995,1) compares policy targeting to combative strategies. "The use of the term 'targeting' in eradicating poverty is based on an analogy—a target is something fired at... The problem is not so much that the word 'target' has combative association. The more serious problem lies elsewhere—in the fact that the analogy of a target does not at all suggest that the recipient is an active person, functioning on her own, acting and doing things." In this passage, Amartya Sen highlights the importance of thinking about the poor as active agents rather than as passive policy recipients, and he nicely summarizes the challenge that CCT targeting faces: Policy beneficiaries are moving targets rather than static ones that are waiting to be "hit" by a policy. Creating an information system capable of finding and tracking

the behavior of these moving targets is not an easy political or technical task. Policymakers are constantly facing a trade-off between missing the target (i.e., excluding eligible beneficiaries) or hitting the wrong target (i.e., including ineligible individuals either by mistake or because of data manipulation). As with every trade-off, there are rewards and penalties associated with each option, which create different reputational dilemmas for the programs, and require different strategies for the creation of information systems that will project an image of objectivity, precision, and political neutrality (Carpenter 2010).

The strategies adopted by Brazil and Mexico to make *Bolsa Familia* and *Progres*a governable and poor individuals visible reflect the choices made by each state agency regarding this trade-off. These choices, in turn, also reflect the diverse set of audiences to which policymakers directed their legitimation strategies in each national context. Building on the content analysis of official documentation and on interviews with policymakers that were involved in decisions about each programs' targeting mechanisms, I next present their rationale for choosing options from opposite sides of the targeting trade-off.

Mexico: Portraying an Image of an Efficient and Anti-Political State

In Mexico, when deciding how to find poor Mexican families, policymakers prioritized hitting the right targets (i.e., minimizing inclusion mistakes), which was considered crucial to legitimating *Progres*a in a political environment marked by general suspicion of poverty-alleviation efforts. As argued in Chapter 2, to fully understand this decision, we have to situate it in Mexico's political and institutional context, on the one hand, and identify its intended audiences, on the other. Starting with the former, as extensively mapped in Chapter 1, decisions regarding *Progres*a's initial targeting mechanism were made between 1995 and 1997, in the

midst of a severe economic crisis in Mexico and during the tenure of an unpopular President, Ernesto Zedillo, who was facing multiple political crises—including inside his own political party, PRI—and under public pressure for greater democracy and transparency (Yaschine and Orozco 2010). Furthermore, policymakers faced the challenge of differentiating *Progresa* from previous anti-poverty programs in Mexico that were broadly associated with political clientelism, inefficiency, and corruption (Cornelius, Craig and Fox 1994).

As part of what became known as the “technocratic group” of the PRI, Zedillo recruited experts with a similar academic training than his own in economics at Yale University, especially at the Finance Ministry, the agency that would be responsible for taking the Mexican economy out of the 1994 Pesos Crisis. Initial decisions about *Progresa* were made by this team, under the leadership of Santiago Levy, an economist trained at Boston University, who came to the federal government after having written an influential World Bank report, calling for drastic changes in Mexico’s anti-poverty policy (Levy 1991). The group of economists at the Finance Ministry was joined by a mix of demographers and social scientists from Mexico’s Population Council, mostly trained in Mexican universities, who brought demography-oriented considerations to *Progresa*’s targeting decisions (Cortés and Rubalcava 2012).

These actors aimed to project an image of *Progresa* as both *efficient* and *anti-political*. Cultivating this reputation involved institutional and technical decisions. First, there was a concern for institutionally protecting the program and insulating it from what were considered the usual corruption schemes in poverty-alleviation efforts by other state agencies. To show that they would change business-as-usual in Mexico, *Progresa* was not affiliated with the Social Development Ministry, which was associated with local-level political clientelism, and the program had insulated, centralized operations in Mexico City (Graizbord 2015). In addition, a

series of administrative measures – such as the annual publication of *Progresa*'s Operation Rules publicly stating how families would be selected to joining the program – were taken to “insulate the day-to-day running of the program from political pressures by state or municipal governments to change eligibility criteria, operations and size of benefits” (Levy 2006, 101). These strategies also intended to create transparency regarding the governance of the program.

On the technical side, the adoption of a very comprehensive means-testing system to determine poverty status was intended to signal that *Progresa* would be economically sustainable and fiscally responsible, which was particularly important to those policymakers from the Finance Ministry. Indeed, targeting was framed not simply as a way of reaching the extreme poor, but as a way of combating poverty in *efficient* ways, transferring resources solely to those that really needed it without incurring in big deficits (Levy 2006).

Similarly, the decisions of “making receipt of the program income transfers contingent on poor household's personal actions to enhance their human capital,” which was constrained by the “supply of health and educational services previously available,” signaled not only an understanding that CCTs would provide families an opportunity to break the inter-generational transmission of poverty by investing in their own human capital. Conditionalities were also presented as a proof that “[income transfers] would eventually be phased out,” and so the government would not have to pay for CCT's costs indefinitely (Levy 2006, 90). For this reason, Mexican policymakers also chose to exclude from the program the localities in which there were not installed education and health infrastructure.

Yet, the rigid targeting scheme also allowed *Progresa*'s high-level staff to see themselves as, and attempt to transmit an image of being, anti-political. Contrary to the professed attitude of professional neutrality in bureaucracies – the expectation that policy decisions will be based on

technical rather than political terms (Weber 1978) – an “anti-political” image includes an understanding of the state and state actors as inherently interested, and also a keen sensitivity to the limitations and built-in pitfalls of state action. It therefore involves taking active measures to resist these perceived limits of the state (Ferguson 1990). As a poverty expert working for *Progresa* explained in an interview, “We would not select which families would benefit from this program. The discriminant analysis would do it.” The power of numbers in their narratives was used as a legitimation strategy against the risk of political clientelism at the local level, but also of the potential disruptions of trusting bureaucratic judgement. As another staff member said, “We did not trust the municipalities. We knew we would fail if we counted on them, so we invested a long time in formulating our statistical model, in a way that not even we could influence the targeting results. It was important to let the numbers decide.”

To interpret this decision, it is worth considering that “trust in numbers” is a political strategy expressing relative weakness rather than strength, as convincingly shown by Porter (1995). As explained in detail in Part III, it is only a group of experts who perceive that they are under intense scrutiny that will try to minimize reliance on their own expert judgement, and “let the numbers decide.” In this sense, the choice of minimizing targeting errors (even at the cost of excluding potential beneficiaries, such as those poor families that lived in wealthier localities) was informed by a perception that only in this way, would *Progresa* be able to differentiate itself from the corrupt poverty-alleviation efforts that had characterized Mexico’s social policy trajectory.

This strategy of legitimation spoke to domestic and international audiences. Internally, the goal was to legitimate *Progresa* in technocratic terms to an audience of key academics and politicians, in order to demonstrate the program’s independence from the PRI (De La O 2015).

To do so, before launching the program, *Progresa* staff organized countless briefings with high-level “strategic” politicians and bureaucrats and “information [about the program] was directly communicated to key actors in Congress, subnational government, academia, and interested parties... The public information campaign kept a low profile” (Levy 2006, 110). Additionally, by perfecting a means-tested targeting system following what at the time were considered international best practices, *Progresa* secured its legitimation with international multilateral organizations and academics that celebrated Mexican policymakers’ commitment to methodological excellence.³²

In sum, in Mexico, the legitimation strategy of *Progresa* involved portraying an image of *efficiency* and *anti-politics*, which shaped the decision to create a comprehensive targeting scheme to make poor families visible, which was designed to minimize inclusion mistakes. This decision was made by a centralized high-level staff that focused its efforts on convincing key domestic and international audiences of the merits of its targeting choices. This strategy was designed to work in the particular context of Mexico in the 1990s, which has been described by Fourcade and Babb (2002, 561) as a “single-party system, coupled with weak democratic institutions, strong corporatism, and a powerful centralized presidency,” in which policy-makers were relatively insulated from pressures from social movements, other political parties and the media (Centeno 1994, Babb 2001). As we will see next, this was not the case in Brazil.

³² The Mexican strategy of legitimation of *Progresa* involved maximizing what Santiago Levy calls the “credibility” of the targeting results. As explained by Levy (2006,41), “there always is a subjective element in assessing credibility, but efforts need to be made to reduce any doubts to the minimum possible. In the case of *Progresa*, the efforts consisted of [...] relying on a mix of national and international academic researchers and domestic and foreign institutions to perform evaluations.” Accordingly, these academics were enthusiastic to participate in the evaluation of a major social policy which included an effort to implement proxy-means testing to predict poverty-status, which was considered the gold-standard of targeting by American academia and the World Bank at the time (Yaschine 1999).

Brazil: Manufacturing an Image of an Inclusive and Politically Neutral State

In Brazil, the bureaucratic groups implementing *Bolsa Familia* understood their role and worked to project an image of being *inclusive* and *politically neutral*. This is reflected by the choices i) to place less emphasis on verifying poverty status prior to entering data into the poverty information system—everyone that fit a broad poverty profile would be included, and only then the federal government would select beneficiaries; and ii) to include families in the program even before the government could monitor if they were following through with education and health conditionalities. There was a greater emphasis placed on missing targets (or in avoiding the exclusion of poor individuals).

To understand this choice, it is crucial to contextualize it. As described in Chapter 1, the BFP was consolidated during the tenure of Brazil's first leftist president after the end of the military dictatorship (1985), in a period of economic growth and public optimism, and after almost 10 years of policy experimentation with different versions of CCTs. Specifically, the Brazilian CCT gained momentum under President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, who gained power by pledging that “every Brazilian [would] have food to eat three times a day” (Hall 2006). Building on this political message, the federal government invested great effort in creating strong partnerships with municipalities and transferring resources to the local level, in order to increase the territorial reach of the program very fast. As a BFP staff member explained, “[The idea] was not to be the police, checking if the poor is really poor or not—this we could do later. First we had to find these people that had always been invisible to us.” Under this premise, asking municipalities to register all low-income families under a very loose definition of poverty status made sense, since it allowed policymakers to collect information about many families quickly and shape social policy efforts accordingly.

Similar to Mexico, in Brazil, there was great concern about politically shielding *Bolsa Familia* from corrupt politics, but the Brazilian case differed in that it did not require institutional insulation of the program from existing social policy agencies. Instead, state bureaucracies within the Ministry of Social Development focused on recruiting “the right people” to shield *Bolsa Familia* from party politics and legitimate the program in the eyes of national and international audiences. They did so by recruiting federal managers from the most prestigious civil servant careers in the country and a diverse set of respected social scientists specializing in poverty studies. As such, the group of actors involved in the Brazilian targeting decisions differed greatly from the majority of foreign-trained economists in the Mexican case.³³ Not only were their academic expertise different – economics versus public administration; but also their professional audiences were different – while in Mexico the international economics community was central for legitimation purposes, in Brazil, other domestic bureaucratic groups and experts were prioritized. Accordingly, the Brazilian group of experts and state officials understood that the legitimation of the program would come from finding and reaching those 13 million poor Brazilians that had historically appeared in the census but had been continuously excluded from safety nets (Cohn 2011).

In this sense, in Brazil, the symbolic and operational weight of conditionalities differed greatly from Mexico. While in the latter, conditionalities were seen as individual investments in human capital that would “pay-off” in the long-run with the break of the inter-generational transmission of poverty, in the former, “the aim of imposing these conditions [was] to ensure access of the beneficiaries to the basic social policies related to health, education and social assistance in order to improve the living conditions of the beneficiary population” (MDS,

³³ See Appendix 3 for the academic profile of my interviewee sample: while 71% of Mexicans respondents got their PhD degrees abroad, in Brazil only 34% did so.

Portaria 551, 2005). Therefore, in Brazil, non-compliance with conditionalities was interpreted first as a signal (“red flag”) to federal authorities that these families might be in risk or in need of special attention, and it was used to pressure municipalities to provide better health and education services (Lindert et al 2007).

A second difference between the reputational images that state agencies sought to project in the two countries is that Brazilian policymakers rejected the anti-politics discourse, instead valuing their bureaucratic judgement and abilities, which they believed was sufficient to portray their political neutrality and professional objectivity. Both in interviews and in official documents, these actors maintained that making Brazil more inclusive was the main purpose that stimulated the design of *Bolsa Familia* and the creation of a new information structure about poverty in Brazil. The main reputational challenge was to demonstrate that the program was politically neutral, despite its loose targeting mechanism, and nonpartisan. To secure the program’s reputation, the BFP staff adopted several measures similar to those in Mexico. For example, cash transfers were done by a public bank through debit cards, and municipalities were given quotas determining the maximum number of beneficiaries, based on census estimates. Unlike Mexico, Brazilian federal managers cultivated transparency into their governance decisions and made organizational, identifiable data about the beneficiaries easily accessible to researchers and control agencies inside the Brazilian state—a strategy I explain in the next chapter. Following Porter (1995), this choice reveals the institutional, academic and political strength of Brazilian policymakers, who at this particular historical juncture enjoyed a great deal of bureaucratic and public prestige.

The Brazilian project of legibility, therefore, sought to secure domestic legitimacy by showing that for the first time in Brazil’s history, “the poor would finally be put at the center of

social policies and would not be left hidden in the most remote, rural parts of the country,” as a BFP staff member explained. This image resonated well with social movements, academia, and political parties (particularly those closer to the Workers’ Party), but it also raised suspicion among other groups that the BFP would be used for electoral purposes. Hence, since its inception, the *Bolsa Familia* staff had to walk the fine line of managing a program that was designed to be “popular,” but that could easily be labeled as “populist.” Furthermore, in the initial years of the program, this choice came at the cost of great international skepticism, since *Bolsa Familia* did not follow international standards of poverty targeting or program evaluation. As another staff member said, “The disagreements with the World Bank were radical... In the beginning, they thought that our approach of including as many poor families as possible in the program was a scandal.” To reiterate the point made earlier, Brazilians policymakers responded to this international skepticism by emphasizing their objectivity and neutrality as civil servants. Objectivity was to be guaranteed not by numbers per se, but by the integrity and professional norms of the BFP staff – a stark contrast with Mexican officials stating that “not even us could influence the targeting results.”

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined Brazil and Mexico’s projects of legibility of the poor that were created to implement the *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresas* programs. I showed that each country developed legibility tools to track the behavior of the poor that aimed to achieve distinct political goals: while Mexico prioritized collecting a great amount of information about poor families to avoid inclusion mistakes, Brazil opted for a simpler approach, based solely on income per capita, meant to minimize exclusion errors. Finally, I argued that these choices connect to the

distinct political contexts and legitimation strategies that were adopted in each case. While Mexico aimed to promote an image of *Progresa* as efficient and anti-political, Brazil bet on an inclusive and politically neutral image to legitimate *Bolsa Familia*.

Considering these legitimation strategies and the ways they affected the format of each project of legibility, how did *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* become seen inside and outside the Mexican and Brazilian states? How did the knowledge infrastructure that was created to make poor families visible produce or hinge new perspectives into these programs, and with what consequences? To answer these questions, in the next chapter, I turn to the long-term consequences of each poverty legibility project, by taking us from the initial years of the programs to the period between 2016-2017. In doing so, I introduce the second critical dimension to Scott's notion of legibility by explaining how, in Mexico, the perceived need to insulate *Progresa* from what was considered corrupt politics, also insulated the program from the dynamic character of poverty on the ground. Brazil's project of legibility, on the other hand, created new and unanticipated views into the state, which both improved the capacity of the program to continuously monitor poor families and made its governance more vulnerable to external criticism. Or, to continue with Scott's conceptual analogy, I will explain how *seeing like a state*, can also *render the state visible*.

CHAPTER 4: RENDERING THE STATE VISIBLE – THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF LEGIBILITY

Introduction

While CCTs started in Brazil and Mexico in 1995, by 2016, CCTs programs seemed to be everywhere: 63 low-and-middle income countries had at least one CCT program, and in Latin America, 26 out of 33 countries had at least one CCT in operation (ODI 2016, 6). Across the board, the Brazilian and Mexican CCTs have been credit with ushering in this “development revolution from the Global South” by opening the path to a new generation of “pro-poor” poverty policies (Ferguson 2015; Adato and Hoddinott 2010). In their initial years, the enthusiasm and speed with which the *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa* programs were received “in parts of the academy was astonishing, and their enthusiastic embrace by international financial institutions was even more surprising” (Valencia-Lomeli 2008, 478). As a result, by 2016, these two programs had been intensely scrutinized by both domestic and international, as well as by academic and policy-oriented audiences.

Yet, less attention has been given to the different long-term trajectories that *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* experienced over the years, in particular to the trajectories related to their distinct approaches to poverty targeting and monitoring (an exception is the work done by UN’s International Poverty Center, based in Brazil). In part, this is because the academic and policy literature concentrated its efforts on the *impacts* of CCTs in a wide-range of socioeconomic indicators, while considering so-called “operational differences” as idiosyncratic or hard to measure – I will further elaborate on this issue in Part III of the dissertation.

In this chapter, I examine the long-term consequences of Mexico and Brazil’s initial decisions regarding policy targeting that were put in place to implement the two CCTs. In doing

so, I address the third analytical category that I proposed for the comparative study of legibility in Chapter 2. So far, in Chapter 3, I analyzed the first two dimensions of Mexico and Brazil's projects of poverty legibility. First, building on Scott's concept of legibility, I presented the different ways that *Progresas* and *Bolsa Familia*'s policymakers made poor families visible for the purposes of implementing their programs. Second, I explained how these legibility schemes were shaped, to a great extent, by the strategies of political legitimation of both programs. In this chapter, I examine how any project of legibility that aims to make a population legible also has the potential of creating novel lenses into the state, since it can open or hinge new pathways for other political actors to evaluate and criticize state action. In doing so, I demonstrate how state legibility can have a multiplicity of unintended consequences, and not just the spectacular failures that James Scott predicts. Specifically, I focus on how initial decisions regarding poverty legibility in Mexico and Brazil were consequential for the intra-state bureaucratic disputes around CCTs, and I show how these disputes had real effects on the capacity of these states to continuously reach and include poor families, in the long run.

Empirically, I focus on the long-term, unintended consequences of poverty legibility as they could be observed between 2016-2017, when I did my fieldwork. While both countries and CCTs changed a lot in the period between 1995 (when the first CCTs were implemented) and 2016 (when I started my fieldwork), in this chapter, I will only refer to these political and socioeconomic changes whenever they are relevant for the interpretation of my findings. Here, I use data from i) the full sample of my interviews (n=100); ii) from administrative data that was (painstakingly) collected about the long-term trajectories of the two programs; and, iii) from official studies or operational audits that I had access to during my fieldwork.

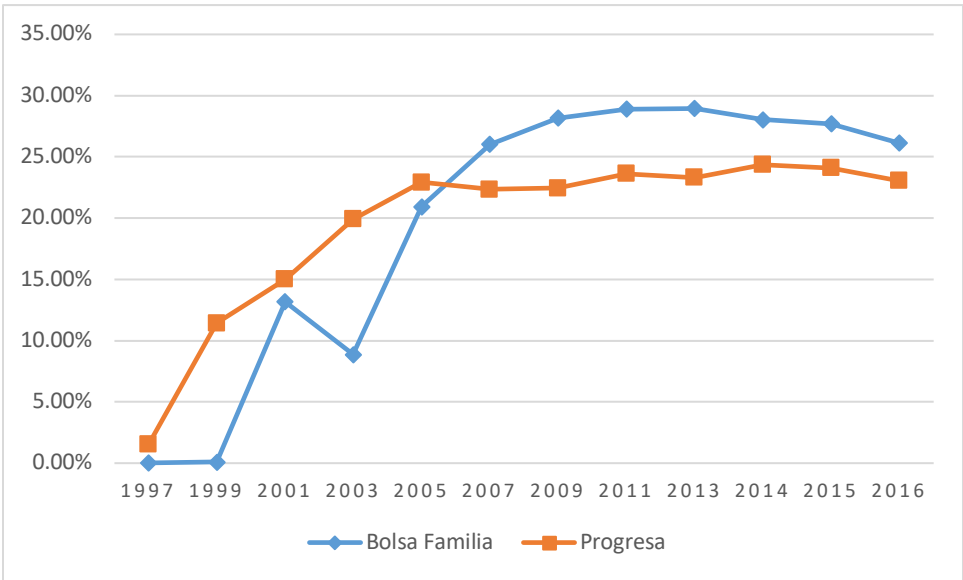
The chapter is organized as follows. The first section provides an overall view of the long-term trajectories of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*. In particular, it provides longitudinal data about their expansion, territorial reach, and targeting performances – i.e., I focus specifically on the trajectories that are relevant for understanding the consequences of their poverty legibility projects. In the second and third sections, I investigate the multiple ways in which Mexico and Brazil’s projects of legibility created distinct pathways for other political actors to question each CCT, as well as their consequences for the governance of poverty on the ground. I do so by asking questions about the distinct policies of accountability of these programs, and how they made the governance structure of the state more or less visible to insiders and outsiders. In conclusion, I summarize the argument put forward in Part II, and I point to implications of my proposed comparative framework for the study of legibility.

4.1 What Happened? Similar Expansion and Distinct Targeting Performances in Mexico and Brazil

Besides being the CCT pioneers, the attention devoted to *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* also relates to the impressive size of each of these programs: In 2016, CCTs were actively reaching and transferring resources to 23.06% and 26.14% of the total population of Mexico and Brazil, respectively. In absolute numbers, this means that approximately 6 million families (or 25 million individuals) were *Progresa* beneficiaries, while 14.5 million families (or 60 million individuals) were *Bolsa Familia* beneficiaries. These numbers are even more impressive if we consider that, in 1997, only 1.53% and 0.50% of the Mexican and Brazilian populations were part of CCTs. Figure 1 shows that while both programs eventually reached approximately a quarter of their national populations, Mexico did so in a more piecemeal way (the biggest

exponential growth was from 1.53% in 1997 to 11.42% in 1999 – which coincides with the end of the Zedillo government, and Mexico’s democratic transition in the year 2000); while Brazil had its exponential growth between 2003-2005 (8.87% to 20.93%) – which corresponds to the entry of President Lula into power. However, as I will demonstrate below, despite these similar numbers at an aggregate level, the programs differed greatly in terms of their inclusion and exclusion errors and in their urban and rural coverages.

Figure 4.1: Number of Beneficiary Families in *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*, as % Population



Source: MDS-SENARC and Sedesol

As we saw in Chapter 3, Mexico’s targeting strategy to identify and reach poor families involved a complex top-down system, based on geographical information; while in Brazil, the federal government chose to partner with municipalities to implement a bottom-up legibility scheme, based on income per capita information. This means that even if both CCTs similarly

reached around 25% of the Mexican and Brazilian populations, a first consequence of each legibility model is that their territorial expansion differed greatly in pace and reach.

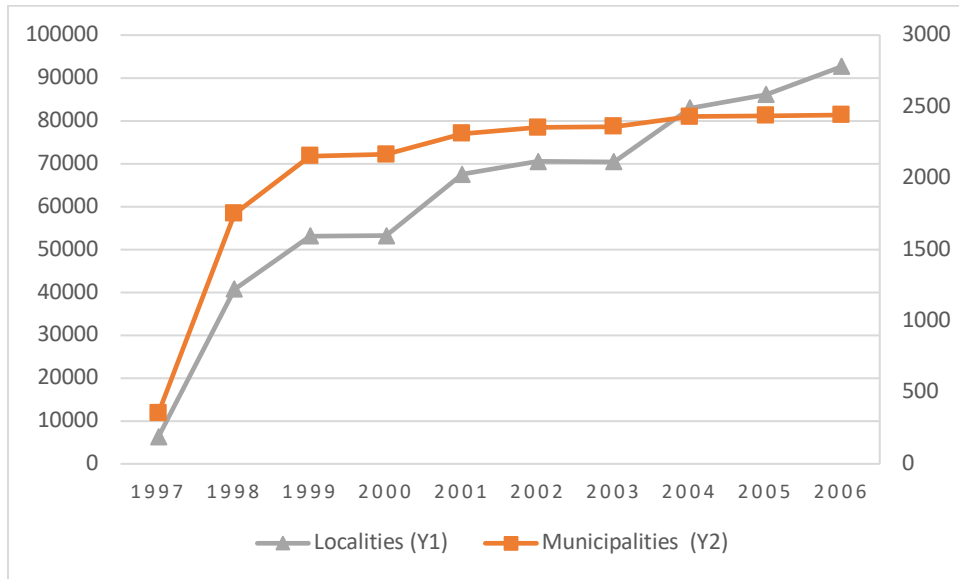
In Brazil, CCTs started at the municipal-level, and by the time *Bolsa Familia* was created in 2003, the federal government was able to include 99.55% of municipalities in the program in its first year, reaching 100% (or 5,570 municipalities) in 2014. These numbers were possible because, by design, including a new municipality into *Bolsa Familia* meant, in practice, that municipal representatives had to sign an official agreement with the federal government,³⁴ and then use pre-existing local-level infrastructure to implement an informational system to identify and transfer resources to poor families. Moreover, as we saw in the previous chapter, *Bolsa Familia* managers chose to expand the program to as many municipalities as possible, regardless of local infrastructure for compliance and monitoring of conditionalities, which they only implemented later.

In Mexico, on the other hand, including a new locality or municipality meant a much more complex organizational effort. It meant that staff located in the federal government had to travel to each locality to implement an initial targeting survey with all families, in order to decide which families would participate in the program – i.e. *Progresa* did not take advantage of pre-existing local-level infrastructures. Moreover, Mexico conditioned the reach and expansion of its CCTs to localities that had functional education and health centers, signaling a strong emphasis on the monitoring of conditionalities. As a result, the territorial reach of the program has been

³⁴ Clearly, signing official agreements with 5,570 municipalities was not trivial, but actors involved seem to have had clarity of the importance of the window of opportunity to create the BFP, and invested great efforts in it (remember: these federal managers were trained in Brazilian federalism, i.e. their expertise was to “makes things work” with municipalities). As a federal manager responsible for this process explained: “[*In the very beginning*], we had to rush things up, we had nothing to work with, there was no paper, no computer, no team, we would bring our family on weekends to assist us in analyzing the joint management agreements with municipalities. It was a period of great voluntarism, but I think it was the best period of construction that I have seen in public administration.”

much more gradual than in Brazil, and only in 2004, 99% of municipalities were included into the program. Figure 4.2, below, plots the evolution of *Progresa*, by localities and municipalities.

Figure 4.2: Territorial Expansion of *Progresa* (1997-2006), by locality and municipality



Source: Sedesol and Levy (2006)

It is worth noticing that while both programs eventually reached a similar proportion of the Mexican and Brazilian population and territory, a closer look at the disaggregated results of the specific groups that were included in the each CCT reveals that these programs had different reach *within* the Mexican and Brazilian poor populations (Soares et al 2010). Below, Tables 4.1.A and 4.1.B show data about what the policy literature terms “targeting performance” of CCTs in 2004 and 2012/2015.

First, in Table 4.1.A (from Soares et al 2010), the left column presents estimates for the exclusion error, or “under-coverage” of CCTs, measured by the ratio of the non-beneficiary poor to the total poor population. The right column presents estimates for the inclusion error, or “leakage” of CCTs, as the number of beneficiary non-poor divided by the total beneficiary population. We can see that these targeting results reflect the initial choice in Mexico of

collecting a great amount of information about poor families to avoid inclusion mistakes, as well as Brazil’s option for a simpler approach, meant to minimize exclusion errors (Soares et al 2010). This is because, in 2004, *Progresa* had a larger exclusion error (70% of poor Mexicans were not CCT beneficiaries, while this number was 59% in *Bolsa Familia*), while Brazil had a larger inclusion error (49% of all beneficiaries were not poor, while in Mexico only 36%). Yet, it is important to interpret these results with a grain of salt because the authors used household surveys for their estimations, and these tend to undercount extreme poor population.³⁵

Table 4.1.A: Targeting Performance of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* in 2004

	Exclusion Error (under-coverage)	Inclusion Error (leakage)
<i>Progresa</i> (2004)	70%	36%
<i>Bolsa Familia</i> (2004)	59%	49%

Source: Soares et al (2010)

In relation to the territorial expansion and reach of each CCT, Table 4.1.B below, also shows that the initial choices regarding poverty legibility directly affected the targeting performance of the two programs in rural versus urban areas after these programs had been running for 10-15 years. Table 4.1.B presents a simpler measure for performance: beneficiary incidence among the poorest 20% population i) in all the national territory; ii) in rural areas, and iii) in urban areas, in 2012 (Mexico) and 2015 (Brazil). Here, we see that by the 2010s, despite the fact that Mexico invested greatly in the accuracy of its poverty targeting system, among the poorest quintile of the Mexican population, 51.7% were *Progresa*’s beneficiaries, while the same

³⁵ The authors point to the limitation of the Brazilian household survey that initially did not have a question identifying BFP beneficiaries, while the Mexican one had, which they believe affected negatively the Brazilian results.

value was 62.2% in *Bolsa Familia*. However, and in line with the geographical targeting prioritized in Mexico, *Progresa* performed much better in rural areas than it did in urban areas (81.9% vs 34.8%). Similarly, Brazil performed better in rural areas (76.8%), but the results in urban areas were not so disparate like in Mexico (49.4%). To put these numbers in perspective for the Latin American context, in 2015, only Peru and Panama had better targeting results than Brazil; and these three countries plus Paraguay had better results than Mexico (ASPIRE data, see also Souza 2018). If we consider that Peru, Panama and Paraguay are considerably smaller than both Brazil and Mexico (and hence the legibility challenge is less complex), *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* still had positive results. However, as we will see in Part III and in the conclusion, the difficulties that *Progresa* had to reach the poor in urban areas of Mexico would impose legitimation challenges in the long-run and reduce its level of societal embeddedness.

Table 4.1.B: Targeting Performance in 2015

	Beneficiary Incidence in Poorest Quintile (Overall)	Beneficiary Incidence in Poorest Quintile (Rural)	Beneficiary Incidence in Poorest Quintile (Urban)
<i>Progresa</i> (2012)	51.7%	81.9%	34.8%
<i>Bolsa Familia</i> (2015)	62.2%	76.8%	49.4%

Source: World Bank ASPIRE and Ipea data, own calculations.

These results show that the initial decisions regarding poverty legibility put Mexico and Brazil in different routes regarding their CCTs, and these programs faced distinct inclusion challenges in the long-run. But even more importantly for the argument in Part II, by seeing the impressive reach of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*, we notice that the poverty legibility tools that were created in 1997 to identify and monitor poor families, by 2016, contained detailed data

about approximately 25% of the Mexican and Brazilian population – i.e., in 2016, these legibility tools made 20 million families visible to policymakers in the two contexts. Predictably, therefore, these instruments became very valuable and disputed inside the two states, as well as for civil society and researchers interested in poverty. As a Brazilian sociologist explained to me, “The *Bolsa Familia* dataset can be understood as poverty census, since now practically all low-income families in the country appear in that dataset. This is great because we can know a lot about poverty. This can be potentially dangerous because contrary to a census, we now have identifiable micro-level information of all these families.”

In what follows, I explain how the initial decisions regarding poverty legibility and their legitimation strategies were consequential for the bureaucratic disputes around CCTs. To do so, I focus first on the mechanisms of accountability that were created to make CCTs visible for other political actors, and then on the unintended consequences of these strategies for the governance of each program.

4.2 Making the State Visible in Mexico: The Opacity of Efficiency

In Mexico, since *Progresas*'s inception, policymakers were very careful with which aspects of the program would become visible for outsiders or not. In the name of transparency and accountability, *Progresas* staff produced its own program reports and stimulated the implementation of multiple external evaluations, as a means to legitimate the program and provide information about its operation (see Parker and Todd 2017 for a summary of the evaluation findings in Mexico, also Part III of the dissertation). Moreover, other state actors,

such as control and auditing agencies responsible for the oversight of federal programs,³⁶ invested great energy in examining the accuracy of the poverty maps that *Progresa* developed to identify poor communities. Poverty experts, external evaluators and civil society organizations, in turn, also focused on scrutinizing the targeting model and the merits of the discriminant analysis that was used to determine the poverty status of families:

In the beginning, it was very hard for people to understand that you put information in what they considered a black box, which then determines who is poor and who is not. So, there were many, many questions about the statistical model: Why do you have 60 questions and not 30? So I spent my days answering questions about the model, the model... Why this, not that? We were scrutinized by everybody when it came to that model. (Former *Progresa* staff responsible for targeting model)

Crucially for our purposes, however, *Progresa's* staff did not deem necessary the facilitation of external access to *Progresa's* beneficiary dataset, and there was a lot of resistance to sharing micro-level information about beneficiaries with other state agencies. My interviewees attribute this to what they saw as a risk of political use of poor families' information, especially by local-level politicians, and also to an understanding that this was organizational data, not easily legible to other public agencies in Mexico:

It would be hard for outsiders to understand it [information in the beneficiary dataset], because they don't know how our data management systems work—our data would make no sense to them. And, to be honest, I also don't know how they would use this information... Maybe they have other political interests, and this is not under my control, so I am not sure why I would share my data with them. (*Progresa* manager).

We are in a country where the information [about beneficiaries] can be so powerful that I am sure it would not be used well. The level of suspicion! In a country that has problems even with the democratic credibility of elections and that public policies are used for electoral purposes, beneficiary datasets... can represent an enormous temptation. And even if nothing happened, the fear that the beneficiary datasets were used for other purposes would always

³⁶ There are two federal agencies responsible for the official oversight of *Progresa*: the Internal Control Body (OIC) and the Federal Auditing Office (ASF). Similar to Brazil, these agencies perform financial audits of *Progresa*, which they combine with fieldwork investigations. I will elaborate further on these issues in Part III.

be present... As a state, we are not ready for that [sharing beneficiary dataset information].
(Federal government evaluator)

Nevertheless, the unintended consequences of this choice was that policymakers in Mexico received little or no feedback from other state actors about what was happening to poverty on the ground. And because they adopted such a rigid way of identifying poor families, they had a hard time monitoring changes in the economic status of poor families after the initial, comprehensive targeting survey was implemented (i.e. including or excluding families depending on the fluctuation of their socioeconomic status). Many times this continuous fear of political intervention and political insulation of the program led to serious operational mistakes:

There was an area in Coahuila that [in the recertification of poverty status process] we had to take out basically all beneficiaries from one neighborhood from the program. In this case, families lived inside abandoned railroad cars... When our surveyor collected information, these train wagons were computed as houses with solid walls, so our statistical model estimated that these families should not be in the program anymore... The mayor of this city made a fuzz, so I had to go up there, and I understood our mistake... When families realized that we were from *Oportunidades*³⁷ they wanted to attack us, and we had to leave the municipality with protection from the police. This was an extreme case, but we had many problems like that. (Former *Progresa* staff)

Besides, the perceived need to insulate from politics the program and all the information that was generated about the poor resulted in great opacity, and many times *Progresa*'s staff and other academic or state actors simply could not find or monitor beneficiaries. This is how a poverty expert explained the problem to me:

The dataset that *Prospera*³⁸ staff provided to us was not updated, or it was just wrong. When we went to marginalized communities to interview beneficiaries, we simply could not find them... We could not find 53% of beneficiaries... Maybe they had moved to another place, but *Prospera* just couldn't explain it to us. I do not think that this is a sign of corruption; probably it is just very poor management of that dataset. However, I was shocked to find out

³⁷ In this quote, my interviewee references to *Oportunidades*, which was the second name of Mexico's CCT between (2000-2012).

³⁸ In this quote, my interviewee references to *Prospera* because these interview took place in 2017, when *Progresa/Oportunidades* had already been renamed *Prospera*.

how disorganized they can be because we always study their targeting model, and we thought that it was quite good. (Poverty researcher from an international organization)

In Mexico, therefore, since the federal government used two separate instruments to make poverty legible, control agencies and poverty researchers focused primarily on scrutinizing *Progresa* through its targeting instruments and not through its beneficiary dataset. On the one hand, this protected *Progresa* staff from explaining in detail its internal operations to outsiders (instead, criticism was directed to the merits of the statistical model)— as we will see next, this is something the BFP team was constantly required to do. However, *Progresa* did not benefit from the positive side of constant scrutiny, and it did not have a constant, official source of feedback on what was happening to poor families at the local level. *Progresa* staff had to mobilize substantial organizational resources to detect even simple changes in poverty status—for example, if a family had a change in its socioeconomic conditions or in the number of members in the household, which often left program staff unable to respond to demands about the operations of the program. Ultimately, the perceived need to insulate *Progresa* from politics made capturing the dynamic character of poverty more difficult. It also made it difficult for actors inside and outside of the Mexican state to directly oversee program operations and understand the dynamics of poverty in Mexico at the micro-level.

4.3 Making the State Visible in Brazil: The Transparency of Politics

In Brazil, on the other hand, the strategy of finding and including as many poor families as possible into *Bolsa Familia* increased the fear that the targeting of the program would be easy to manipulate. Conscious of this risk, the BFP staff had to find ways to continuously calibrate and improve the information that was collected from families, and to verify that municipalities were following through with their responsibilities. Internally, at the Ministry of Social

Development (MDS), this was done by comparing descriptive statistics from the BFP database with census data and other administrative databases in order to identify inconsistencies or errors in the information provided by the families. For example, between 2011-2015, MDS realized six data crosschecks of the BFP dataset with other administrative datasets, leading to a request for re-verification of the poverty status of 25 – 60% of families in the Program (MDS 2016). Moreover, MDS created multiple financial incentives for municipalities to invest in their data-gathering activities, such as the Decentralized Management Index (IGD), which rewarded municipal governments that had valid, updated, and complete information about beneficiaries (Hellman 2015).

Yet, these internal validation and monitoring mechanisms were not considered enough to guarantee the legitimacy of the program to external audiences. To achieve this goal, federal managers made the *Bolsa Familia* beneficiaries dataset easily available for evaluation by academics and other public agencies inside the Brazilian state.³⁹ Initially, this strategy was seen as a risky, yet it was deemed necessary to show that the program was not being manipulated for electoral purposes. On the one hand, facilitating the evaluation of the BFP beneficiaries' dataset by other agencies could backlash if used by rival groups inside the Brazilian state to expose operational mistakes of *Bolsa Familia*. On the other hand, systematic data scrutiny and the possibility of doing crosschecks with other federal administrative datasets could facilitate a reflexive process that would ultimately improve BFP's beneficiary targeting. In Brazil, even at

³⁹ In Brazil, three federal agencies – the General Controllers Office (CGU), the Federal Audits Court (TCU), and the Office of the Public Prosecutor (MP) – are responsible for formal oversight and controls of the BFP. These agencies use three instruments: (a) regular random-sample operational audits (every year, 60 municipalities are audited concerning their local implementation of *Bolsa Familia*); (b) annual financial audits; and (c) on-the-ground case investigations.

the risk of political backlash and vulnerability, policymakers opted to make access to the BFP beneficiary dataset as easy as possible to guarantee its continuous improvement:

I cannot protect the *Cadastro* [BFP dataset in Portuguese] from external evaluation. What we want is to improve the quality of information in the *Cadastro*. I want other researchers to tell me what I might be doing wrong... Some people inside the Ministry did not want to publicize the auditing results, which showed irregularities in the income of two, three million families... They thought that it would criminalize the poor. But I always tried to argue that we needed to do it, because our society is conservative, so sometimes to legitimize a good path, you need to give some blood to people. (*Bolsa Familia* manager)

As the quote above suggests, by making their beneficiary data accessible, federal managers intended to show that they were not reluctant to share their organizational data, and that if discrepancies were found, they were keen to take action. They also intended to stimulate a reflexive process about what they were doing and to receive constant feedback on their mistakes, which ultimately made the information system stronger. For this to happen, however, federal managers also invested great efforts in making their internal governance legible to different actors, so they could understand the operational dynamics of the program and what the information in the beneficiary datasets represented:

Sometimes we would devote a considerable part of our time during 3, 4 months to meetings with auditors to explain how things worked... For an external person to understand how things work, what the difficulties are, what can't we do, what can we do... it takes a long time. So initially this person may make some stupid comments, or focus on something that we have already changed 5 months ago... But at one point, they start to understand our policy almost or as well as we do, and then they can point us to relevant issues, and make useful recommendations. (Former *Cadastro* manager at *Bolsa Familia*)

At the same time, however, sharing beneficiary datasets with other actors made *Bolsa Familia* exposed to criticism and scrutiny from other agencies inside the state. As I will explore further in Part III, in Brazil, it is common that auditing and control agencies use the beneficiary dataset to evaluate the merits of the program and to search for incidents of fraud. These exercises

in validating the BFP dataset and in data crosschecking usually raise new questions or concerns about the program:

Data mergers can get parts of irregularities, but only data mergers are not enough. Because a person can lie about their income per capita once, and then go back to the municipality office and lie again, even if now MDS blocks the benefits of people that are caught twice. But there is a big risk that we noticed when we did fieldwork that families omit information about someone that works. It was funny when the data collection staff asked us about what should they do with ‘the gallows of husbands’...⁴⁰ People eventually figure out that you are only caught in these data mergers if you give information about someone from the households that works. So they might omit the husband or a son that works... This you can only figure out in a home visit, which is what we started doing. (Federal auditor)

The goal of our project was not to clean a dataset. Our goal was: ‘If you find any irregularity, even if it’s a mistake, send it to the locality, and the locality solves it.’ We have found people that were considered dead but are alive, people that had their social security number used by someone else, and the person would say ‘Oh my god, I had no idea!’... Today municipalities think, ‘The federal prosecutor’s office may come here,’ and they do their jobs better because of this. (Brazil’s Federal Prosecutor)

In Brazil, therefore, the main instrument that was created to make poor individuals visible—*Bolsa Familia*’s beneficiary dataset—was also used to make the governance arrangement of Brazil’s CCT more visible. Other state agencies could use this information to directly *see* the characteristics of poor individuals that were part of the program, rather than indirectly through official reports or descriptive statistics like is done in Mexico. In this process, whenever there was a sign of error or fraud in the data, these actors required a response from the multiple municipal, state, and federal BFP staff, which ultimately made the program’s governance structure more transparent to outsiders. It also improved the ability of the BFP staff to quickly generate information about beneficiary families, and to both include and exclude

⁴⁰ The interviewee is jokingly making a reference to “gallows of husbands” (or the execution of husbands by hanging) to explain why female beneficiaries may omit information about their partners when they are interviewed.

families from the program depending on changes in their poverty status, even at the cost of greater vulnerability to external criticism.

4.4 Conclusion of Part II and Implications

In the second part of this dissertation, I have analyzed Mexico and Brazil's projects of legibility of the poor that were created to implement the *Progresas* and *Bolsa Familia* programs. Building on a comparative framework I proposed in Chapter 2, I have demonstrated that creating instruments of legibility to *see* poor families and to track their behavior involved a trade-off between extending policy coverage and improving efficiency in targeting. I have argued that the choices made by the Brazilian and Mexican states regarding this trade-off reflect the political legitimization strategies that were adopted in each case and that these strategies created different challenges and opportunities for the reputation of the programs. Whereas Mexico prioritized refining the targeting instrument to prevent the inclusion of individuals who were not poor, Brazil elected to expand its targeting broadly, even at the cost of dealing with inclusion mistakes.

These choices made poverty visible in different ways in the two contexts. In Mexico, the poverty information system allowed policymakers to have an accurate portrait of poverty, which captured multiple features of poor households in the moment of entry in the program but depicted changes in poverty status less accurately. In Brazil, the dynamics of the BFP information system portrayed a simpler image of poverty based solely on income per capita, but it was designed to capture movements in and out of poverty more frequently. Finally, in this fourth chapter, I have argued that the same information systems that were created to make the poor visible changed the ways that these programs were evaluated and scrutinized. In Brazil, multiple actors evaluated *Bolsa Familia's* beneficiary dataset, while in Mexico, policymakers

prioritized protecting their organizational data, although they were often blinded to poverty dynamics on the ground. Table 4.2 below summarizes the main findings and the three dimensions of legibility that I have presented.

Table 4.2: The Three Dimensions of Legibility in Comparative Perspective

	Dimension	Mexico	Brazil
Seeing Like a State	Categorical, Informational	Top-down; Multidimensional View of Poverty; Precise and Static	Bottom-up; Unidimensional View of Poverty; Loose and Dynamic
Projecting an Image of the State	Symbolic, Reputational	Efficient and Anti-Political	Inclusive and Politically Neutral
Making the State Visible	Relational; Evaluative	Opacity, Protection of Data and Partial Blindness	Strategic Transparency and Vulnerability

To conclude, I would like to return to the assumption commonly shared across the political sociology literature that the more a state knows about its population, resources and land, the better equipped the state is to intervene effectively in social life. My findings suggest that this is not necessarily the case and that the search for more information and accuracy in legibility projects can backfire. As the Mexican case illustrates, attempting to *see* more accurately could result in a legibility system that is so rigid and difficult to maintain that it is not useful for improving governance, beyond the initial goal of avoiding corruption and political manipulation.

Put differently, by looking comparatively at projects of legibility, we can start to problematize what it means for a state to *see* well, and to specify the assumption of a positive correlation between information-gathering activities and state power. Having more information about poor families does not necessarily translate into governing effectively, if this information is not useful for policy-purposes or if it is too administratively complex to be collected. As the

Brazilian case suggests, it is important to consider that a legibility system that aims to *see* less accurately, more frequently, and through different eyes can be more productive for increasing state capacity. Hence, to advance our understanding of the politics of legibility and its enduring effects on society, we must shift the scholarly dialogue towards a different set of questions: What types of state knowledge have the potential to increase state power? What are the trade-offs between privileging a synoptic view of society, or aiming to capture the *mètis*? What are the institutional and political conditions for a positive relationship between information-gathering and state capacity?

The argument presented in Part II also refines Scott's conclusions about legibility by suggesting a different reason for the failure or unintended consequences of these projects. For Scott (1998), failure results mostly from a combination of a high modernist ideology and schemes that over-simplify the local, neglecting to capture the dynamic character of society. As both the Mexican and Brazilian legibility projects make clear, however, failure or unintended consequences can also occur from the fear that other parts of the state will distort, or contaminate, the vision of social objects (or of the poor population, in our case). This is particularly true for Mexico, where policymakers were so aware of the risks of political clientelism and electoral use of the program that they sought to isolate their view of the poor from other parts of the state. Yet, in doing so, it became more organizationally complex and difficult to capture the temporally fluctuating aspects of poverty on the ground.

Finally, my findings have consequences for policy debates about which types of anti-poverty programs are better. The take-away of this research is that you cannot answer this question without taking into consideration the political and institutional context in which decisions about welfare programs were initially made, as well as the implications that different

knowledge infrastructures have for the politics of legitimation of anti-poverty program. As has been demonstrated by multiple scholars (De la O 2015, Hulme et al 2012), giving money to the poor is always politically contentious. My research shows that a key but understudied aspect to secure the political viability of cash transfer policies is their knowledge production. I have proposed that we can study these knowledge systems by conceptualizing them as legibility projects, and that to understand their impacts on poverty governance, we should study them by unveiling how they are organized around three analytical categories. I hope that this framework will allow sociologists to pay closer attention to the politics of knowledge-making and its effects on society in different contexts.

PART III: THE EVALUATION

CHAPTER 5: SEARCHING FOR SUCCESS – THE INITIAL EVALUATIONS OF *PROGRESA* AND *BOLSA FAMILIA*

Introduction

In the very early days of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*, policymakers in Mexico and Brazil grappled with questions of program evaluation as they made initial decisions about policy design and implementation. How would they know whether CCTs work? What metrics and evidence would they need to conclude whether or not their policy is successful? These fundamental questions cascaded outward, forcing political actors to address several others. Who will have the authority to determine the success or failure of CCTs? Should they involve external specialists in this process, or should evaluations be performed in-house? What will count as credible evidence, and who will make such determinations? Part III of the dissertation examines how policymakers answered these questions in the early days of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*, as well as the consequences of these initial decisions for the long-term legitimation of both programs. In doing so, Part III also demonstrates how the methodological decisions regarding social policy evaluation were influenced by the specific institutional and political contexts in which each program was implemented.

While most scholarly analyses of the politics of social policy evaluation choose to focus on either state-level institutions or the politics of research methods, in Part III, I study the two in tandem to flesh out the distinct and dynamic ways that they influence each other. On the one hand, historical and political sociologists have studied how decisions concerning the content of official knowledge depend on larger socio-institutional patterns and on powerful economic and political interests (Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996, Weir et al 1988, Somers and Block 2005). Science and technology scholars (STS) have, by contrast, focused on clarifying the ways that

different evaluation methodologies bring different objects and facts into view, and analyzing how social policy becomes structured accordingly (Breslau 1998, Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007, Eyal and Levy 2013). Yet these studies rarely explain the mechanisms through which socio-institutional arrangements of policy evaluation affect the choice of evaluation methodologies and instruments, and how these tools then shape the conditions of political struggles in the institutional field.

Part III aims to intervene in the debate between political sociologists and STS scholars by combining insights and concepts from both sub-disciplines in new ways. First, in Chapter 5, I explain how differences in the social policy regulatory environment in Mexico and Brazil at the initial moment of CCT implementation impacted the legitimation challenges of each program, and hence the evaluation choices made by policymakers. Moreover, I show that Mexico and Brazil prioritized distinct audiences in their evaluation choices: While Mexican policymakers chose to adopt what was considered the “gold-standard” evaluation methodology at the time—a randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluation, aimed at impressing international expert audiences—in Brazil, priority was given to building a domestic consensus around CCTs, for which a different set of evaluation techniques, including statistical analysis and simulations, were considered sufficient.

Second, in Chapter 5, I delve into the short-term consequences of these methodological choices for the legitimation of the two CCTs. I show that, as intended, the RCT evaluation of *Progres*a achieved its goal of creating an international consensus around the positive results of the Mexican CCT, which was then leveraged to pursue a series of domestic political goals around the policy. I also demonstrate that there was nothing straightforward about this process: The implementation of an RCT was very controversial, and the key actors involved in the public

legitimation of *Progresa* skillfully took advantage of Mexico's democratization period to argue for the program's continuation. In Brazil, on the other hand, while the statistical analyses of *Bolsa Familia's* effect on poverty reduction earned the program credibility with domestic academic experts, they were not sufficient to stop attacks from opposition parties, something that did not happen with the same intensity in Mexico. In Chapter 6, I will employ the same conceptual apparatus to investigate the longer-term consequences of the Mexican and Brazilian models of knowledge-production and policy evaluation regarding CCTs as they could be observed in 2016 and 2017.

The findings in this chapter culminate in a comparative discussion about the goals of social policy evaluation that draws on Ted Porter's seminal work about the search of objectivity in public life (1995). I argue that the Mexican search for a bullet-proof evaluation methodology, manifest in its choice to use an RCT, can be characterized as a legitimation strategy based on "trust in numbers," typical of contexts in which there is an overall suspicion of expert knowledge and a weak regulatory environment. In this case, the goal of the evaluation was to persuade an adversarial audience of the merits of *Progresa*. In Brazil, by contrast, the distinct combination of a robust institutional environment and political support led to a legitimation strategy based on "trust in experts," in which the evaluation both served state officials' epistemological needs and built on their authority. The goal was to learn how to make *Bolsa Familia* better.

The chapter is organized as follows. I start by presenting the conceptual framework that guides my analysis of the politics of CCT evaluation. Then, I explain in turn the initial evaluation strategies of Mexico's *Progresa*, and Brazil's *Bolsa Familia*. For each country, I present i) the institutional arrangement of social policy regulation; ii) their preferred methodological choices; and iii) the short-term consequences in terms of legitimation of each CCT. I conclude by

summarizing the arguments presented and drawing comparative conclusions about the goals of social policy evaluations.

5.1 The Politics of Policy Evaluation: The Interplay between Numbers and Institutions

To understand why Mexican and Brazilian policymakers chose different evaluation strategies to assess the impacts of CCTs, in the two chapters that compose Part III, I will investigate how a combination of institutional, political and epistemic elements influenced policymakers' methodological decisions. First, to understand the institutional determinants of social policy evaluation, I will draw on the political sociology literature that explores how decisions concerning the content of official knowledge depend on larger socio-institutional patterns and on powerful political interests (Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996, Weir et al 1988, O'Connor 2002). Of particular interest is the literature that provides an analytical framework for assessing the impact of ideas on policymaking and the emergence of national knowledge regimes (Campbell and Pedersen 2014, Somers and Block 2005), as well as scholarly work on the multiplicity of institutional logics that can exist within the same state, and how state agencies differ in the ways they implement policies and organize their work (Morgan and Orloff 2017).

From this literature, we know that when knowledge is assembled for policy purposes, the process tends toward quantitative methods. This is largely due to the ability of numbers and calculations to defy disciplinary and national boundaries, and therefore to effectively link academic and political discourses (Porter 1995, Fourcade 2009). However, the primacy of quantification depends on the license it provides researchers to ignore or reconfigure aspects of social projects that are difficult to translate into numbers, meaning that there is a high probability that policy-salient information will be lost or distorted (Espeland and Stevens 2008). Moreover,

studies in this tradition typically argue that quantification only has social meaning when connected to processes of legitimation and credibility of methods (Timmermans and Epstein 2010). In Part III, I build on the insights of this literature to argue that these validation processes can only be understood if we take into consideration the historical trajectories of official knowledge-making in each state. I argue, additionally, that the importance of national processes holds true even with the contemporary push toward “global policy paradigms” (Babb 2009), such as the current trend to use RCTs to evaluate social policies (Ravaillon 2009). Below, I draw on this scholarship to describe the institutional arrangements surrounding social policy regulation in each country in the early days of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*, and to explain how they shaped policymakers’ decisions.

Next, I will employ the insights of science and technology studies (STS) to examine how different evaluation methodologies bring different objects and facts into view, which in turn help structure social policy (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007). While the political sociology literature is relevant to understanding the institutional determinants of official knowledge creation, it fails to open the black box of how concepts about the social world are formed and how different forms of knowledge are validated. The STS literature is thus essential because it routinely unravels the complex networks underlying scientific concepts or devices, and the construction of different forms of expertise (Latour and Weibel 2005, Mitchell 2006, Eyal 2013).

In this field, I build particularly on the literature that problematizes the politics of measurement and valuation in different policy arenas (Lamont 2012, Becker and Clark 2001). In contrast to studies that seek to understand when and whether social scientific knowledge is used to influence the implementation and evaluation of social programs, this STS-influenced literature focuses on how evaluations and other research practices can shape the political discourse around

programs by objectivizing a specific definition of the program and its effects (Miller and Hopwood 1994, Breslau 1998, Power 1997). I employ the insights of this literature to examine how official knowledge about CCTs and poverty can gain and maintain credibility as scientific, and be perceived as apolitical or value- and ideology-free.

The manner in which I will combine the set of insights and concepts from political sociology and STS is new. Most scholarly analyses explaining the politics of policy evaluation tend to place either state-level institutions or micro dimensions of power at the center of their theories. However, I will use the two together within the contingencies of the historical cases to determine the potential for each to affect each other. I propose to study the multiple ways that socio-institutional arrangements of social policy regulation affect and are affected by evaluation methodologies. This necessitates, on the one hand, a serious assessment of the interactions between state institutions and evaluation methodologies (i.e. forms of reports, technical documents and types of social indicators), and, on the other, a consideration of the relationship between the content of the evaluation knowledge and the variety of institutional logics within states.

By adopting this conceptual framework, I also aim to put this research in conversation with Ted Porter's discussion of the search for objectivity in public life (1995), in which he examines why and under what conditions public administrators and scientists rely on rigorous, impersonal numbers as criteria for decisions, as opposed to experienced (or expert) judgment. By asserting that quantification is a technology of distance, distrust and, especially, "a refuge of the weak," Porter argues that only administrators who lack social status, political support or professional solidarity defer to "rigorous numbers" over their own judgement. In what follows, I build on Porter's insight that "objectivity is defined by its context" (1995, 90) to explain the

particular combination of institutional arrangements and methodological options that characterized the context in which Mexico resorted to a legitimation strategy of “trust in numbers,” while Brazil opted for “trust in experts.”

In the remainder of the chapter, then, I engage with these conceptual discussions to explain why Mexico and Brazil chose different evaluation strategies to assess and legitimate CCTs. Specifically, I explore the relationship between each state’s regulatory institutions and the legitimation challenges that the evaluations were supposed to settle, as well as the relationship between the *types* of quantitative methodologies used (RCTs vs. statistical analysis) and each regulatory environment. In so doing, I argue that while the academic habitus and expertise of the main policymakers influenced their methodological choices, it was their position of weakness or strength in the changing political fields of their respective countries that was the key determinant of each CCT evaluation strategy.

5.2 Mexico: Trust in Numbers in a Weak Regulatory Context

When *Progresas* was officially launched in December 1997, Mexican officials were not only starting a program that would help change the global paradigm for combating poverty, but also innovating by building an experimental evaluation into the original policy design, an RCT evaluation that would receive worldwide attention in its own right (Graizbord 2016). Similar to medical trials, RCT evaluations bring experimentation into everyday life to measure the impact of social programs by comparing the results of treatment and control groups. While RCTs are broadly accepted in the social sciences, there is nothing simple or straightforward about the randomized assignment to a “no-intervention” control group in social policymaking. As demonstrated elsewhere (de Souza Leão and Eyal 2019), when RCTs involve a form of social

assistance, any attempt to assign people randomly to a “no-intervention” control group incurs strong political resistance from participants, the implementing bureaucracy and politicians. How can state officials justify giving financial resources and public services to some people but not to others who need them just as much?

In this section, I explain why Mexican policymakers chose to implement an RCT evaluation to assess the impacts of *Progresa*, even at the risk of incurring a political backlash for “experimenting with the poor.” To do so, I start by describing the weak institutional context for social policy regulation that existed in Mexico at the time, and I highlight the lack of trust in official poverty measures, which were seen as corrupted by party politics. Second, I delve into the specific politics of *Progresa*’s RCT evaluation and the controversies it provoked. Third, I investigate the consequences of this evaluation for the short-term legitimation of the program, and the positive effect it had in influencing the successful continuation of *Progresa* between presidential terms, at the time a unique feat in the Mexican political landscape.

The Institutional Context for Social Policy Regulation

As we saw in Chapter 1, *Progresa* was initially implemented in 1997, in the midst of a great political and economic crisis and prior to Mexico’s democratic transition in the year 2000. Fourcade and Babb (2002, 561) have described this period in Mexican history as characterized by “a single-party system, coupled with weak democratic institutions, strong corporatism, and a powerful centralized presidency, [where] technocratic policymakers [were insulated] from political pressures.” This means that in 1997, *Progresa*’s policymakers benefited from a political system that allowed them considerably more freedom to implement their policy choices “than would be tolerated in most full-fledged democracies.” Crucially for our purposes, however,

policymakers also benefited from a weak regulatory environment since Mexico did not have strong institutions that guaranteed public policy accountability, evaluation and oversight. Therefore, Mexico's institutional context for social policy regulation differed greatly from Brazil's, where *Bolsa Familia* was implemented after the country's democratic transition and a series of state reforms that guaranteed public policy accountability. As we will see below, these different institutional environments put different weight on the evaluation choices instituted in the two contexts.

To be more precise, in 1997, Mexico did not yet have its Public Information Law, which would only be created in 2003 to guarantee public access to official records. There were also no institutional mechanisms for the management of public information, and no administrative obligation to keep public records (Maldonado 2012). Furthermore, Mexico did not have a government accountability office, responsible for providing auditing, evaluation and investigative services to Congress and/or to the Federal Executive. Mexico's *Auditoría Superior de la Federación* (ASF) would only be created to serve those functions in the year 2000.⁴¹ In fact, the only accountability requirement for social programs at the time was to provide aggregate spending information to Congress as part of the annual federal budget review. In other words, *Progresá* was implemented in a context of great opacity regarding the federal government's action, a legacy of 70 years of single party rule and an authoritarian regime (Ackerman 2016).

At the same time, Mexican policymakers faced a historical lack of trust in official poverty measures, which were seen as corrupted by PRI's politics. In 1997, there was great

⁴¹ To be sure, Mexico counted with a Federal Accounting Office (*Contaduría Mayor de Hacienda*) since 1824, which would be reformed in 1978 as an independent agency responsible for providing aggregate fiscal information about all public administration to Congress. Only in the 2000s, a formal Auditing Office would be created.

disagreement about the scale of poverty, as well as about the historical trends of poverty levels in the country (Orozco and Yaschine 2010). While Mexico's National Statistics Office (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática*, or INEGI) was created in 1983 and enjoyed considerable credibility as the state agency responsible for implementing the census and household surveys, the fact that prior to 1983, statistical agencies were part of the President's office contributed to the perception that official data could be manipulated for political purposes. Additionally, since practically every president had dismantled his predecessors' flagship anti-poverty initiative to propose a new social policy agenda (see Chapter 1), state officials used different methodologies and data-collection efforts to measure poverty under each program, and often these were incomparable through time.

When it came to the legitimation of *Progresá* and generation of credible information about its impact on socioeconomic indicators, this weak regulatory environment and distrust toward poverty measures provided both challenges and opportunities for the program's staff. Since they lacked, for example, an official auditing agency broadly perceived as independent, Mexican policymakers did not have a clear mechanism to generate trustworthy information about *Progresá*. Without a public institution responsible for the oversight of government's action, they would have to find creative ways to prove that the program was effective at addressing poverty and not succumbing to clientelistic practices. The generalized distrust in official statistics also made it hard to prove the program was working. With no consensus on the initial poverty benchmark, how could they show progress was being made? However, on the positive side, given the absence of a legislation guaranteeing public access to official records, policymakers could be strategic about which data to release, when and to whom. The program's level of

transparency was largely under their own discretion. This gave policymakers flexibility, but it also increased the weight of their strategic decisions.

The Hidden RCT Evaluation & Controversies

It is in this context of state opacity and public distrust that *Progresa* officials decided to implement an RCT evaluation. In retrospect, it is hard to overestimate the extent of public acclaim and political importance garnered by this choice, both in Mexico and in the international development community (Graizbord 2016, JPAL 2018). According to Behrman and Skoufias (2006), the experimental evaluation of *Progresa* underscored the gains of pursuing a serious evaluation rather than a reliance on “myths,” a priori beliefs, and “vested interests” biases that, according to the authors, had all too often predominated in determining the effectiveness of social programs. The RCT evaluation achieved considerable credibility worldwide, with the World Bank (2008) lauding *Progresa* for generating real “measures of impact.”

As I mentioned above, though, at the time there was nothing obvious about implementing a randomized experiment to determine the effects of the Mexican CCT. In particular, there was nothing obvious about choosing to create a control group that would not receive the cash transfers (while they were eligible to do so) in order to determine the causal impact of *Progresa*. Parker and Teruel (2005, 209), two economists involved in the RCT evaluation, put it thusly: “Constructing a control group is clearly an ethical issue in the context of a program aimed at the poorest members of the population. The point that it might be perceived that eligible communities were being kept out of *Progresa* for the sake of the evaluation was of great concern to program officials.” Why, then, did Mexican officials choose to do so?

Distinct institutional, contextual and strategic factors contributed to the decision. First, in the weak regulatory environment of Mexico, there was a generalized perception among *Progresa*'s staff that the program needed to “voluntarily” provide credible evidence that a CCT would change business-as-usual in Mexican anti-poverty programs. As observed by Maldonado (2012), the anticipation of a policy backlash and the likely resistance by status quo stakeholders was widely discussed among policymakers in the early years of *Progresa*, and this influenced the decision to adopt an evaluation as a key aspect of the program's initial design. Daniel Hernandez (2008, 107-108), who was part of this initial team, explained that adopting an evaluation was based on the “conviction” that accountability was important even without a legislation requiring it and on the need to “demonstrate” that CCTs worked:

The reason why we put so much emphasis in the evaluation is related to the fact that the program proposed a new form of doing social policy... We wanted people to trust us by demonstrating that we could make things differently and with good results... We firmly believed in accountability of public action, in the efficient use of public resources, and in the necessity of documenting our work since our working group was convinced that public actions should be documented so people can know what was done, how it was done, and what was achieved.

Another economist involved in the evaluation also echoed these sentiments in an interview with Graizbord (2015, 25):

Evaluation has lots of purposes, and [*Progresa*'s] had a very clear purpose which was to legitimate the policy... [T]hey weren't really thinking to design an evaluation to modify the program, but rather one that would prove, in terms of methodological rigor, that the program was working.

Second, as we saw in Chapter 3, *Progresa*'s key decision-makers had a strong academic orientation, and the majority were US-trained economists (Lustig 2011). As a result, the choice of the evaluation methodology was “heavily influenced by the works of economists... who have generally argued that a randomized design, although not without potential difficulties, can have

great advantages over nonexperimental methods in obtaining unbiased estimates of program impact” (Parker and Teruel 2005, 210). In other words, priority was given to an experimental design because it was considered both academically rigorous and unbiased by the decisionmakers involved.

Finally, in a context of generalized mistrust toward official poverty measures, policymakers would have to generate their own data about the impacts of *Progresa* to convince the public that the evaluation results were credible. In this regard, the RCT evaluation was a perfect fit, since the method required extensive data-gathering for evaluation purposes (i.e. it was not possible to use available administrative or household surveys data to implement the experimental evaluation), thereby making it appear more credible and justifying the high costs of implementing an RCT.

To design and conduct the RCT evaluation of *Progresa*, Mexican policymakers hired the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a renowned academic institution based in Washington, DC. The choice of an international, academic evaluator was also a conscious strategy to enhance the credibility of the evaluation results, as the *Progresa* team believed that Mexican research institutions would be suspected of lacking sufficient independence vis-à-vis the government (Maldonado 2012). As an interviewee explained to me, “It had to be an external actor, we had to recruit the best possible academics so we would arrive in the presidential transition with the best chances to legitimate the program.”⁴² Yet, as Santiago Levy (in Behrman

⁴² Archival data gathered by Behrman (2007, 19) suggests that *Progresa* staff initially tried to hire the Nobel Prize winner James Heckman, considered the father of experimental evaluations by American economists, showing indeed a very strong commitment to bringing internationally-recognized authorities onboard: “On December 3, 1997, ... an e-mail addressed to Lawrence Haddad, Jere Behrman, Paul Gertler, Paul Schultz, and James Heckman was sent... enclosing the program for the meeting on December 10, 1997, and further information and asking for references regarding these individuals’ expertise. Haddad, Ruel, and Quisumbing from IFPRI, Behrman, Gertler, and Schultz all attended the meeting (Heckman did not but asked Petra Todd to attend in his place, which she did) ... [which led] to IFPRI proposal for undertaking the evaluation on which agreement was reached in the late summer of 1998.”

2007, 82) explained, the fact that IFPRI “was not associated with structural adjustment... as would have been e.g., World Bank or IDB” and it “was not a private organization,” was also crucial at a time of public resistance to structural adjustments in Mexico; and its status as a nonprofit academic institution allowed IFPRI to serve as a “vehicle for engaging international academics to enhance the credibility of evaluation.”

The RCT evaluation itself was designed to occur alongside the gradual implementation of the program. Initially, IFPRI’s economists intended to randomize beneficiaries at the household level, but program officials “judged it to be infeasible” because in communities where “everyone knows everyone” it would create problems between those in the treatment and control groups. They chose to randomize at the locality-level instead (Parker and Teruel 2005, 208). Then, *Progresa* staff chose 506 localities in seven states as its evaluation sample, consisting of 24,077 households. 320 localities were randomly allocated to serve as the treatment group and 186 as the control. While beneficiaries in the treatment localities were among the first to receive *Progresa*’s cash transfers in May 1998, the localities in the control group only joined the program in December 1999, and in this period there was a lot of work to make sure these localities were “not contaminated” (i.e. did not receive any benefit that could lead to claims of substitution bias).

In fact, as reported by Parker and Teruel (2005, 211), initially the plan was that the experiment would cover a longer period (at least 24-30 months) so researchers could observe the longer-term effects of the Mexican CCT. Yet, the experimental period coincided with an exponential growth in the size of the program as a whole, with it swelling from 300,000 families to 2 million, a development “which did not go unrecognized by the control communities.” As a

result, program officials decided to end the experiment earlier than planned, after just a year and a half, to avoid media accusations of neglecting the poor and a political crisis.

During the 18 months that the experiment lasted, families were subjected to surveys every six months to investigate the core elements of the program: days of school attendance, health status, anthropometric measures, consumption and spending patterns and intra-household dynamics, among others. But while evaluators and program officials had this preliminary information as early as half a year in, the evaluations' results were not made public until the control group joined the program in December 1999. This was a calculated decision. Since evaluators expected to find positive results in many areas, it would look bad for the government to have consciously denied benefits to many thousands of households living in abject poverty (Behrman 2007). With this concern in mind, once results became public, officials framed the experimental evaluation in strategic terms. In the words of an American and Mexican economists involved in the RCT:

The argument internally put forth by *Progresa* officials was that the evaluation was carried out at an early phase where budget limitations implied that not all eligible families could be incorporated. Thus, there were many eligible households who were not receiving benefits during this time period; the actual control group would be no different from these other eligible households; they were simply being monitored (e.g., applied questionnaires) meanwhile. Indeed, one could argue that in a situation of insufficient funds, the fairest determinant of which families received benefits first would be through a lottery or randomization. (Parker and Teruel 2005, 209)

As Maldonado (2012) has shown, however, the truth was that the RCT evaluation was built-in since *Progresa*'s early stages of design regardless of budgetary concerns, precisely to maximize the credibility of the intervention's documented results. In public, however, the federal government tried to keep the experiment confidential both for methodological and political reasons (Graizbord 2016). Once it was obvious that this would be impossible to achieve, the

official discourse announced that the reason for this discrimination was, as stated above, strictly budgetary.

The first results of the IFPRI evaluation were positive overall, and relevant impacts were reported in school enrollment, health clinic attendance and expenditures. Emmanuel Skoufias, the coordinator of the evaluation, was enthusiastic in the first official report:

In the central impact areas of education, health, and nutrition, the results are very encouraging. The initial analysis of PROGRESA's impact on education shows that the program has significantly increased the enrollment of boys and girls, particularly of girls and above all, at the secondary school level... In the area of nutrition, PROGRESA has had a significant effect on reducing the probability of stunting for children aged 12 to 36 months. Finally, PROGRESA has also had important impacts on food consumption... In other areas of the evaluation, the design feature of PROGRESA that gives control of the monetary benefits to women has increased their household decision-making... Additionally, there is no evidence that adults are working less in response to the monetary benefits. (Skoufias and McClafferty 2001, ii-iii)

Importantly for legitimation purposes, one of the very first academic publications about the program praised the apparent "precision" and "trust-worthiness" of the *Progresas*' targeting scheme:

The method of selecting PROGRESA beneficiary families follows transparent operating methods which are rigorous and objective, and which avoid discretionarily in the allocation of benefits of the program to the beneficiary families... The methodology used increases the trust-worthiness of the selection process of the households, by reducing the risk of errors in the classification of households due to erroneous or imprecise income measurement. (Skoufias, Davis, and Behrman 1999, 39)

Note that these results focus on what can be considered micro, short-term impacts of the program on a sample of 24,077 households. Besides the methodological disagreements over the external validity of RCT findings (Deaton and Cartwright 2016), these results do not focus on the impacts of *Progresas* on macro-level social indicators in Mexico. This differs from what we will

see in the evaluation of *Bolsa Familia*, where poverty experts used household surveys to focus instead on measuring the overall impact of the program on poverty levels in Brazil.

A Successful Legitimation Strategy: Political Work at a Critical Historical Juncture

So far, my account could be interpreted as suggesting that, *Progresa* officials had a very clear legitimation strategy from the beginning, and that the “rigorous results” generated by the RCT evaluation were sufficient to prove that the program had a positive impact, thereby guaranteeing its political survival and worldwide acclaim. This is, in part, the narrative adopted by international organizations and by the economists involved in the RCT evaluation:

Evaluations based on random assignments, such as Mexico’s *Progresa*, or other rigorous evaluations give confidence to policymakers and the public that what they are seeing is real. Based on the systematic evaluations of *Progresa* the government has scaled up the program to encompass 20 percent of the Mexican people. Governments are constantly trying new approaches to services delivery. Some of them work. But unless there is some systematic evaluation of these programs, there is no certainty that they worked because of the program or for other reasons. (World Bank 2003)

In fact, however, there was nothing automatic about the link between the RCT’s “rigorous evaluation” and the “scale-up of the program.” To understand the successful legitimation of *Progresa* and its political survival, we have to unearth the political work that was done around these short-term positive results, and to take into consideration that policymakers also benefited from the broader political changes happening in Mexico at the time.

Maldonado (2012) reviewed the press coverage around *Progresa* in its first years of existence and found that it was met initially with widespread suspicion on all sides of the political spectrum, especially, in light of Mexican history, regarding questions around its suspected partisanship. Similarly, by reviewing comments from academics in newspapers at the time, Maldonado (2012) found that even after the successful evaluation results were publicized,

specialists believed that the continuation of the program beyond Zedillo's administration was very unlikely (Scott 1999, Barba 2000). In fact, when the PRI lost hold of the Presidency and the Senate in 2000, most analysts predicted *Progresas*'s demise. As we know now, these expectations did not come to pass. *Progresas* turned out to be the first of its kind in Mexico to survive the changing of administrations.

Here we must take into consideration the contingencies of the political context at the time, as well as the relationship between the RCT method and Mexico's institutional arrangement. First, in contrast to previous elections, social policy was *not* a salient issue in the 2000s election (Domínguez and Lawson 2004). Instead, it was the regime cleavage—the need for democracy vs. the continuation of authoritarianism—that ultimately shaped the electoral strategies of candidates, the response of voters and the eventual PRI defeat (Ackerman 2016). This benefited the legitimation efforts of *Progresas*'s officials because it avoided an early politicization of the program as part of the electoral debate, and it also allowed them to frame their evaluation efforts and commitment to accountability as inherently “democratic,” and therefore of a piece with the political changes of the time:

When single-party rule and a strong president prevailed, policy discussions took place mainly within the executive branch...But when the president's party does not have a majority in Congress, it is no longer sufficient (although still necessary) to have the support of the president for a new program, even if its technical merits are high. Backing by Congress is essential. But to make an informed decision, Congress must have access to credible information about the program's operations and results and sufficient assurance that it will not be used for other purposes. That is why transparency, accountability, and credibility, the *modus operandi* of *Progresas-Oportunidades*, have played such a key role in the program's continuity... *Progresas* was lucky to develop in the context of Mexico's democratic transformation. (Levy 2006, 104-105)

Second, while *Progresas* staff was quite strategic about “having a visible, internationally recognized, A+ evaluation, ... as bullet-proof as possible” (Levine in Behrman 2007, 88), they

also benefited from what by then was a growing epistemic community in favor of CCTs and the enthusiasm of American economists for running a massive RCT evaluation with governmental support. As Graizbord (2015, 26) aptly put it, “Recruiting US economists to run the evaluation did not only guarantee ‘methodological rigor’ and legitimacy but it linked the fate of the CCT-RCT to an emergent field of economic expertise. *Progresa* provided that opportunity for US economists to experiment with an experiment.”

As a result, during the presidential transition period, President Fox’s incoming team was flooded with support for *Progresa* from international organizations, Mexican scholars and public intellectuals urging the president-elect to keep the program, citing the results of “rigorous,” “technical” and “outside” evaluations. Seizing the moment, the IFPRI team strategically began to release the results of their work, always presenting them in Spanish via Mexican officials to avoid accusations of academic imperialism (Levy in Behrman 2007):

I still remember the meeting I had in DC with my colleagues to discuss what were the best options to communicate in a political efficient way the results and impacts of PROGRESA in order to “convince” the politicians that it should continue into the new administration and that it should be expanded. I was introduced to the IFPRI expert in this topic. She showed me different examples of the type of product I was looking for and then she helped prepare the short document that we used to inform about the evaluation (with the 9 volumes of reports). I still think this is one of the most important issues in public policy [that I have learnt]. (Daniel Hernández in Behrman 2007, 88).

Third, the strategy of centralization and institutional insulation of the program discussed in Chapter 3—especially the one that gave *Progresa* a headquarters distant from the PRI-associated Social Development Ministry (Sedesol)—also bestowed it with a physical and reputational neutral space from which to do the necessary convincing, distant from the “shadows from the PRI’s past.” In the end, *Progresa* survived the transition to the Fox administration. Under its new name *Oportunidades*, it was increasingly expanded to semi-urban and urban areas, with the number of

beneficiaries increasing from 2.3 to 4.2 million households over the next 6 years. This continuity, as Santiago Levy himself admitted in an interview (Behrman 2007), depended mostly on “a lot of deals and political maneuvering for Fox to agree with continuing, which makes the story about the impact of evaluation a little less romantic.” Among the key deals, the willingness of key members of *Progresa*’s staff to remain onboard into the Fox era is usually cited as crucial to the long survival of the program.

To sum up, Mexico’s decision to implement an RCT evaluation was informed by a combination of institutional, political and epistemic reasons. On the one hand, the weak regulatory environment coupled with great suspicions of the goals of anti-poverty programs made the promise of an “unbiased” RCT very attractive. For that, the majority of US-trained economist staff and their partnership with an international academic institution contributed to the perception that an RCT would be the most “bullet-proof” method. On the other hand, the controversies around randomization and control group could be better managed in the context of the last PRI government, which benefited from political and bureaucratic insulation. Once the political regime changed, however, *Progresa* staff successfully used the transparency and accountability demands of the time to align the program’s operation with democratic winds. As we will see next, the combination of institutional, political and epistemic factors was quite different in Brazil.

5.3 Brazil: Trust in Experts in a Robust Policy Regulatory Context

During a visit to Brazil in January 2012, Abhijit Banerjee, an MIT-economist and co-leader of the leading center for administering RCT evaluations (The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, or JPAL), was asked in an interview about his opinion regarding the *Bolsa Familia* program:

The results and impacts of *Bolsa Familia* have never been properly evaluated by the Brazilian government, which is a very big flaw. Hence, it’s hard for any researcher to have

an opinion about the program. Similar programs, like in Mexico and Malawi, were evaluated in a correct way and we see significant effect... Brazil needs to properly evaluate its program. Only then, minimally, we will know how many kids are in school, how many kids are vaccinated... You need to look at the program's result beyond poverty reduction. I look forward for the day we will learn more about the program.⁴³

By saying that *Bolsa Familia* had never been properly evaluated, Banerjee meant that an RCT evaluation had never been implemented to assess the impacts of the Brazilian CCT. In reality, however, by the time of his comments, more than 25 official evaluations had been performed, including 10 non-RCT impact evaluations, as well as many more academic studies (SAGI 2016). Particularly in the early days of *Bolsa Familia*, poverty experts focused on measuring the impacts of the program on poverty levels through annual household surveys, and the Social Development Ministry created an in-house evaluation unit to develop monitoring indicators of the program's results and to contract out domestic external evaluations. Together, these indicators and studies helped to create a domestic expert consensus around the program. Yet, unlike the Mexican case, the BFP's evaluations were not enough to shield the program from partisan attacks, mainly because of its strong association to President Lula and the Worker's Party. As we will see in Chapter 6, broad acceptance would only come in the longer term in Brazil.

In this section, I explain why Brazilian policymakers strongly rejected the option of an RCT evaluation, as well as their preference for other econometric methods and monitoring indexes. To do so, I start by describing the robust institutional context for social policy regulation that existed in Brazil at the time, and I highlight the historical expertise that state research institutions had developed in measuring poverty and tracing tendencies in poverty lines

⁴³ "When combating poverty, the best solution is to avoid ready-made formulas," published in *Veja Online* on January 6, 2012. <https://veja.abril.com.br/economia/no-combate-a-pobreza-o-melhor-a-fazer-e-abandonar-as-formulas-prontas/> Accessed on June 12, 2019.

across time. Second, I investigate the resistance to implementing an RCT in Brazil, as well as the politics of the alternative statistical analysis choices. Third, I delve into the consequences of *Bolsa Familia*'s style of evaluation for the short-term legitimation of the program, and the strategies the program adopted to gain international recognition.

The Institutional Context for Social Policy Regulation

In Chapter 1, I explained how Brazil's path to CCTs differed greatly from Mexico's. For the purposes of this chapter, it is worth remembering that all the experimentation with CCTs in Brazil and the eventual creation of *Bolsa Familia* happened *after* Brazil's 1985 democratic transition, and after a series of reforms strengthening state institutions, especially control, planning and regulatory agencies (Souza 2013). In fact, since the 1967 administrative and managerial reforms during the military regime, Brazil has continually expanded the number of highly-technical, insulated agencies, including the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) which would play a key role in the statistical analysis about the impacts of *Bolsa Familia* (see de Souza Leão 2018 for an overview of reforms). As a result, Brazil's institutional context for social policy regulation and analysis was much more robust than Mexico's at the initial moment of CCT implementation. Even as this robustness benefitted BFP's policymakers, who could count on the federal government's regulatory capacity and domestic poverty expertise to oversee their activities, it also deprived them of the control over transparency enjoyed by their Mexican counterparts.

For example, both in 1995 when the first CCTs were implemented and in 2003 when *Bolsa Familia* was created, Brazilian policymakers had to maintain records of their activities and provide information to fiscal, auditing and control agencies, who held great prestige in Brazilian

society.⁴⁴ As Souza (2013, 4-5) has shown, at least since the country reached macroeconomic stability in 1995, an aggressive policy was put in place to “strengthen the capacity of agencies in charge of overseeing officials – Accounts Tribunal, Federal Comptroller's Office, Public Prosecutors – as well as the Federal Police.” Similar to what would happen in Mexico in the mid-2000s, the efforts of bureaucratic and institutional strengthening of these agencies recognized oversight as an important instrument for consolidating Brazilian democracy at the time. Furthermore, during the same period, the federal government also aimed to strengthen its managerial capacity by creating the prestigious federal manager career path⁴⁵ (PGPE), a program that sought to recruit through public competition the “top minds” in the country to be trained in Brazilian federalism and implement innovative solutions for public policy problems. (These would be the managers recruited to implement the BFP). In other words, *Bolsa Familia* was implemented in an environment of enthusiasm for the possibilities of democracy and the creation of a “new developmentalist state” (Boschi 2010), in which federal managers enjoyed great prestige, and federal auditors and prosecutors pursued an agenda of guaranteeing the accountability and transparency of state action.

Unlike Mexico, Brazil did not have a historical distrust of poverty measures or generalized suspicions that household surveys would be manipulated for political purposes. Since 1936, Brazil possessed a respected National Statistics Office (IBGE, *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*) that gained full separation from the President’s office and technological and budgetary autonomy in 1967. But even more important to the generation of official poverty

⁴⁴ Similar to Mexico, at the initial moment of *Bolsa Familia*, Brazil did not have its Access to Public Information Law (which would only be created in 2012), but federal programs had to comply with auditing and control agencies informational demands.

⁴⁵ In fact, as part of New Public Management reforms that characterized the period (1995-2010), 29,627 federal managers (PGPE) and 11,259 federal auditors were hired via public competition, representing the 3rd and 5th largest public sector occupational expansion, only behind federal university faculty and administrative staff (Souza 2013, 13).

knowledge, since 1967 the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) had been publishing studies and cultivating domestic expertise in poverty, and was particularly renowned for the leading role it played in creating poverty lines for Brazil.⁴⁶ Finally, Brazil had no history of Mexican-style massive, flagship anti-poverty programs tied to specific presidents, since the “social agenda” would only become important with redemocratization (see Chapter 1).

The combination of a robust regulatory environment for social policy and a prestigious public institution responsible for the generation of poverty knowledge imposed challenges and opportunities for BFP’s legitimation and the generation of credible information about its impacts. First, since its inception, *Bolsa Familia* staff knew that it would be scrutinized by federal auditors representing Congress (TCU, *Tribunal de Contas da União*) and the Federal Executive (CGU, *Controladoria Geral da União*). This gave BFP staff the opportunity of a close collaboration with other well-respected arms of the state to generate credible information about the program, especially to allay any concerns about corruption and political clientelism. Yet, it also opened the program to auditors’ criticism and increased the chances that any operational mistakes would be exposed.

Second, the BFP staff could count with prestigious domestic experts at IPEA and the National Statistics Office (IBGE) to generate studies about the impacts of the program, and use household surveys to collect credible information sources about poverty in Brazil. While the relationship with auditing agencies could ensure the generation of credible evidence about the

⁴⁶ Since its creation in 1967, IPEA has been portrayed as an insulated technocratic bureaucracy in the Brazilian state, and its researchers have been key players in multiple policy debates, including the poverty debate. IPEA is an organization dominated by economists, but there are also a number of engineers and quantitative sociologists. Most of the researchers got their PhDs from prestigious universities in Brazil, but some senior researchers were educated abroad, in places such as MIT and the University of Chicago. Historically, IPEA hosted the major debates about “poverty lines” in Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s, attracting and training many academics to the institution, using datasets from national statistics offices and the most advanced econometric techniques of the period. Thus, it is not a coincidence the key role that IPEA researchers played on measuring the impacts of BFP.

trustworthiness of the program's operation, IPEA studies and impact evaluations could inform policymakers about the effectiveness of the program on poverty reduction. For domestic legitimation purposes, this obviated much of the need to solicit an external, international actor to evaluate the quality of the program.

Even so, as I explained in Part II, the need to legitimate the policy concept of “giving money to the poor” was still very present in Brazil, and similar to Mexico, policymakers agreed that evaluations (or “solid numbers,” as an interviewee told me) would play a key role in this regard. For this reason, when the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) was created in 2003 to implement the BFP, it included the first in-house evaluation department in Brazilian history (SAGI/MDS), with the highest possible bureaucratic ranking inside the Ministry. In the first six months of its existence, SAGI contracted out 10 domestic evaluations of the impact of BFP on health, education and nutrition outcomes (Lindert et al 2007), with six of these being quasi-experimental evaluations (e.g. regression discontinuity, difference-in-difference and other methods that artificially create a control group). Even more important than building an evaluation portfolio of the BFP, SAGI built an in-house monitoring system responsible for generating indicators about *Bolsa Familia*'s operation, implementation and results in the 5,770 municipalities that partnered with the federal government. In its early years, *Progres*a had no comparable system.

Attempts at Randomization and the Predominance of Statistical Analysis and Simulations

Even in this robust regulatory environment, international organizations, especially the World Bank, pressured *Bolsa Familia* officials to implement an RCT evaluation in the very early days of the program (Cohn 2012). In Brazil, however, policymakers strongly rejected the

arguments for an experimental evaluation on political, ethical and methodological grounds. On the political side, RCTs were mostly associated with their controversial need to maintain a control group, which ran against the government's legitimation strategy of quickly spreading the BFP (see Part II). Furthermore, as an IPEA researcher explained to me, having a control group would complicate the decentralized arrangement of *Bolsa Familia*: "Nobody took experiments seriously here because it would mess with a fundamental issue: the federative question. Any given experiment would require a mayor deciding to benefit and not benefit part of the population, in a program in partnership with the federal government. Mayors would tell us to go find another municipality to serve as a laboratory!" The duration of the political cycle in Brazil (four-year tenure at all levels), however, was the most commonly cited political obstacle to implementing an RCT:

To do an RCT, you need a baseline and a follow-up two years afterwards... In four years you might have a result. No politician wants this. So maybe you can do it if you are a university, a research center... but it makes no sense to ask the Brazilian government to do an RCT. The RCT problem is not ethical, its political. (IPEA and UNDP Researcher)

While the researcher above differentiated political and ethical reasons, other interviewees that participated in the Social Development Ministry's decision-making regarding evaluation methodologies tended to collapse ethical and political-strategic reasons when explaining their rejection to adopting RCTs:

Ethically, this option [of an RCT] was not viable, this was always very clear for me. I could not justify *any* process of control group selection that we could try: Using municipalities as controls, areas inside a municipality as controls, or households as controls. I could not use randomization as a justification, politically we could not do it. This was very clear for everyone at MDS. So our decision was that the gain that randomization could bring in terms of robust evidence did not compensate the political toll... Furthermore, the best evaluation is the one that does not interfere with implementation. If it's not going to interfere, and it can be experimental, great. But also you cannot be mean to people, to lie to people and etc., this is an absurd. This is public policy, these are people's lives, they are not rats in a laboratory." (BFP federal manager)

We could have done an experimental [evaluation], but it would be a public policy stupidity, it would be technocratic ruling, right? We were able to redesign four CCTs and create the BFP without a budgetary shock... We did not have a strong technical resistance against experiments, it just didn't make any sense, and ethically it would be a violence in terms of public service provision, we would have to make people stop receiving transfers, which would be politically unviable, and besides the idea was to reach 13 million families very fast, in our first day we only had 3.6 million, and nothing would stop this fast expansion. (MDS former secretary [highest bureaucratic ranking])

Similarly, on the methodological side, most state researchers and federal managers were not convinced of the superiority of the RCT methodology. First, as one put it, "CCTs did not start in 2003, ... so you could not measure their pure effect," complicating the risk of substitution bias, i.e. the possibility that individuals in the control group were receiving other similar policies that could bias results. But, most importantly, instead of doing experimental evaluations, IPEA poverty experts had the technical preparation to use annual household surveys to measure the impacts of the program on the overall poverty and inequality levels, and to communicate these findings to the public. In other words, since IPEA researchers came from a long tradition of poverty-line and inequality studies, they had the expertise and credibility to vouch for the results:

Honestly, we didn't need to do an RCT. Two years after the program was ready, we got the household surveys data that showed us the following: this income is so large that its being captured by surveys with national sample, this income is reaching the poorest, and even if they are receiving so little cash and cannot move away from poverty completely, you are reducing inequality spending 0.5% of the GDP. Why spend money in a small-sample and politically complicated RCT, when we were finding these robust results? (IPEA researcher)

As I explain in detail below, in Brazil, the impacts of the BFP on poverty reduction would be the most salient results employed by policymakers and politicians to legitimate the program, and the prestige of IPEA researchers would play a key role in publicizing and academically validating these results for a domestic audience. Finally, inside MDS, the MDS evaluation unit (SAGI) had a methodological preference for developing monitoring and

implementation indicators rather than impact evaluations. The idea was that these indicators would help keep track of targeting results, which were useful for operational purposes, while also being used to statistically simulate poverty and inequality levels with and without the program, or with different levels of cash transfers and poverty lines:

Inside the ministry, folks always worked to produce two types of evaluation. One was centered on the implementation process, on real indicators about what was happening on the ground so that we could improve our operations, and see how we could increase our impact. This type of evaluation had a central role in MDS... The other type of evaluation was to publicize, to show results to the public, to show how the transfers are affecting people's lives. I don't think we invested so much in this one. (BFP former executive committee member)

In terms of these institutional evaluations meant to “show results to the public,” the largest one was the *Avaliação de Impacto do Bolsa Família* (AIBF), a quasi-experimental impact evaluation of the BFP that was contracted out by SAGI in 2005, with co-funding from the World Bank and UNDP. Since randomizing benefits was not considered an option, in this evaluation, the 15,426 families that participated in the study were divided into (i) BFP beneficiary families; (ii) families that were not program beneficiaries but were included in the *Cadastro* (the BFP beneficiary registry); and (iii) families not included in the *Cadastro*, but with a profile that matched that of registered families.⁴⁷ While the results of this impact evaluation were generally positive, showing small but statistically significant impacts in educational, health and nutritional outcomes (SAGI/Cedeplar 2007), they did not receive much traction in the media, the

⁴⁷ The construction of control groups for this impact evaluation was problematic, undermining trust in the findings for many academics involved. As a BFP manager explained: “In the beginning, we did not want to have a control group – and this was a first battle with the World Bank – because the principle that guided us was that entry into *Bolsa Família* is automatic, based on need and income per capita, we do not choose which families [enter], and that we did not have the right to choose which families will live in misery to be in the control group. Our principle is that the program would grow very fast, so there would be no real control group, just those right above our poverty line that were in the *Cadastro*.” This means that the control group was composed of families that were considered low-income, but whose income was slightly above the poverty line, which might have influenced the size of the impacts found. See Chapter 3 for the process of entry into the BFP registry.

government or academia. Instead, the effects of the program on poverty were the ones that received more attention:

When MDS did the first institutional evaluation of *Bolsa Familia*... they found a small impact here and there. But in these impact evaluations people tend to forget the most important thing about a cash transfer. Because folks evaluate the impact of CCTs on everything, on things that CCTs don't even propose to change... Now, all CCTs want to tackle the problem of insufficient income, so this is the first thing you need to look in CCTs. What it's the impact of the program on poverty?... This problem is solved in Brazil. You had more than 40 studies, using different parameters, by scholars with very different political inclinations and using different poverty lines, but we were all finding things in the same direction. And in 2004, 2005, we could already see that *Bolsa Familia* had a small but measurable impact on inequality reduction: 3-8%, and was responsible for 16-25% of poverty reduction. Period... With time, by 2010 or so, maybe we had 100 or more studies, and the results were even stronger, what else do you want? (IPEA senior researcher)

Domestic Expert Consensus and a Slow International Recognition

As its hopefully clear by now, while BFP officials considered evaluations important to demonstrate the impacts of the CCT, priority was given to the fast and sustainable implementation of the program, and evaluation methodological choices were adapted to fit this goal. For this reason, inside the Social Development Ministry, SAGI prioritized the production of operational and results indicators, contracting out a quasi-experimental impact evaluation, which did not receive much attention. However, *Bolsa Familia* did benefit from the work of IPEA researchers and their expertise in measuring poverty with household surveys. These surveys were able to capture the short-term impacts of the program fast, using traditional statistical analysis, causing Brazilian decision-makers to see RCTs as “interesting, but not relevant for us,” as put by a MDS staff. Finally and crucially, since IPEA is a state research institution, researchers produced both academic and policy-oriented reports about their findings, which helped to stimulate a debate about the BFP among both poverty experts and a broader public.

In comparison to Mexico, therefore, *Bolsa Familia*'s evaluation choices were not as tied to its designers' strategy and credible information about the program in its initial 2-4 years was produced in a more decentralized and diffused way. While auditors and federal prosecutors were producing comprehensive studies about the trustworthiness of the BFP in terms of local-level corruption and political clientelism, SAGI indicators helped to produce stylized facts about the program that were easily comprehensible to the media and other state actors (Hirschman and Berman 2014). At the same time, IPEA was aggressively scrutinizing the impacts of the BFP on poverty and inequality levels.

To understand this decentralized style of policy evaluation, we have to place it in the political-institutional context of Brazil in the early 2000s. As I have shown, *Bolsa Familia* was implemented with the support of an especially popular president whose political agenda was centered on reducing hunger and poverty, and the key bureaucrats involved with the program implementation, evaluation and auditing enjoyed considerable prestige inside Brazil's public administration. Unlike Mexico, where policymakers emphasized the need to "demonstrate" the effects of CCTs to "convince" a suspicious domestic audience, Brazilian state officials and poverty experts consistently referred to their "experience" in policy implementation and "trust" in their findings as means to justify their operational and methodological choices:

When we do statistical simulations, we are interested in understanding if there are alternative designs of *Bolsa Familia* that, with the same budget, you can have a larger impact on poverty reduction... If you trust your assumptions and your model, you know that the tendency [of poverty] will go on this, rather than that direction. You know you have a reasonable model and that you are not making absurd assumptions. You can build models like this and then you have a huge advantage. We have been doing this forever, with a lot of experience. It's much cheaper to do this than an RCT. (IPEA senior researcher)

Or, to quote a federal manager at SAGI who entered the government after earning a PhD in sociology at a public university in Brazil:

Let's go back to old Weber, in that article he wrote about the epistemology of social sciences, where he talks about the values of the researcher. So what did he defend? The choice of a research object has everything to do with your values, with what you think it's important, and it's like that here. I like to joke: 'Who will do research about an HIV vaccine? People that think that HIV is bad.'... We were interested in generating robust studies about things that we thought were important. Sometimes we were surprised with the results, we learned something, but we always decided to evaluate by the best means possible what we thought was important... Say what you want, but I can both do robust studies and admit that all that is technical is political, it will always include my values as a researcher. (SAGI/MDS researcher)

Beyond the sociological reference, the quote above highlights something both impressive and consistent in the narratives of federal managers (and, it should be said, of poverty researchers): Their willingness to admit that they did "what they thought was important" based on their expertise and experiences. In my concluding remarks I will connect this narrative to a context characterized by "trust in experts," distinguished by what Porter (1995, 138) described as an "elite so secure that they rarely needed to negate or conceal their own discretion." First, however, I would like to highlight that while Brazilian state officials enjoyed internal prestige that helped to domestically legitimate their operational and evaluation choices in this particular historical moment in their country's history, this domestic prestige did not automatically translate internationally. And, for a country like Brazil, the approval of international organizations like the World Bank matters, since "whenever the World Bank chooses to adopt, research, and disseminate any given theme...this theme is then echoed in the debates among development professionals around the world, including academic economists" (Babb 2009, 9).

Following with *Bolsa Familia*'s priorities, international legitimation of *Bolsa Familia* derived from a focus on "the managerial revolution" that the BFP represented, which made possible the "world's largest experiment with cash transfers" (World Bank 2006). In contrast to *Progres*a that would receive world attention for its RCT evaluation and demonstrated positive

impact, even as its internal operation remained opaque for both domestic and international audiences. For *Bolsa Familia*, it was “the nuts and bolts” that provoked admiration, leaving the World Bank “consistently impressed by their [MDS officials’] dedication, professionalism, and technical excellence, who have been running a ‘marathon at a sprinter’s pace’ in the design and implementation of the BFP” (Lindert et al 2007, 3). On the MDS side, BFP managers also portrayed good relations with the World Bank:

I feel like the World Bank really respected our staff once they saw that we delivered things well here, that things had been sufficiently evaluated with our own means, regardless of what is considered gold-standard evaluation around the world... If the Bank wanted to impose something on us, it was just in the real beginning, then the dialogue became more productive... Our partnership with the World Bank is good mostly for technical reasons because financially, it represents nothing. We got a \$200 million loan from the World Bank for five years, which is what I spend with 1/3 of cash transfers a month... So it means nothing. In terms of technical debate, it’s great to have a close dialogue with them... The World Bank can legitimate and publicize our choices, and it’s good for them to be associated with a program that works so well. (BFP federal manager)

Eventually, as we will see in detail in Chapter 6, this focus on bureaucratic excellency and “on implementing things well on the ground and not in a laboratory,” as pointed by another former BFP staff, eventually led the World Bank to co-sponsor the creation of the think tank World Without Poverty, hosted by the Brazilian government, to disseminate knowledge about CCT implementation—what the Bank called the “science of delivery.”

A final point regarding the short-term legitimation of *Bolsa Familia* deals with the strong early association between the program and President Lula and his Worker’s Party. This made the Brazilian CCT vulnerable to partisan attacks at a level not faced by its Mexican counterpart. While CCTs in Brazil had started in 1995 at the municipal level and had been adopted by right- and left-wing local and federal governments, the BFP’s ambition of reaching “every poor person in the country” blurred the line between a popular policy and a populist one, rendering it an easy

target of criticism. Besides, given the positive early results of the program, it was common for President Lula to refer to *Bolsa Familia* as one of its greatest achievements, and for his political opponents to expose failures in the program to criticize the Worker's Party administration.

This strong association between the Worker's Party political agenda and the fast expansion of the *Bolsa Familia* program created challenges for its federal managers, who reported having to come up with "creative ways to show that the BFP was nonpartisan." In conjunction with reports produced by IPEA and federal auditors who found overall positive results of the program, MDS took upon itself "the burden of managerial proof," betting on transparency and publicly formalizing its procedures to facilitate external scrutiny (Maldonado 2012, 423, see also Chapter 4). Yet, as I will argue in more detail in Chapter 6, these transparency measures would only pay off on the long run.

To sum up, in Brazil, the style of CCT evaluation and the decision to eschew an RCT evaluation was informed by a combination of institutional, political and epistemic factors. The robust social policy regulatory environment coupled with the domestic prestige of *Bolsa Familia*'s federal managers and IPEA researchers helped to reduce the need for a "bullet-proof" evaluation method, since there was already considerable trust in the experts involved. As a result, the accumulated domestic expertise in poverty-line studies based on household surveys contributed to a quick generation of credible results about the impacts of the BFP on poverty and inequality. At the same time, Brazilian policymakers saw an inherent incongruity between the political goal of fast expansion of the *Bolsa Familia* program and the requirement to establish a control group, making an RCT evaluation look less attractive. Instead, more emphasis was placed on generating and publicizing indicators about the *quality* of this fast expansion and its impact on poverty. However, since its inception, the impressive size and territorial reach of the

BFP were associated to President Lula and to the Worker's Party, making the Brazilian CCT vulnerable to partisan attacks, in spite of the expert consensus surrounding it.

5.4 Conclusion: Comparative Considerations on the Goals of Social Policy Evaluation

In his provocative bestseller, *White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, economist William Easterly (2006, 237) praised *Progres*a as an exemplary case that should inspire the "future of western assistance:"

Because the program was such a clearly documented success, it was continued despite the voters' rejection of the longtime ruling party... [As a result of evaluation] the new government then expanded the coverage for the urban poor. Similar programs began in neighboring countries with support from the World Bank. The lesson for aid reformers is that the combination of free choice and scientific evaluation can build support for an aid program where things that work can be expanded quickly.

In this chapter, I have traced the institutional, political and epistemic elements that influenced the different styles of CCT evaluation in Mexico and Brazil. Continuing with an analytical focus on the distinct legitimation needs of CCTs also presented in Parts I and II, I showed how the methodological choices regarding CCT evaluation had less to do with the "intellectual preferences" of the key policymakers, and more to do with the distinct institutional and political environments in which they were operating. And, contrary to Easterly's quote above (one that has been echoed by great part of the international development community), I showed how the political support and successful legitimation of CCT programs did not result *automatically* from "scientific evaluations," be they RCTs or not, but from the political work that was done around evaluation results in the specific context of Mexico and Brazil in the early days of their CCTs.

Before turning to the long-term consequences of these early decisions regarding evaluation, I would like to return to Porter's contrast between legitimation strategies based on "trust in numbers" vs. "trust in experts" (1995), which I addressed in the introduction to this chapter. Clearly, Mexico's search for a bullet-proof evaluation methodology typifies a legitimation strategy based on "trust in numbers," since it resulted from the goal of persuading an adversarial audience of the merits of *Progresas*. By contrast, Brazil's rejection to the experimental method and confidence in its state officials' professional judgement is typical of a legitimation strategy based on "trust in experts," which results from the rare combination of prestigious experts operating in cooperative (or less adversarial) contexts.

While Porter's insights about the differences between "trust in numbers" and "trust in experts" have provided a productive apparatus to contrast the short-term evaluation dynamics of my two cases, they are less useful to understand long-term changes in state structures and legitimation strategies. This is because Porter does not theorize under which conditions expert knowledge can change status and become distrusted, or alternatively, when expert knowledge can go on the opposite direction and become legitimate. In this chapter, I have sought to push Porter's argument further by suggesting that a combination of public policy regulatory arrangement, political disputes and academic expertise of key policymakers were the key factors that differentiated the Mexican and Brazilian contexts. Yet, to understand the long-term effects of *Progresas* and *Bolsa Familia*'s initial evaluation strategies, we also have to consider that there is nothing fixed or absolute about the relationship between legitimation strategies and distinct contexts. In fact, as we will see in Chapter 6, this relationship is historically determined and depend on on-going negotiations between expert and political fields. And once the regulatory environment, political disputes or key experts change, the analyst has to consider how the basis

of political legitimation of social programs might have changed too. It is to this discussion that I now turn.

CHAPTER 6: MAINTAINING NARRATIVES OF SUCCESS – LONG-TERM EVALUATION TRAJECTORIES

Introduction

Since the initial creation of CCTs in the late 1990s, Mexico and Brazil have experienced important economic, political and societal transformations that shaped the long-term legitimation strategies of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*. In Mexico, in the year 2000, the PRI lost hold of the Presidency for the first time in 71 years, initiating a period of democratic opening that was accompanied by a series of restructuring state reforms, slow economic growth and a timid reduction in poverty rates. In Brazil, the 2000s were characterized by a rare combination of economic growth and reductions in poverty and inequality, which helped to consolidate the Worker's Party 14-year hold on the Presidency, the longest period of leftist control in the country's history. By 2016, however, crumbling economic growth and a Presidential impeachment pushed Brazil into an era of political uncertainty.

In this chapter, I will examine the long-term consequences of Mexico and Brazil's initial decisions regarding CCT evaluation, and how they interacted with the politico-institutional changes in the two countries over the past 15-20 years. I do so by building on the conceptual discussion introduced in Chapter 5, specifically by clarifying how the interplay between institutional arrangements and evaluation methodologies affected the legitimation strategies of both programs. I show that, in Mexico, the creation of a new set of institutions designed to increase accountability and transparency of public programs allowed, for the first time, an official appreciation of the impacts of *Progresa* on overall poverty levels, as well as auditing studies about its operation. I demonstrate, however, that these new institutions did not alter *Progresa's* relative insulation from other part of the state, and officials deemphasized new and

long-term impact evaluations of the program. As a result, even in a reenergized regulatory environment, *Progresa* staff continued to build on the legacy of the initial RCT evaluation, and to benefit from an insulated administrative structure inside the state to shape the image of the program for domestic and international audiences.

In Brazil, the same period was characterized by institutional and political continuity, which helped *Bolsa Familia* to improve its governance structure and construct a positive image of the program for international organizations, even if it continued to suffer partisan attacks during election cycles. Furthermore, I show that the BFP benefitted from a continuous period of reduction in poverty and inequality rates, which could, in part, be statistically attributed to the cash transfers, and demonstrate how the program developed institutional resilience as a result of the constant scrutiny from other agencies in the Brazilian state. By 2016's Presidential impeachment, then, *Bolsa Familia*'s legitimacy was well-consolidated among academic and bureaucratic circles. Despite its strong association with the Worker's Party, the Brazilian CCT survived the political turbulence and maintained its size, budget, and staff.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I introduce the main political and institutional changes that happened in Mexico in the mid-2000s and examine how they shaped the long-term evaluation strategies of *Progresa*. This is followed with a similar analysis of the interplay between institutional arrangement and evaluation choices for the Brazilian case. Throughout these two sections, I focus on the long-term politics of each CCT evaluation as observed during my fieldwork in 2016 and 2017. Empirically, I build on my interviews, archival data and secondary literature about the two programs. This chapter's concluding section includes a summary of arguments presented in Part III.

6.1 Mexico: Institutional Change and a Renewed Trust in Numbers

The 21st Century has been a period of political change and innovation in Mexico. In the year 2000, the PAN broke the PRI's 71-year hold on the Presidency with the election of Vicente Fox, and scored again when he was succeeded by Felipe Calderón in 2006. For 12 years, then, Mexico experienced political alternation in power, a disruption that was accompanied by a series of restructuring state reforms that aimed to dismantle the PRI-era opacity of the federal executive. In 2012, even in a renewed institutional environment, the PRI recaptured the Presidency through the election of Peña Nieto, ushering in one of the most unpopular governments in Mexican history (Ackerman 2019). Remarkably, *Progresa* survived these transitions, being rebranded *Oportunidades* (2000-2012) during the PAN presidencies, and then *Prospera* when the PRI returned to power (2012-2018). While each administration added new elements to the Mexican CCT, they all preserved the basic logic of distributing cash transfers conditioned on health and educational outcomes.

Throughout this period, *Progresa* carried the marks of the initial implementation and evaluation decisions made between 1997 and 2000 (reviewed in Chapters 3 and 5). This legacy included an insulated centralized administrative structure at the federal level, the protection of administrative and organizational data and the use of external strategic evaluations to legitimize the program. Yet these consistent features had to adapt to a rapidly changing institutional environment, which presented new challenges to and opportunities for the continuous legitimation of the program. In this section, I review the relevant institutional changes in Mexico in relation to social policy regulation, and explain how they affected the interplay between numbers and institutions that had characterized the initial short-term legitimation of *Progresa* (Chapter 5).

Democracy, Institutional Changes and New Actors

The end of the seven-decade rule by the PRI is usually referred to by scholars as Mexico's democratic opening, not only for the alternation of political party in power, but even more crucially because democracy came with an impulse for state reforms (Magaldi and Maldonado 2014). Most relevant for our purposes are three reforms and institutional changes that were pursued in the early 2000s: 1) The creation of a National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy – the CONEVAL (*Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social*), which would be responsible for establishing an official poverty measure and instituting official social policy evaluations; 2) The promulgation of a Public Information Law; and 3) The creation of a more robust federal auditing agency accountable to Congress, the *Auditoría Superior de la Federación* (ASF). Let me start with CONEVAL.

As we saw in Chapter 5, it has long been difficult to assess Mexico's historical trends in poverty. This is in large measure due to a generalized mistrust in official poverty measures, which were seen as susceptible to political manipulation and were often not comparable through time. When the new PAN administration took power in the year 2000, it sought to remedy this situation by sponsoring the creation of a Technical Committee for Poverty Measurement (*Comité Técnico para la Medición de la Pobreza*, CMTP), which gathered a team of prestigious national experts to develop an official methodology for the measurement of poverty. The hope was that this new methodology would allow the government to follow trends in poverty indicators and to evaluate how the government's actions impacted poverty reduction (Zavaleta and Moreno 2017).

In 2002, the group's proposed methodology was made public and used to estimate the incidence of poverty first for the year 2000, and then for 2002 and 2004 (Yaschine and Orozco 2010, 56-57). Based mostly on an income per capita conceptualization of poverty, the new

government estimated the incidence of three poverty lines: food poverty (lack of income to cover basic food needs); capacity poverty (lack of income to cover food, health and education needs); and asset poverty (lack of income for food, health, education, clothing, shoes, housing and public transport needs). Unfortunately, despite the prestige of the experts involved in creating this new poverty measure, the official figures were met with great distrust by the opposition parties in Congress (Zavaleta and Moreno 2017). For example, the committee found that each of the three poverty lines had fallen between 2000 and 2002 (respectively from 24.2% to 20.3%, 31.9% to 26.5%, and 53.7% to 51%), which struck many politicians as unlikely given that the country's economy had been contracting over the same period. In other words, regardless of the technical merits of the new official measures, the fact that the committee had been sponsored by the government was enough for it to face a certain level of "generalized distrust" (Coneval 2016, 3). This indicated, in turn, that a new solution for the mistrust in poverty measures was required.

At the time, Congress was moving toward a consensus on the need to create a new regulatory framework to monitor social policies, which led to the 2004 establishment of a General Law of Social Development (*Ley General de Desarrollo Social* – LGDS). As part of this law, the CONEVAL was established as a decentralized public agency with technical and managerial autonomy, and was tasked with publishing an official, multidimensional measure of poverty periodically, as well as with generating indicators of social programs' performance. The creation of a steering committee composed of six academics and two state officials (each representing the Finance and the Social Development Ministries) is often cited as the most relevant measure taken to generate public confidence and credibility in CONEVAL's independence from political pressures (Graizbord 2016). This credibility was also cultivated through the democratic election of CONEVAL's steering committee: Scholars seeking to fill the

six academic slots were required to present their candidacies through an open public call, and would then face election by members of the federal government, the states of Mexico, representatives of the municipal authorities and Congress. Furthermore, these academics were required to retain their university positions, which helped guarantee “their academic and financial independence, as their academic wages [we]re still covered by the universities to which they [we]re attached.” (Zavaleta and Moreno 2017, 4)

By 2016, the academic and popular consensus was that CONEVAL had managed to solve the historical problem of trust in official poverty numbers produced by the state (Graizbord 2016). Coincidentally or not, CONEVAL possessed similarities to the institutional arrangement of *Progresa* that distinguished both from other state agencies in Mexico. Each had an insulated centralized administrative structure, bringing together academics and policy experts whose career had been made outside the public service, though only CONEVAL had the mandate to inform Congress and civil society organizations about the evolution of poverty and the quality of social programs. Furthermore, CONEVAL also employed a strategy based on “trust in numbers” to deal with lingering suspicions from the PRI era, which is perhaps best illustrated by its slogan: “What Can Be Measured, Can Be Improved” (*Lo que se mide, se puede mejorar*). Finally, in international policy circles, CONEVAL was celebrated for its mission of increasing the transparency and accountability of the federal government, especially with respect to poverty-alleviation efforts (Levine and Savedoff 2015).

The era’s second relevant change was the promulgation of an Access to Information Law in 2002 (*Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental*), guaranteeing the public’s right to request and receive information from all state agencies in the federal government. With this Law, citizens, journalists and civil society organizations gained

access to information about the organizational structure, budget, salaries and activities of all public agencies, including information about the beneficiaries that participated in social programs. Unfortunately, as we will see below, the wording of the law did not specify the modes of presentation or the minimum quality requirements of the public data (Cejudo, Lopez and Rios 2012, 17), and many programs, including *Progresa*, found ways to protect their organizational information by rendering sensitive data practically illegible. Even so, this law helped the state appear less opaque, and opened the possibility of external access to beneficiary information and organizational data that could (at least in theory) be used to assess the quality of *Progresa*.

Finally, a robust External Control Office (the *Auditoria Superior de la Federación*, ASF) was created between 2000 and 2002 with the mandate to provide auditing, evaluation and investigative services for the Mexican Congress. Findings and recommendations from ASF possessed greater force than those from CONEVAL. CONEVAL's evaluations on social programs had a voluntary character, in the sense that state agencies did not have to follow them if they disagreed with the results (Graizbord and de Souza Leão 2019). The suggestions and evaluative findings of ASF, by contrast, had a mandatory character, as the office was empowered to impose limits to other agencies' actions and budget. While ASF's mission has been primarily connected to an anti-corruption agenda, it is also responsible for both auditing and evaluating the performance of *Progresa*. Yet, as I will demonstrate below, ASF's relationship to the CCT has not received much attention by the public, the press or other members of government.

In sum, the early 2000s was a period of state reforms for Mexico, effectively changing the regulatory environment around social programs, especially with regard to transparency and accountability. These institutional developments created both opportunities and challenges for the long-term legitimation and evaluation of *Progresa*. With the creation of other agencies to

assess social programs, *Progresa* could have created partnerships to make the program legible to a broader state audience, initiating a reflective process about its operations and increasing horizontal accountability for its actions at the federal level. However, these agencies could also begin to expose *Progresa*'s organizational failures or administrative mistakes, increasing the vulnerability of the program to domestic criticism. As we will see, *Progresa* would leverage its prestige and insulated structure to minimize its interactions with these new agencies, thereby retaining primary control over the politics of its long-term legitimation.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?: Longitudinal poverty trends, operational indicators and the RCT legacy

A direct consequence of the creation and technical reputation of CONEVAL was to allow state officials, academics and civil society organizations to understand the impacts of *Progresa* on official poverty measures and to trace the historical evolution of poverty in Mexico. As we saw in Chapter 5, in terms of the short-term legitimation of *Progresa*, state officials and poverty experts focused on the results of the RCT evaluation, which used a small experimental sample to demonstrate the impacts of the program on a series of socioeconomic indicators. Until CONEVAL announced Mexico's official multidimensional poverty measure in 2009,⁴⁸ the RCT evaluation results were the main source of quantitative validation for the program.

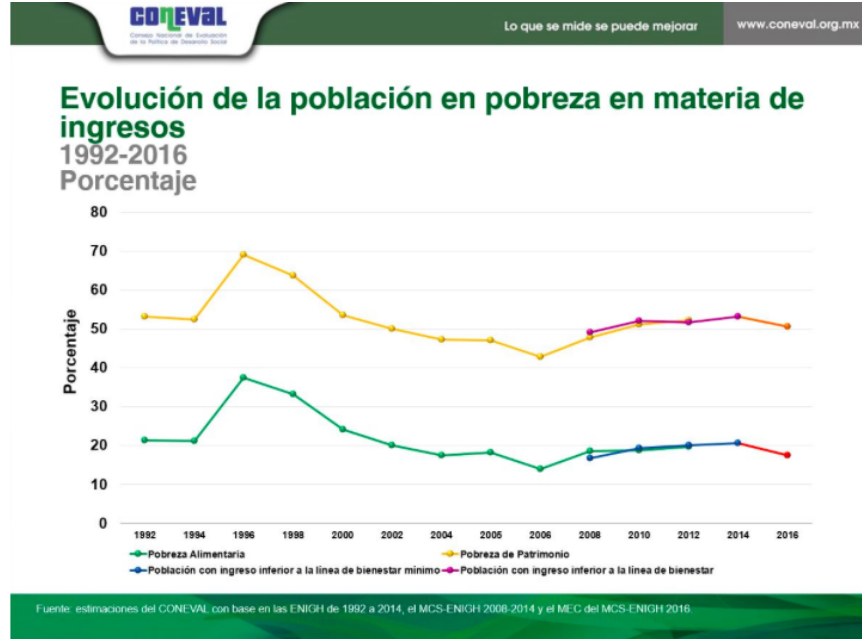
From 2009 onwards, this increased transparency regarding poverty trends meant that *Progresa*, as the main anti-poverty effort of the Mexican government, would have to legitimate its existence by more clearly showing its efficacy in combating poverty. Further, pressure on

⁴⁸ Mexico's multi-dimensional poverty index includes the following dimensions: income, educational lagging, deprivations due to access to health services, social security, housing quality and spaces, access to utilities in households, food access. As an official poverty metric, this measure allows an appreciation of the lack of income dimension of poverty (similar to Brazil), but also includes a more comprehensive view of poverty (Coneval 2016).

Progresa mounted into the 2010s as its share of Mexico's overall expenditure continued to grow. In 1997, its budget represented 0.004% of the GDP or 1.67% of the government funds earmarked for with poverty alleviation. By 2016, the figures had risen to 0.47% and 24% respectively (Davila 2019, 43-44). At this point, the program was present in all municipalities in the country, reaching 6 million families. Despite the growth, this number represented only 63% of *Progresa*'s potential reach according to CONEVAL's new estimates. Even with this considerable gap in service reach, throughout the 2000-2017 period, *Progresa* continued to present itself as a highly effective anti-poverty effort to the successive Presidential administrations, who, in turn, anxiously expected a reduction in poverty levels.

Unfortunately, Mexico did not see the drastic reduction in poverty experienced by many Latin American countries in the 2000s (for comparative numbers see next section, and Tables 6.1 and 6.2). This, to a certain extent, complicated the long-term prospects of *Progresa*. Below is a CONEVAL graph showing longitudinal trends in Mexico's official poverty measures that was widely reproduced in the media, presenting the longitudinal trends in Mexico's official poverty measures (the green line is the closest to a monetary definition of poverty, comparable to Brazil's definition, plotted in Figure 6.2 below). While we can see a substantial reduction in the different poverty lines from 1997 to 2006, poverty rates increased or stayed the same from 2006 to 2016.

Figure 6.1: CONEVAL Slide with Trends in Official Poverty Rates in Mexico, 1992-2016



Since many structural factors can and do affect these poverty measures, the overall trends should not be used as a proxy for the long-term impact of *Progres*a. However, for the purposes of political legitimation, the numbers did not help the program’s cause. The static—and at times increasing—poverty rate provided ammunition to CCT critics and skeptical politicians, who demanded answers from *Progres*a’s officials. As an academic council member of CONEVAL explained to me:

Every new [federal] administration would question the program... “Hey, if this program is so good, why do we have so much poverty?” And then this was used to put more money into the program and include new elements into our CCT... [The latest explanation] was that people were not converting their human capital into higher productivity, so the new administration included a productivity element into *Progres*a... All of this was motivated by this concern that nothing is happening to poverty.

In this sense, CONEVAL’s new politically credible poverty measures imposed new challenges to the continuous legitimation of *Progres*a. By the time of my fieldwork in 2016-2017, the answers of *Progres*a’s staff regarding the lack of poverty reduction built on the

narrative established by the program's initial policymakers. They held that human capital accumulation—not poverty reduction—should be the main goal of any CCT, and that *Progresa* could not be expected to be the sole solution to poverty (even if in other contexts, the program demanded budget and bureaucratic insulation precisely because it was Mexico's "flagship anti-poverty program"). Taken from 2006 and 2019, the two quotes below illustrate the continuity of this narrative:

[*Progresa-Oportunidades*] is not Mexico's only poverty alleviation strategy... [It] focuses exclusively on subsidizing the demand for health and educational services... To eradicate poverty, *Progresa* must be reinforced by the success of other components of a poverty strategy, and equally, by macro-and-microeconomic politics...[A]lthough it may be an essential component of the solution, a single program cannot solve a problem that has multiple causes. (Levy 2006, 19-20)

To sum up, the program has achieved a lot, but it also faces challenges to achieve better results in relation to its specific goals and main goal [to reduce poverty]. However, these challenges do not concern only *Progresa*, but require a combination of economic and social policies. Neither poverty reduction, nor its intergenerational rupture can result from one isolated program, what we need is a comprehensive social policy. (Yaschine 2019, 65)

In addition to provoking a debate about the impact of *Progresa* on poverty, a second change brought by CONEVAL was the mandatory release of certain operational indicators by every social program. This information was collected by CONEVAL, and then used to appraise Congress about the development of said programs. Since 2009, the publicity of these indicators has increased the transparency of *Progresa's* governance. Multiple actors now have access to longitudinal measures of *Progresa's* implementation, which are relatively easy to find online. However, though *Progresa* has so far followed the letter of these guidelines, it has done so without a commitment to use the indicators to change its governance. Further, *Progresa* did not provide CONEVAL with direct access to the organizational data and beneficiary datasets that other social programs provided. As explained by two former *Progresa* staff, the insulation and

importance of the program in Mexico's administrative structure has meant that the program could complicate CONEVAL's ability to evaluate it:

CONEVAL has not influenced *Progresas*'s evaluation, only when the national coordination office requested its help in very rare cases. Because of *Progresas*'s relative weight, it has been difficult that CONEVAL could coordinate with it. This is a challenge, and it would be helpful that the Council would be informed about the evaluation projects and studies about the program...and that these evaluations followed a regulated agenda, not only the discretion of managers. (Hernández and Gutiérrez 2019, 438)

A similar dynamic can be observed in *Progresas*'s relationship to the new Public Information Law and the External Control Office (ASF). While the new legislation and institution created mechanisms to access information about *Progresas*, they have not substantially affected the program's ability to shape its image and drive the politics of its legitimation. For example, while ASF produces audit studies about *Progresas* that are quite comprehensive (ASF 2017), its status as a young agency with a less experienced staff has meant both that its studies have received little public attention and that *Progresas* could manage its auditors from a position of strength. As a former staffer put it: "We have good relations with ASF, even if it is complicated for auditors to understand who is poor and who is not poor, so we explain things to them and they follow our lead. They respect us a lot."

By exercising the rights acquired in the Public Information Law, civil society organizations have requested that *Progresas* publish a list of its beneficiaries, so as to increase the transparency of its targeting mechanisms and choices. Yet so far, the list has been published online only in a non-downloadable format, with incomplete names of beneficiaries, and therefore has been of little use in assessing the quality of the CCT (Transparencia Mexicana 2016). In fact, during my fieldwork, *Transparencia Mexicana* (an NGO focused on social policy accountability) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) joined forces to sponsor a study about *Progresas*'s beneficiary dataset, making use of the Public Information Law and UNDP's funding.

For this study, researchers were given access both to administrative data about the program and to the list of beneficiaries, and they performed fieldwork to assess the quality of the information. The results were not impressive for *Progresa*: researchers could not find 53% of the beneficiaries on the list. However, these findings had little impact on the reputation of the program (PNUD 2016). It seems that the strategy of the *Progresa* staff to disregard these external findings had, then, been successful. As one of the researchers involved in the project explained to me:

For the public release of the study, we had agreed that there would be a public event and a media release, but it was not like that. We only did a closed meeting with *Prospera*⁴⁹ and PNUD... They knew we were going to ask “where are the 53% of people in your beneficiary dataset?” so they arrived in the meeting with their armor ready. We were two people from *Transparencia*, four from PNUD, and there were 17 people from *Prospera*. There were 17 people defending themselves in a very strong way! I got so impressed by it that I left the meeting thinking that the mistake was ours. But now I see that they were not open to hear about our findings.

In short, by the time Mexico adopted a series of state reforms that could have substantially changed the politics of the program’s evaluation, *Progresa* was already a well-established, prestigious state agency well-positioned to manage these new institutional relations. Internally, the overall perception is that the priorities of the program had shifted “from the necessity of being evaluated to prove that it works and guarantee its continuity, to the necessity of consolidating our capacity to manage a massive program,” as a current *Progresa* staffer told me. Still, the program managed to coast on its initial RCT evaluation, for which it continued to be celebrated both domestically and internationally (according to Parker and Todd 2017, 867: “over one hundred articles in economics and health journals have been published” using the RCT dataset). Hernández and Gutiérrez, former *Progresa* staff, write:

Progresa’s most cited evaluation in different parts of the academic and public policy worlds... it’s the experimental evaluation done between 1997 and 2000... after that, the next

⁴⁹ The interviewee refers to *Prospera* because at the time of the interview this was the name of the CCT.

evaluations had had a marginal impact compared to the initial experimental, rural one. We think that this results from a general perception that, after 20 years of existence, the balance between what *Progresa* has done with the evidence it produced and the improvements it should have done... it's not favorable, especially if you contrast it to the improvement that happened in other CCTs in the world. (2019, 439)

Put differently, in the initial implementation period (1997-2000), *Progresa* bet on a legitimization strategy based on “trust in numbers” and used what was considered at the time the most robust evaluation methodology, an RCT design. It also succeeded in insulating the program from other parts of the state. Later, once *Progresa* had survived three presidential transitions, the staff continued to build on both the RCT findings and on its unique, central and insulated institutional arrangement inside the Mexican government to persuade different audiences of the merits of *Progresa*. Even in a new regulatory environment, in which experts questioned the lack of impact of the CCT on poverty levels, *Progresa* continued to tout its initial success story, and through its size and prestige, was able to dismiss or diminish the work and data produced by other agencies. As we will see next, this was not the case in Brazil.

6.2 Brazil: Institutional Continuity and a New Type of Trust in Experts

While Mexico was experiencing a period of institution building and political change, the 2000s were a period of institutional and political continuity in Brazil. In 2006, President Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva was reelected president with 61% of the vote, and in 2010, the election of President Dilma Rouseff consolidated 12 years of Worker’s Party rule. Between 2004 and 2010, the Brazilian economy grew an average of 4.5% a year, benefitting from a major boom in the prices of commodities. Growth continued from 2010 to 2014, though slowing to an average of 2.1% per year. (As a comparison, Mexico grew at an annual average of 1.9% in the period between 2004 and 2014, see Bacha and Bonelli 2016, 155.) Moreover, during the first three PT

governments, the minimum wage grew substantially (an average of 9% annually in real terms during Lula years, and 3.2% during Rousseff years), which helped to increase domestic consumption and to further spread enthusiasm over the economy. This growth was accompanied by a reduction in both poverty and inequality rates (more about this below).

By 2014, however, the public good will toward the government was dampening. The economy began to slow down and there was widespread discontentment over the high costs of hosting a World Cup (2014) and Olympic Games (2016), leading millions of Brazilians to protest in the streets in 2013. While President Rousseff was reelected in 2014 by a very small margin (51% of votes), her popularity was down drastically due in no small part to the austerity measures she was expected to institute. Her tumultuous tenure ended with a controversial impeachment in May 2016 over accusations of poor management of public resources, and she was replaced by her vice-president, Michel Temer, of the center-right political party PMDB. After 14 years of political continuity, the Worker's Party was forced from power under a cloud of corruption, and with a weakened hand in Congress and an uncertain future.

In this section, I describe the long-term evaluation strategies of *Bolsa Familia*, both during the golden years of economic growth and poverty reduction, and in the politically turbulent years of mass protests, political polarization, and instability. Mirroring the dynamics that characterized the initial short-term evaluation of the program (Chapter 5), I show that between 2006 and 2014, the BFP continued to bet on a combination of statistical analyses showing its impact on poverty and inequality reduction, while also using the period of political continuity to improve its governance structure and to create institutional resilience in its relationship with other state agencies. This culminated in 2013 with the creation of World Without Poverty – Brazil Learning Initiative (WWP), a partnership with the World Bank to

spread information about the “Brazilian model of CCT implementation” around the globe. By the turbulent years between 2014 and 2016, the program had helped secure its position through its experience in successfully handling scrutiny, and through its strong penetration throughout the Brazilian territory (i.e. local-level implementation infrastructure). Despite its associations with President Lula and the Worker’s Party, the BFP defied most forecasts and survived the political transition.

Institutional Continuity, Increased Scrutiny, and Resilience

In Chapter 5, I described Brazil’s robust institutional arrangement for social policy regulation that existed in the initial years of *Bolsa Familia*. This allowed the program to build on the prestige of other parts of the state to generate information about the BFP impacts on poverty and the quality of its operation, even if this came at the cost of increased vulnerability to exposing operational mistakes. During the period of the program’s long-term legitimation (2006-2017), and contrary to the Mexican experience, there were no significant state reforms or new legislation that rearranged Brazil’s social policy regulatory setting; *Bolsa Familia* still had to collaborate with and respond to the demands of the same institutional players. Perhaps, the major difference is that scrutiny of the program increased over time, both due to its increasing prominence and the changing political and economic situation.

First, the relationship between federal managers at MDS (the Social Development Ministry, where the BFP is hosted) with poverty researchers at IPEA intensified in both collaborative and confrontational ways. On the collaborative side, IPEA researchers continued to play a key role in investigating the impacts of *Bolsa Familia* on poverty and inequality, publishing their results as soon as household survey data was released, and issuing a variety of

policy and academic reports about the program. Moreover, through its statistical simulations of different levels of cash transfers and administrative poverty lines, IPEA researchers also helped to fine-tune the targeting of the BFP, continuously providing information to MDS about the quality of the income variable in their beneficiary dataset (Osorio and Soares 2014).

However, especially after the 2014's economic slowdown decreased the pace of poverty reduction, IPEA researchers and poverty specialists at SAGI (the MDS evaluation unit) engaged in public disagreements over how to operationalize BFP beneficiaries in household surveys, creating tension between the agencies. At the time, the main disagreement was over how to deal with the respondents that declared zero income in the household surveys (Souza 2015, Jannuzzi et al 2014), since different techniques led to different estimates of poverty reduction (Souza et al 2019). While the discussion was quite technical and hard to summarize for the broader public, IPEA researchers defended their positions fiercely in academic circles, and the media tended to report IPEA estimates more frequently than those from MDS. Yet, even with these intellectual disagreements over how to measure poverty and the impacts of the BFP, the relationship between *Bolsa Familia* and IPEA was mostly collaborative throughout the period.

Second, the scrutiny from auditing agencies intensified greatly, especially when the corruption scandals reached the media in the 2010s.⁵⁰ The CGU (*Controladoria Geral da União*), for example, increased the number of audits of both the beneficiary datasets and *in loco* investigations, auditing the local-level implementation of the BFP on an average of 400 randomly selected municipalities every two years. Similarly, the TCU (*Tribunal de Contas da União*) also invested in big data expertise to assess the information given by

⁵⁰ The corruption scandals involved politicians from all political parties, but since there was evidence of vote-buying and bribes among top PT politicians, they particularly affected Dilma's administration. While the charges were not related to *Bolsa Familia* itself, but the oil industry and vote-buyin in Congress, control agencies intensified their anti-corruption activities at all levels.

families to BFP local officials, publishing annual studies with their findings. These audits revealed serious operational mistakes that frequently reached the headlines (e.g. a case of a BFP beneficiary that donated \$70 million Brazilian *reais* to a political candidate, or a mayor that was himself a beneficiary). Even so, signs of fraud or corruption were found in only 3.3%-4.7% of beneficiaries in CGU audits (2012, 2014) and 5-8% of families in TCU audits (TCU 2005, 2009, 2015), figures that were much lower than other social programs (CGU 2012).

While federal managers reported that “something changed in 2010, when auditing agencies became much more aggressive in their auditing efforts, and we had to spend a lot of effort providing them with our organizational information,” they also believed that the program ultimately benefited from the developments:

In 2009, the TCU did the first merger of our beneficiary dataset with another agency’s administrative dataset, with very bad auditing results for us. But it was good for us to technically qualify our team, and for us to realize that Brazil has a very serious problem of dataset certification. For example, I can get the electoral voters’ dataset and merge it with the BFP one, and say the BFP is wrong. There is no official authority to say the administrative dataset A has good quality to evaluate the dataset B... [From 2009, 2010] It became a story of “If you want to do anything, just use the *Bolsa Familia* dataset.”... Ultimately, however, it was good because we had to learn to communicate when something was our mistake or another agencies’ very bad data management.

As governmental agencies increased their scrutiny on BFP in the wake of the aforementioned corruption scandals, there were two long-term consequences. As the quote above indicates, the first was that the BFP staff developed the institutional or organizational resilience⁵¹ to quickly respond to external criticism, to improve its governance, and to effectively communicate with the public. The civil service tenure of the *Bolsa Familia* staff and the 14 years of political continuity were crucial to giving state officials the time to learn from these

⁵¹ I am aware that there is a political science literature on institutional resilience, as well as sociological analysis on organizational resilience. In future iterations of the dissertation, I plan to review this work to assess the similarities and differences with my findings.

experiences and build this institutional resilience, as they could operate without the constant risk of being fired or replaced.

Second, the continuous scrutiny helped to reduce the association of *Bolsa Familia* with the Worker's Party, at least among the investigating state agencies. As a federal auditor told me, "I noticed that the press is always saying bad things about *Bolsa Familia*, that it's vote-buying for Lula... I used to say this too. But now I defend the program. Because I really saw poverty [in *in loco* investigations] and I know how important the program is. Besides, the program is well-managed, which is rare." BFP managers also mentioned this positive externality of the constant scrutiny:

Our goal was always to transform the program from [the policy of one administration's] government to a state policy. All the auditing, media attacks, and constant analysis of our data ended up helping with this goal, because they can see that we are doing a good administrative job, even if our work has not been perfect, and there is still a lot to do.

However, the disentanglement of the BFP from the Worker's Party and partisan politics was never complete, and federal managers continuously faced the challenge of managing a program that could easily be derided as populist. As a result, throughout the period 2004-2016, municipal and presidential elections brought *Bolsa Familia* increased scrutiny from politicians and the media, causing spikes in press attention that had no parallel in the Mexican case.⁵² For example, one World Bank study found that around the 2002, 2004, and 2006 elections, the number of newspaper articles about CCTs tripled and their tone became more critical than in non-electoral years. The same study, however, notes the impressive ability of the BFP staff to

⁵² To my knowledge, there is no comparative, systematic analysis of media articles about CCTs in Mexico and Brazil. In my interview schedule, however, I asked questions about the role of the press for each CCT legitimation and asked respondents to name particular articles that were extremely detrimental to their reputation. While only 2 out of 45 Mexican interviewees could name one article, 48 out of 55 Brazilian interviewees could name one or more articles. During my fieldwork, I had the same impression that the BFP was more constantly under attack than the PP. While these are imperfect measures, they both signal to a more intense public scrutiny around CCTs in the Brazilian case.

react to media criticism by quickly improving its governance. In the (perhaps overtly) enthusiastic words of the World Bank authors:

Our analysis shows that CCTs have been highly visible in the Brazilian press, and the frequency of media coverage expanded as the program scaled up. We also find that while the press may endorse the overall concept of CCTs as a social policy instrument, the quality of implementation matters not only for program effectiveness but for public acceptance. The press will publicize perceived weaknesses with increased scrutiny, particularly in the face of elections (political interplay). The press also reports favorably on Government actions to improve implementation quality. Without claiming causality, we observed several junctures in which this interplay between vibrant public debate in the media, on the one hand, and proactive and transparent actions by the Government, on the other hand, seems to have contributed to strengthening the program through what could be viewed as a “virtuous cycle” of accountability (technical interplay). (Lindert and Vincensini 2010, 2)

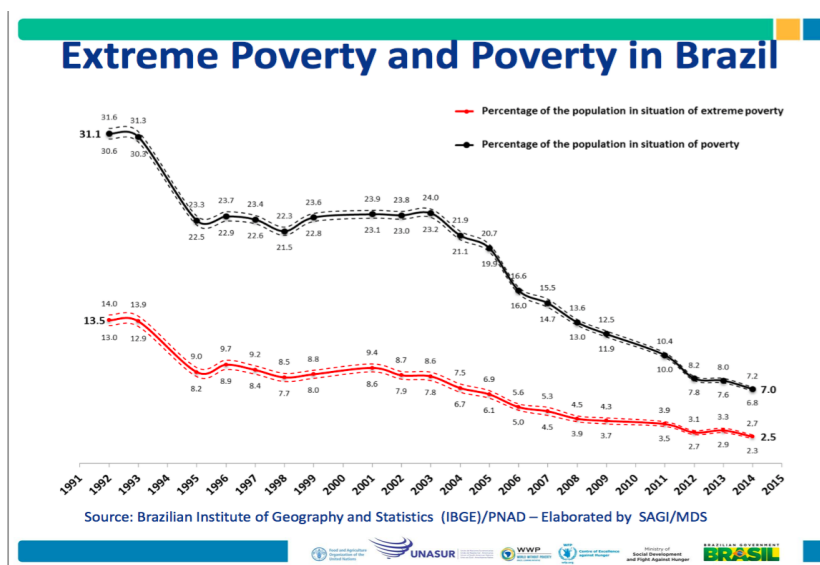
In sum, after its initial years of implementation, the BFP’s legitimation continued to depend on its interaction with other agencies inside the Brazilian state. The audit studies of both TCU and CGU continued to generate credible information about the program, especially regarding corruption and political clientelism. Even if these audits did sometimes expose serious operational mistakes, they also helped to convey a positive image of the program, and especially of its management’s ability to respond quickly by changing course and reducing mistakes. Also, IPEA experts continued to generate studies about the program’s impacts, and to use household surveys as valuable information sources about poverty in Brazil. This set of relationships helped the BFP to increase its resilience to political turbulence and to cultivate voices inside the state to protect the program, which would prove to be crucial for its long-term survival.

Poverty Reduction, International Recognition, and Political Survival

In contrast to Mexico, the long-term legitimation of the BFP also benefitted from a continuous period of poverty reduction in Brazil that lasted until at least 2015. Figure 2 below shows the continuous decline in official poverty rates, as presented by SAGI. As with the

Mexican case, we cannot conclude from this data alone that the BFP is responsible for all the poverty reduction, but politically speaking, the correlation did contribute to the public legitimization of the program, and these numbers consistently appeared in the media and in political debates (Campello, Falcão and Viana 2014). More robust analysis, however, showed the program to be responsible for 15-30% of the reduction in poverty⁵³ and 9-21% of the inequality reduction during the period between 2001 and 2017.⁵⁴ Put differently, as the main anti-poverty program of the Brazilian government, the BFP benefitted from a period of continuous decline in poverty rates, even if it was not the sole or even main cause of this reduction.

Figure 6.2: Trends in Official Poverty Rates in Brazil, 1991-2015



⁵³ Souza et al (2019), the leading IPEA specialists in poverty, find that the BFP was responsible for 15% of poverty reduction between 2000-2017, and 25% of extreme poverty reduction.

⁵⁴ Results vary depending on the statistical method and the time period used. Soares, et al. (2006) find that the cash transfers were responsible for 21% of the Gini coefficient reduction between 1995 and 2004; Barros, Carvalho, and Franco (2007) found 12% for 2001-2005; Soares et al. (2010) and Hoffmann (2013) estimated a 16% impact of the BFP on Gini reduction for the periods 1999-2009 and 2001-2011, respectively. The only study I found evaluating the impact of the BFP on inequality reduction over a period covering the economic recession (2001-2015) found that the program was responsible for ~10% of the reduction in Gini coefficients, with the largest impact (17%) occurring during the fast expansion period of the program (2001-2007), and then falling to ~9% (Viana et al 2018). In general, these studies show that the increase in the minimum wage was the main source of inequality reduction (~50%).

Additionally, throughout this period, federal managers and researchers at SAGI took advantage of these impressive figures to produce federal and local-level governance indicators, which served their communication strategy with national and local presses (Hellmann 2015). Hence, while the results of the multiple federal audits brought criticism and occasionally dented the program’s broader public image, SAGI also improved its capacity to quickly generate information about the BFP operations to mitigate the damage. The creation of accessible tools to provide official information about the program was especially important to local-level officials as they responded to press questions about audit results and BFP impacts on their local populations.

But in terms of the long-term legitimization of *Bolsa Familia*, perhaps the most important development was the international recognition that arrived from 2010 onward. Two factors played a key role in this change. First, Brazil’s combination of growth and poverty reduction was impressive even compared to other countries that also reduced poverty in the same period, and international organizations were quick to report on this trend (ECLAC 2007, 2009, 2017). As an example, Tables 6.1 and 6.2 below present World Bank data on poverty trends in the three countries with the largest CCTs in Latin America:⁵⁵

Table 6.1: Evolution in % of population living under US\$3.1/day (~extreme poverty)

	Circa 1999	Circa 2016	Variation
Brazil	28.5%	10.5%	-63.07%
Colombia	35.1%	15.1%	-56.88%
Mexico	27.6%	17.3%	-37.09%

Source: World Bank and Coneval (2019)

⁵⁵ This table presents the overall poverty reduction in the three countries. The World Bank estimates that cash transfers (CCTs + other social transfers) were responsible for 41.6% of this reduction in Brazil and 21.4% in Mexico. The average for all Latin American countries was 28.4% (ASPIRE 2018).

Table 6.2: Evolution in % of population living under US\$5.00/day (~poverty)

	Circa 1999	Circa 2016	Variation
Brazil	44.2%	21.2%	-52.1%
Colombia	54.7%	29.9%	-45.42%
Mexico	46.2%	37.2%	-19.43%

Source: World Bank and Coneval (2019)

Second, the program benefited as international organizations shifted from a focus on policy impact to what became known as the “science of delivery,” or an increased focus on programs’ operations and implementation. By 2013, the international excitement for the BFP’s managerial style and decentralized operations was so intense that the Social Development Ministry, IPEA, the World Bank, and UNDP sponsored the creation of the World Without Poverty – Brazil Learning Initiative (WWP) to “systematically assemble information and share Brazil’s experience of economic development with social inclusion and promote the exchange of best practices with international partners.”⁵⁶ The WWP became the main agency responsible for dealing with international requests about information of *Bolsa Familia*, and it played a key role in BFP’s international legitimation by producing information about the program in multiple languages and by attracting positive attention through high-level policy events.

Hence, when the very turbulent years of 2014-2016 arrived and impeachment supporters expected the full dismantling of the “big, inflated state created by the PT” and the erasure of “PT clientelistic actions” (Carvalho 2017, 3), the *Bolsa Familia* program was sufficiently legitimized among bureaucratic, academic, and NGO circles to survive the political attacks and the greater scrutiny that followed. As I have said, organizational resilience combined with the BFP’s perceived role in the continuous decline in poverty helped the program withstand the political

⁵⁶ From the website, <http://wwp.org.br>, accessed on June 12, 2019.

turbulence without meaningful budgetary cuts or managerial changes. This was enabled by two key factors. First, the large decentralized governance infrastructure, which extended into 5,570 municipalities, protected the program from being quickly eliminated or substituted—i.e. the BFP benefitted from its penetration throughout the Brazilian territory. Second, the fear of the negative electoral effects of dismantling *Bolsa Familia*, both at the federal and local levels, helped to shield the program from the major, restructuring budgetary cuts that happened after 2016. (I will further address the electoral factor in the conclusion of the dissertation.)

Put differently, since its initial implementation in 2002-2004, *Bolsa Familia* did not operate with a centralized, strategic politics of evaluation like *Progres*a. Instead, the program benefitted from a robust regulatory environment and from the work of other, respected state agencies to provide credible evidence about its short-term impacts. In the ensuing years, the BFP continued to profit from the reputation of these other agencies, especially as IPEA offered continuous estimates of the program's impacts in poverty and inequality reduction. Moreover, the BFP developed the organizational resilience to handle the increased scrutiny from auditing agencies that followed the corruption scandals of 2010 onward.

At this point, the program could have handled the rising public suspicion of government activities by turning to a *Progres*a-style legitimation strategy of “trust in numbers.” Instead, the federal managers and poverty experts who had relied on their prestige inside public administration and academia to legitimate their short-term operational choices turned their managerial expertise into a legitimation strategy in itself, partnering with international organizations to disseminate Brazil's “science of delivery.” As the political situation changed, this renewed “trust in experts” played a key role in securing the political survival of the program.

6.3 Conclusion of Part III and Implications

In the third part of this dissertation, I have analyzed Mexico and Brazil's evaluation strategies that were designed to assist in the legitimation of the *Progresas* and *Bolsa Familia* programs. Building on the conceptual apparatus I proposed in Chapter 5, I have investigated the institutional, political and epistemic elements that influenced the different styles of CCT evaluation in Mexico and Brazil, as well as their short and long-term consequences. I have argued that, in Mexico, the weak social policy regulatory environment coupled with great suspicions of the goals of anti-poverty programs and the majority of US-trained economist staff contributed to the perception that an RCT was be the most "bullet-proof" method. In Brazil, the robust social policy regulatory environment coupled with the prestige of its state officials and the accumulated domestic expertise in poverty-line studies contributed to the perception that statistical analysis of the impacts of the BFP on poverty were enough to assess the program.

I have also connected these findings to Ted Porter's contrast between legitimation strategies based on "trust in numbers" vs. "trust in experts" (1995). In the short-term (Chapter 5), I proposed that Mexico's choice of an RCT evaluation intended to persuade an adversarial audience of the positive impacts of *Progresas* typifies a legitimation strategy based on "trust in numbers." In turn, Brazil's rejection to the experimental method and confidence in its state officials' professional judgement is typical of a legitimation strategy based on "trust in experts." In the long-term (Chapter 6), I showed how policymakers recreated these initial strategies to adapt to the changing institutional and political contexts of the two countries.

The analysis in Part III has implications to understand the consequences of how evidence hierarchies are used to assess success (or failure) in poverty-alleviation efforts. My findings suggest that methodological choices are not automatically superior or more powerful in

influencing social policymaking. Instead, the power of numbers results from the political work that is done around them in specific political and institutional contexts. Further, by juxtaposing the Mexican experience adopting a RCT with the rejection of the experimental approach in Brazil, I have also provided an in-depth account of the political economy of RCT evaluations, and their relationship with the policy process on the ground. Considering the prominent role that these policy experiments currently play in determining “what works” in the development community (de Souza Leão and Eyal 2019), the findings in Part III are also relevant to envision the possibilities of creating alternative models of evaluation, as well as more democratic methods of establishing the political viability of transferring money to the poor.

CONCLUSION

Looking back on 2018, it was an eventful year for domestic politics and the future of CCTs in Mexico and Brazil. In June, Mexico elected a new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (or AMLO), the leader of a new political party, the National Regeneration Movement (or MORENA, *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional*). AMLO won the election on a leftist platform, promising to start Mexico's "fourth transformation"—*la cuarta transformación*.⁵⁷ In October, in the south of the continent, Brazil also elected a new president, Jair Bolsonaro, the leader of a historically extreme-right political party, the Social Liberty Party (or PSL, *Partido Social Liberal*). Bolsonaro won the election on an ultra-conservative platform, promising to take Brazil back to the "good, old years of military dictatorship."⁵⁸ A few months earlier, in April 2018, former Brazilian president and then-presidential candidate Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva was detained under corruption charges, dramatically sealing the fate of the political project of the Worker's Party in the country.

In an unexpected move, one of AMLO's first presidential measures was to eliminate *Progresá*. Bolsonaro, in contrast, decided to continue with *Bolsa Família* and to retain its staff, operational design, and budget. The sudden erasure of *Progresá* from Mexico's social policy landscape shocked many national and international analysts, who have accused AMLO of "ignoring the evidence" of the program's quality and of being "irresponsible with the poor."⁵⁹ The political survival of *Bolsa Família* also surprised many domestic and international experts and

⁵⁷ AMLO has referred to the political changes that he plans to enact under his administration as the "Fourth Transformation," following other "transformations" of Mexican politics: The War of Independence from Spain (1810-1821), the Reforms Period (1857-1872), and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917).

⁵⁸ "Dictatorship Was A 'Very Good' Period, Says Brazil's Aspiring President." NPR Latin America, July 30, 2018. Available in <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/30/631952886/dictatorship-was-a-very-good-period-says-brazil-s-aspiring-president>. Accessed on August 25, 2019.

⁵⁹ Rodolfo de la Torre, <https://twitter.com/equidistar/status/1160547379302391812?s=11>

disappointed Bolsonaro's most ardent supporters, who had expected the end of any Worker's Party-associated social program, in an effort to "stop socialist tendencies and bring discipline back to the country".

To a degree, I was also shocked, worried, and relieved by the radical changes happening in the two countries and in the two CCTs that I had been studying for the past seven years. As I conclude this dissertation, I would like to address a set of pressing questions in regards to these recent developments. Why did a self-identified leftist president eliminate (rather than reform, improve, or replace) *Progresas*, a program that provided cash transfers to six million Mexican families, and that had helped them to improve a series of nutrition, health and education outcomes? Why did an ultraconservative president, who promised to privatize or eliminate most forms of social policy in Brazil, decide to keep *Bolsa Familia* unaltered? Or simply: What has happened?

My cautious answer is that it is still too early to tell. In a few years, scholars will have an interesting comparative puzzle to explore, once we have enough temporal distance to properly investigate the different socioeconomic and political processes that led to the election of these two presidents, as well as the consequences of their administrations for Mexico and Brazil. To conclude, however, I will build on the main findings of this dissertation to provide a tentative answer to these questions. Specifically, I will explore how the elimination of *Progresas* and continuation of *Bolsa Familia* are related to the politics of legitimation of each program and to the knowledge tools that were created to operationalize and evaluate them.

The main argument that I put forward in this dissertation relates to the distinct legitimation strategies that Mexico and Brazil adopted to secure the political viability of CCTs. While *Progresas* adopted a strategy of institutional insulation and centralized governance that was focused on efficiency and "trust in numbers," Brazil adopted a strategy based on a decentralized, transparent

governance structure that was focused on inclusion and “trust in experts.” I demonstrated how these distinct legitimation strategies were influenced by the specific (and very different) contexts in which *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia* were initially implemented, and investigated their consequences for a series of implementation and evaluation features that the programs adopted in the short and long-terms in the two countries.

For methodological reasons, I stopped my empirical analysis in 2017, the year that I finished my fieldwork. Yet, in light of recent events, it seems that the long-term consequences of these distinct legitimation strategies became even clearer in 2018, when the two countries experienced what some analysts have described as an about-face in their political landscapes.

As I argued in Chapters 4 and 6, two long-term outcomes of the distinct legitimation strategies of each CCT could be observed in 2017. First, *Progresa* and the BFP had different levels of infrastructural presence throughout the national territory, measured by the different levels of embeddedness in local-level state structures (resulting from centralized governance in Mexico vs. decentralized governance in Brazil), as well as by different targeting results (more inclusion of poor families in Brazil vs. fewer targeting mistakes in Mexico). Second, *Progresa* and the BFP also had a distinct set of allies inside the federal government, since *Progresa* invested in rigid insulation from other parts of the state while *Bolsa Familia* interacted more closely with diverse political actors. I believe these two outcomes help shed light on the futures of the two programs.

A negative consequence of *Progresa*'s bureaucratic insulation and operational centralization inside the state apparatus is that it was comparatively easier for AMLO to eliminate the program without causing a series of ripple effects throughout Mexico's federal and local governments. As I reiterated throughout the dissertation, *Progresa* did not depend on a local-level infrastructure to reach the poor, which would also have to be eliminated or converted for new

purposes (Streeck and Thelen 2005). Neither did the program depend on strong allies who could defend the program from inside the government, since it had deliberately isolated itself to avoid corruption and the constant scrutiny from other state agencies in Mexico. Hence, in a moment of purposeful state change in the name of the “fourth transformation” and a radical shift in the ruling coalition, it was relatively easier to eliminate *Progresas*. Furthermore, the few actors that were invested and prepared to argue for the continuation of *Progresas*, such as international organizations, academics and the program’s staff, were themselves isolated by the change in ruling coalitions. Since these actors were tied to AMLO’s criticism of the “abusive privileges of state elites” and “neoliberal bureaucrats,” their defense of the program was easily dismissed by the new administration as “bureaucratic entitlement.” Put simply, *Progresas*’s isolation inside the Mexican state made the program more vulnerable in a moment of dramatic political change.

In contrast, BFP’s decentralized governance arrangement and continuous horizontal exchange with other federal agencies created a positive externality: it was comparatively harder to bluntly eliminate or convert for new purposes a program that was embedded in the state infrastructure of 5,570 municipalities and that had powerful allies inside Brazil’s federal administrative structure. As in the Mexican case, Brazil experienced a radical shift in the ruling coalition, but *Bolsa Familia* benefited from its strong penetration throughout the national territory and federal administration and has survived the political transition. As I explained in Chapter 6, the constant scrutiny that the BFP faced throughout the years helped it to develop organizational resilience, which so far has been fundamental to securing its position in the political structure during the first year of Bolsonaro’s government. This is impressive particularly considering the widespread budget cuts that have occurred in the education and health sectors in Brazil.

What about CCTs' beneficiaries? Why aren't *Progresa* beneficiaries revolting against the end of the program? And what role did *Bolsa Familia* beneficiaries play in securing the continuation of the program? Here, the findings of my dissertation can provide limited insight, because my analytical approach to the politics of CCTs privileged the viewpoint of the state. Nevertheless, the distinct legitimation strategies that Mexico and Brazil adopted provide some clues to address these questions.

In Part II, I demonstrated how in Mexico an unintended consequence of the fear of political clientelism and electoral use of *Progresa* was that policymakers sought to isolate their view of the poor from other state agencies, especially at the local level. Yet, in doing so, I also suggested that it became more organizationally difficult to maintain close relationships to poor families on the ground, resulting in scenarios in which “more often than not, *Progresa* staff simply does not know where families are,” as one interviewee explained to me. Therefore, it is unclear how *Progresa* beneficiaries understood and experienced the program in their daily lives and how much contact families had with *Progresa* staff in order to have a clear understanding of the role beneficiaries could have had in supporting the continuation of the program. The few observers who have tried to address this question have reported that while families seem confused with the changes, they expect that AMLO's administration will eventually provide new cash transfers.⁶⁰ We will have to wait to discover what happens in the future.

In Brazil, however, the loose targeting mechanism and constant scrutiny of the information given by poor families meant that beneficiaries were constantly receiving home visits from local-level *Bolsa Familia* staff or auditors and that they had to update their income information more often than in Mexico. In other words, *Bolsa Familia*, by design, is comparatively more present in

⁶⁰ “Menores sin escuela y adultos sin medicina. Los saldos del fin de Prospera.” *La Jornada*, May 27, 2019. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/05/27/politica/004n1pol> Accessed on May 29, 2019.

families' lives and serves as an access point to a series of additional public services provided through local-level social assistance agencies (MDS 2016). The societal penetration of *Bolsa Familia* makes its elimination more visible and contentious for its local administrative staff as well as for beneficiary families.

As a consequence, the distinct levels of societal embeddedness of *Progresa* and the BFP, which were shaped by their different legitimation strategies, have affected the electoral penalties associated with openly eliminating CCTs in each context. The electoral weight of *Bolsa Familia* beneficiaries, who represented approximately 25% of the electorate in Brazil in the last elections, might have played a relevant role in securing the continuation of the program. In 2018, President Bolsonaro had his worst electoral results in the poorer regions of the country, and lost throughout rural regions in the Northeast, where most *Bolsa Familia* beneficiaries were located.⁶¹ Eliminating the program, therefore, could be politically risky for the future of the new administration, especially because Bolsonaro's political agenda does not include a clear substitute for the BFP but rather a broadly stated intention to privatize social policy provision.

In Mexico, conversely, AMLO had a sweeping victory throughout the country (and especially in the poorest regions⁶²), which the President has vocally interpreted as a signal to initiate comprehensive changes in Mexico's federal administration (Ackerman 2019). While the new administration has promised a series of policy changes aimed at Mexico's poorest populations, it is too early to tell if former *Progresa* beneficiaries will be taken into account by them, and the electoral consequences of these decisions.

⁶¹ "How did Brazilians vote." Nexo Jornal, October 29, 2018. <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/grafico/2018/10/29/Como-o-Brasil-votou-no-segundo-turno-para-presidente-em-mapas>. Accessed on August 25, 2019.

⁶² "Este mapa muestra el triunfo arrollador de Andrés Manuel López Obrador en México." Univision on July 2, 2018. <https://www.univision.com/noticias/elecciones-mexico-2018/este-mapa-muestra-el-triunfo-arrollador-de-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-en-mexico>. Accessed on August 25, 2019.

The second argument that I made in this dissertation was that knowledge production played a key role in the legitimation process of CCTs. In the two contexts, policymakers faced the similar challenge of creating narratives of success that would be considered objective and credible by a diverse set of audiences, yet they chose a distinct set of knowledge tools and methodologies for this purpose. I explored this issue in particular in Part III, in which I contrasted the goals of each CCT evaluation and explained the factors taken into consideration for using or rejecting an RCT evaluation in relation to the specific political and institutional contexts of Mexico and Brazil in the early days of each program. In doing so, I demonstrated how policymakers in the Mexican case hoped that RCT results would provide a “bullet-proof” shield against any suspicions regarding *Progresas* and guarantee the longevity of the program. Considering that *Progresas* survived four presidential transitions between 1997 and 2018, the general sentiment was that the RCT-based strategy had been successful and that it would be “simply impossible to close down [PROGRESA] because it has proven that it achieves results” (IADB 2005). By contrast, policymakers did not adopt such a bullet-proof evaluation strategy with *Bolsa Familia*, in large part because they could count on other branches of the Brazilian state to produce credible information about the program. Moreover, *Bolsa Familia* benefited from 14 years of political continuity, which strengthened its internal governance and was essential for dealing with the constant scrutiny that the program faced over the years, particularly from 2010 onward.

There has been a predictable outcry over *Progresas*’s cancellation among the domestic and international experts who were involved in the early RCT evaluation. In a recent Skype interview, a former staff member of *Progresas* captured the general sense of bewilderment, “With so much evidence of the positive impact of *Progresas*, I am shocked by its cancellation. AMLO clearly does not care about evidence.” A Brazilian poverty expert, echoed a similar disbelief regarding

Bolsonaro's decision to maintain *Bolsa Familia*, but instead it attributed the President's decision to the positive role that evidence might have played in this development: "I honestly think he does not care about the poor, or about anything that is social. But also, with so much evidence of the BFP's positive impact, the new administration would be stupid to eliminate it."

Although it would be convenient if the future of each CCT depended on AMLO and Bolsonaro's positions regarding evidence, the findings of my dissertation suggest that we should follow a different path to address the paradox presented by the actions of the new administrations. The relevant sociological question, I have suggested, is not if different types of evidence matter for policy decisions. Rather, a sociologically-informed question should investigate the relationship between numbers and institutional arrangements, on the one hand, and the political work that is done around them, on the other. In this sense, in order to shed light on the role that evidence might have had in *Progresas*'s cancellation, we have to examine how the knowledge infrastructure that was created to implement and evaluate the program shaped and mediated the ways in which the CCT was perceived by the new political actors in power. Similarly, to understand *Bolsa Familia* under Bolsonaro, we have to examine if and how the knowledge regime around the program created new possibilities, objects, and metrics for understanding the Brazilian CCT that benefited its continuation, despite far-reaching budget cuts in other social policy areas.

In other words, the comparative-historical interpretation that I provided to explain differences in the adoption of CCTs in Mexico and Brazil – a perspective which is normally used to try to understand how the past influences the present, can also be extremely valuable in discussing the futures of CCTs and, mainly, the contemporary challenges involved in consolidating truly inclusive safety nets for the poor.

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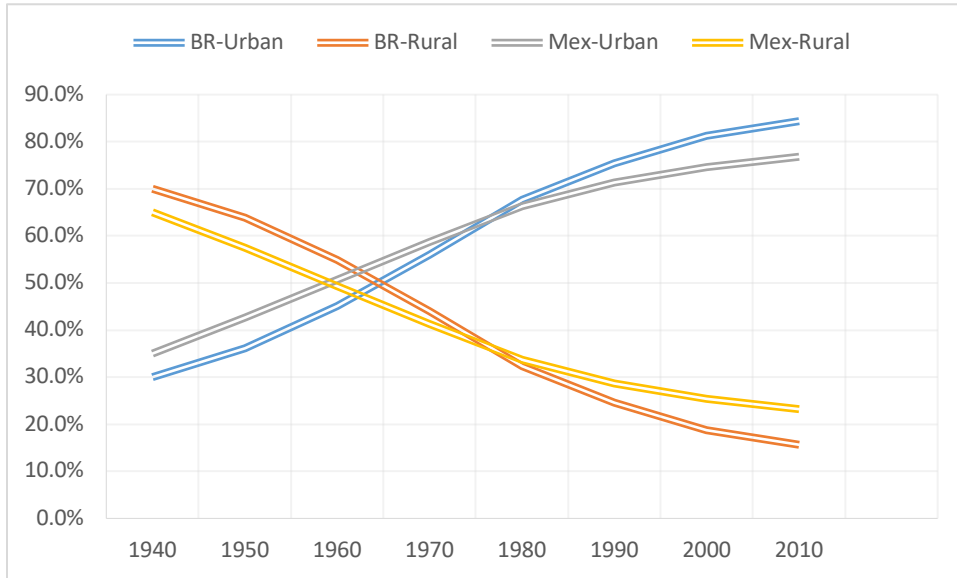
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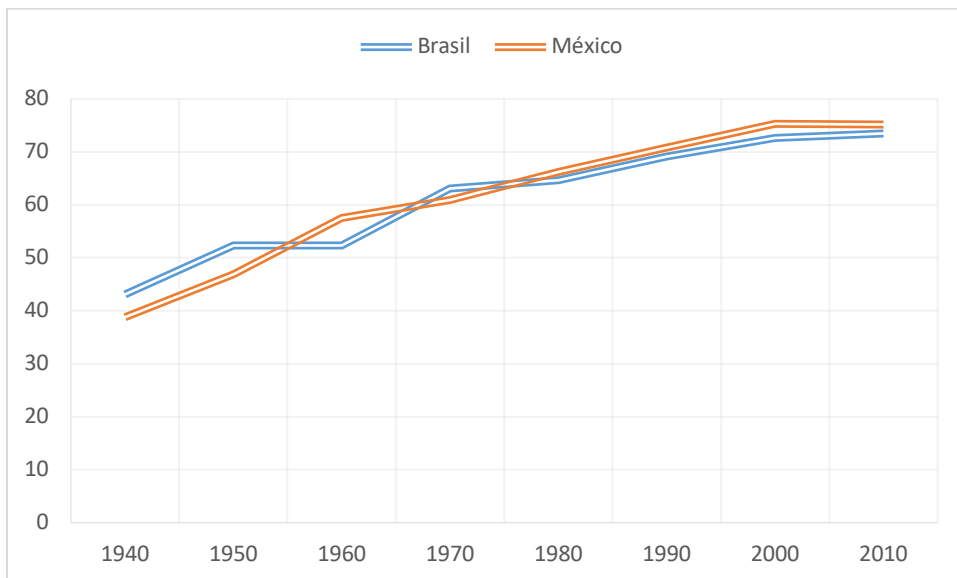
APPENDIX 1 – COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL TRENDS

Figure A.1: Percentage of Population Living in Urban and Rural Areas in Mexico and Brazil, 1940-2010



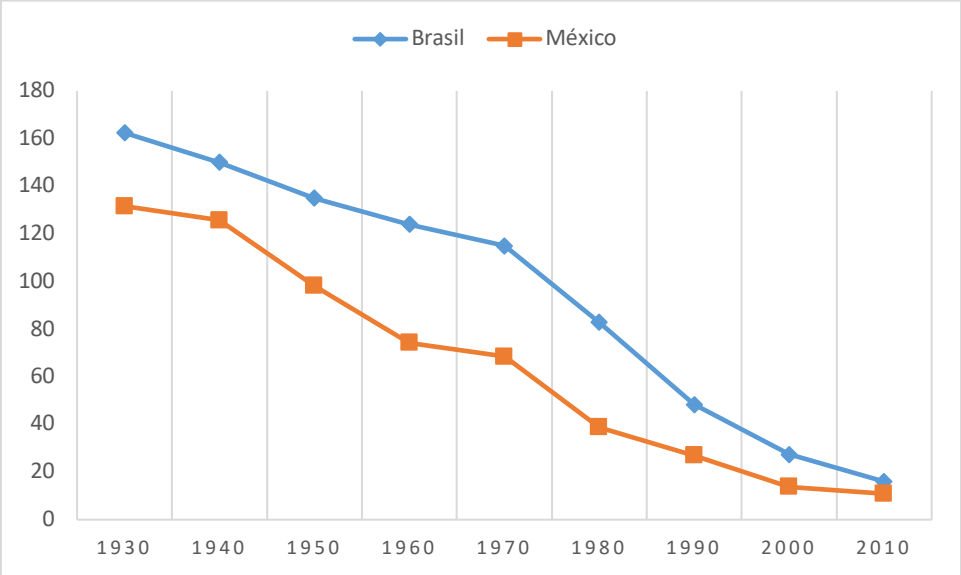
Source: IBGE and INEGI

Figure A.2: Life Expectancy in Mexico and Brazil, 1940-2010



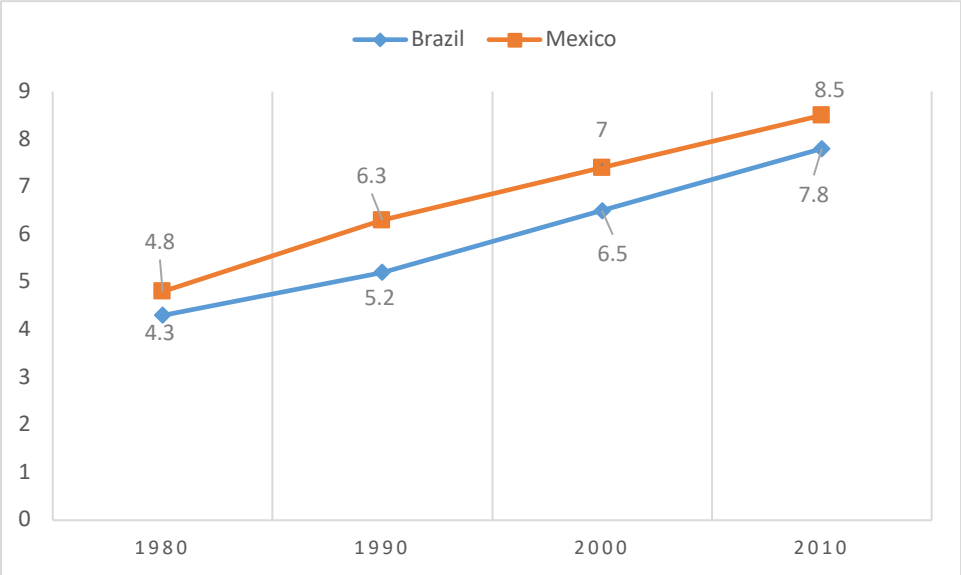
Source: IBGE and INEGI

Figure A.3: Child Mortality in Mexico and Brazil (by 1,000 people born), 1940-2010



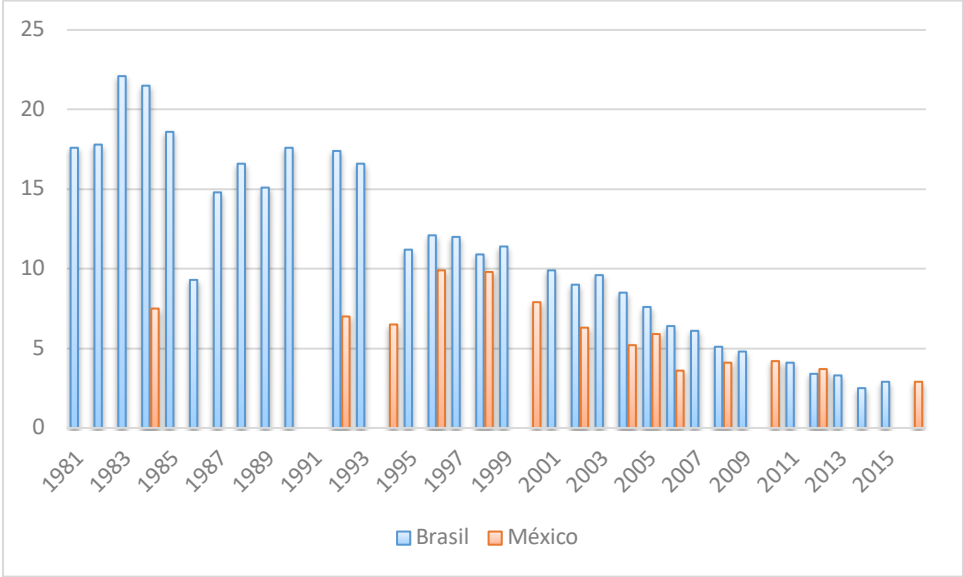
Source: IBGE and INEGI

Figure A.4: Educational Attainment in Mexico and Brazil, Average years in school, 1980-2010



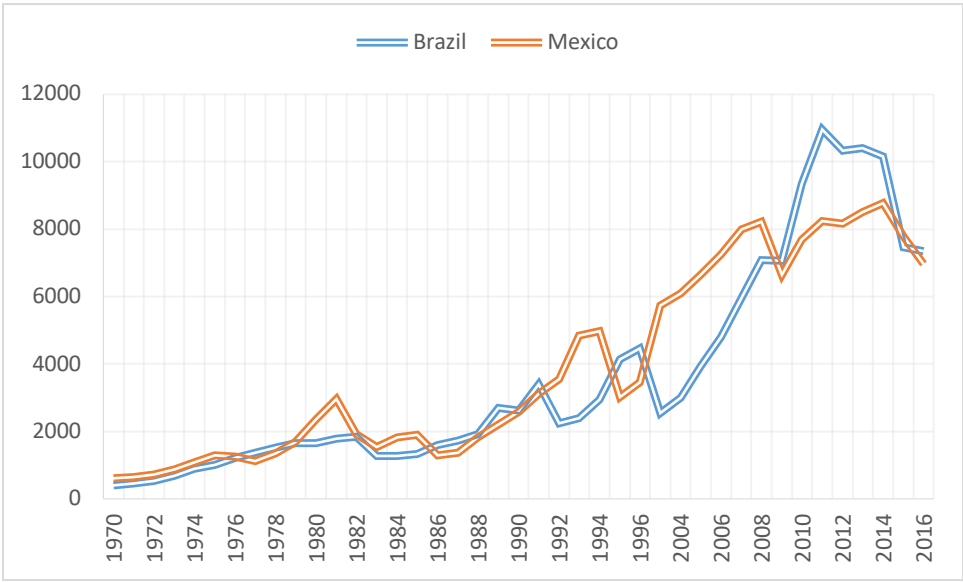
Source: IPEA-Data and INEGI

Figure A.5: Poverty Gap at US\$3.2 a day (PPP 2011), % of Population, in Mexico and Brazil, 1981-2015



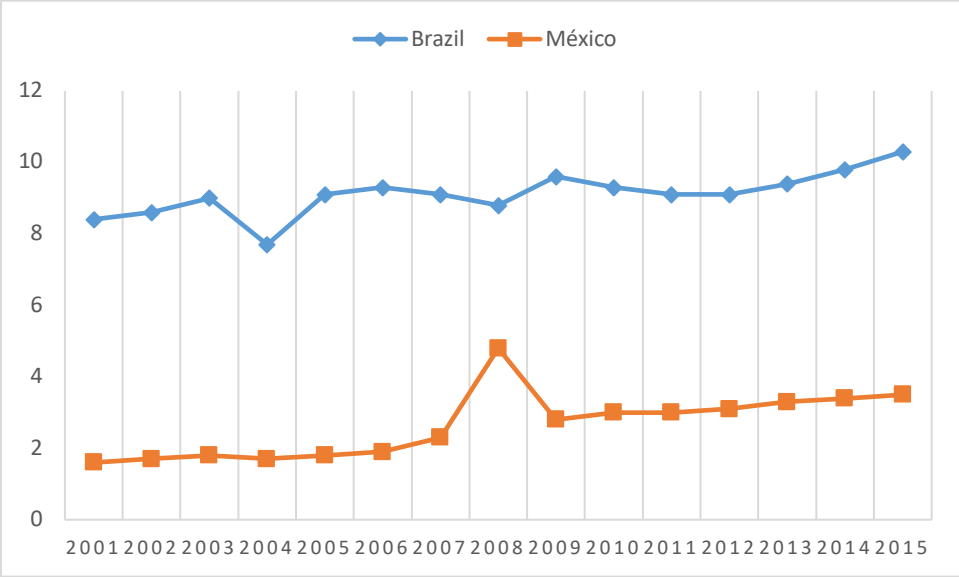
Source: World Bank

Figure A.6: Income per Capita (in 2018 US\$ dollars) in Mexico and Brazil, 1970-2016



Source: ASPIRE, World Bank

Figure A.7: Social Expenditure, as % of Total Expenditures, Mexico and Brazil, 2001 - 2015



Source: CEPAL

APPENDIX 2 – CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAJECTORIES OF THE TWO PROGRAMS

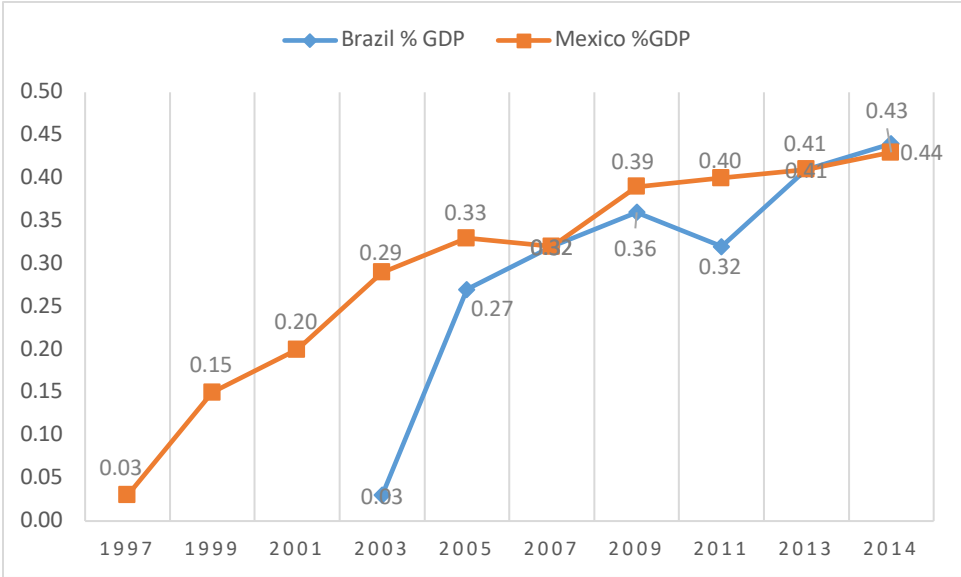
Table A.1: The main features of the *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa* programs

	Bolsa Familia (BFP)	Progresa/Oportunidades (PP)
Size	2003 (creation): 3.6 million families 2008: 10.5 million families 2012: 13.9 million families 2016: 14.0 million families	1997 (creation): 220,000 families 2002: 4 million families 2012: 6 million families 2016: 6.1 million families
Size/Population	2016: 26% of the Brazilian population	2016: 23% of the Mexican population
Target group and official poverty classification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor and extreme poor families; • Extremely poor families: monthly per capita income < R\$77.00(US\$20.38); • Poor families with monthly per capita incomes between R\$77 (US\$20.38) and R\$154 (US\$40.83). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families living in extreme poverty; • Poverty Index based on six social goods (education, health, social security, housing, utilities, and food) and basic income to satisfy basic needs or well-being; • 2012 Poverty Line (PL) set at US\$2.9 per day (rural areas); US\$4.0 per day (urban areas). • Poverty classification: Poor: income < PL and deficient on one or social goods; Extreme poverty: income < PL and deficient in three or more social goods.
Cash transfers	2003 (from US\$16 – US\$61) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Basic</i> (US\$16) – For families in extreme poverty • <i>Variable</i> (US\$5 to 15,00) – \$15,00 for each child, up to 3 children (< 15 years old) 	2003 (from US\$14 to US\$146) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Basic</i> (US\$14) – Fixed monthly nutrition grant • <i>Variable</i> (US\$9.5 to US\$60 per child) – Variable grants according to gender and school year of each children.
Targeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National target of number of poor families to determine municipality quotas; • Self-declared income registered in <i>Cadastro</i>, in all municipalities; • Federal Government selects family below PBF poverty lines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical targeting at community level (marginality index derived from census data); • Surveys in <i>all</i> households in eligible communities are carried out; • Proxy-means testing at federal level determines who are beneficiaries.
Conditionalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health: Verification of calendars for vaccinations and growth and development of children / Prenatal care for pregnant & lactating women. • Education: School enrollment and minimum monthly attendance of 85% (ages 6-15) and of 75% (ages 16-17). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health: i) Registering with the health unit; ii) every member of the household must attend scheduled appointments with health services; iii) taking part in educational workshops aimed at self-care. • Education: enrolling children in school, and encouraging them to attend school on a regular basis. Children may not have four or more unjustified absences in one month.

Role of Federal Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines total target audience and quotas for municipality; • Grants benefits and undertakes monthly payments to beneficiaries via a Federal Bank; • Coordinates and develops management instruments for the <i>Cadastro</i> to be used by municipalities, states and federal government. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible for all aspects of management and operation; • Grants benefits and undertakes bimonthly payments to beneficiaries via direct cash transfer and via a Federal Bank; • Responsible for contracting out external evaluations of the program.
Role of Municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify low-income families and register them into the <i>Cadastro</i>, update their info at least every 2 years; • Ensure the monitoring and oversight of PBF initiatives in the community; • Oversees conditionalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipalities have no official role other than help with logistics; • POP has 32 offices (1 in each MEX state), with regional customer service units that serve target population;

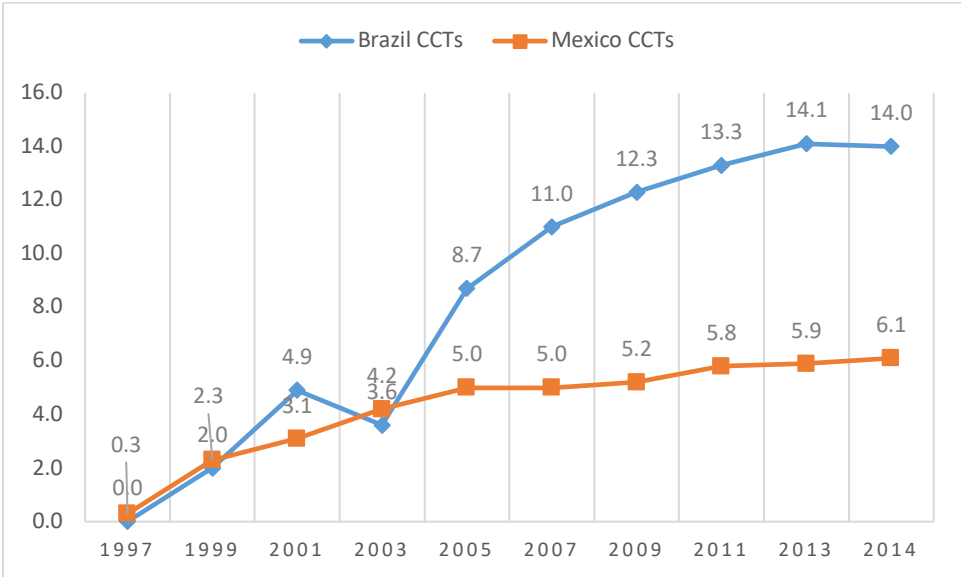
Source: Produced by the author.

Figure A.8: Evolution of Progresa and Bolsa Familia Budgets, as % GDP



Source: MDS-SENARC and Sedesol

Figure A.9: Evolution of Progresa and Bolsa Familia Size, as number of families (million)



Source: MDS-SENARC and Sedesol

APPENDIX 3 – INTERVIEW DATA DESCRIPTION

Table A.2: Descriptive Statistics of Interviewees Sample

	Brazil	Mexico
Gender	Female: 27%	Female: 56%
	Male: 73%	Male: 44%
Highest Educational Level	PhD: 60.4%	PhD: 20.6%
	MA: 25%	MA: 67.6%
	BA: 14.6%	BA: 11.8%
Field of Study Undergraduate	Economics: 40%	Economics: 35%
	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 25%	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 15%
	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 6%	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 21%
	STEM: 19%	STEM: 24%
	Others: 10%	Others: 3%
Field of Study Graduate (highest level achieved)	Economics: 49%	Economics: 30%
	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 27%	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 43%
	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 15%	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 17%
	STEM: 5%	STEM: 7%
	Others: 5%	Others: 3%
Foreign Degrees	PhD: 34%	PhD: 71%
	MA: 20%	MA: 33%
	BA: 4%	BA: 6%
Total (N):	55	45

Table A.3: Sample Interview Schedule

- 1) Could you please start by telling me about your professional and academic trajectories [from your bachelor's degree until now]?
- 2) When did you start working in this organization? How were you recruited?
- 3) What types of studies and/or research have you done while working here? Is there any study that you think was particularly influential in the Brazilian/Mexican policy debate?
- 4) Could you tell me a little bit more about your studies and publications about the *Bolsa Familia/Progresia Program*? How did your interest in the topic started?
- 5) How did you choose the methodology for this study? What are the main advantages and disadvantages of this research method? [Probe criticism about the study]
- 6) Who have been your main interlocutors in the debate about the *Bolsa Familia/Progresia Program*?
- 7) Have your findings or research been reported by the media? If yes, which ones? What did you like and dislike about these media pieces?
- 8) Have you ever been approached by a public institutions or public officials to talk about your *Bolsa Familia/Progresia Program* research? If yes, how was it?
- 9) What about international organizations, such as the World Bank, UN, or even academic research centers? If yes, how was it?
- 10) Do you see any differences in the reception of your work when you talk to an international or national audience? If yes, how so?
- 11) For you, what is a good evaluation? Why? [Check for differences with auditing and monitoring].
- 12) Before ending, I would like to know your opinion about the use of field experiments to evaluate social policies. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of this method?
- 13) More specifically in relation to the *Bolsa Familia/Progresia Program*, do you think that the program would have benefited from a field experiment? Why?
- 14) Mexico/Brazil did (or did not) a field experiment to evaluate their cash transfer program, Progresia, which is similar to the Brazilian *Bolsa Familia Program*. What do you think that were the advantages and disadvantages of the Mexican/Brazilian strategy?