

Whither Clientelism?

Good Governance and Brazil's *Bolsa Família* Program

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Providing social services to poor people without entangling them in patron-client networks is a prevalent development goal. In many developing countries delivering services free of political interference has proved exceedingly difficult. Examples of ambitious social programs that become grist for subnational patronage mills fill the comparative politics and development studies literatures. It is especially challenging to ensure clean social provisioning in large countries where federal authorities oversee programs that require local cooperation. Even programs meant to enhance poor people's autonomy from patronage machines can end up intensifying their dependence on them. Given that the clean delivery of basic services is a cornerstone of the development of social rights, it is important to learn ways to design and implement antipoverty programs that avoid clientelism.

This first requires identifying cases where social programs are implemented free of political manipulation in countries with a history of patronage politics. Yet most of the social science literature focuses on cases where this has not occurred,¹ and provides few insights into successful examples, defined here as social provisioning that conforms to rights-based bureaucratic principles rather than those of patronage politics, whereby voters trade political support for particularistic goods and services. Also, the positive cases analyzed often involve state governments, such as in Ceará in Brazil and Kerala in India.²

Whereas many conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs are regarded as susceptible to political machinations,³ Brazil's *Bolsa Família* is often presented as a major federal program that has avoided the clientelistic pitfalls potentially entailed by municipal co-administration. Drawing on survey data and evidence from focus groups, this article investigates whether in fact the *Bolsa Família* is clean. It would indeed be noteworthy if, in a country of over 5,000 municipalities with uneven administrative capacity, such a program managed to reach recipients without local political interference. To preview our findings, "good government" in a continental-size country

with a history of clientelism is possible. Solid ministerial commitment, thoughtful policy design, and strong technocratic capacity appear to be important in structuring social provisioning in ways that avoid clientelism and empower ordinary citizens.

Brazil's Bolsa Família is the largest CCT program in the world. Widely credited with raising living standards, the grant represents a significant income source for roughly 52 million poor Brazilians.⁴ The Bolsa's main goals are to alleviate poverty and to improve the education and health of low-income children. The government entity in charge, the *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social* (Ministry of Social Development, or MDS), casts federal assistance as a right of all citizens whose incomes fall below an amount necessary to fulfill basic needs and develop human capital. If this is the case, poor families should receive regular financial support free from political discretion. Moreover, recipients should understand the program in this way.

The size, scope, and geographic concentration of the Bolsa Família in Brazil's impoverished Northeast, a historic stronghold of clientelism, call for an investigation of its political effects. Specifically, despite its bureaucratic appearance, has the Bolsa reinforced patron-client relations? Or does it break with the historic tendency of federal social assistance programs to fuel local patronage networks? Moreover, is there any evidence that the program has fostered an understanding among citizens of social assistance as a "right" or government entitlement rather than as a "favor" of a personal benefactor?

Most research on the politics of CCTs examines their impact on the electoral prospects of presidential candidates.⁵ Many studies have noted the Bolsa's positive effects on the electoral prospects of the former presidential candidate most closely identified with it, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.⁶ Tracy Fenwick and Alfred Montero also examine the relationship between the program and gubernatorial dynamics.⁷ By cutting out state governments from administering the program, federal officials effectively bypassed one important historic source of resource diversion. State officials cannot gain access to Bolsa Família resources to build their clientele. Yet the Bolsa's impact on municipal politics also warrants investigation, given that local officials help people apply for the program and monitor recipients' compliance with its conditions. The paucity of attention paid to whether local manipulation exists is surprising given how public resources have been distributed historically in Brazil.

The other major strand in the CCT literature is more policy based, focusing on outcomes like improved service delivery and efficiency. Measuring such outcomes in technocratic terms, this literature does not address how they translate into the quality of citizens' interactions with the state.⁸ For example, can citizens gain access to the Bolsa Família through exclusively bureaucratic channels? Do they view it as transparent and clean? For insight into how ordinary people experience the program, researchers should hear directly from citizens.

This study aims to fill important gaps in both bodies of literature. We examine the politics of the Bolsa Família at the municipal level, where the majority of direct interactions between beneficiaries and the state takes place. We also learn about the program through the voices of participants themselves. Our survey and focus group

research was conducted among people whose socioeconomic status (low income and education) and location of residence (Northeast Brazil) render them likely candidates for political manipulation.

Much is at stake in how the distribution of Bolsa grants is determined. Not reaching the neediest families would be a serious outcome of clientelistic manipulation. Moreover, meaningful democratic development would be limited if recipients perceive the program as subject to vote buying.⁹ This perception might also contribute to undermining collective efforts to claim a greater share of public entitlements in the long term. As Scott Desposato writes, “vote buying at its worst eliminates both participation and influence. Voters do not participate in public decision making, instead trading their votes for private gains.”¹⁰ If the Bolsa Família is implemented in a strict bureaucratic fashion using clear eligibility criteria, it may help free poor Brazilians from thinking that securing social assistance depends on supporting local political machines.

Theoretical and Empirical Debate

In countries where a sizable poor population votes in democratic elections, pro-poor policies often become grist for political clientelism.¹¹ Evidence abounds of Latin American politicians using seemingly neutral antipoverty programs for particularistic political gain. We must differentiate between clientelism and vote buying. Following Luis Roniger, clientelism refers to a

nonuniversalistic *quid pro quo* between individuals or groups of unequal standing. It implies mediated and selective access to resources and markets from which others are normally excluded....Those in control—patrons, subpatrons, and brokers—provide selective access to goods and opportunities and place themselves or their supporters in positions from which they can divert resources and services in their favor. Their partners—clients—are expected to return their benefactors’ help, politically and otherwise.¹²

Examples of clientelism include offers of cash, material goods (bricks, food, small appliances), and services such as health care, or public sector employment in exchange for political support. Vote buying, which occupies the far end of the continuum between “programmatic” and “clientelist” strategies of electoral mobilization, entails the offering of particularistic material rewards to prospective voters near election time. Compared to patronage, which often has an ambiguous legal status, vote buying is almost always illegal.¹³

Many studies stress several background conditions that render people vulnerable to clientelism, namely, poverty, inequality, and rural settings.¹⁴ Patronage and vote buying are often viewed as especially prevalent where there is severe poverty, given the high value placed on benefits that patrons can deliver.¹⁵ With the low levels of education that typically accompany extensive deprivation, indigent individuals are less likely to organize for broad collective solutions. Recent studies also suggest inequality

as a key contributor to vote buying.¹⁶ Where the gap between the “haves” and “have nots” is extreme, vote buying is an inexpensive strategy; politicians can pay out relatively little to win over large numbers of poor people.¹⁷ Rural settings are also highly conducive to clientelism. One explanation posited for the link concerns the client’s normative sense of obligation to the patron.¹⁸ Another explanation involves vote monitoring. Sparsely populated rural communities tend to be small political constituencies, where politicians are better able to figure out how people vote.¹⁹ In fact, cross-national evidence suggests that rural Latin Americans are more likely to report having been offered material goodies in exchange for their votes. A recent AmericasBarometer confirms what anthropological and social scientific studies alike have long concluded: that basic survival needs and a lack of options fuel the predatory practices of vote-seeking politicians.²⁰

A second issue raised in the literature concerns the opportunities for manipulation that seemingly modern national programs entail for local politicians. Scholars have long recognized the role of “intermediaries” in linking local to national units.²¹ Even when states develop to the point of having institutionalized programs of social protection, poor people often encounter so many challenges in navigating the system that they seek the assistance of “brokers.” The result is a modern version of the traditional patron-client relationship.²² The more necessary local mediation is in gaining effective access to national benefits, the more political influence is to be had. Beyond local politicians, “street-level bureaucrats” can exercise tremendous discretion over who obtains and maintains benefits.²³ Although public employees should follow bureaucratic rather than political criteria, they are themselves often enmeshed in clientelistic networks, owing their jobs to patronage-bearing politicians.

Reasons to Expect Clientelistic Provisioning Why might the Bolsa Família be expected to exhibit traditional patron-client dynamics? First, the sociodemographic features described—poverty, inequality, and ruralness—characterize the region where the majority of beneficiaries live.²⁴ Second, the local authorities’ assigned role opens up considerable opportunities for brokerage. Thus, while the CCT appears to operate according to means-tested bureaucratic principles, there are compelling reasons to think that municipal-level politicians might use the federal transfers in *quid pro quo* exchanges. The logic of our approach conforms to a “most likely” case study for confirming the theoretical predictions of clientelism.²⁵ If in these highly probable contexts people did not report local political manipulation, they would be even less likely to do so in other settings. If expectations are not confirmed, the subsequent search for an explanation may generate new and interesting causal insights.

The Northeast is not only Brazil’s least-developed area, but it also has “the largest concentration of rural poverty in Latin America.”²⁶ Compared to other regions of Brazil, it has the highest percentage of households making less than one minimum wage.²⁷ Over half the population (57 percent) lives in poverty and over a third (37 percent) is indigent.²⁸ Furthermore, a striking number of residents (roughly 26 percent) still lives in rural areas, where the poverty rate reaches 76 percent.²⁹ Income inequality is the

highest in Brazil due to extraordinarily skewed patterns of land ownership.³⁰ Amidst this backdrop, one can expect local politicians wanting to take credit for Bolsa Família transfers, which equal as much as 11 percent of some Northeastern locations' municipal budgets.³¹

In fact, stark deprivation in the poor, arid zone has rendered Northeasterners vulnerable to patronage appeals.³² Clientelism has assumed various forms, including the manipulation of federal programs by subnational political elites.³³ A well-known example is SUDENE (Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast), an economic development agency inaugurated in 1959 that soon became a "huge patronage operation."³⁴ Similarly, resources from various social ministries in Brasília have been frequently misused. For example, food from a Ministry of Education school lunch program has fueled many local patronage networks. Survey evidence also reflects the notorious "wheeling and dealing" in the region. A recent cross-regional poll found that 46 percent of Northeasterners claimed personal knowledge of people trading votes for material benefits, and 21 percent reported that they had done so themselves.³⁵

A second reason to expect local shenanigans with Bolsa Família grants concerns the municipal authorities' assigned role. Although the federal Ministry of Social Development retains ultimate decision-making authority, local governments serve as citizens' main contact point, creating a ripe opportunity for political brokerage. People apply for the Bolsa Família through municipal offices, where local officials do all the "intake," reviewing documents, interviewing families, and entering personal data into a national database. In some small cities, the application process takes place in the *prefeitura* (city hall), in which case the perceived "distance" between the municipal and federal roles may be nonexistent. There are several ways in which enterprising politicians could facilitate the poor's entry and maintenance in the program, such as transporting destitute families to the nearest Bolsa Família office or helping applicants obtain the numerous identity documents required. Also, in many places mayors appoint the municipal supervisors of the Bolsa. Local officials (teachers, nurses, and social workers) responsible for monitoring beneficiaries' compliance with conditionality requirements may themselves owe their jobs to patronage dynamics. In short, the political insulation that comes with a professional civil service is far from guaranteed.³⁶ Given these factors, local political interference in the program's operation would not be surprising.

Finally, media reports cast doubt on the Bolsa Família's independence from local politics. For instance, the *Folha de São Paulo* reported allegations that mayoral and city council candidates had used the program for vote buying before the October 2008 municipal elections. The *Folha's* investigation found isolated cases of electoral interference in Ceará and Piauí, and identified complaints in three other Northeastern states where officials allegedly promised some voters a Bolsa Família card in exchange for their support and threatened backers of opposition candidates with a loss of benefits.³⁷ It is crucial to discern whether these select reports—which themselves could have resulted from overzealous

investigative journalists, sentiments against the program, or personal animosities against certain officials—represent systematic and pervasive malfeasance.

In sum, this investigation is born out of theoretical debates in comparative politics and empirical features of Brazilian politics. Given the demographic profile of recipients and the region, the intake and monitoring role of municipal governments, and occasional media investigations, there are multiple reasons to expect efforts to appropriate Bolsa Família grants for political gain. To assess whether this is happening, we turn to the poor for insight.

Research Design and Empirical Test

To investigate whether local politicians use the Bolsa Família in ways that reinforce clientelism, we conducted field research in three Northeastern municipalities in 2009 and 2011. A significant degree of clientelism could be expected in all three locations. A common feature is poverty, arguably the single most important condition that renders people vulnerable to vote buying. Each municipality displays at least one related or additional characteristic highlighted by studies of clientelism: extreme poverty (Camaragibe, in the state of Pernambuco), a sparsely populated rural setting (Pau Brasil, in Bahia state), or high socioeconomic inequality (Jaboatão dos Guararapes, also in Pernambuco).

Camaragibe is extremely poor even by the standards of Northeast Brazil. The most impoverished of the three locations, nearly three-quarters (74.5 percent) of its population fall below the poverty line.³⁸ This medium-sized city (population 136,381) has a Gini coefficient of 0.41, and 35 percent of all households receive the Bolsa. In Pau Brasil 52 percent of all residents live below the poverty line and income inequality is less marked than in Camaragibe (Gini coefficient of .38).³⁹ Its small size (12,111 people), location in the state's interior (32 percent of the population are in a rural area), and low employment prospects for agricultural workers render its electorate vulnerable to clientelism. Of our three cities, Pau Brasil has the highest proportion of households receiving the Bolsa Família (63 percent). Finally, Jaboatão is a large industrial city (population 630,008) that neighbors the state capital, Recife. Jaboatão exhibits considerable poverty (54 percent) and has the highest income inequality (Gini coefficient of .45) of the three cities.⁴⁰ Approximately 32 percent of households receive the family grant. Empirical accounts of egregious political behavior are also rife. A recent mayor, following a sequence of others' political malfeasance, was known to offer coffins in exchange for votes. In short, these municipalities reflect the most significant socioeconomic and demographic preconditions for clientelism. Therefore, it could be expected that respondents would report a high degree of political interference with the Bolsa Família.

Survey Data and Methodology To understand how poor people view the politics of the Bolsa Família, we administered a face-to-face survey in each of the case study cities in 2009.⁴¹ In addition, we met with Bolsa Família recipients from each city

through eleven focus groups.⁴² In 2011 we interviewed local and federal officials involved with the program. Insights from the focus groups and interviews inform the discussion of the statistical results.⁴³

The survey consisted of an approximately fifteen-minute, face-to-face questionnaire, administered by a team of trained university students who went door-to-door in poor neighborhoods located throughout each city. We employed a quota sampling method to capture the experience of recipients and nonrecipients. Quota samples are non-probabilistic samples designed to capture a predetermined distribution of respondents based on important parameters, such as sociodemographics.⁴⁴ One of the main drawbacks is that interviewers may introduce selection bias. We attempted to correct for this through training and supervising the interviewers. In addition, we required even geographical distribution of subjects in our cities.

Practical, ethical, and theoretical considerations informed our sampling methodology. First, given that telephone coverage in Brazil remains low among the poor, a randomized phone survey would not have captured our population of interest.⁴⁵ The use of face-to-face surveys was the best method to include the poor. Second, given the sensitive nature of some questions and the economic vulnerability of the relevant population, it was essential that respondents trust the independence of the research team. For this reason, we interviewed participants in their homes, rather than recruit them in public venues such as municipal buildings or town squares. The survey team made clear that it was not affiliated with any government agency (local, state, or national) and had no authority over people's social benefits. Finally, recruitment based on place of residence was intended to avoid any bias that might come from selecting participants from official program rolls. Given the theoretical possibility that local politicians might manipulate the program for political purposes, we did not utilize official lists of Bolsa Família beneficiaries or applicants produced by local or federal governmental authorities.

As our sampling method is non-random, we cannot reliably estimate the standard errors and coefficients for the broader population in the Northeast or in Brazil more generally. In other words, we are not willing to assert that errors in our models will be independent and identically distributed. This is not to say that quota sampling can never produce estimates that have good inferential qualities. According to T.M.F. Smith, under certain circumstances inferences about the parameters of a conditional distribution (in our case, the conditional distribution of the log-odds of responses to various vote-buying questions) can be valid.⁴⁶ The conditions are: (1) the mechanism that selects which houses to visit is not a function of the variables measured in the survey; (2) that the choice of whether to include the observation in the sample is not a function of variables measured in the survey (save the Bolsa Família participation question); and (3) that the parameters governing selection are distinct from those that describe the conditional distribution of responses (which, since the other two conditions are true, seems reasonable here). This suggests that the statistical inferences about the coefficients in the model can be made, if only to the population selected into the sample.⁴⁷

The quota sample, by design, is 80 percent Bolsa Família participants and 20 percent nonparticipants. Actual participation rates among the poor (that is, those potentially included in our sample) for the three cities in our study are: Camaragibe (62.76 percent), Jaboatão (74.05 percent), and Pau Brasil (69.9 percent).⁴⁸ Thus, Bolsa participants are oversampled in our data, which could bias our coefficient estimates. In an effort to reduce this type of bias, we reweighted the data to impose the appropriate population distribution. With this weighting, we expect the relationship between our sample and the population of poor people in these cities to be similar. Thus, we use these data to estimate the effects of our variables of interest on vote buying and to draw inferences about the experiences of the poor in our case study cities.

Dependent Variables We develop three models to analyze the degree of clientelism and political interference associated with the Bolsa Família. To capture respondents' experiences and perceptions of clientelism, the survey asked three questions: (1) Do politicians buy votes in your city? (2) In the last election, did a politician offer you something in exchange for your vote? (3) Is the Bolsa Família used in exchange for votes? We are interested not only in the responses to each question but also in how respondents differed across all three scenarios.

The first question seeks to gauge general perceptions about politics and clientelism in respondents' cities. Overall, 65 percent reported that politicians buy votes in their city. The second question inquires more directly about people's personal experiences in the most recent election. Arguably more sensitive in nature, the question was worded so as not to compromise the respondent. (Reporting that a politician offered you something does not necessarily mean that you accepted.) More than a quarter (28.3 percent) reported that they had received a recent vote buying offer. The third question asks people about vote buying in specific relation to the Bolsa Família. Far fewer (14.9 percent) reported that they thought the Bolsa was used for vote buying. All the dependent variables are coded dichotomously.

Independent Variables

Municipality: Each city presents a somewhat distinctive political and socioeconomic scenario associated with clientelism. Camaragibe has the highest rates of poverty, Pau Brasil is predominantly small and rural, and Jaboatão has the highest income inequality. Given the diversity of settings, we anticipate city effects on vote buying and test their independent effects.

Our models include four demographic control variables that may also be relevant to respondents' vote-buying experiences.

Bolsa Família Participation: While all respondents share socioeconomic vulnerability to vote buying, participation in the Bolsa Família situates recipients to assess whether local politicians use it to buy votes. Arguably, Bolsa recipients are better positioned to know whether they had to sell their votes to receive or maintain the benefit.

Education: It is reasonable to expect educational attainment to play an important role in the lives and worldviews of respondents. As education increases, the life prospects for individuals also increase through better employment and higher incomes. We anticipate that respondents with more education will be less vulnerable to patronage and vote buying. The average respondent had less than six years of formal schooling.

Sex: Studies of development show that men and women experience poverty and social exclusion differently.⁴⁹ We anticipate women to be more informed about the Bolsa Família as grants are targeted to mothers. Further, social networks and information sharing are likely to form along gendered lines. Given the gendered effects of poverty and the Bolsa's program design, we control for sex.

Age: Finally, we control for the potential effects of respondents' age as it may inform their experiences and perceptions of clientelism. We reason that younger respondents will have voted in fewer elections and thus had fewer opportunities to observe vote buying. Conversely, older citizens will have had more elections from which to recall *quid pro quo* offers. Age, however, may not matter for experiences with recent vote buying (in the last election) and perceptions of vote buying with the Bolsa Família.

For further details on all the above variables, including measurement, coding, and descriptive statistics, see the Appendix.

Model Estimation and Results

Table 1 displays the findings from the three logistic models constructed around survey participants' perceptions and experiences of general vote buying.

High levels of vote buying are evident everywhere; 66 percent of the sample reported that politicians typically offer *quid pro quo* exchanges for votes. Even so, model 1 shows that perceptions of vote buying vary according to location. Compared to Pau Brasil, respondents from Camaragibe are significantly less likely to report that politicians bought votes in their city, as indicated by the negative coefficient. Jaboatão and Pau Brasil were not significantly different from each other in this model.

The predicted probability of reporting vote buying can be analyzed using the log odds ratio (see Table 2 for predicted probabilities for all models). The probability varies depending on where the respondent resides. For the mean respondent—who receives the Bolsa Família, is thirty-nine years old, studied for 5.5 years, and is female—the probability of reporting vote buying is highest if she lives in Jaboatão or Pau Brasil (69 percent), but drops if she resides in Camaragibe (54 percent). Clearly, this model reveals that our respondents identify a tremendous amount of general vote buying in their cities, and its extent varies according to local conditions.

The second model, which examines offers for votes in the most recent election, also yields insights into the effects of local conditions. Respondents were more likely to report receiving an offer in Jaboatão followed by Camaragibe and then Pau Brasil.

Table 1 Logistic Models for Clientelism

	Model 1 Do politicians buy votes in your city?		Model 2 In the last election, did anyone try to buy your vote?		Model 3 Is Bolsa Família used for vote buying?	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
City ^a						
Camaragibe	-.6541***	.1777	.5223**	.2016	.1618	.2398
Jaboatão dos Guararapes	.0141	.1870	.9661***	.2013	.3572	.2416
Controls						
Bolsa Família Participation	-.4441**	.1430	-.0166	.1430	-.9250***	.1678
Age	-.0254***	.0057	-.0212***	.0062	-.0154*	.0074
Education	.0581**	.0208	.0081	.0209	.0544*	.0251
Male	-.0104	.2605	.1757	.2630	.9382***	.2715
Constant	1.919	.3411	-.7524	.3493	-1.1142	.4147
N	1100		1100		1100	
Log Likelihood	-680.6047		-647.9518		-474.9464	
Prob > Chi2	0.000		0.0000		0.0000	
Pseudo R2	0.0537		0.0356		0.0657	

^aPau Brasil is the comparison case.
p* ≤ .05. *p* ≤ .01. ****p* ≤ .001.

How do the city-level variables affect the predicted probability that a poor resident reports having received a vote-buying offer? For the average respondent, residence in Jaboatão and Camaragibe results in an offer about one-quarter of the time; in Pau Brasil, such reports are less likely. Indeed, city context matters for the predicted probability of reported *quid pro quo* offers.

Finally, the results in model 3 offer a sharp contrast to the previous logistic models. Unlike those models, which identified varied local experiences with vote buying, in model 3 respondents across all cities report that the Bolsa Família is not used for vote buying. In other words, whereas city of residence explains variation within models 1 and 2, in model 3 city variables are not significant. Respondents' views on vote buying and the Bolsa Família are consistent across all three municipalities. Instead, the control variables yield the leverage in explaining reported differences in the use of the Bolsa Família for vote buying. The most analytically relevant finding in this regard is that recipients of the program were the least likely to view it as grist for vote buying.

This question reveals a dramatically different scenario regarding the likelihood that poor families view the Bolsa Família in exchange for votes. Drawing once again on the log odds ratio to generate predicted probabilities, city of residence has no

Table 2 Predicted Probabilities for Models 1, 2, and 3

Model 1	Predicted Probability	95% Confidence Interval
Jaboatão dos Guararapes	Pr(y=1 x): 0.6949	[0.6437, 0.7460]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.3051	[0.2540, 0.3563]
Camaragibe	Pr(y=1 x): 0.5386	[0.4832, 0.5940]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.4614	[0.4060, 0.5168]
Pau Brasil	Pr(y=1 x): 0.6919	[0.6294, 0.7543]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.3081	[0.2457, 0.3706]
Model 2		
Jaboatão dos Guararapes	Pr(y=1 x): 0.3584	[0.3061, 0.4107]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.6416	[0.5893, 0.6939]
Camaragibe	Pr(y=1 x): 0.2638	[0.2169, 0.3108]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.7362	[0.6892, 0.7831]
Pau Brasil	Pr(y=1 x): 0.1753	[0.1257, 0.2249]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.8247	[0.7751, 0.8743]
Model 3		
Jaboatão dos Guararapes	Pr(y=1 x): 0.1216	[0.0892, 0.1541]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.8784	[0.8459, 0.9108]
Camaragibe	Pr(y=1 x): 0.1023	[0.0728, 0.1317]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.8977	[0.8683, 0.9272]
Pau Brasil	Pr(y=1 x): 0.0883	[0.0542, 0.1224]
	Pr(y=0 x): 0.9117	[0.8776, 0.9458]

Calculations for average respondent: Bolsa Família participant, 38.9 years old, 5.58 years of education, and female.

meaningful effect on the probability of vote buying with the Bolsa. For the average respondent, the probability is only 12 percent for Jaboatão, 10 percent for Camaragibe, and 9 percent for Pau Brasil. As reported in Table 1, demographic factors drive the variation. Holding all else constant, simply participating in the Bolsa Família alters the probability that respondents view the program for vote buying (from a high of 23 percent to a low of 12 percent). Given this result, familiarity with the program’s operation matters. Whereas those with direct knowledge of how the Bolsa functions are more likely to view it in bureaucratic terms, those without personal experience are more likely to presume that it is prone to political manipulation.

The side-by-side comparisons of these models allow us to contextualize views on vote buying with the Bolsa Família. Most important, whereas models 1 and 2 suggest that perceptions and experiences of vote buying vary according to local conditions, the model about the Bolsa Família program generates a standard response. Had there been political interference with this social policy, we would have found some degree of local variation. Instead, we found the opposite. That the experiences of poor families

from three very different cities were uniform on the question of whether the Bolsa Família was insulated from vote buying suggests that the program stands apart from conventional political wheeling and dealing. In the next section, we explore why that is.

Discussion of Findings

Our focus groups and field research corroborated the statistical results of the three models. Focus group testimonies revealed not only the general prevalence of clientelism but also the exception represented by the Bolsa Família in these communities. Given clientelism's widespread operation, it is noteworthy that people saw the Bolsa Família as different. Focus group participants told us that vote buying was frequent and typically took the form of exchanges for goods or "favors." For example, some related that council members sought to buy votes for amounts between 5 to 50 Reais (approximately \$2.50 to \$25 US dollars).⁵⁰ Other respondents indicated that they had received basic goods, such as a *cesta básica* (food basket), bricks, and cement, in exchange for votes.⁵¹ One participant's brother was even promised a job in exchange for his entire family's vote.⁵² The readiness with which participants acknowledged vote buying suggests that clientelism remains a reality of local elections.

At the same time, participants insisted that Bolsa Família grants were not being traded for votes. When asked whether politicians were either promising Bolsa resources or threatening to withdraw them our respondents resoundingly answered "no." One person stressed,

I think that politicians would be wrong to try to use Bolsa Família for [vote buying].... It would be wrong because the benefit is federal. It comes from a federal agency.⁵³

As she went on to explain, the poor would not believe local officials' promises to provide or threats to withdraw Bolsa Família grants because they understand that the program falls outside their influence. This sentiment was echoed across the three communities.⁵⁴ "Brasília decides" was commonly repeated to emphasize that local political efforts to influence the program would violate its very terms and not even be possible in practice. Importantly, the focus groups also revealed that local politicians do not play a regular brokerage role. No one testified to this kind of political assistance, despite expressions of difficulty understanding some aspects of the program's operation, like the amount of time it took to enroll and changes in grant amounts. Clearly, people seemed to know the limits of what local authorities could readily deliver or withdraw.

Exploring Causes: Perspectives from Below Suggest How Program Design Matters

What accounts for the finding that the Bolsa Família does not appear to grease clientelistic networks in a "most likely case?" Testimony from beneficiaries suggests

that policy design choices instituted from above can influence, in meaningful ways, perspectives from below. More specifically, how the Bolsa operates causes ordinary citizens to perceive limits on the scope of local political interference. We suggest preliminarily some of the characteristics that could make social programs less available for clientelism. The national agency in charge should control entry into the program, institute a direct mechanism to transfer resources to beneficiaries, provide user-friendly bureaucratic channels for solving problems, and institute transparency and oversight mechanisms. Moreover, it must inform the public about these measures. Conveying clearly the terms of a program is a crucial first step in reducing clientelistic interference, which breeds on the misunderstandings and vulnerabilities of low-income populations.

Tools to control entry: Strong national oversight by technocrats committed to running a clean program and equipped with the administrative and technical capacity to do so appears to be a key precondition for insulating CCTs from local political dynamics. Above all, strict targeting criteria need to be adhered to. Authorities must convey that the program's terms do not allow for negotiation.

The Ministry of Social Development in Brasília has exercised such leadership. In 2004 President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva established the MDS as the Bolsa Família's home, and staffed it with well-trained technocrats committed to targeting resources toward the poorest Brazilians while keeping them away from the sticky fingers of municipal-level politicians.⁵⁵ Technocratic criteria structure decisions about who receives the program. First, based on countrywide poverty maps, the MDS determines the number of grants to be disbursed per municipality.⁵⁶ Eligibility formulas, based on income level and household composition,⁵⁷ increase the probability that grants go to the most destitute families. The MDS clarifies its rules in a booklet provided to applicants and beneficiaries. We encountered its widespread availability while in the field. Entitled, "*Bolsa Família: Agenda de Compromissos da Família*,"⁵⁸ it is illustrated by simple graphics and written in clear, accessible language. After outlining the requirements of eligibility and maintenance in the program, the booklet underscores in bold letters: "Keep in mind: If your family meets the eligibility requirements of the program, receipt of the benefit is your right, not a favor from anyone."⁵⁹

Technocrats from the MDS also manage a national database (*Cadastro Único*) that incorporates the household information and assessments described above. They have means to verify some of the given information through several other government databases. Crosschecking ability is key to heightening Brasília's influence. For example, if an applicant claims wages below the poverty line but other databases (such as one for pensions) reveal a household income in excess of Bolsa Família eligibility, she will be screened out. With such tools, personnel in the MDS make the final decision about whether a family receives the benefit. We heard consistently from focus group participants that "Brasília decides" entry into the program. While they did not know the "ins and outs" of the process, they did understand the apolitical nature of the screening.

Direct payment mechanism: National authorities should transfer resources directly to beneficiaries and thereby eliminate local governments as financial intermediaries.

The advantage of a direct transfer is two-fold. First, it reduces the potential for funds to be diverted, a problem experienced with many federal transfers. Second, the more impersonal the nature of the pay out, the less the beneficiaries have anyone to thank for performing a “favor.” Focus group participants often stressed how much they valued the personal autonomy afforded by the direct transfer.

A critical innovation featured by the Bolsa Família is the direct payment mechanism to beneficiaries through ATM-like cards. In most cities, recipients take their Bolsa Família card to a bank (*Caixa Econômica Federal*) to receive the cash grant.⁶⁰ The direct payment mechanism helps account for people’s perception of the central role of the federal government and the low utility of local patrons. As one person stated, “The program must be federal because the card ‘says so.’”⁶¹ Participants in all three cities recognized that “Brasília” paid for the program and ultimately determined who received the grants while municipal personnel dealt with the data entry aspect of applications. Notably, the small booklet given to beneficiaries explains how payments work and contains a pocket where cards can be inserted for safekeeping.

Bureaucratic problem-solving mechanisms: User-friendly bureaucratic features should be instituted to induce beneficiaries to seek help through official channels instead of local political intermediaries. For the impoverished segment of the population enrolled in many social programs, the temptation to resort to local sources of assistance can result in “brokerage.”

MDS announcements encourage participants to solve problems through bureaucratic procedures rather than municipal brokers. The ATM card opens the way for Caixa Econômica bank tellers, who are federal civil servants, to help people solve problems with their payments. A toll-free number encourages applicants and recipients to call the ministry if they have questions. The small beneficiary booklet not only provides the number but also indicates who will be answering it: personnel from the MDS in Brasília.⁶²

Focus group participants reported that instead of turning to a local official for help they used bureaucratic (mainly federal) channels to overcome confusion and roadblocks. Several indicated that bank tellers at the Caixa Econômica had provided guidance. Others remarked on having called the [0-800] number provided by the MDS. One participant even reported that her daughter “called Brasília” to find out why she hadn’t received her Bolsa card and had her problem resolved.⁶³ Participants apparently feel they can turn to bureaucratic channels for assistance. Besides reducing local political intervention, such institutional means of problem solving seem to have created more uniform administration of the program across municipal governments.

Transparency and Oversight Mechanisms: The provision of transparency and oversight mechanisms are also important in the detection of local wrongdoing. As Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz note, policymakers’ use of “fire-alarms”— “a system of rules, procedures, and informal practices that enable citizens and organized interest groups to examine administrative decisions ... and seek remedies”—can be an effective tool for policy oversight.⁶⁴ In *Good Government*

in the Tropics, Judith Tendler noted the significance of citizen-oversight mechanisms to enhance accountability in the Brazilian state of Ceará.⁶⁵ The state's campaigns to urge citizens to monitor the public service—in the cases of health, drought relief, and procurement—brought about civic action. In Tendler's words, such messages "put in people's minds a vision of better and more just government, implored citizens to stand up against the abuses of government, and explained how to recognize infractions and what to do about them."⁶⁶ Notably, the dynamic she observed regarding the state-municipal relationship in Ceará holds for the national-municipal relationship vis-à-vis the Bolsa Família.

The MDS has built into the Bolsa Família multiple mechanisms for citizen oversight, starting with easy public access to a complete list of beneficiaries in a given city.⁶⁷ Heightening the incentive to report malfeasance is the "zero-sum" situation that the municipal quota produces: one family's receipt of a grant reduces another's ability to receive one. Residents have several channels to report suspected fraud, including a toll-free number in Brasília or a local municipal council.

Our fieldwork uncovered an example of how the Bolsa Família's "fire alarm" features can work. In Pau Brasil, the leader of a citizens' group, Friends of Justice Association, learned that nearly 200 utterly destitute families were not receiving the Bolsa. He acknowledged being especially motivated to act after learning that the federal government's municipal quota meant that every undeserving recipient hurt a deserving family's chances of enrolling in the program. Using the list of existing Bolsa beneficiaries, he identified and reported suspicious cases to the municipal department of social assistance and to "Brasília" (officials in the MDS). A public prosecutor undertook an investigation, which resulted in the removal of a municipal administrator and a reassessment of need among families in the municipality. Notably, local media covered the story.⁶⁸

Finally, federal audits constitute another important mechanism that has enabled Brasília to transfer resources while preventing subnational officials from capturing and diverting them to their clienteles. As discussed by Marcus Melo, the Federal Internal Audit Office has made significant efforts in recent years to detect shenanigans in the transfer of federal funds to municipalities, especially in social programs. With respect to the Bolsa Família, federal auditors have focused on clientelism and corruption in the local management of the registration process, "the last bastion of local control"; auditors have discovered cases of fraud but no major schemes of manipulation.⁶⁹

While our research suggested several measures that limit clientelistic usage of the Bolsa Família, the portrayal would not be complete without acknowledging that these effects are not uniform. Technical improvements cannot assure a clean sweep of all problems. Given the diverse degrees of administrative capacity found among the country's 5,000 municipalities, there is sometimes slippage and clientelist intervention. For example, in Pau Brazil we observed political criteria at work in the appointment of the municipal head of the Bolsa Família office (the mayor is typically in charge of this appointment). An audit revealed that under one administrator, whose appointment was blatantly political, at least 100 ineligible families had enrolled,

including friends of the mayor and members of the Bolsa Família staff. The ineligible families were later removed, however.⁷⁰

There is also the question of whether the nonclientelistic character of the Bolsa Família depends on a programmatic party being in power in Brasília. Would the bureaucratic checks described above be subverted if a party inclined toward clientelism occupied federal power? In theory such a party could reconfigure the MDS and throw out the technocrats who have run the ministry until now. We deem this scenario unlikely. Any turn toward a politically based distribution of grants would surely be picked up by the Brazilian media, which have scrutinized the program and cast it in a more positive light as its terms have tightened.⁷¹ Such a shift would also carry electoral risks due to the possible exclusion of people who have been receiving the Bolsa as a “social right” and to the objection of higher income nonrecipients, whose support for the program appears to hinge on its tight controls.

Conclusion

It is rare to find well-operated social programs in the developing world. One of the foremost challenges for democratic governance in such contexts is to provide the poor with basic services while avoiding the predatory practices of politicians. Meeting this goal becomes even more difficult in large federal countries where local cooperation is necessary. Drawing on poor people’s experiences and perceptions, we explore whether the Bolsa Família represents yet another example of social assistance that reinforces local patron-client exchanges or whether it promises a new rights-based form of social protection that is insulated from political interference. Given the program’s size and scope, together with the federal-municipal cooperation it requires, there are solid reasons to think that local politicians would get their hands on the benefits.

The study was designed as a crucial case of the Northeastern region, where politicians would be most likely to use the program for their own political benefit. In the survey, many respondents attested to a considerable amount of *quid pro quo* political activity in their cities, (model 1); some admitted to politicians trying to buy their votes in the most recent election (model 2); yet very few regarded the Bolsa Família as grist for clientelist networks (model 3). In other words, the overwhelming majority was quick to perceive the Bolsa Família as a non-clientelistic form of poverty relief, very different from the usual political wheeling and dealing. Discussions in the focus groups echoed these findings. Participants attested to the continued vitality of clientelism in general in their cities. Yet, across the board—even in cities known for high levels of malfeasance—beneficiaries talked about the program in ways that suggested its insulation from vote buying and other clientelistic dynamics. The study thus concludes that “good government in the tropics” is possible.

What explains this remarkable finding? Broader comparative research is surely needed to determine the characteristics of social programs that make them more or

less available for clientelism. Based on our study of the Bolsa Família, we suggest preliminarily what some of those characteristics might be, recognizing that this treatment falls short of a full-scale research project that examines variation in the features of different social programs. Federal improvements in policy design appear to be important in keeping social programs above the local political fray and in empowering ordinary citizens. Our research to date suggests the promise of a central role for national authorities in maintaining tight control over the terms of enrollment, providing a direct transfer of resources to recipients, instituting bureaucratic channels for problem solving, and making available citizen oversight mechanisms to detect and report wrongdoing. Notably, our findings on the Bolsa Família, a national program, reinforce a conclusion reached by Tendler with respect to the state government in Ceará and its role in municipal health care. Rather than success being a product of decentralization, it has “more to do with something done by central, rather than local, government.”⁷²

Our findings have implications that go well beyond Brazil. Other developing nations need to develop social protection programs that do not become enmeshed in patron-client networks. Increasingly, they have sought to address poverty alleviation through the adoption of CCTs, much like Bolsa Família.⁷³ We hope that our findings provide a road map for how social assistance can be insulated from patron-client networks.

A question for the long term is whether programs of this kind, especially those that require considerable local administration, will eventually erode if not dismantle altogether the norms and practices of subnational clientelism. Whether this aspiration will be achieved is a matter for future research. For now, however, we know that the principles embodied in the Bolsa Família have brought poor Brazilians one step closer to achieving the goals of social inclusion and meaningful citizenship.

Appendix

Table 1A Survey Variables, Measurement, and Descriptive Statistics (Weighted)

Variable	Measurement	Frequency	Min.	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Independent Variables						
Jaboatão dos Guararapes	Dichotomous	404	0	1	.3596	.4801
Pau Brasil	Dichotomous	258	0	1	.2293	.4207
Camaragibe	Dichotomous	461	0	1	.4108	.4922
Bolsa Família Participant	Dichotomous	726	0	1	.6471	.4781
Age	Continuous	-	16	82	38.8396	12.5251
Education	Continuous	-	0	16	5.7494	3.6796
Male	Dichotomous	76	0	1	.0681	.2520

NOTES

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39. *Ibid.* Note that the percentage of the population and the percentage of households are not identical. Poorer households tend to contain more people.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Surveys were standard across all three cities, with the exception of the names of local politicians (mayor and governor). Out of 1104 responses, only 4 individuals declined to answer one of the vote buying questions. For comparable analysis, we drop those respondents from our statistical analysis.
42. We held four groups (two male/two female) in Camaragibe, four groups in Jaboatão (one male/three female), and three groups in Pau Brasil (one male/two female).
43. Focus group testimonies are anonymous to protect participants' privacy.
44. This sampling method is employed in pre-election polls in Great Britain due to the short election period. See Herbert F. Weisberg, *The Total Survey Error Approach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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47. Making inferences to the set of observations not selected into the sample with these data would require more information about the observations, both in and out of the sample. See Smith.

48. We draw these percentages from the Ministry’s *Secretaria Nacional de Renda e Cidadania*, which provides data on the number of families that applied for the program and met the program eligibility requirements and the number of families that actually receive the Bolsa.

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50. One participant in Camaragibe reported the range was between R\$15-R\$50; Focus group testimony, Camaragibe, Men’s Group, June 12, 2009. Elsewhere, a participant reported her vote cost R\$5; Focus group testimony in Jaboatão, Women’s Group, June 13, 2009.

51. A *cesta básica* typically contains basic household necessities for one month.

52. Focus group testimony, Pau Brasil, Women’s Group, June 9, 2009.

53. Focus group participant, Pau Brasil, Women’s Group, June 9, 2009.

54. Focus group participant, Jaboatão, Women’s Group, June 25, 2009.

55. Many technocrats were recruited from the *Escola Nacional de Administração Pública*.

56. Strictly speaking, targeting the poorest municipalities does not necessarily mean the poorest families receive the grant. Nor does it mean that beneficiaries—even if they are well chosen—receive the benefit free of clientelistic interference.

57. For further details, see Lindert et al. The average value of the grants received in the first six months of 2006 was US\$30.

58. MDS, *Bolsa Família* (Brasília: MDS, 2006).

59. *Ibid.*, 9.

60. In small cities without such a bank, beneficiaries can go instead to a *Casa Lotérica* (Lottery Store), which serves as an informal banking outpost.

61. Focus group testimony, Pau Brasil, Women’s Group, June 9, 2009.

62. MDS, “Bolsa Família: Agenda de Compromissos da Família,” 7.

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65. Tendler.

66. *Ibid.*, 152.

67. Only the names of beneficiaries and their respective cities of residence are publicly available. Other personal data are restricted.

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