

Why the Bolsa Família is not clientelistic (and what it might be instead)

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Abstract

As conditional cash transfers (CCT) continue to expand throughout the world, some continue to wonder whether these programs are merely a legal new way of exchanging cash for votes, thereby undermining democratic competition and accountability. In Brazil in particular, many have accused the 'Bolsa Família' (BF), the world's largest CCT and a flagship policy of the Workers' Party (PT), of being clientelistic. This article, however, disputes this interpretation, in four steps. The first offers a theoretical discussion of the concept of clientelism. The second summarises the debate on the BF-clientelism relationship as it has evolved in the literature, and shows that, despite early rallies to the accusations of clientelism, most scholars have come around to arguing that the BF is a programmatic policy. The third part draws on original data to show that the behaviour of actual BF-beneficiaries differs from those expected of 'clients', on the basis of 29 in-depth beneficiary interviews conducted in Recife (Pernambuco) in the summer of 2014. Finally, the last section points to the burgeoning literature on CCTs' diffuse political effects, and calls for a research agenda that goes beyond the question of clientelism, to consider what kind of citizenship cash transfers promote.

Résumé

Alors que les transferts conditionnels en espèces (TCE) continuent de s'étendre à travers le monde, certains continuent à se demander si ces programmes sont simplement un nouveau moyen légal d'échanger des billets pour des votes, compromettant ainsi la compétition démocratique. Au Brésil en particulier, beaucoup ont accusé le «Bolsa Família» (BF), le plus grand TCE du monde et une politique clé du Parti des Travailleurs (PT), d'être clientéliste. Cet article, cependant, conteste cette interprétation, en quatre étapes. La première propose une discussion théorique de la notion de clientélisme. La seconde résume le débat sur la relation BF-clientélisme tel qu'il a évolué dans la littérature, et démontre que, malgré un appui initial aux accusations de clientélisme, la plupart des auteurs ont fini par conclure que le BF est une politique dite 'programmatique'. La troisième partie s'appuie sur de nouvelles données afin de montrer que le comportement de réels bénéficiaires du BF diffère de celui auquel on s'attendrait de la part de «clients», sur la base de 29 entretiens réalisées à Recife (Pernambouc) pendant l'été 2014. Enfin, la dernière section se réfère à une littérature en plein essor sur certains effets politiques plus diffus des TCE, et appelle à un agenda de recherche qui irait au-delà de la question du clientélisme, et s'interrogerait sur le type de citoyenneté que les transferts monétaires promeuvent.

October 2006. President Luis Ignacio da Silva, a.k.a. Lula, is re-elected to the Brazilian presidency. Just a year prior, his party, the *PT*, had been mired in a legislative bribing scandal which many had expected to seriously tarnish the incumbent's campaign. But whilst Lula lost votes in the South and Southeast, he more than compensated for it with rising support in the poorer North and Northeast, which had benefitted from the social policies under the *PT*'s first-ever stint in federal government.

At the top of the list of these social programs features the flagship *Bolsa Família* ('family grant') conditional cash transfer program. Conditional cash transfers emerged in Brazil (at the state-level) and Mexico (at the federal level) in the 1990s, and have since spread across Latin America. They consist in direct-to-beneficiary cash transfers, usually on the basis of a program-specific debit card which allows withdrawals at government-bank ATMs. The monthly transfers are targeted at poor families, and conditioned on children's regular school- and health-post attendance. In Brazil, a number of federal CCTs emerged under the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1998-2002), but only really became a central policy instrument and priority under Lula's government, which regrouped several minor programs into the *Bolsa Família* transfers, and significantly expanded their value and coverage. After 10 years of operation (2004-2014), *Bolsa Família* has established itself as the world's largest CCT program, reaching around 14 million households, or 50 million people, or 25% of Brazil's population. It currently (late 2014) provides between 77 and 340 reais per month per family (~ US\$40-170), depending on the number and age of children. The average actual transfer is R\$167 (~ US\$85),¹ and represents roughly 50% of beneficiary households' income (Nichter, 2014:133).

The international reception to *Bolsa Família* (and CCTs more generally) has been overwhelmingly positive: various studies have attested to its positive impacts in broad poverty-related, educational and health terms (see Soares 2012 for an overview), as well as general good management and limited leakage and corruption (Sugiyama & Hunter, 2013). And yet, in this October of 2006, parts of the Brazilian electorate were furious at the program. In their eyes, the *Bolsa Família* was nothing but a massive, well-orchestrated vote-buying operation, used by Lula to shirk accountability for his poor governance. Using Southerners' taxes, so the argument ran, Lula and the *PT* put part of the money in their pockets – as allegedly demonstrated by a 2005 corruption scandal, the *Mensalão* – whilst 'doling out' just enough of that state money to the poor illiterate masses of the Northeast to secure their vote. By buying the votes of those too disinterested or uninformed to know how truly 'bad' his government was, Lula seemingly recused himself from the accountability of the newspaper-reading Southern middle class, and could do almost anything in office as long as he continued to feed the mouths of starving families. The argument was not pretty; but to many it rang true, and the fact that the program was significantly expanded in the last 3 months before the election (Hall, 2008:813) seemingly vindicated its critics. Similar debates have surrounded the role of the *Bolsa Família* in the subsequent 2010 and 2014 polls; and at a recent conference on Latin American social policy I attended, the panel on CCTs rapidly turned into a discussion on the political (mis-)use of policies like the *Bolsa Família*.

In social science terms, the accusation is one of *clientelism*. Clientelism consists in the private exchange of benefits or favours, given out by a *patron*, for political support, provided by the *client*. This is usually thought to be contrary to the principles of democratic theory²: under clientelism, political competition is based on candidates' resources, not ideas, and terrible candidates – patently corrupt ones, for instance – can

¹ <http://www.mds.gov.br/saladeimprensa/noticias/2014/maio/beneficios-do-bolsa-familia-tem-reajuste-de-10> (2014).

² Clientelism is not restricted to democratic systems; indeed the term initially described dynamics in what social scientists used to refer to as 'traditional' societies. This paper, however, concentrates on democracies.

be (re-)elected if they can ‘buy’ enough support. This is usually contrasted with *programmatic* politics, where politicians convince citizens of their *program* (i.e. policies, proposals), or at least of their personal qualities that make them fit for public office. The difference is not always straightforward, however, and is less about the kinds of goods offered than about the way they are presented to citizens. A politician giving candy to Jack because he voted for her is running on a clientelistic platform; candy is her bargaining counter. A politician promising a program of free candy distribution to all is running on a programmatic platform; candy is her policy.

The Bolsa Família is an example of the latter: it is a *programmatic* policy. However, it has often been (mis-)interpreted as a *clientelistic* policy, as suggested above. This article attempts to clarify this debate, and explains why the Bolsa Família falls resolutely into the programmatic category. In doing so, it elaborates both on the concept of clientelism, and on the specific program. In terms of the concept, it assesses the Bolsa Família on the basis of two prominent frameworks in the literature, and shows that calling the BF clientelistic stretches the concept. This, however, may not convince those who either argue that the concept of clientelism *should* be stretched – because the BF constitutes a *new* form of clientelism, not accounted for by previous frameworks – or those who argue that, even if not technically ‘clientelistic’, the BF still generated a class of devoted Lula-voters who would support him no matter what, thereby undermining competition and accountability. Against this view, this article further shows that BF recipients do not behave and think like one would expect typical ‘clients’ to, and thus that the Bolsa Família cannot be said to have systematically ‘captured’ poor voters. Indeed, the program may have done quite the opposite: by extracting families from the direst poverty, it may have allowed them to break their ties with, and loyalties to, their established local patrons.

The article proceeds in four parts, makes four contributions, and draws on four corresponding sources. The first part offers

a theoretical discussion of the concept of clientelism as applied to the BF, and draws on two prominent, contemporary frameworks. The second part summarises the debate on the BF-clientelism relationship as it has evolved in the literature, and shows that, despite early rallies to the accusations of clientelism, most authors have come around to arguing that the BF is programmatic. The third part provides new, original data which shows that the behaviour of actual beneficiaries differs from those expected of ‘clients’, on the basis of 29 in-depth beneficiary interviews conducted in Recife (Pernambuco) in the summer of 2014. Finally, the last section draws on the burgeoning literature on CCTs’ more diffuse political effects, and calls for a research agenda that goes beyond the question of clientelism, to consider whether transfers can promote *citizenship*.

The Concept: Programmatic Politics, Clientelism, and the BF

How can we tell whether the BF is clientelistic? Clientelism has been defined in a number of ways over the years. One approach, which has enjoyed some popularity for being relatively straightforward, defines clientelism simply as “the exchange of political rights for social benefits” (Fox, 1990: 153). That formula, however, will not do as a yardstick for the Bolsa Família, because it is simultaneously too loose and too narrow. It is too loose, because if ‘exchange’ is interpreted generously, then “it is difficult to distinguish what is specific to clientelism from most political bargaining more generally”, as Fox himself recognises (1994:153).³ It is, however, also too narrow, because if ‘exchange’ is interpreted strictly, then the Bolsa Família cannot possibly be clientelistic, since even critics will admit that the president does not *actually* ‘exchange’ anything with beneficiaries.

³ In full, Fox notes: “Because analysts have found elements of clientelism in an extraordinarily wide range of hierarchical power relations, the usage can become so broad as to encompass almost any reciprocal exchange between actors of unequal power.” (ibid).

If the theoretical challenge is to have any value, it ought to start from a definition which gives at least some *a priori* credence to the idea that the BF *may* be clientelistic. The recent work of Kitschelt & Wilkinson (2007) on clientelistic linkages is useful in this regard. At first sight, their description of the concept strikingly seems to encompass programs such as the Bolsa Família (emphasis added):

“In many political systems citizen-politician linkages are based on direct material inducements targeted to individuals and small groups of citizens whom politicians know to be highly responsive to such side-payments and willing to surrender their vote for the right price. Democratic accountability in such a system does not result primarily from politicians’ success in delivering collective goods such as economic growth, jobs, monetary stability, or national health care, nor does it rest on improving overall distributive outcomes... Instead, **clientelistic accountability represents a transaction, the direct exchange of a citizen’s vote in return for direct payments** or continuing access to employment, goods, and services.”

This is exactly the worry raised in the case of the Bolsa Família: that it consists in a targeted “material inducement” to the poor in the form of “direct payments” which guarantee to the government, if not the vote of every beneficiary, then enough of the national vote share that it need not concern itself with ‘economic growth’ or general good governance. That concern was particularly acute after 2006, when Lula’s re-election bid was expected to be routed by the ‘*Mensalão*’ scandal, before being seemingly rescued from any form of ‘accountability’ by the accelerated rolling out of the Bolsa Família. Little wonder, in that context, that the program was accused of clientelism.

As fitting as the above description may seem, however, a more detailed look into Kitschelt and Wilkinson’s framework reveals that ‘clientelism’ is not the right term to apply to the BF. This requires a little explanation. The authors broadly distinguish between ‘clientelistic’ and ‘programmatic’ party-voter linkages (which they subdivide into programmatic ‘policy’ competition, based on programs and issues, and programmatic ‘valence’ competition, based on governance

and management skills). To distinguish the three linkage modes, they identify five key components of linkage theory:

1. Contingency of the exchange (whether it hinges on the voter’s actions)
2. Nature of the goods offered to voters (individual, collective, or ‘club’ goods)
3. Predictability (how likely voters are to react to an inducement)
4. Elasticity (how many votes can be gained for how many resources)
5. Monitoring (the amount of information about voters needed)

The following table, borrowed from Kitschelt & Wilkinson (p.21), summarises their typology:

Table 1.1.

The BF as a linkage mode on the right, table 1.1 illustrates the corresponding classification of the Bolsa Família, based on which of the three options on its left best describes the program. A brief explanation follows:

1. **Contingency:** the BF benefit is not tied to a vote, since non-voters, and non-voting populations, are entitled to the benefit on an equal basis. Moreover, although the benefit is ‘targeted’, it is targeted to the poor, not to pro-government voters.
2. **Nature of the goods:** the BF is a club good insofar as it is ‘excludable’ (not everybody receives it) but non-rival (my receiving does not prevent you from receiving it).⁴ What may be counterintuitive here is that the transfers themselves are, of course, eminently private goods; but what is evaluated here is the policy as a program, not the transfers. Doing otherwise would classify anything from social assistance to public pension funds as private goods, and thus under this scheme, as a clientelistic linkage.

⁴ This is true except at the margins, when the municipal quotas may be too small to fully account for the full amount of needy families, in which case the BF becomes rival for new entrants (cf. Kidd & Huda, 2013).

Yet as Stokes et al. (2013:12) note, “targeting individuals still constitutes programmatic politics”.

3. **Predictability:** the likelihood that beneficiaries ‘reciprocate’ is variable: potentially strong in the first (re-)election, and ever weaker thereafter (cf. Zucco, 2013, which we return to below).
4. **Elasticity:** the BF has a relatively high elasticity, given its low cost, although like its predictability, its elasticity weakens in the long-term, getting closer to medium.
5. **Monitoring:** there is no dedicated monitoring activity for the electoral effects of the Bolsa Família (beyond what can be deduced from routine electoral research), and certainly no external enforcement. The subtlety here is that one might consider the threat of the BF disappearing if the government changes as an ‘enforcement mechanism’, but this

is neither technically true (since all parties pledge to continue the program), nor widely believed (as shown in the third section).

As this illustrates, then, the BF shares certain elements with all three linkage modes. However, if it had to be classified under one heading, it would clearly be “Programmatic Policy Competition” (PP). The BF can be qualified as PP in all five categories, whereas it shares elements of “Programmatic Valence Competition” (PV) in three categories, and, strikingly, is only “Clientelistic” (CL) in two of them. Since the program is thus, by this framework, so far removed from being classified as clientelistic that it actually seems closer to a valence linkage (which, admittedly, is a little surprising), the above classification is likely robust to a change in any particular coding. Indeed, within this framework, the BF’s codings would require significant changes in more than half the categories for the program to be considered resolutely

Table 1.2 Modes of citizen–politician linkage

	Strategic linkages			BOLSA FAMÍLIA
	Programmatic valence policy competition	Programmatic policy competition	Clientelistic competition	
1. Contingency of exchange: Benefit tied to vote? (“targeted” delivery)	No	No (indirect exchange)	Yes (direct exchange)	NO (PV/PP)
2. Nature of goods offered to voters: Private, club, or public goods?	Collective and club (“pork”) goods (“valence competition”)	Club goods (“spatial-directional” competition; redistribution)	Private or club goods	CLUB GOODS (PV/PP/CL)
3. Predictability: Compliance of individuals/groups responding to politician’s actions?	Low	Variable	High	VARIABLE (PP)
4. Elasticity: Change in constituents’ vote choice due to politician’s stimulus?	Small	Medium	Large	MEDIUM TO LARGE (PP/CL)
5. Monitoring and external enforcement of the exchange?	No	No	Variable: 1. Individual surveillance 2. Group oversight and self-policing	NO (PP/PP)

clientelistic.

One avenue left to the critic is to question the validity of Kitschelt and Wilkinson's framework. The latter, certainly, is not the only way to define clientelistic linkages. Nevertheless – to reiterate some points made above – the typology is a sensible litmus test to classify the BF, since (a) it *a priori* seems to rank the program as clientelistic, and (b) it is a relatively recent and authoritative framework in the literature. Moreover, a brief look at another, even more recent and equally prominent typology only serves to confirm the BF's unambiguous classification as programmatic and not clientelistic.

In their recent work 'Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism', Stokes et al. (2013) provide a typology of programs and politics, which centres on the idea of 'publicity', that is, the public nature of a program. They draw a general distinction between, on the one hand, programs with an open, clear, and transparent set of rules, and on the other hand, political dealings which either leave enough discretion for their spirit to be betrayed, or which are altogether hidden, obscured, and indeed often illegal. CCTs are, so they argue, an eminent example of a *programmatic* policy with a clear set of guidelines and rules. Whilst the programs distribute individualised benefits, they are upfront about eligibility criteria and benefit structures, and can thus be understood, evaluated, and be voted up or down. Clientelistic dealings, by contrast, often occur in the shadows, with no publicly justified rationale, no guidelines, and no dedicated budget – meaning they are impossible to assess, support, or ban for the electorate. Thus, even if the intent of the Bolsa Família was indeed to 'buy' votes, the public nature of the program signifies, in the eyes of Stokes et al., that it is a programmatic policy. Programmatic policies are not necessarily good policies, of course – but they are fair game in a democracy.

On theoretical grounds alone, then, the Bolsa Família hardly lives up to the definitions of 'clientelism', and cannot accurately be said to 'buy votes' without stretching the

concept; after all, beneficiaries receive the transfers whether or not they voted for the party that introduced them, and the electorate as a whole has a clear idea of what the program is, and whether it wants to support it. However, most of the scholarly debate about the clientelism-BF relationship has been conducted in empirical, not theoretical terms, and has concentrated on the Bolsa Família's actual effects. Although many scholars were initially critical of the program, the literature ultimately came around to arguing that the Bolsa Família had not generated an unalienable Lula 'clientele', as had initially been feared. The next section recapitulates and summarises the evolution of this debate.

The Debate in the Literature: back and forth on the Bolsa Família

In the literature, much like in the public realm, the debate around the (suspected) clientelistic nature of the BF emerged largely after Lula's 2006 re-election, which witnessed a significant shift in Lula's electoral base, from the wealthier South to the more impoverished Northeast. Because the NE was also the site of deepest BF-penetration, both the press and scholars were quick to suspect that the BF had benefited Lula, and that it may thus have been politically motivated.

Three sub-debates consequently emerged: (a) Did the BF generate electoral gains for Lula? (b) Was the BF distributed according to need or political reasons? (c) How could one empirically distinguish between retrospective voting (perceived as legitimate) and clientelistic voting (seen as illegitimate)?

Regarding (a), a number of early articles established that the BF had indeed bolstered Lula's support in 2006 (Hunter & Power, 2007; Soares and Terron 2008; Zucco, 2008). As Bohn (2013:26) notes, this finding was initially framed as evidence *for* macro-clientelism:

"The higher likelihood that BF beneficiaries would vote for Lula is said to be a "response by voters to direct cash handouts from the government" (Zucco

2008, 35), transforming the 2006 presidential reelection into “yet another unfolding of the old story of using the government to build clientelistic support” (Hunter and Power 2007, 9).”

By 2013, however, the conclusions to be drawn from those electoral gains had become less clear, since the debate had advanced on count (b): using a variety of different techniques, a number of authors showed that the distribution of the Bolsa mapped objective “need” closely, at least in geographic terms (Fenwick, 2009; Rodrigues-Silveira, 2011; Fried, 2012).⁵ Indeed, Fried (2012:1042) notes that he found “... little evidence that political criteria explain the difference between the number of poor families that live in a municipality and the number of families that receive support.” Although the election may have incentivized the government to accelerate the rolling out of the BF (Hall, 2008:806), the match between need and BF disbursements suggests that these increases ultimately only served to incorporate into the BF program those who indeed had a right to the transfer.

Given (b) – the BF seems to be administered according to need – the debate shifted to (c): how clientelistic and programmatic voting might be distinguished. One way to do this is akin to the theoretical discussion of the previous section, which concluded that the term ‘clientelism’ was not appropriate because there was no implicit threat to be cut off from the program if one did not vote for Lula. Even so, this leaves open the question of why citizens voted for the incumbent. Was it, as some critics suggest, a personal thank-you note to Lula for the extra cash they personally enjoyed every month? (which does not constitute a direct exchange, but is akin to reciprocating for a private favour). Or was it a vote of support for his general political agenda?

These may be difficult to distinguish, because it is easier to know *how* people voted than *why* they did so – and in any

⁵ The BF is also well targeted in material terms, as even critics admit: “Bolsa Família is not only the largest but also the best targeted CCT scheme in Latin America, with 73 per cent of benefits reaching the poorest 20 per cent of the population, and 94 per cent falling within the lowest two quintiles (FAO, 2006).” (Hall, 2008:807).

case, many program beneficiaries did indeed vote for Lula in 2006. There are, however, a number of empirical strategies to tell these alternatives apart. A first one would be to note that support of the BF largely exceeds the ranks of recipients: for instance, after the 2010 election, 86% of respondents to a nationally representative survey approved specifically of the BF (Ames et al., 2010), suggesting that it is considered a sound program beyond the circles of those who benefit from it directly.

A more intricate way, suggested by Zucco (2013), is to investigate whether the electoral gain from the BF endures across elections (which would indicate a stable clientele), or whether it fades over time (which would suggest standard retrospective voting). As Zucco shows, the latter is the case in Brazil: the electoral reward for the BF peaked and then elided, which he interprets as evidence for a good policy obtaining a one-off reward, as opposed to a continuous vote-buying mechanism. Though Zucco had himself formerly criticised the BF for buying votes (cf. Zucco, 2008),⁶ he ultimately concludes that “there is evidence that CCTs have not created ‘partisan clienteles’... In this context, CCTs do not seem like a tool with which to build overall political dominance” (p.820). Similarly, when De Figueiredo and Hidalgo (2010:1) used survey and experimental evidence from Recife, they found that “Bolsa Família, while generating support for President Lula, has not altered the partisan allegiances of low income voters in Brazil”.

To sum up, although the BF did indeed generate substantial electoral support, it did so as a “programmatic policy” (Fried, 2012:1042). This view is confirmed by various other authors, including by research on another major CCT program, Mexico’s Oportunidades:

“... findings are difficult to reconcile with the notion that the electoral effects of CCTs are a result of prospective concerns triggered by threats of program discontinuation or endogenous program enrolment. Instead, the evidence in this article suggests that CCTs’ mobilizing effects are compatible with programmatic politics” (De la O, 2013:1).

⁶ Zucco had previously written, “Bolsa Família is a [...] way to ‘buy’ votes” (Zucco 2008:48).

“These [Brazilian and Mexican CCT] programs are of course not apolitical in the broader sense; in fact, their success has been a boon to the political fortunes of those responsible for them... However, the political rewards for these programs are those of programmatic politics, not clientelism.” (Weitz-Shapiro, 2014:73)

“Even though Bolsa Família has generated substantial electoral returns for President Lula and the PT, the program cannot be considered an instance of clientelism, for the selection of beneficiaries is based on universalistic criteria (mainly per capita income).” (Borges, 2011:31)

Ultimately, as *The Economist* summarized in 2008, “*Bolsa Família* is sometimes equated with straightforward vote-buying. That is unfair”.⁷

Qualitative Interviews with Beneficiaries Evidence: with

In addition to the above literature, in-depth interviews I conducted with BF-beneficiaries shine further light on the relationship between the Bolsa Família and clientelism. Although relatively few in numbers (29) and limited to select neighbourhoods of Recife (Pernambuco), their semi-structured conversational nature allowed for the exploration of how beneficiaries interpreted the Bolsa Família. Although a variety of opinions was expressed on any given topic, the general picture that emerged from the discussions further confirms the findings from the previous section.

Regarding clientelism, three themes explored during the interviews were relevant:

- a) beliefs about the normative status of the program (whether it is a citizens’ right, or a favour from the government)
- b) beliefs about the future of the program (whether and how it might end)
- c) voting patterns (whom people voted for and how they decided that)

Presumably, the archetypical ‘client’ of the Bolsa Família, so often invoked by the Brazilian media, would (a) perceive the program as a favour or gift, (b) believe that the program would end if the PT lost power, and (c) would thus vote for Lula/Dilma, and do so specifically *because* of the BF.

As it turned out, although each of these separate views was occasionally voiced throughout the interviews, none of the interviewees expressed all of them. Instead, the majority expressed an interesting mixture of attitudes, which, although uneven, did not generally justify identifying them as ‘clients’ of the program. In summary, the responses to the three items were as follows:

- a) When asked whether the BF was a right or a favour of the government, the vast majority of respondents answered that it was a right of theirs.⁸ Elaborating, some pointed to a duty of the state to help those in need, and/or noted that they paid taxes, and thus had a right to obtain something in return (“it’s a right, I think it’s a right of the people, because it’s our taxes, the taxes the people pay, so this money is due to us. The country has an obligation to give this money to who needs it, to who doesn’t have...”, 18/2). Admittedly, it was not always obvious with what notion of the term ‘right’ respondents were operating; but overall, very few actually described the BF as a favour.⁹

⁸ There is a genuine debate about what constitutes the ‘actually correct’ answer on this matter. The BF remains, to this day, a program set up by a ‘mere’ law (i.e. neither a constitutional nor even an organic law). The program, then, is technically *not* a right. It is not even an entitlement, because, as some authors have noted, municipal quotas for the program mean that not all of those who are eligible for the program are actually registered (cf. Kidd & Huda, 2013). Nonetheless, civil society groups and BF officials tend to insist that they advertise the program as a right, reminding beneficiaries that they owe nothing to anybody in exchange for the benefit, which is duly theirs. Moreover, politically, if citizens believe the program is a right, then the cost to any politician trying to deny them the BF would be so high that the actual legal status may not matter.

⁹ This goes against the claim of Cristovam Buarque (2006), a Brazilian Senator, who claims that Bolsa Família “has become a vote-buying scheme... a program with a strong electoral appeal since it is seen as aid without counterpart, a kindness received from the government” (cited from Nichter, 2014:323). As the fieldwork revealed, few beneficiaries

⁷ <http://www.economist.com/node/10650663>, retrieved online 17/01/2014.

b) Respondents were also asked if they thought the program might disappear if the government changed, a salient question not only because of the upcoming general elections that year (2014), but also because the incumbent president and Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, had (wrongly) claimed in her campaign that some of her rivals would abolish the program. Interviewees' answers here were divided. On the one hand, nearly half rejected the idea that the BF would disappear, explaining either that (i) it had already survived a change of president ("One [government] already got out, and another came in..." 10/10), or that (ii) the people would revolt if it disappeared ("It would lead to a nuclear war, wouldn't it?" 15/5), or yet that (iii) every sensible politician knew they would lose votes by cutting the program ("they need votes. If they [cut] this they will totally lose the electorate" 22/6).¹⁰ On the other hand, quite a few confessed that it 'may' disappear ("They shouldn't change it, see? But it might well happen", 6/6), or that they were not really sure, but that there were certainly 'rumours': "I have heard that they [politicians] will cut it, that the program will disappear. But then others say that they won't cut it. So I don't know" (23/7). It is worth noting that this uncertainty does not necessarily benefit the incumbent; some were so unsure about what would happen that they were not even sure whether Dilma Rousseff herself would continue the BF ("if Dilma wins, I don't know if she'll continue [the program], and if it's another, I also don't know what will happen", 27/7).¹¹ Overall, only few respondents

explicitly thought that Dilma was the only candidate who would retain the program.¹²

c) When asked directly whether they identified with any party or candidate, most beneficiaries said they did not; those few who indicated a preference chose Dilma/the PT as often as not. If anything, exactly half the respondents said they would not vote if they did not have to.¹³ Asked how they decided whom to vote for, a majority generally referred to the idea of choosing the best candidate (e.g., "Analysing... I go around looking... Listening... To choose that candidate who will change the country", 16/6). Others said they take advice from neighbours and family, trust local politicians they know, or just vote blank.

Overall, then, the Bolsa Família does not seem to have allowed the PT to constitute itself a 'clientele' amongst beneficiaries (if ever that had been its intention), or not in urban areas anyway. As the summary in Table 1.2 shows, respondents did not, in general, behave like the archetypical 'BF client'.

ultimately see the Bolsa Família as a 'kindness' from the government.

¹⁰ Some might see exactly that as the proof that the Bolsa Família is clientelistic. However, that seriously distorts the concept of clientelism, applying it to any policy that gathers votes, and thus seemingly merging the concept with that of programmatic politics. Politicians would lose votes if they cut health care, too, but that in itself does not make public health care clientelistic.

¹¹ Those who expressed such uncertainty usually justified it by saying things such as 'I don't know anything about 'political' things' (1/1). This may reflect ignorance, but also

the feeling that politicians are unpredictable, unaccountable, and do whatever they want, leaving the people to suffer the consequences (good or bad).

¹² The 'technically correct' answer, given candidates' campaign promises in the run-up to the 2014 election, is that all of the main candidates would have retained the program. Allegations that opponents would do away with the program were rife, especially on the part of Dilma Rousseff, but whilst they suggest a political use of the program, they do not make it clientelistic.

¹³ Voting is a legal obligation in Brazil. Interestingly, one interviewee linked her obligation to vote to the Bolsa Família: "I have [an obligation to vote], you see, because of the Bolsa Família" (7/7). Even then, she seemed to see it more as a condition of the program – like bringing your children to school – than as a moral obligation to reward anybody specific (Lula/Dilma/the PT) with her vote. Indeed, when asked, she did not identify with any party or candidate.

Table 1.2 – Comparing ‘client’ and ‘actual’ responses

*different totals are due to missing responses for some questions

Question	Expected response of archetypical BF client	Actual responses of BF beneficiaries
Do you see the BF as a right or a favour?	A favour	<u>A right</u> : 16/22 (73%) <u>Gift/favour/help</u> : 6/22
Do you think the BF might disappear if the government changes?	Yes	<u>No</u> : 8/20 <u>Maybe/not sure</u> : 11/20 <u>Yes</u> : 1 person
Do you support or identify with any candidate or party?	Dilma / the ‘PT’	<u>Dilma / PT</u> : 4/29 <u>Campos / Marina</u> : 5/29 <u>No affiliation</u> : 20/29

However, a ‘standard’ beneficiary could also not be identified: respondents displayed a variety of views, and combined them in different ways. In that sense, the numbers in the table should not be read as exact estimates, since they hide a sea of ambiguities, half-starts, hesitations, and contradictions in beneficiaries’ views and responses. Thus, although most interviewees did not act and speak like BF clients, some did indeed display attitudes that may make critics of the BF suspicious. For example, Lula did indeed attract significant praise in the interviews, sometimes specifically for the BF:

“Many people thank him, Lula, for having started this program, because it helped the people quite a bit” (17/1).

“For me [the BF] was optimal, because I had no benefit... after getting into [the program], it helped me quite a bit... I thank God and Lula... I know that for me it is fantastic. Now Lula... he was the person that I always want to vote for... if he runs ten times, I would vote for him 10 times... I voted for Dilma because of him” (13/3).

Respondent 13/3 was also one of the few to see the BF as a gift (“I think it is a gift”), and said she did not know whether the program would continue if the president changed (“It depends on each [candidate], whether [the BF] continues,

or... I don’t know. But it would be good, to continue...”). Since she promises to ‘always vote for Lula’ and carried her vote over to Dilma, she seems the perfect example of a PT partisan ‘captured through cash’, an image that haunts part of Brazilian society, which fears masses of BF recipients reliably delivering votes, no matter how corrupt or incompetent the government.

In 13/3’s case, that may be true, although she stands out as an exception. Whilst many others praised Lula, the *laudatios* often stressed his poor origins more than the BF.¹⁴ More importantly still, this praise only semi-transferred to Dilma. Take respondent 23/7, who on the one hand declared, “the president I really liked was Lula”, but on the other hand expressed criticism of Dilma, whom she does not credit for the BF: “many people aren’t liking much of her [Dilma’s] work, you know? Because she came in, this program already existed, it wasn’t her”. Others were similarly critical:

¹⁴ For instance, and touchingly, 23/7 said: “I say the president I really liked was Lula. He changed, really changed [things]. But it’s because he was born of the people, really. He’s from the people. He’s from us, from here in Pernambuco. One day I would like to meet with him, shake his hand, tell him, you [‘cara’], my brother, you... you changed us, the life of many people. It was him, really... he changed things.”

“The BF wasn’t Dilma, it already existed...” (26/10)

“Dilma, I won’t vote for her this year. Because Dilma says things are getting better... but no. Because Dilma, she already spent all this time in power. Is it that the people don’t know what Dilma did? They know. The people aren’t stupid. Now you vote for her if you want.” (27/7)

“She [Dilma] isn’t doing much for Brazil...” (18/2)

This, incidentally, mirrors Zucco’s (2008) findings cited above: CCTs can lead to a spike in support, which then ebbs with time and presidents. What emerges from the interviews is thus not entirely surprising: as is well known, Dilma obtained a ‘sympathy boost’ in 2010, as the handpicked successor of the popular Lula. However, she subsequently started being judged on her own performance, as one might expect from responsive voters. The result, at least in the neighbourhoods surveyed, was clearly not a set of devoted PT-partisans.

Ultimately, then, the quantitative and qualitative evidence converge toward a programmatic interpretation of conditional cash transfer programs. Although some – like 13/3 – may now be devoted PT voters because of the BF, beneficiaries in general do not seem to (a) see the BF as a favour, (b) think only Dilma will retain the program, or even (c) intend to vote for Dilma. Instead, many seem to remain responsive to actual performance in office, which suggests programmatic/retrospective voting. Indeed, in a recent book, Rachel Weitz-Shapiro comes to the same conclusion:

“By most accounts, Mexican and Brazilian beneficiaries access these programs based on need, understand these resources are funded by the state, and they do not believe that their continued access to benefits is linked to individual political behaviour.” (2014:73)

Future research avenues: the BF, clientelism, and citizenship

To conclude and reiterate the main point of this paper, calling the Bolsa Família ‘clientelistic’, accusing it of buying votes,

or lamenting that it undermines competition and accountability are all undue charges against the program, which rest on a misunderstanding both of the concept of clientelism, and of the actual effects of the program. Theoretical frameworks, quantitative evidence from the literature, and qualitative evidence from recent fieldwork all converge towards this conclusion.

This is not to say that the program – and conditional cash transfers more generally – do not interact with clientelism in interesting, if perhaps unexpected, ways. This final section offers two alternative, possible relationships, but it first briefly delves deeper into the mechanisms of clientelism.

As explained above, clear, coherent, and rule-bound national programmes like the Bolsa Família do not fit the category of ‘clientelism’. Indeed, ‘clientelism’ is rarely steered from the centre, but relies on an army of local ‘brokers’, who contact, reward, and monitor voters. Although these brokers may fit into national political structures and have links to the top, their activities are also eminently local, and rely on an intimate acquaintance with citizens in their area (Auyero, 2001; Stokes et al., 2013). The Bolsa Família may affect this relationship between brokers and voters in at least two ways.

On the one hand, if brokers manage to get their hand on the cash transfers, control registration, or even just hold back the documents needed to register (such as proofs of residency, distributed by often politicised neighbourhood associations), then brokers can act as gatekeepers to the program, and ensure it is only distributed to those who vote their way. The risk, then, is that the BF may be (ab)used by local elites as a source of patronage, thereby reinforcing pre-existing clientelistic networks. Note the blame here is not on the federal instigators of the program, but rather on the unfortunate misappropriation of funds at the local level. After all, “It would certainly not be the first time in Brazil’s history that federal government transfers were turned into grist for patronage at sub-national levels” (Hunter & Sugiyama, 2009:13).

Fortunately, Wendy Hunter and Natasha Sugiyama (2009; 2013) have studied the question, and found that beneficiaries do not perceive the BF as an instrument of clientelism. Although beneficiaries in focus groups were happy to report widespread clientelism and vote-buying *in general*, they were explicit that (i) enrolment in the BF was not political; that (ii) no mayor/council person had offered them help with the sign-up; and that (iii) the transfer was a right, and that politicians could thus not remove it. Their conclusion (which my own fieldwork corroborates) is, accordingly, encouraging:

“In sum, we found consistent evidence that the Bolsa Família provides tangible benefits to the poor without subjecting them to manipulation by local political patrons or arguably even to concerns of such a prospect occurring” (ibid, p.30).¹⁵

On the other hand, the Bolsa Família’s cash injections may do quite the opposite; namely, undermine the relationship between local patrons and poor citizens, by loosening the grip the former have over the latter. Now that the family receives a regular income, often for the first time ever, it may be less dependent on the assistance of local brokers, many of whom were previously able to gain easy votes in exchange for meagre food or monetary assistance. Conditional cash transfers, then, may free citizens from voting with their stomachs, and empower them to make true use of their political rights. In this spirit, in an interview with the *Folha de Sao Paulo* published in June 2013, Brazilian sociologist Walquiria Rego suggests that the ‘colonel’ – the local patron – has lost weight:

“The colonel lost weight because she [the BF beneficiary] acquired a liberty she didn’t have. She does not need to go to the mayor [anymore]. She can ask for a better street, but not food, which was the way coronelism functioned.”¹⁶

This possibility has so far been hardly explored by scholarly research. In a forthcoming work, I argue that conditional cash transfers have indeed affected the relationship between voters

and their local patrons (and have weakened the latter), although they have not single-handedly eliminated clientelism, partly because they have not – unsurprisingly – eradicated poverty and basic needs.

From the point of view of the general literature, the modest lesson to be drawn from this article is that the research agenda on the political consequences of conditional cash transfers should be re-oriented and extended. Re-oriented, away from the idea that CCTs like the Bolsa Família constitute or strengthen clientelism, and extended, towards the possibility that transfers may actually undermine local patronage networks, and thus contribute to the emergence of a new or at least strengthened citizenship, understood not only as the existence of rights, but as their realization and exercise on one’s own terms. After all, if ‘programmatic politics’ is one antonym of clientelism, ‘citizenship’ is another: as Escobar (2002:23) argues, “citizenship and clientelism are fundamentally incompatible”, because the rights that constitute citizenship are sold, not exercised, under clientelism.

The idea that ‘policies make citizens’, and that the design of social assistance shapes broad patterns of political participation, is not, of course, new (Campbell 2003; Soss 1999). However, it is in the early days of being applied to conditional cash transfers and the Bolsa Família. Although the government-sponsored edited volume to celebrate the program’s ten years was titled ‘Programa Bolsa Família: uma década de inclusão e cidadania’ (‘Bolsa Família: Ten Years of Citizenship and Inclusion’), it actually spent little time considering the issue of citizenship. Rego and Pinzani (2013) are more explicit in their analysis, and argue that the BF has been transformative for the lives of the poorest (and especially women), but critics retort that the program’s unparticipative and individualised nature threatens to fragment communities and create a culture of dependence (Martins, 2004). In the same vein, Attanasio et al. (2009) use experimental evidence to show that CCTs increase interpersonal trust, but Chong et al. (2009) use much the same

¹⁵ A survey reported in “Whither Clientelism” (Sugiyama & Hunter, 2013) corroborates these findings.

¹⁶ *Folha de São Paulo*, 11th of June 2013, “O Bolsa Família enfraquece o coronelismo”. <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2013/06/1293113-bolsa-familia-enfraquece-o-coronelismo-e-rompe-cultura-da-resignacao-diz-sociologa.shtml>

methods to show the opposite; and whilst Schober (2013) and Rodriguez Chamussy (2011) carefully suggest that Mexican CCTs have encouraged broader political participation, Auyero (2012) tells dark tales of the deleterious effects of the Argentine welfare state on the poor (to my knowledge, no equivalent studies exist for Brazil).

These debates are a start, but they deserve to be taken further. Having long ago ascertained the economic effectiveness of CCT programs, another push in the research agenda is now needed to understand their diffuse effects on the relationship between beneficiaries and the state, beneficiaries and society, and beneficiaries and their own communities. We now know the BF is not clientelistic – but can it be a force for citizenship? If it is, then under what conditions, and what exactly does it promote? What will be the long-term consequences? If it is not, then are the economic gains worth the losses in local trust and solidarity, or in collective agency? Alternatively, can the programs be made more participative, should they, and to what effect? It is time to understand whether and how CCTs can contribute to the “difficult transition from clientelism to citizenship” (Fox, 1994) so urgently required in Latin America.¹⁷

¹⁷ For one vibrant attempt to understand these ‘diffuse effects’, interested readers can turn to the special ‘ten years of the Bolsa Família’ edition of **POLÍTICA & TRABALHO**, *Revista de Ciências Sociais*, n. 38, April 2013. Not all articles therein directly engage the notion of citizenship, but their (usually ethnographic) attempt to grasp the subtle symbolical and cultural implications of the Bolsa Família – particularly if not exclusively in terms of gender and community – are an encouraging and stimulating example of this new research agenda.

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