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**Mexico's Response to COVID-19: How a Comparison with Brazil Explains the Country's Deficient Response**

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**Abstract**

This research paper tackles the question of why Mexico had such a deficient social policy response to COVID-19 despite the leftist rhetoric employed by its president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. A comparative analysis with Brazil is used, since this country represented a political context in which its COVID-19 social policy response was more generous than that of Mexico even though Brazil's president, Jair Bolsonaro, was a conservative. This comparison showcases how the lack of strong left opposition strength in Mexico, coupled with the negative policy legacies of its restrictive *Oportunidades* program shaped the relatively limited nature of Mexico's pandemic response.

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various dilemmas in Mexico as social issues, such as food insecurity, unemployment, income shock, poverty, and other problems, continue to worsen. Inequality has also worsened as the Gini coefficient is projected to increase from 0.46 to 0.48 and the number of poor from 67.5 million to 75.2

million (Blofield, Giambruno, and Filgueira 58-59, Blofield, Lustig, and Trasberg 8-9). And yet, despite these pressing socioeconomic issues, the leftist government under President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has provided a very limited social policy response in Mexico that has been incapable of mitigating the rising rates of poverty and inequality. This is particularly baffling given the pro-poor rhetoric on which Obrador ran his presidential campaign on in 2018.

The purpose of this research paper will be to answer the following question: why did the leftist president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador fail to support Mexicans through adequate social safety nets and social assistance in the first two years of the pandemic, especially in comparison to the more generous response by Brazil under right-wing populist President Jair Bolsonaro? This research paper argues that low leftist opposition strength and negative policy legacies from the *Oportunidades* program in Mexico are important variables that explain why Mexico had such a limited response in comparison to Brazil which, conversely, had strong leftist opposition strength and positive legacies from the *Bolsa Familia*.

Within the following sections, this research paper explains why the social policy responses in both Mexico and Brazil diverged from the political rhetoric employed by their respective presidents. In doing so, this research paper seeks to contribute to the nascent literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the provision and expansion of social welfare provision and policies. It does so by using the two identified variables to emphasize how important they are in determining the size and scope of social policy responses from central governmental bodies during times of crisis.

Mexico is the main case study referenced within this framework because, as aforementioned, its limited social policy response represents a puzzling situation in which the leftist platform of its leader betrays the actual nature of its response to the pandemic. The paper will compare Mexico to the second case study mentioned: Brazil. Brazil represents an equally confusing case during the pandemic. This is because despite the conservative platform of its president, Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's social policy response ended up being a lot more expansive and defined than that of Mexico.

For the first variable, examples of the strength of leftist opposition influencing social policy initiatives and reforms will be briefly considered for both cases in order to highlight the role leftist opposition strength has played in the politics of the welfare state. The argument will then shift towards quantitatively analyzing the results of the 2018 election in both Brazil and Mexico. In doing so, the strength of the opposition in both countries is identified in order to showcase how it influenced the nature of the social policy response in Brazil and Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper argues that high levels of leftist opposition strength generated more inclusive and generous social assistance programs in Brazil while low levels of opposition generated inaction and retrenchment in Mexico during the pandemic.

For the second variable, the differential development of the welfare state in Brazil and Mexico is considered. This is done to highlight how different policy legacies emanated from their distinct approaches to social welfare and influenced the nature of social policy responses to the pandemic. Particular focus will be given to welfare state developments during the Left Turn that characterized Latin American countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In doing so, this paper argues that positive policy legacies

associated with the *Bolsa Familia* explain why Brazil passed proactive measures during the pandemic, despite a conservative presidential administration. Meanwhile, policy legacies associated with the restricted coverage, strict conditionalities, and low benefits of *Oportunidades* explains why Mexico experienced a much more limited response based on austerity despite having a left-wing president.

The organization of this research paper will be as follows. The next section will review the literature pertaining to variables that contributed to the development of the welfare state and literature that compares Brazil and Mexico's social policy responses during the pandemic. This section will then present the argument that two particular variables, the strength of leftist opposition and policy legacies of the two major CCTs in Brazil and Mexico, can explain why they differed in their response to the pandemic. The Empirics section will analyze the importance of these two variables in greater detail. For the first variable, the section will consider the 2018 election results and consider how this election played an important role in determining the strength of leftist opposition in both Mexico and Brazil and their pandemic responses. For the second variable, the characteristics of *Bolsa Familia* and *Oportunidades* will be considered in order to explain why each generated a positive and negative policy legacy, respectively, and how these policy legacies were relevant in the social policy responses of Brazil and Mexico during the pandemic. Lastly, the conclusion will provide a concise overview of the argument and evidence discussed throughout the paper. It will then briefly consider the merits of future points of consideration, such as policy implementation and subnational variation, and how these factors may factor into the effectiveness of social policy responses during times of crisis.

**Literature Review**

One of the foremost topics relevant to the argument in this paper is the development of the welfare state in different Latin American countries. Books and chapters by authors, including Segura-Ubiergo, Haggard and Kaufman, and Huber and Stephens consider a multitude of variables that have contributed to the development of the welfare state, such as regime type, the strength of the left, trade openness, policy legacies, and institutional strength. Within these readings, there is a recognition that the presence of variables such as democracy, strong left parties, positive policy legacies, and entrenched institutional strength have all contributed to the development of more generous social policies and more robust welfare states within Latin America. This paper draws on two particular variables from these readings to make its argument: the strength of the left and policy legacies.

The first variable, the strength of left parties, merits special attention in this literature review because it is strongly considered for this paper's arguments. This is because Mexico represents a situation where its president was already "left" and did not see a generous social policy response as argued in the readings mentioned above. Whereas, in Brazil, although non-leftist actors contributed to the more generous social policy response, it was the overwhelming Congressional and civil influence of the Left that explains why Bolsonaro seemingly betrayed his own political ideology in his pandemic response. A number of sources cited in this paper, such as those of Garay; Huber and Stephens; Blofield, Giambruno, and Filgueira; and Giraudy, Niedzwiecki, and Pribble consider how the strength of the Left is relevant in the pandemic in Brazil and Mexico and are utilized for this very purpose in the paper's argument.

Lastly, literature that compares Mexico and Brazil during the pandemic is useful because it identifies specific information that differentiates their social policy response, such as the breadth of their social assistance programs or the number of people affected, to name a few. Research by Lustig and Trasberg; Blofield, Lustig, and Trasberg; and Blofield, Giambruno, and Filgueira provide key numerical figures that illustrate the social context in both countries during the pandemic. They also provide key insights into why their pandemic responses might have differed, such as the legacy of previous social assistance programs, mobilized opposition, presidential ideologies, etc. These insights are relevant to the two variables used in this paper's argument.

*Social Policy Responses in Mexico and Brazil During the Pandemic*

With the literatures mentioned above in mind, this paper considers the following observations and arguments in mind. The social policy responses of Mexico and Brazil are both insightful when compared in tandem. The leftist ideology and rhetoric employed by Obrador during his presidential campaign and Bolsonaro's traditional right-wing ideology both betray the actual nature of their social policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although both essentially downplayed the significance of the coronavirus, as established earlier, Obrador's social policy response in Mexico was much more limited than that of Bolsonaro's social policy response in Brazil.

As mentioned before, the two variables that are considered significant in this research paper are the strength of leftist opposition, including, but not limited to leftist parties, movements, and political actors, and policy legacies from the two major CCTs in Mexico and Brazil. It is these two variables that will be analyzed within the political

context of these two case studies in order to discern what explains the limited social policy response in Mexico.

The strength of leftist opposition is a variable that has been prevalent in the study of welfare state development in Latin America within the past century. The strength of leftist parties has been cited as one of the key main variables that determines the extent of social policies and whether social expenditures will be increased or reduced. In other words, the political orientation of the president and the concentration of power are not the only relevant determinants; it is also the mobilizational capacity of leftist opposition that is crucial in shaping the outcome of policy reforms and responses (Huber and Stephens 157). Huber and Stephens make this argument in the context of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s in Latin America, but this paper asserts that this argument is fully relevant and applicable to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a special emphasis on the strength of leftist opposition in explaining the social policy responses in Mexico and Brazil.

Likewise, the logic of policy legacies is one that is useful to consider when trying to understand the shape that social policy responses took in Mexico and Brazil. Brazil's legacy of "generous social policy and existent universalistic social programs" positioned the country within a more comfortable spot than Mexico, which has had a much more fragmented social welfare system, at the onset of the pandemic (Giraudy, Niedzwiecki, and Pribble).

This is particularly relevant when comparing the policy legacies of the two major CCTs in Brazil and Mexico, the *Bolsa Familia* and *Oportunidades*. In that sense, it can once again be concluded that the ideology of the president is not the sole relevant factor

when it comes to social policy responses. This variable showcases how the policy legacies of these CCTs were relevant in determining the social policy responses of Mexico and Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is no coincidence that Brazil, the country with positive policy legacies from the *Bolsa Familia*, had a more comprehensive social policy response over Mexico, which had a restrictive CCT that left negative policy legacies.

These two variables and their effect on the social policy responses of Mexico and Brazil will be explored in further detail using historical trends and contemporary data in the section below.


**Empirics**

How exactly was Brazil's social policy response more generous than Mexico's during the pandemic? One of the major differences which will be discussed in further detail below is the implementation of an emergency social assistance program in Brazil versus the commitment to pre-pandemic social assistance programs in Mexico. In Brazil the Auxilio Emergencial (AE) was created as a replacement of the *Bolsa Familia* in response to the *Bolsa Familia's* inability to address the drastic increases in poverty and inequality resulting from the pandemic. AE was relatively successful in "supplementing the incomes of the poorest deciles" and inequality may not have risen as drastically thanks to the social assistance program (Lustig and Trasberg 2021). In addition, the Brazilian government has both extended the AE and added additional transfers due to Congressional pressure, effectively reducing extreme poverty (Blofield, Giambruno, Filgueira 58). Other relevant pandemic response measures include opening credit lines

for companies to allow them to continue to pay worker salaries, establishing emergency benefits due to reduced work hours and in lieu of salary, and delivering cash transfers to the informal sector.

In Mexico, on the other hand, there was a notable aversion from President Obrador to create a new and broad social assistance program specifically designed for pandemic social crises. Instead, relatively small and inadequate programs were created with conditionalities that targeted very specific demographics. In most cases, these smaller programs were inadequate as income substitutions that could stave off the effects of poverty. Some limited measures enacted by the Mexican government include the creation of new jobs through public works projects and promising workers full salary until August 2021 if they were laid off. However, Obrador's commitment to austerity meant that there were not "subsidies for protecting formal sector employment, as other countries had done," and no additional social protections for those in the informal sector either (Blofield, Giambruno, Filgueira 58-59). Unsurprisingly, in the face of federal inaction, some state governments tried to provide some social protection, but lacked the adequate resources to do so effectively.

What explains this variation in the pandemic response between Brazil and Mexico? The relevance of the two variables identified in the argument will be explained in the following subsections.

*Strength of Leftist Opposition*

The strength of leftist opposition actors is a highly relevant variable when explaining the social policy responses of Mexico and Brazil during the pandemic. The

logic behind this variable is that the strength of the left will determine whether central governments will adopt or expand certain social policy initiatives. In cases where leftist opposition is high, central governments are more likely to adopt social initiatives that go against their partisan ideology if it serves to placate the clamor of social movements and prevent electoral threats to the incumbent party. As a result, this context presents the opportunity for more expansive social policy initiatives and the implementation of social assistance from both sides of the political spectrum that extended, in some cases, to members of the informal sector, or "outsiders" (Huber and Stephens 175-176, ). Conversely, in cases where left opposition strength is low, central governments are less likely to suffer electoral consequences for policy inaction or even policy retrenchment. The inability of the opposition to apply political pressure on the incumbent party within this context prevents any feasible attempts for social policy reform or expansion.

This political dynamic is one that has played a role at various points in Mexico and Brazil's history. For instance, during the neoliberal tide of the 1990s, the weak strength of the Left in Mexico allowed the country to fully privatize its pension system while strong levels of leftist opposition in Brazil, conversely, prevented any private components being added to its pension systems (Huber and Stephens 158). Some more specific examples include the 1998 election in Brazil and the 2000 election in Mexico where leftist opposition strength played a role in generating social policy action from the Cardoso and Fox administrations in each country, respectively (Garay 147-148, 236-237).

Thus, based on the examples just discussed, the applicability of this political dynamic is useful when considering the Bolsonaro and Obrador administrations during

the pandemic and explaining what shaped the size and scope of each government's respective social policy response.

In Brazil, although Bolsonaro rejected social distancing requirements and purported false information about the COVID-19 virus, a fragmented Congress, where neither Bolsonaro or leftist opposition held majorities, came together to create new social protection measures beyond Bolsa Familia, which Bolsonaro agreed to amidst plunging approval ratings (Lustig and Trasberg 2021).

The strength of the left within the context just discussed can be traced to the results of the 2018 election. It is true that Bolsonaro won by a clear majority over Fernando Haddad in the 2018 presidential election as shown in Table 1.1. However, the results of the Congressional races provide insight into the fragmented state of Congress just mentioned. As shown below, the party Bolsonaro ran under, the Social Liberal Party (PSL) won only 11 percent of the Senate seats won in the 2018 election. The other 88 percent of seats were won by parties ranging from leftist parties to centrist parties to right-wing parties. Although not all of these parties necessarily opposed or disagreed with Bolsonaro's political ideology, the fact that the PSL was only one of twenty parties that won seats in the 2018 election reveals the immense level of electoral competition that existed in Brazil during this time frame.

As a result, despite Bolsonaro's right-wing political orientation, the sheer multitude of opposition parties that presented electoral threats and pressure in Brazil prevented Bolsonaro from proceeding with plans of inaction or retrenchment typical of more conservative administrations. Instead, the political initiative to implement "these [social assistance] stemmed not from the executive branch, but from the Congress"

where coalitions of legislators and civil society actors on the left mobilized in order to influence the adoption of crucial social policies in response to the pandemic (Lustig and Trasberg 2021).

**Table 1.1: Share of votes garnered by Bolsanoro's side and his opponents in the 2018 elections (Sources: Reuters Graphics and ElectionGuide.org)**

|  | Bolsonaro and his party (Social Liberal Party) (PSL) | Opponent(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Share of the presidential vote | 55.13% | 44.87% |
| Share of Congressional seats won in the Brazilian Federal Senate | 11.36% | 88.64% |

On the other hand, in Mexico, Obrador's Morena party holds political majorities in both chambers of Congress, and despite his commitment to austerity measures, his approval ratings have remained relatively stable since opposition parties like the PAN or PRI are not considered "viable governing alternatives" (Lustig and Trasberg 2021).

As in the Brazilian case, the 2018 election provides clear indications of the strength of the opposition. Table 1.2 below provides figures on the presidential election result and figures on the share of electoral seats won by MORENA and opposition parties in the Mexican Senate. In both the presidential and Congressional races, Obrador and his party won by clear majorities. However, the opponents column is a bit misleading in Table 1.2 as it considers all major opposition electoral figures combined rather than by individual figures of various opposition actors. When the different

opposition parties and actors are considered individually, the dominance of Obrador and

MORENA in the 2018 election becomes more striking. In the presidential election,

Obrador managed to gather 53.19% of the vote while the PAN candidate only gathered

22.27% of the vote and the PRI candidate gathered 16.4% of the vote. These figures

reinforce the claim mentioned earlier by Lustig and Trasberg that the PRI and PAN were

not considered viable governing alternatives. This claim holds up when analyzing the

results of the 2018 Senate race in Mexico, as well. Of the three major electoral

coalitions that existed during the 2018 election, the "Together We Make History"

coalition, which encompassed Obrador and his party, won 58 percent of the Senatorial

seats up for grabs in the election. Meanwhile, the PRI and PAN coalitions only won 13

percent and 27 percent of the Senatorial seats, respectively.

**Table 1.2: Share of votes garnered by Obrador and his party, MORENA, in the 2018 election (Sources: WilsonCenter.org and ElectionGuide.org)**

|  | Obrador and his party (MORENA) | Opponent(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Share of the presidential vote | 53.19% | 46.81% |
| Share of Congressional seats won in the Mexican Senate | 58.24% | 41.76% |

Thus, Obrador's social policy inaction during the COVID-19 pandemic is not as

surprising, even if it does betray the leftist rhetoric of his presidential election campaign.

Since the strength of leftist opposition following the 2018 election was so low, Obrador

gained the political flexibility to maintain austerity measures without facing electoral and

political repercussions, even as unemployment, food insecurity, and other related social dilemmas rose in the wake of the pandemic. Since the PRI and PAN were both marred by the recent legacies of corruption scandals and policy failures, their ability to pressure the Obrador government was relatively minimal (Lustig and Trasberg 2021).

A relevant perspective argued by Cesar Renteria and David Arrellano-Gault offers more insight into the weakness of the opposition during the Obrador administration and the COVID-19 pandemic. These two authors compare the "populist" response of the Obrador government with the non-populist response of the Jalisco state government. One of the major arguments is that the populist rhetoric employed by Obrador and his government, and consequently, their social policy response, was one that fundamentally depended on a logic of appropriateness where "making sense of the circumstances" was based on prior beliefs and "related previous experiences in crisis management" (Arellano-Gault and Renteria 2021). Meanwhile, the approach employed by the Jalisco state government toward the pandemic involved basing their understandings on external expert knowledge with references to World Health Organization recommendations and following the strategy used by countries that addressed the pandemic at an early stage (Arellano-Gault and Renteria 2021).

The comparative analysis by these two authors provides a crucial insight. It illustrates that, despite leftist opposition strength being low, there was, in fact, a subnational response that attempted to offset the social policy inaction of the Obrador government during the pandemic. However, these efforts were relatively contained to a regional or state level and were hampered by fiscal limitations. Therefore, even in situations where the left is capable of mobilizing a response, the strength of leftist

opposition and its ability to provide political and electoral pressure nationally determines whether incumbent governments will adopt social policy initiatives and expansions, as can be seen in this case.

In short, the strength of leftist opposition played a major role in determining the social policy response in Mexico and Brazil. The ideology of each country's respective president mattered little when considering this variable. In Brazil, although Bolsonaro was a right-wing conservative, the social policy response ended up being much more expansive than expected because of the ability of leftist opposition forces in Congress and civil society to pressure the president. Meanwhile, the lack of such a formidable opposition force in Mexico allowed for Obrador and his government to retain their affinity for austerity measures. The scant political legitimacy afforded to the PRI and PAN limited their ability to politically pressure and challenge Obrador and his MORENA party. As such, Mexico's social policy response to the pandemic was much more limited than Brazil's, despite the pro-poor and leftist rhetoric employed by Obrador during his presidential campaign.

*Policy Legacies*

Yet, the strength of the opposition is not the only relevant factor when discerning what influenced the shape of the social policy response of Mexico and Brazil during the pandemic. The logic of policy legacies is also an important variable to consider in order to understand why Brazil had a much more generous social policy response than Mexico. This logic dictates that the success or failures of past policies define the decisions that policymakers take for present policies. Policy legacies can "generate

coverage gaps that push politicians" to respond to demands, generate fiscal pressure that push politicians to take action, or shape politicians' perceptions of budgetary constraints and fiscal costs of reform, "[limiting the scope of [their] action" (Arza, Castiglioni, Martinez, Niedzwiecki, Pribble, Sanchez-Ancochea 46-47). As mentioned earlier in this research paper, Brazil developed a more generous policy regime that had existent universalistic social programs while Mexico's policy regime was much more stratified and less generous in nature (Giraudy, Niedzwiecki, and Pribble 2020). This is reflected in the CCTs of each country. In Brazil, *Bolsa Familia* had a positive policy legacy associated with the reinforcement of social citizenship and poverty alleviation. In contrast, *Oportunidades* in Mexico was marred with negative policy legacies of social stigmatization for recipients, restricted coverage, and relatively inadequate benefits. The significance of these policy legacies is explored further below.

In the Brazilian case, the 2002 election of left-wing PT candidate Lula de Silva was met with expectations of social policy reforms and improvements. Although Lula de Silva did not achieve all his goals to the extent that he originally visioned, his administration passed key social initiatives, such as a new, financially sustainable pension reform, the implementation and expansion of the *Bolsa Familia*, an increase in the minimum wage, and increased expenditures for health care (Huber and Stephens 192).

Among these reforms, the policy legacy of the *Bolsa Familia* is the most important when attempting to understand why Brazil had a more expansive pandemic response compared to Mexico. The *Bolsa Familia* represented a transfer program that not only aimed to "break intergenerational poverty by providing immediate income to

poor families," but also aimed to foster investment in human development and human capital within Brazil's social policy aim under Lula de Silva (Hunter and Sugiyama 833). The *Bolsa Familia* was a social transfer program that destigmatized the view of cash transfers and redefined the character of these cash transfers as constructive and beneficial.

How did the *Bolsa Familia's* policy legacy translate to Brazil's pandemic response? For one, the rigidity of the Bolsa Familia as a policy made it easy for the program to be scaled up in order to include 1.2 million more people who had previously been on the waiting list (Lustig and Trasberg 2021). However, the insufficiency of *Bolsa Familia*, especially for those who did not qualify for the program, pushed Congress and civil society actors to vouch for the passage of Auxilio Emergencial (Emergency Aid)(AE), a new temporary cash transfer program in response to the pandemic. The AE's implementation built upon the *Bolsa Familia's* implementation, since the AE covered "those already registered in the existing, non-contributory *Bolsa Familia* cash transfer program" (Blofield, Lustig, and Trasberg 6). This existing *Bolsa Familia* registry allowed the AE to also include low-income informal workers and self-employed workers since less resources were needed in order to account for *Bolsa Familia* recipients.

Thus, the policy legacy of the *Bolsa Familia* is apparent in Brazil's pandemic response. The implementation of an emergency of a new social assistance was met with overwhelming support from civil society actors and opposition actors in Congress, despite Bolsonaro's conservative political orientation. This was due in large part to the overwhelming success and popularity of *Bolsa Familia* in the years since its implementation, especially in regards to its ability to address poverty and inequality in a

productive manner. Furthermore, when it became apparent that even the *Bolsa Familia*

was not enough to mitigate the detrimental socioeconomic effects on Brazil's poor and

working class during the pandemic, the passage of a new social assistance program

was treated with familiarity and support, rather than resistance, by capable and relevant

leftist political actors.

  The same cannot be said for Mexico. Social policy reform during the early 2000s

in Mexico was a lot more stratified and a lot less generous than reforms in Brazil. Under

the Vicente Fox administration between 2000 and 2006, there were innovations and

reforms that were undertaken in the areas of income support, pensions, healthcare,

education, and other related social issues. However, unlike in Brazil, these social policy

reforms were a lot more restrictive and market-based. For instance, the Mexican

equivalent of Bolsa Familia, *Oportunidades, was* flawed in many ways. Some of these

flaws included the targeting of only those in extreme poverty, the imposition of an

artificial quota, strict enforcement of conditionality (in contrast to the supportive

conditionalities of Bolsa Familia), and moderate levels of benefits, all of which

"[reflected] a preference for limited government intervention" from the Fox administration

(Garay 244). Reforms in healthcare, pensions, and education reinforce this argument

since all of them involved some form of either limited coverage, low benefit levels, or

erosion of social institutions in favor of more market-based providers.

  The policy legacy of *Oportunidades* is pertinent to understanding the limited

social policy of Mexico during the pandemic. First of all, the means-tested nature of the

*Oportunidades* was fundamentally different from that of *Bolsa Familia* because of its

incredibly strict nature. Rather than supporting families who failed to meet

conditionalities, Mexico's *Oportunidades* would simply cut off beneficiaries from the program with little to no chance of benefits being reinstated, even if compliance was once again met. It is no surprise that by 2019, the *Oportunidades* program had come to an end due to flawed targeting, low benefit levels, and governmental opposition to the program. Consequently, there was no replacement in sight capable of filling the health and educational gap left by the program's demise (Kidd 2019, Bearman 2019). By the onset of the pandemic, there was no real social assistance program that Mexico could emulate or build a foundation off of for an emergency program capable of dealing with the pandemic. In that sense, the policy legacy of a limited and ineffective social program made the proposition for a new one unappealing in Mexico.

In that sense, the negative policy legacy of *Oportunidades* has led President Obrador to commit to austerity despite increased poverty and inequality in Mexico during the pandemic. It was Obrador who made the decision to end *Oportunidades*, as well as a few other childhood programs and social assistance programs. Although Obrador did implement three new cash transfer programs, these programs are restrictive since they only cover those above or below the working age, do not provide an income floor for the working population, and only extend to about 40 percent of those below the poverty line (Lustig and Trasberg 2021). The other 60 percent do not meet the requirements to be eligible for these programs. Thus, Mexico's policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic was one that continued to "pursue its pre-pandemic policies," where policy legacies of limited government intervention, restrictive coverage, and low benefits remain strong, and "[Mexico] has not created new [substantial] cash transfer programs or expanded existing ones" (Blofield, Giambruno, and Filgueira 59).

Subnational governments have attempted to alleviate some of the deficiencies from the federal response, but face acute limitations financially.

In sum, the differential policy legacies of the *Bolsa Familia* and *Oportunidades* in Brazil and Mexico explains why their COVID-19 responses went against the ideologies of their respective presidents In Brazil, the more robust development of the *Bolsa Familia* created policy legacies that made the formation of inclusive social assistance programs much more familiar and acceptable during the pandemic as evidenced by the creation of the AE. This can be attributed to the *Bolsa Familia's* success in the early to mid- 2000s. Meanwhile, in Mexico, the characteristics of the *Oportunidades* program was a lot more restrictive in nature. The program was highly means-tested, limited in benefits, and strict in its conditionalities, generating relatively negative policy legacies associated with social assistance programs. Therefore, the limited response in Mexico and Obrador's commitment to austerity can be interpreted as a response to the deficient legacy of *Oportunidades* during the early 2000s.

**Conclusion**

At first glance, Mexico's limited policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic represents a baffling political decision, given the anti-poor rhetoric President Obrador employed in his 2018 electoral campaign and the increasing rates of poverty and inequality to which the pandemic contributed. Yet, in this research paper, comparing Mexico's social policy response to Brazil's highlights two key variables that are crucial to explaining why Mexico had such a limited pandemic response.

The first of these two variables, the strength of the left, is important to consider in the political context of both Mexico and Brazil during the pandemic. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's downplaying of the virus and his conservative platform were essentially nullified by the strength of the left in both Congress and civil society. The Brazilian case showcases how high levels of left strength were able to provoke an executive social policy response that was rooted in mobilization by the legislative branch and civil society. Conversely, in Mexico, Obrador and his party, MORENA, were able to maintain a position of austerity and a limited social policy response because opposition strength was negligible. Despite increasingly severe social issues, such as rising unemployment and food insecurity, Obrador has managed to avoid any major dips in his approval ratings despite his social policy inaction.

The second variable, policy legacies, also contributes to answering why Mexico had such a limited social policy response to the pandemic. The most important emphasis is on the policy legacies of their main social assistance programs, *Bolsa Familia* and *Oportunidades*, respectively. The comparison of these two cases reveals how policy legacies, especially those associated with social assistance programs, impacted Brazil and Mexico's pandemic response. In Brazil, positive policy legacies deriving from the *Bolsa Familia* made the implementation of an emergency program appealing. This is best evidenced by the fact that opposition in Congress and civil society pushed for measures that went beyond simply expanding Bolsa Familia, which was Bolsonaro's original plan. In contrast, in Mexico, negative policy legacies associated with *Oportunidades* led to Obrador straying away from implementing any emergency social assistance programs. From his perspective, the benefits of austerity

are in its ability to "avoid the damaging effects of an IMF stabilization program," which would threaten spending for other social policies (Lusbig and Trasberg 2021). The Oportunidades program represented Obrador's worst fears: a social assistance program that kept spending high while ineffectively addressing the problem of poverty through its extreme targeting and meager benefit levels.

In sum, opposition strength and policy legacies are both variables that explain why Mexico had such a limited social policy response, despite its leftist administration. The lack of opposition strength in Mexico made it easy for Obrador to maintain austerity and policy inaction. Furthermore, the negative policy legacies associated with social assistance programs in Mexico bolstered Obrador's averseness to increasing public spending. From Obrador's perspective, the pre-pandemic programs were more than enough to address the socioeconomic problems that flared during the pandemic, and it was not necessary to increase social expenditure. In tandem, the negative policy legacies of social assistance programs in the past and the lack of opposition strength influenced Obrador's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and explain why Mexico had such a limited policy response.

With that said, it is important to consider the importance of implementation of social policies. This paper covers what influences the size and scope of social policy responses and identifies Brazil as having a more generous social policy response during the pandemic than Mexico. However, more social policies does not always necessarily mean more effective. As noted by Lustig and Trasberg, even though AE did represent a beneficial and effective program for those who did receive it, there were still troubles with its implementation such as the reliance on electronic applications, which

excluded those without Internet access, and the overly centralized nature of the

program, making implementation at the state and municipal level more difficult (2021).

Cesar Renteria and David Arrellano-Gault also consider how subnational responses can

differ depending on the actions of the central state. In their article, they note the way in

which the Jalisco state in Mexico attempted to carry out comprehensive social action

due to relative inaction from the central state. With this in mind, it would be useful to

consider the ideas posited by Sara Niedzwiecki on the politics of subnational variation.

Her argument states that "subnational governments react differently to national

policies," as some seek to enhance these policies while others seek to hinder them.

Within the context of the pandemic and the arguments made in this paper, it would be

useful to consider how the comprehensiveness of central state social policy responses

during times of crisis affects the cooperation and actions of subnational government

actors. This is a notable point for future consideration beyond this paper.

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