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## Partisanship, Cross-Party Coalitions, and Social Policymaking in Brazil

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### Abstract

Brazil is among the few countries where income distribution has become fairer in recent decades. Its Gini coefficient fell significantly in the 2000s while the left-wing Workers' Party government approved key equity-enhancing reforms in Congress. By analyzing hundreds of news pieces, legislative documents, and secondary sources, I show the strategies that incumbents from the left adopted to build and manage cross-party coalitions that allowed structural changes to materialize. This research is the first systematic effort to detail how three consequential redistributive policies in the areas of conditional cash-transfer programs, education, and minimum wages found their way through a fragmented legislature where the chief executive's party was minoritarian. Findings add nuance to social policymaking and reveal that partisanship-based approaches to how inequality declined in Latin America require deeper complexification. In the Brazilian case, leftist presidents improved redistribution by investing in multiparty cooperative arrangements while ideology got diluted in the process.

**Keywords:** Latin American politics; cooperation; coalition dynamics; political parties; social policymaking

### Resumo

O Brasil está entre os poucos países em que a distribuição de renda se tornou mais justa nas décadas recentes. O coeficiente de Gini caiu significativamente nos anos 2000, enquanto o governo de esquerda do Partido dos Trabalhadores aprovava reformas equalizadoras importantes no Congresso. Por meio da análise de centenas de notícias, documentos legislativos e fontes secundárias, demonstro as estratégias que incumbentes de esquerda adotaram para formar e administrar coalizões multipartidárias que permitiram a materialização de mudanças estruturais. Esta pesquisa é o primeiro esforço sistemático para detalhar como políticas redistributivas de impacto nas áreas de transferência condicional de renda, educação e salário mínimo encontraram um caminho por um legislativo fragmentado no qual o partido do chefe do executivo era minoritário. Os achados adicionam nuances ao entendimento de políticas sociais e revelam que abordagens baseadas em partidarismo para explicar como a desigualdade declinou na América Latina requerem maior complexificação. No caso brasileiro, presidentes esquerdistas melhoraram a redistribuição de renda via investimentos em arranjos cooperativos multipartidários, enquanto a ideologia acabou sendo diluída durante o processo.

**Palavras-chave:** política latino-americana; cooperação; dinâmicas de coalizão; partidos políticos; políticas sociais

In several countries around the world, inequality has been growing in the past decades. However, for most Latin Americans, inequality levels have actually declined after a series of social reforms in the region (López-Calva and Lustig 2010; Kapiszewski, Levitsky, and Yashar 2021). Across Latin America, many countries have enlarged their welfare systems between the 1980s and 2010s. For example, Brazil's income distribution became fairer during this period (Birdsall, Lustig, and McLeod 2012). After the end of military rule in 1985, Brazil expanded public education, launched an ambitious conditional cash-transfer program, and regularly raised minimum wages. As a result, the country's Gini coefficient fell significantly for consecutive years during the 2000s (Barros et al. 2010; Arretche, Marques, and Faria 2019; Ferreira, Firpo, and Messina 2022). This positive socioeconomic change is a prime manifestation of meaningful progress achieved in democratic regimes in recent times.

A leading body of scholarly work emphasizes partisanship and (leftist) party-society linkages as an essential mechanism in political processes that have culminated in less inequality and more social protection in Latin America. Power resources theory stresses that left-wing parties, the usual representatives of working-class voters, play a vital role in improving welfare conditions when they can compete in the political arena, win elections, and govern for relatively long periods. The rationale is that "power from below" matters; hence, redistribution increases to the extent that the lower classes, via their connections with the left, gain influence over social policymaking (Korpi 1983; Esping-Andersen 1989; Huber and Stephens 2012; Pribble 2013; Anria and Niedzwiecki 2016).

Yet executive-legislative relations, a constitutive part of the policy ladder, remain understudied in this literature. Legislatures in Latin America occupy a central place in the political processes shaping policy outcomes, as legislators can and do amend or reject executive proposals and even cut short the officeholder's mandate (Hochstetler 2006; Alemán and Tsebelis 2016). In democracies in which the party of the incumbent tends not to be majoritarian in the assembly, which is the rule in many Latin American countries, cultivating cross-party coalitions becomes critical for the president to survive and pass legislation (Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2018).

Under such conditions, it is also the case that the formation and management of interparty alliances are necessary for redistributive policies to advance. If it is reasonable to expect that a left-wing government wants to reward workers, it is equally plausible that a minority president wants to build a majoritarian coalition that can improve the chances of their social agenda being enacted into law. Therefore, in this type of democracy, coalition dynamics should affect the politics of equity-enhancing reforms.

My research presents the first systematic effort to detail three of the most critical redistributive policies approved under the first administrations of the left-wing Workers' Party (2003–2016) in the areas of cash-transfer programs, education, and minimum wage. I assess historical records to present a fine-grained account of the political decision-making process surrounding these reforms. As its main contribution, this article seeks to add nuance to social policymaking in Latin America.

Findings show that the Workers' Party government was aware the party did not have a majority in Congress by itself but that the executive could use different instruments to increase its legislative base. When in power, the Workers' Party adopted these instruments, such as cabinet appointments and favor-exchanging, to encourage right-leaning parties to support its program. Crucially, Workers' Party administrations even circumvented divisions within the left by courting potential allies on the right. By observing the political process behind each reform, the data reveals an association between a relative absence of societal input from below on one side and the presence of the president's coalitional tools on the other. Thus, the research contends that a left-wing government in Brazil expanded social policies by investing in cross-party cooperative arrangements while downplaying the ideology factor.

In the discussion section, I propose that new research could benefit from investigating links between left-right cooperation and recent socioeconomic gains in Latin America. In several countries in the region, institutional settings are characterized by minority presidents, and although the scholarly literature has advanced on how the executive in such systems influences policy outcomes, greater attention could be dedicated to the role that presidential coalitions play in social policymaking. The present article is an effort in that direction.

### **How the political left affects inequality**

Power resources theory (PRT) asserts that redistributive policies progress as political parties from the left become more competitive electorally. Promoting economic equality is contingent on the capacity of left-wing parties to mobilize the working class in support of more encompassing welfare states (Korpi 1983, 2006). The more resources the workers' representatives have available to compete in elections and extend the participation of societal actors in government, the more likely they are to shape political institutions in favor of deepening social protection systems. In sum, for PRT, a fairer income distribution depends on the lower classes being able to mold policymaking to their benefit (Brady, Blome, and Kleider 2016).

With the third wave of democratization, millions of Latin American voters gained the option to elect left-wing politicians. In various cases, the left won successive elections while advocating growing levels of social spending and broader coverage of public services. During the 2000s, leftist-led coalitions were simultaneously in power across the region in what became known as the Pink Tide (Levitsky and Roberts 2011). These governments broadened social safety nets and increased welfare payments, which either kickstarted or accelerated the fall of Gini coefficients in many countries (Huber and Stephens 2012).

As partisanship-based approaches argue, the emergence and expansion of inequality-reducing programs in Latin America depended on the left being electorally competitive and working-class movements gaining political weight and policy input through linkages with left-wing parties (Pribble 2013; Anria and Niedzwiecki 2016). Even if during the 2000s inequality also dropped in Latin American countries governed by the right, stronger (leftist) party-society connections may have determined the creation of more encompassing redistributive initiatives where the left held office. Cross-regional statistical analyses further validate the downward effect that left-wing parties would exert on inequality (Birdsall, Lustig, and McLeod 2012; Feierherd et al. 2023). Therefore, many studies claim that ideology remains a key variable affecting the processes that culminated in the inequality reductions across Latin America after democratization.

Accordingly, the left-wing Workers' Party in Brazil has been a perennial electoral force since the first presidential elections of the new republic in 1989; the party has always maintained close links with societal actors, and during its first time in office, from 2003 to 2016, Gini coefficients fell almost every year (World Bank 2023). The party won the presidency in five of nine national contests after the military dictatorship ended and finished second in the defeats. When in opposition, in the 1990s, it could adopt a strategy of resisting equity-enhancing bills on the basis that this would facilitate the party entering office to redistribute even more (Hunter 2010, 45–78). Also, since its foundation, the Workers' Party has been organized around links with unions and social movements (Keck 1995), and once in power, the party expanded the participation of those groups in policy forums (Mayka and Rich 2021). Experts have described the party as Latin America's most successful left-wing political organization (European Consortium of Political Research 2013; Reid 2014, 140; Bethell 2018, 213).

Yet, although it is reasonable to assume that a leftist president wants to reward the lower classes, and granting their representatives more influence over policies is a way of achieving such a goal, incumbents also work to enhance their political power, and to that end, approving their proposals in the legislature is essential (Geddes 2003). In this sense, as it is common in Latin American presidential systems that the chief executive's party is minoritarian in the national assembly, left-wing presidents may be required to seek the legislative votes of non-left groups to pass their social agenda. In turn, the necessity of cross-party cooperation could dilute the ideology factor and, consequently, the role of "power from below" in social policymaking.

In the Brazilian case, the Workers' Party arrived in power for the first time in 2003 after firming up an unprecedented electoral alliance with a right-leaning party, and in government—similar to its predecessor, the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB)—it led an ideologically diverse coalition that was large enough to get executive-sponsored legislation over the line (Power 2010, 2016). Therefore, an observable implication here would be that even though the Workers' Party was a dominant representative of the left in general elections and displayed deep linkages with working-class movements, the party downplayed its ideology to build interparty cooperative arrangements that could enable the approval of equalizing reforms.

### **Coalitions, cooperation, and how proposals become law**

Despite the alleged perils of presidentialism and the supposed difficult combination of presidentialism, multipartyism, and democracy (Linz 1990; Mainwaring 1993), a new wave of studies has found no inherent element that would make multiparty presidential systems prone to failure (Cheibub and Limongi 2002; Elgie 2005; Cheibub 2006; Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2018). Contrary to early negative expectations about stability and governability, with the consolidation of Latin American democracies, political scientists noticed that multiparty presidentialism could endure and that gridlock was not unsurmountable. Hence, advances in policy are feasible even if the political party of the president is minoritarian in the legislature (Figueiredo and Limongi 2000; Cheibub, Przeworski, and Saiegh 2004; Amorim Neto 2006; Cheibub and Limongi 2010).

When incoming chief executives lack a majority in the assembly, forming and managing cross-party coalitions becomes critical. Minority presidents will likely reach out to other parties to create alliances that could provide the government with greater legislative strength. In these terms, the capacity of the officeholder to attract support, coordinate interests, and administer conflicts is a key factor explaining the success of otherwise unexpected reforms in minoritarian presidential systems, also referred to as coalitional presidentialism (Abranches 1988).

Following Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power (2018), coalitional presidentialism represents strategic incentives for minoritarian incumbents to seek political partners in order to acquire a degree of influence over legislative works. Typically, minority presidents strive to enlarge their supporting base in the assembly because they want to finish their terms and approve their proposals. On this basis, to cultivate interparty alliances, they may have a toolbox at their disposal (Raile, Pereira, and Power 2011; Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2018).

As such, while pursuing those objectives by forming a coalition, presidents also end up taking ultimate responsibility for the coalition's management. In this sense, coalition management displays the chief executive's tactical choices to select instruments that can help them prevent potential impeachment threats and keep allies on board the presidential policy program. Thus, the chances of government survival and the passing of targeted legislation in a fragmented legislature rise when the executive has the means to foster cooperation among diverse political groups and these tools are employed effectively.

According to Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power (2018), minority presidents can count on five tools to form and manage coalitions: legislative and agenda-setting powers, the authority to appoint cabinet members, control over their political party (partisan powers), the ability to distribute budgetary allowances, and informal favor-exchanging powers. The implication is that coalition management can be considered effective when incumbents use these instruments, separately or in combination, to build and maintain majoritarian alliances that enable presidential programs to be turned into law.

The Brazilian case is crucial considering, on the one hand, the Worker's Party's prominence as a leading electoral competitor from the left, its foundational party-society linkages, and the substantial decline in inequality levels during its first administrations from 2003 to 2016. On the other hand, the country's legislature is one of the most fragmented in the world (Taylor 2020, 123), so constructing and sustaining coalitions constitute a pressing demand on the incumbent.

Evidence suggests that presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010, 2023–present) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) adopted the toolbox to attract cross-party backing for their policy agendas. For the period when the reforms analyzed here were introduced (2003–2011), whereas the Workers' Party always had less than 20 percent of the seats in Congress, taken together, the parties forming the governing coalition represented, for most of the time, a share of legislative votes greater than 60 percent (Montero 2014, 56). Every governing cabinet led by the party included right-leaning ministers (Amorim Neto 2019, 304–305). Lula and Rousseff used partisan and legislative powers to approve specific projects (Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2018, 111–114, 142–143). The executive's dominance and success rates in the legislature during Lula's first two terms and Rousseff's first remained around 70 percent and 90 percent throughout the period (Limongi 2006; Pereira 2017, 48–49).

Coalitional presidentialism works, and it matters. Considering incumbents want stability and to deliver on their policy program, it is plausible to expect that the Workers' Party governments passed their social agenda through a divided Congress with the cooperation of non-left legislators. In the process, the expectation is that (left) ideology was diluted by accords that may have prioritized coalition management over societal policy inputs from below.

### **The case of declining inequality in Brazil**

Brazil is among the few countries worldwide where, in the past decades, redistribution has improved and income inequality levels have declined (Birdsall, Lustig, and McLeod 2012). Barros and colleagues (2010) and Ferreira, Firpo, and Messina (2022) have demonstrated that extensive state initiatives were strongly associated with a fall in Brazil's Gini coefficient. They were mainly larger fiscal transfers to people experiencing poverty, reforms to augment school attainment, and increases to the national minimum wage. Morgan (2017) and Souza (2018) concur that a wider distribution of benefits, reforms to education, and raising of real minimum wages helped elevate the income share of the lower classes. The country's income distribution became fairer in the 2000s, and, crucially, Brazil's Gini coefficient came down while inequality trends worldwide arced upward (World Bank 2016). According to the World Bank (2023), although a decrease in the country's Gini index started to appear between 1997 and 2002, the fall in inequality accelerated significantly for the period 2003–2014, at the time the Workers' Party reached more than a decade in power.

### **Qualitative observations of political processes**

Although different statistical analyses suggest that inequality fell more significantly in Latin American countries where the left governed compared to where the right was in

power (Birdsall, Lustig, and McLeod 2012; Feierherd et al. 2023), those analyses do not reveal how the behavior of left- and right-wing parties might have differed in relation to social policymaking. They also overlook cases of leftist governments attracting the support of the right to approve inequality-reducing reforms, as well as cases of equity-enhancing programs approved under right-leaning coalitions, which subsequent left-wing administrations then continued. In short, such statistical exercises focus on the effects of causes, whereas this article is concerned with in-depth explanations of causes of effects (Gerring 2004). The article seeks to bring history back to investigate the political game behind different policy changes and check how political parties behaved when their ultimate vote determined whether redistribution would improve (Kreuzer 2010).

Therefore, three policies launched in Brazil by different Workers' Party administrations in the period between 2003 and 2011 were analyzed: Programa Bolsa Família (PBF), a conditional cash-transfer program that began on a smaller scale in October 2003 and whose official launch took place in January 2004; FUNDEB (Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica), an education reform that boosted public funding to schools, a constitutional amendment approved in Congress in 2006; and Brazil's first binding multiyear plan to provide real raises to the minimum wage (or MW), which received the legislature's assent in 2011. Historical evidence proved effective in setting objectivist generalizations against what sometimes was a messy reality.

I collected qualitative data from primary sources, including one of Brazil's most read and accessed newspapers, *Folha de São Paulo* (*Folha*) and Congress archives, and secondary sources. *Folha* is an authoritative source for academics interested in the country—see, for instance, Hunter (2010), Montero (2014), Garay (2016), Garmany and Pereira (2018), and Taylor (2020). Also, since 1978, still during the military regime, *Folha* has adopted a liberal editorial position openly defending redemocratization, civil society's participation in politics, and the fight against inequality (CPDOC 2022). That makes the newspaper comparatively less likely to register left-right cooperation as a relevant feature in the political processes that led to the approval of redistributive policies or social inputs from below as less important.

Empirical evidence from *Folha* exposes negotiations and the strategic positions of political parties around reforms. Legislative archives show how long bills took to be scrutinized, how parties voted on each bill, possible defections against the leadership's voting instructions, and whether politicians took the stand in Congress to manifest a cooperative or competitive stance toward each piece of legislation. By going through hundreds of news pieces, editorials, and opinion columns on *Folha*, as well as decision trees, the formal processing of bills, and multiple plenary transcripts in Congress's archive, I could observe causal mechanisms in action and catalog instances of players adopting or rejecting cooperation as well as how ideology and societal actors entered the political process.

I conform to a general consensus in the literature on social policymaking in Latin America and Brazilian politics to classify the political parties that appear in the policy cases below (Melo and Pereira 2013; Garay 2016; Garmany and Pereira 2018). The Workers' Party is a left-wing party that led a center-left coalition (2003–2016); the PSDB is a centrist party that headed a center-right alliance in 1995–2002; the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) is a center-right party; finally, the Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL), Partido Liberal/Partido Republicano (PL/PR), and Partido Progressista (PP) are right-wing, and the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT), Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB), Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB), and Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL) represent the left. While the Workers' Party was formed predominantly by middle-class groups and consolidated its ascendancy over the most vulnerable only in the 2000s, the party was born of an ambition to dethrone traditional elitist classes, and its constitutional links with rural and urban labor movements are pivotal in that sense (Garmany and

Pereira 2018, 47–48). Plus, although the PMDB held cabinet positions in both the PSDB and Workers' Party governments, which could render it ideologically amorphous, its national alliance with the Workers' Party was never envisaged until it happened (Bethell 2018, 216). The PMDB has long been a leading representative of conservative economic elites in Brazil.

Essentially, it is expected that the behavior of the Workers' Party governments matches the theoretical predictions of PRT, according to which a left-wing incumbent wants to reward low-income voters by giving working-class and social movements a more significant role in social policymaking. However, it is equally expected that a minority president pursues cross-party support to pass legislation. Therefore, if ingrained analyses of three of the most consequential inequality-reducing reforms carried out by successive Workers' Party administrations displayed the executive adopting presidential tools to prioritize agreements with non-left parties over societal policy inputs from below, then it would be valid to conclude that ideology was outweighed along the way.

Depending on whether evidence favors such a hypothesis, a crucial extra case would be added to the politics of inequality literature, and partisanship would be weakened as an explanatory variable for how income distribution became fairer in Latin America in the past decades. For replicability, a list of all evidence collected is available online in the article's Supplementary Materials. Each piece of data cited here can be found there in full by the code: policy (PBF, FUNDEB, MW) plus source (Congress, *Folha*) plus date (DD/MM/YYYY).

## The politics of redistributive policies in Brazil

### *Programa Bolsa Família*

The PBF case shows President Lula using legislative and partisan powers to approve a critical part of his policy agenda. Also, evidence shows that turning the scheme into law coincided with the right-of-center PMDB party entering the governing coalition—thus depicting the president's cabinet appointment tools. Crucially, Lula's control over the Workers' Party resulted in limitations for societal input in the cash-transfer program. Enabled by the presidential toolbox, shaping Bolsa Família as a technocratic product, built on existing initiatives first federalized by the previous center-right coalition, helped Lula's government harness the support of non-left legislators.

By the turn of the century, Brazil had already developed several local programs of social welfare payments. They were scaled up nationally in 2001, during the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB, 1995–2002), with the introduction of Bolsa Escola (Fenwick 2009, 109–112). The program made fiscal transfers to low-income families on the condition that they kept their children at school. In late 2003, Lula's first year in office, PBF was created by provisional measure, a presidential instrument of agenda-setting, legislative power that works as a law by decree at introduction while pending congressional verdict. The final legislative vote on the program took place in December, then turning it into ordinary law and allowing its official launch in January 2004. PBF unified Bolsa Escola, two other similar cash-transfer schemes inherited from Cardoso, and a newly launched state-funded food card—Cartão Alimentação (food card), which represented the Workers' Party administration's main social action at that point (Hall 2006).

The food card, aimed at subsidizing food purchases for the most vulnerable, was at the core of the umbrella Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) initiative, and it counted on the leadership of Workers' Party's members linked to social movements who wanted the program to have a strong element of civil society participation (Bruera 2015). However, its implementation was problematic once hierarchical structures were to be avoided, and the governance model involving social stakeholders never took off (Hall 2006; Fenwick 2009). In contrast, PBF could easily follow the template of Bolsa Escola's centralized, top-down organizational structure. As Hunter (2010, 154–156) and Bruera (2015) reckon, state efficiency and

delivery rather than inputs from below constituted the basis for the expansion of conditional cash transfers during Lula's first term.

The use of the president's partisan powers and the relative disregard for societal policy input in the design of PBF appears in frictions that emerged during the run-up to the program's launch. While ministers and bureaucrats worked on either solving the problems of *Cartão Alimentação* or replacing it entirely with PBF, divisions in the Workers' Party were brewing. A dispute about what would become the government's flagship social policy featured a group described as "neoliberals," mostly economists associated with the Ministry of the Economy, against another group of officials historically aligned with the Workers' Party (PBF-Folha-21/04/2003, 25/04/2003a, 25/04/2003b). *Neoliberalism* in this context meant the prioritization of means-tested, cost-effective policies, which had the intellectual backing of international organizations such as the World Bank (PBF-Folha-25/04/2003a, 30/09/2003, 25/10/2003).

"Neoliberals" wanted PBF to build on existing targeted programs, like *Bolsa Escola*, while the opposing group defended a retooled project based on universal principles and communitarian oversight—represented by *Cartão Alimentação*. The economy minister and Workers' Party member Antonio Palocci endorsed a targeted program, arguing it was not rightist and had a proven record of tackling poverty effectively (PBF-Folha-25/04/2003b). President Lula took advantage of his partisan powers and decided to go with "neoliberals." In two speeches, he first declared in the ceremony announcing PBF's creation that it should be seen as a state rather than a government institution, briefly mentioned how the program evolved from existing initiatives, and praised its effectiveness (PBF-Folha-20/10/2003). In a second public event, the then president celebrated his administration's early achievements, including PBF, while appraising politics as the art of the possible (PBF-Folha-19/12/2003).

Divisions within the left were exposed by the government's efforts to provide a gentle way out to Workers' Party members defeated in the debate against "neoliberals" while changes in the ministries responsible for PBF were taking place rapidly (PBF-Folha-19/09/2003a, 19/09/2003b, 14/11/2003, 20/12/2003). Once the legislature was ready to vote on turning *Bolsa Família's* into ordinary law, the governing coalition collected acclamation victories in both houses of Congress, with all amendments proposed in the plenaries being rejected (PBF-Congress-18/12/2003, 20/12/2003).

In the legislature, aligning *Bolsa Família's* format with policies introduced by the previous center-right governing coalition had significant implications. It facilitated attracting the votes of the now opposition, given that the president had control over his party, so he did not risk losing his side. Although there was a credit-claiming competition in Congress regarding which party, the Workers' Party or PSDB, would be the real parent of PBF, there was no serious contestation about its merit or design. In the Chamber of Deputies, a PSDB deputy spoke out against some uncoordinated attempts by a handful of opposition members from his party and the rightist PFL to extend the bill's scrutiny process and said at the tribune that the PSDB should approve *Bolsa Família* without delay as it signified a continuation of Cardoso's social policies (PBF-Congress-18/12/2003). Unanimous approval followed. Similarly, in the Senate, the PSDB's leader stated that nobody in their right mind could be against PBF, as it expressed a natural progression of programs implemented by the Cardoso administration (PBF-Congress-20/12/2003).

When President Lula used legislative powers to kickstart PBF via provisional measure, the program had already assumed a technocratic character that carried similarities with *Bolsa Escola*. Hence, cash transfers flowing to beneficiaries respected the prevalent "neoliberal" logic. In that sense, the executive gave right-leaning legislators an easy choice of backing an ongoing project that they could say they already supported when the PSDB-led coalition was in power. In the Senate, the bill's sponsor was a senator from PMDB, the proposal took one day to be passed in full, and scrutiny procedures were finalized in hours



(PBF-Congress-20/12/2003). Like the PSDB, senators at the right side of the spectrum—the PFL, PL/PR, and PMDB—highlighted that, just as their parties had backed related initiatives before, like Bolsa Escola, they would do so again (PBF-Congress-20/12/2003).

PL/PR was already part of the Workers' Party-led coalition, with the vice presidency and one ministry, and *Folha* reported that the PMDB's strong support for key government proposals helped the party win cabinet positions at a time when the Workers' Party wanted to enlarge its base in the legislature (PBF-*Folha*-31/05/2003, 06/01/2004). Thus, in early 2004, after PBF had just become law, the PMDB joined the governing alliance. The party jumped from zero to three ministries from the first to the second year of Lula's presidency (Amorim Neto 2019, 304), indicating his willingness to use presidential tools to enlarge the coalition with non-left partisans as social policies were being expanded.

### **Education reform**

Evidence of policy input by societal actors exists for the education reform, but they are limited to the stage of Congress negotiations while the project as a whole remained a technocratic enterprise that largely built on FUNDEB's predecessor—a change to education spending approved in the mid-1990s under Cardoso. On the one hand, civil society organizations, representative groups of local education directors, and teachers' unions accomplished tangible goals during the scrutiny of FUNDEB in the legislature; specifically, the extra funding provided by the reform ended up including nurseries and a hard target for the amount that state and municipal authorities had to direct to the remuneration of teachers.

On the other hand, not only were these initiatives not opposed by right-leaning parties, but also, the inclusion of nurseries was not part of the government's original proposal sent to Congress, and non-left legislators in the special committee voted unanimously for that addition into the sponsors' final bill report in the lower house. There, the legislation received only a handful of no votes. Moreover, many of these organized groups had already been articulated successfully by the education ministry during the approval process of FUNDEB's precursor (Draibe 2004; Menezes Filho and Fernandes 2019).

FUNDEB was a constitutional amendment that required at least two rounds of voting in each house of Congress, and at each time, approval depended on three-fifths of the votes. In every legislative stage, the education reform got nearly unanimous consent, and it was finally turned into law in December 2006, eighteen months after being proposed by the executive. Cross-party cooperation was facilitated by FUNDEB's design being similar to what legislators in opposition had voted before when the PSDB-led center-right coalition governed in the 1990s, and by the use of the presidential toolbox, particularly favor-exchanging and the distribution of cabinet positions, to attract right-wing backing for President Lula's administration.

Intending to increase school attainment in primary education, the government of Cardoso launched, in 1995, a transitory fund named FUNDEF (Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento do Ensino Fundamental e de Valorização do Magistério). FUNDEF reorganized federal, state, and municipal responsibilities in the public (free) education system; set a national minimum compulsory spending per pupil between seven and fourteen years old, with the fund topping up expenditures of less resourceful municipalities and states; and established mechanisms to reward local authorities that increased school enrollments (Hunter and Sugiyama 2009, 39). In 2005, as FUNDEF was about to expire, the executive, by then led by the Workers' Party, proposed the creation of FUNDEB, which kept most of the design of its predecessor but expanded the reach of the fund to preschools and high schools (Barros and Machado 2022). Choosing expansion through continuation was significant because, when in opposition in the

1990s, Workers' Party legislators were directed to vote against FUNDEF (Huber and Stephens 2012, 172–173).

In the FUNDEB vote, in both houses of Congress, members of PSDB and PFL, the main parties in opposition, and PMDB and PL/PR, rightist members of the Workers' Party-led coalition, openly defended it. Many claimed that the new fund was an extension of FUNDEF, and even some left-wing legislators praised the contributions to public education made by the expiring fund (FUNDEB-Congress-20/01/2006, 25/01/2006, 05/07/2006).

Gomes, Nogueira da Silva, and Costa Oliveira (2019) have argued that while FUNDEF loosely defined 60 percent of the fund's expenditure to teachers' training and earnings, FUNDEB specified that this percentage was to go exclusively to remuneration. The institution of a hard target for spending on teachers' salaries was a demand from unionized workers that only left-wing parties like the Workers' Party had vowed to attend. Other studies affirm spending under FUNDEF was already equalizing and that it was the fiscal expansion represented by FUNDEB to finance preschool and high school, which largely followed FUNDEF's premises, that enhanced the policy's redistributive effect the most (Cruz and Rocha 2018; Menezes Filho and Fernandes 2019). Critically, however, all these improvements were widely supported by centrist and rightist parties (FUNDEB-Congress-20/01/2006, 25/01/2006, 05/07/2016).

Moreover, during votes in Congress, legislators across the aisle acknowledged civil society organizations' role in extending FUNDEB's coverage to attend zero- to three-year-old children (FUNDEB-Congress-20/01/2006, 25/01/2006, 05/07/2006). Adding nurseries to FUNDEB was a change that deputies made to the proposal sent to Congress by the Workers' Party government itself (FUNDEB-Folha-15/06/2005, 08/12/2005). Therefore, non-left legislators supported amending the executive's project to serve a demand from societal actors.

While civil society participation and small-scale protests appeared during FUNDEB's legislative journey (FUNDEB-Folha-14/06/2005, 09/03/2006, 27/04/2006), a representative of an education-focused pressure group publicly asked politicians to approve the amendment faster and avoid the voting becoming a partisan issue (FUNDEB-Folha-20/05/2006b, 20/05/2006c). After the reform was first approved at the Chamber of Deputies, the two leading members of the reform's special committee, both from the Workers' Party, wrote an op-ed thanking social movements and all legislators for their help with modifying the government's proposal to include nurseries in the remit of FUNDEB (FUNDEB-Folha-10/04/2006). Later, after Senate approval, the education minister again thanked political parties for not turning the reform into an ideological dispute (FUNDEB-Folha-09/07/2006). The left and societal actors tried to downplay partisanship while signaling the benefits of cooperation.

Most disagreements in executive-legislative relations around FUNDEB regarded President Lula's complaints of a supposed delay in the analysis of the constitutional amendment (FUNDEB-Folha-05/12/2005, 28/12/2005, 04/04/2006b, 12/06/2006, 28/06/2006, 09/08/2006), which was fiercely rebuked by upper house members, including allies like Renan Calheiros of PMDB, the Senate's president (FUNDEB-Folha-28/06/2006b, 28/06/2006c). As senators scrutinized FUNDEB, the government changed its leadership in the house from the Workers' Party to the PMDB. With his favor-exchanging tool, the president worked to strengthen the alliance between the two parties, facilitating FUNDEB's approval as well as gathering support for the 2006 national elections and an eventual new term—which he won later that year (FUNDEB-Folha-31/05/2006). PMDB Senator Romero Jucá, who had already been house leader in the Cardoso years, regained his old job, and some of his right-leaning peers commended his conduction of the FUNDEB votes—which was unlocked in the Senate and unanimously passed soon after Jucá's appointment (FUNDEB-Congress-05/07/2006).

Noticeably, Lula was reelected in a contest in which his primary opponent, Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB), praised FUNDEB (and FUNDEF), saying it should not be an electoral battleground (FUNDEB-*Folha*-30/08/2005, 26/04/2006). Also, FUNDEB's bill sponsor in the Senate was the rightist Senator José Jorge (PFL), Alckmin's running mate. Besides, using cabinet appointments to increase the legislative base for his second term (2007–2010), as FUNDEB's final voting rounds at the lower house took place, Lula was informed by then PMDB's president, Michel Temer, that the party had accepted to be part of the incoming governing coalition (FUNDEB-*Folha*-23/11/2006). Between the end of 2006 and July 2007, the number of ministries held by the PMDB jumped from three to six (Amorim Neto 2019, 304).

### **Minimum wage**

As one of her government's initial legislative proposals, newly inaugurated President Rousseff sent to Congress in February 2011 a bill to turn into law an agreement reached with unions in 2007 by Lula's government establishing a formula that would guarantee annual real raises to the MW (MW-*Folha*-10/02/2011b, 16/02/2011e). If before 2011, every year the executive prepared a new bill adjusting the MW according to the agreed criteria, Rousseff's project created Brazil's first binding multiyear policy that predetermined yearly increases in the minimum wage (MW-*Folha*-03/02/2011b). The Workers' Party believed it continued to honor its compromise with workers, and in that respect, an element of social input exists in the MW example.

However, this case also shows unions subjected to the Workers' Party's authority and ample use of the presidential toolbox to form a majoritarian alliance around a value for the 2011 MW that was below what unions demanded but fit the executive's fiscal plan. The president relied particularly on partisan and favor-exchanging powers to circumvent divisions within the left while courting the support of right-leaning parties. Meanwhile, after winning the 2010 national election as Lula's hand-picked candidate, Rousseff counted on an enlarged PMDB as her government's main partner. At that point, PMDB held the vice presidency with Temer, plus seven ministries (Amorim Neto 2019, 305).

From the defeat of hyperinflation in 1994 and for two decades after, different Brazilian governments raised the national minimum wage in real terms. Saboia and Hallak Neto (2018) estimate that during the Cardoso administration, real raises to the MW amounted to 35 percent, whereas in the first decade of the Workers' Party government, the MW increased by 68 percent. In 2011, both in the Chambers of Deputies and in the Senate, the governing coalition faced almost no resistance to instating a formal urgency for the scrutiny of the bill, and in both houses, the project was approved easily and quickly (MW-*Folha*-15/02/2011p, 22/02/2011g; MW-Congress-16/02/2011, 17/02/2011, 23/02/2011, 24/02/2011). This MW's legislative journey at the beginning of Rousseff's presidency repeated what had happened with previous MW projects in the Cardoso and Lula years (MW-*Folha*-19/02/11a). As *Folha* put it in an editorial, once again, the executive's firepower had prevailed (MW-*Folha*-18/02/2011e).

In the Chamber of Deputies, where opposition to the bill was more robust, opponents from the right and center, plus critics on the left, wanted in fact to amend the government's proposal to set the MW at a higher level—in line with what unions were demanding (MW-Congress-17/02/2011; MW-*Folha*-09/02/2011d, 11/02/2011a,e). In the 2010 presidential election, the eventually defeated PSDB candidate had promised to elevate the minimum wage above the value that was then current in the last year of Lula's second term (MW-*Folha*-09/02/2011d, 11/02/2011a). However, after the opposition's amendments were rejected, the executive's bill received acclamation approvals from deputies and senators.

The position of coalition members in the executive's defense was to stress that a higher MW would deteriorate the country's national accounts (MW-Folha-13/01/2011, 08/02/2011d, 15/02/2011i). In a speech to the legislature, President Rousseff expressed her concerns that a disproportionate MW increase could risk fueling inflation (MW-Folha-02/02/2011f). The Workers' Party's coalition partners on the right, such as PMDB, PL/PR, and PP, gave the government nearly total support to vote down the opposition's amendments in both houses of Congress (MW-Congress-16/02/2011, 17/02/2011, 24/02/2011; MW-Folha-16/02/2011p, 16/02/2011r, 17/02/2011b, 23/02/2011m, 23/02/2011n, 24/02/2011b).

In the Chamber of Deputies, left-wing PSOL was the only party whose leadership advised a no vote against the government. For them, the proposed minimum wage would be unacceptably low (MW-Congress-17/02/2011). For the same reason, the coalition saw a few defections from a small number of deputies of leftist PDT and the Workers' Party itself (MW-Folha-17/02/2011f). In contrast, all deputies from the largest rightist party in the coalition, PMDB of Vice President Temer, backed the executive by unanimously rejecting the opposition's amendments to change the MW proposal upwards (MW-Folha-18/02/2011h). Following an easy win in the lower house, the bill faced an even clearer path in the Senate (MW-Folha-18/02/2011h). Continuing as the government's leader there, Senator Jucá (PMDB) became the bill's sponsor. Following the executive's order, he accomplished the government's goal of passing it as quickly as possible (MW-Folha-22/02/2011g, 23/02/2011a, 23/02/2011). Senators concluded the legislative processing of the new minimum wage in just two days and without alteration (MW-Congress-23/02/2011, 24/02/2011).

Unions protested loudly against the government's position on the MW (MW-Folha-04/02/2011c,d, 16/02/2011). Union leaders criticized what they saw as an unfair fiscal adjustment led by Rousseff's administration, staged several protests, articulated mobilizations with students' and rural workers' movements, and pressured legislators at the lower and upper houses of Congress (MW-Folha-17/01/2011c, 18/01/2011, 27/01/2011, 14/02/2011f, 15/02/2011d, 15/02/2011l, 24/02/2011a). Unions received backing from some deputies and senators, especially members of the PDT party, but they were contested by the Workers' Party and most of its allies—evidence of Rousseff's using partisan powers. Former president Lula, the party's most prominent leader, accused unions of opportunism (MW-Folha-08/02/2011a). Other party figures publicly stated that the unions' position was mistaken and that the government would not act irresponsibly (MW-Folha-08/02/2011d, 08/02/2011f, 10/02/2011f, 15/02/2011n). Coalition partners followed the executive's request and defended Rousseff's fiscal caution (MW-Folha-11/02/2011c). A Workers' Party senator who had threatened to back a higher minimum wage retreated after a meeting with Rousseff; he deferred to her ask for party unity (MW-Folha-17/02/2011j, 22/02/2011c, 23/02/2011d, 23/02/2011f).

Favor-exchanging was also used as a presidential instrument for coalition management in the political process leading to the approval of the MW. Before the vote in the Chamber of Deputies, the government made known that budget access could be cut from legislators who voted against the bill (MW-Folha-12/02/2011a), and a PDT minister had his position challenged because of the defections in his party (MW-Folha-17/02/2011m, 17/02/2011n). After the MW was approved, the executive authorized political appointments to public banks, state-owned companies, and other state agencies made by coalition allies PMDB, PP, PSB, and PCdoB (MW-Folha-06/02/2011a, 16/02/2011c, 18/02/2011a, 18/02/2011d). The government had paused the process of filling the positions while it waited for the result of the MW voting (MW-Folha-06/02/2011a, 16/02/2011a). After victory in the MW, an influential PMDB member told the media that President Rousseff was glad her coalition had shown cohesion (MW-Folha-17/02/2011i).

### Discussion and concluding remarks

This article has addressed the following puzzle: although partisanship-based approaches assert that left-wing political parties in government improve redistribution by giving the lower classes more influence over social policymaking, a president in a minoritarian position needs to form a cross-party coalition to pass legislation. Therefore, it could be expected that leftist minority presidents work to attract for their social agenda the support of non-left parties, and ideology gets diluted along the way.

The detailed study of three consequential equity-enhancing initiatives promoted by Workers' Party governments in 2003–2011 confirms this expectation as observable implications about the downplaying of partisanship and effective coalition management can be plausibly ascertained. As Lula and Rousseff advanced with their redistributive reforms, it was possible to observe an association between a relative absence of societal policy inputs from below and the presence of presidential tools employed to form and manage multiparty alliances. Two concurrent trends, which cut across all cases above, underscore the salience of such association: the three policies assumed a technocratic character, and the number of ministries controlled by the right-of-center PMDB party went from zero to three in 2003–2004 and from three to seven, plus the vice presidency, between 2004 and 2011.

Therefore, to the extent that it was reasonable to expect that, when a left-wing party held office, social and labor movements would play an integral role in the development of inequality-reducing programs, the example of the Workers' Party governments (2003–2016) weakens the explanatory power of partisanship and (leftist) party-society linkages. Conversely, concerning coalitional presidentialism and social policymaking, this study indicates that if minority presidents have effective instruments to form and manage interparty alliances, equity-enhancing reforms can succeed even if ideology ends up being downplayed. Crucially, Lula and Rousseff even circumvented divisions within the left while pursuing the approval of their proposals with votes from the right. To be sure, this article does not disprove that left-led administrations tend to be more redistributive than rightist ones or that the public spending preferences of the left would be better aligned with low-income groups. Instead, findings establish that, in the crucial case of Brazil, the Workers' Party achieved a fairer income distribution by investing in cross-party cooperative arrangements and avoiding ideological conflict.

In the case of Programa Bolsa Família, the executive decided to sideline the food card and the Zero Hunger initiatives, which aspired for greater civil society participation, and promote a conditional cash-transfer program that followed a top-down structure. At the same time, President Lula used his agenda-setting, partisan, and cabinet appointment powers in the approval process of PBF. Likewise, for FUNDEB, societal policy inputs were restricted to the legislative arena, representatives of social movements and even the left itself refused the activation of partisan linkages, and a victory by an organized group during the scrutiny of the reform (the inclusion of nurseries) implied a change in the executive's original project. Meanwhile, in the education reform, it is possible to observe the president using his toolbox to facilitate approval in Congress—in this case, favor-exchanging and cabinet appointments were deployed.

Finally, the same association exists for the minimum wage project. On the one hand, unions' demand for a higher raise to the minimum wage was publicly reprovved by members of the Workers' Party-led coalition who wanted to affirm the government's commitment to fiscal responsibility. On the other hand, President Rousseff ordered her legislative base to fall in line in the congressional voting—which they did (partisan powers), and after the lower house approved the MW, loyal allies were authorized to make political appointments for public banks, state-owned companies, and other state agencies (favor-exchanging powers).

Power (2010, 2016) considers that a national consensus existed in Brazil from 1994 to 2014, represented by the dominance of two policy-driven parties at the federal level, the Workers' Party and PSDB, that would share comparable inclusionary plans. Consensus is less evident in the cases of PBF and FUNDEB, as there is an indication that the Workers' Party was divided on these policies; a group in the party defended the food card over PBF, and party members voted against FUNDEB's predecessor in the 1990s. Power (2010, 2016) also acknowledges that during the consensus period, the Workers' Party first resisted the stabilization measures of 1993–1994, which ended hyperinflation and gave an immediate boost to the earnings of low-income earners, and then moved its economic thinking to the political center in the run-up to the party's first presidential victory in 2002. Still, the author states that how coalitional presidentialism was operated would mark a continuation between Cardoso and Lula, as both adopted presidential tools to overcome their minoritarian status in Congress and pass legislation. In these terms, the key finding presented here, that left-right cooperation underpinned the success of equity-enhancing reforms in the 2000s, even if ideology was diluted in the process, is reinforced.

Mauro (2021) suggests that electoral competition between the Workers' Party and PSDB, two relatively institutionalized parties, significantly affected inequality reduction in Brazil, whereas partisanship would have had a diminished effect. In the three policy cases analyzed here, there is evidence that both the Workers' Party and PSDB promised the electorate that they favored increases in redistribution. Nevertheless, the intentions of the party in power are not enough, and policy proposals must get legislators' consent to be enacted into law. For instance, in 1998, the PSDB government lost a vote to create a minimum retirement age for formal workers in the private sector (people in informality and rural work had already to respect a minimum age to retire), and in 2007, President Lula suffered a legislative defeat when trying to renew a contributory tax whose revenue was earmarked for the public health-care system (Skidmore 2004; Arretche, Marques, and Faria 2019). Besides, after Congress voted to impeach Rousseff in 2016, her program was automatically abandoned—Brazil's second presidential impeachment since redemocratization. These were cases in which alliances broke down. In contrast, the three policies studied in this article are examples of effective coalition management being vital for their materialization.

It is well known that negotiations between the Workers' Party and other coalition members in the years being considered could involve corruption practices such as illegal vote buying and fraudulent campaign financing (Doctor 2017, 11–12; Taylor 2020). In the policy cases, examples exist that the Workers' Party and its coalitional partners filled vacancies in the public administration with political appointees, and that was later found to be one of the strategies parties adopted to set up kickback schemes. Even though there is no direct evidence of criminal activity in the data I collected, controversial backroom deals could have been the price the Workers' Party accepted to pay to secure legislators' support and, especially in the 2010s, the party and its allies found themselves in trouble before the courts and the electorate due to corruption investigations (Whitehead 2021). As it is, the presidential toolbox remains operational as the third Lula administration (2023–present) pursues the backing of different parties to advance its agenda (Pooler 2023).

Analytically, this article demonstrates the robustness of Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power's (2018) multivariate approach to the study of coalition management; minority presidents have several instruments available to cultivate multiparty alliances, and different tools may be employed for the same goal. The framework sheds new light on executive-legislative relations and the functioning of the presidential toolbox. In this paper, the case of a government facing steep levels of coalition necessity corroborates predictions in Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power (2018) that cabinet appointments may represent coalitional presidentialism's most common currency as fragmentation makes power sharing increasingly unavoidable and that minority presidents seem to have a basic

homework to do in keeping their own party under control (partisan powers) and disposing of resources to attend legislators' requests when necessary (favor-exchanging powers). More policy and country case studies would help better identify specific conditions under which one tool might be more likely to be used than another.

Additionally, in line with Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power (2018), macroeconomic circumstances could make coalition management more or less challenging. Academic works argue that the commodity boom of the 2000s provided additional fiscal space for Latin American countries, which helped drive regional improvements in income distribution (Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Sánchez-Ancochea 2021). Extra export revenues benefited Brazil during the Workers' Party's first stint in government, and the favorable external scenario might have facilitated the approval of equity-enhancing reforms as politics needed not become a zero-sum game then. The Workers' Party administrations expanded public spending through initiatives like PBF, FUNDEB, and minimum wage raises in a context of growing commodity rents, and in that respect, it would be reasonable to expect that greater financial room could have strengthened coalitional instruments such as budgetary allowances and the distribution of favors. Therefore, to the extent that economic conditions may affect the presidential toolbox, a commodity boom could be a scope condition influencing effective coalition management in Brazil, and as such, it should be subject to further investigation.

The scholarly literature on the relationship between Latin American political institutions and policy outcomes has evolved substantially in the past decades, and the view that minority presidents can use formal and informal tools to navigate fragmented legislatures—with varied degrees of success—is consolidating (Haggard and McCubbins 2001; Alemán and Tsebelis 2016; Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2018). Yet executive-legislative relations are still largely missing in studies about social policymaking in the multiparty presidential systems of Latin America. This article represents an effort to examine how coalition dynamics shaped political processes leading to socioeconomic gains.

More broadly, since the 2010s, polarization has been rising in many Latin American countries at the same time that democracies in the region are losing quality and inequality levels started to go up again (Levitsky 2018; Busso and Messina 2020; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2023). Greater attention to whether less space for political cooperation is associated with worsening welfare indicators could have substantial implications for new research on the politics of equity-enhancing reforms.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2024.33>

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