

# THE ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR OF THE POOR IN BRAZIL

## A Research Agenda

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*Abstract: Some deem the Bolsa Família program (BF) in Brazil to be a quintessentially clientelistic tool, thought to have produced colossal sociodemographic transformations in the base of support of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, particularly in the 2006 election. An earlier article (Bohn 2011) maintained that significant changes in Lula's electoral base took place prior to his reelection; other social policies, such as the Benefício de Prestação Continuada, contributed significantly to the changes in Lula's camp; and, most important, that the link between the receipt of social benefits and vote is less straightforward than those who view Bolsa Família as a clientelistic program assume it to be. This work addresses some of the criticisms that the article received and reinforces the need for further research that uses individual-based data to disentangle the complexity of the electoral behavior of the poor in highly unequal societies.*

No sooner were the results of the presidential election of 2006 in Brazil made public than observers started to point to the potency of the Bolsa Família (BF), a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program, as a clientelistic tool. They argued that instead of the educated and highly politicized voters from Brazil's industrial belt that supported Lula in the 1989 presidential election, Lula's voters in 2006 were overwhelmingly the poor, particularly from the Northeast. These poor, who are said to have "carried Lula to victory" (Hunter and Power 2007, 24), were not just any poor; they were recipients of conditional cash transfers through the Bolsa Família. Furthermore, it was argued that "Bolsa Família is a very cost efficient way to 'buy' votes," particularly given the fact that Lula managed "to claim direct credit for the benefits to the poor" (Zucco 2008, 48, 40).

This particular diagnosis of the 2006 presidential reelection gives rise to several questions. First, given that Lula was a three-time unsuccessful candidate for the presidency, when did his constituency really start to change? Did its transformation parallel the very gradual process of "normalization" (Hunter 2007, 2010), or deradicalization, of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), a former proponent of socialism (Samuels 2004)? Or, on the contrary, did the bulk of the changes occur after Lula controlled the presidency of Brazil, when he could make use of the state's resources to expand his electoral support? Second, what evidence did BF-as-clientelism proponents provide that CCT recipients cast their votes for Lula in higher percentages than nonbeneficiaries? Finally, and, perhaps more important, did the vote for Lula in 2006 imply that the "Bolsa Família is no more than the latest 'technology' in the field" (Zucco 2008, 45)? Does it resemble,

in some regards, the electoral strategies used by caudillos and *coronéis*, as “Victor Nunes Leal told us just that more than 50 years ago in his classic work *Coronelismo, enxada e voto*” (Hunter and Power 2007, 9)?

These questions composed the backdrop against which I crafted my 2011 article. The current text begins with a summary of the main shortcomings of analyses of BF as a tool of clientelism. These limitations are worth mentioning, as they drove me to look at the phenomenon using individual-based data. I then briefly summarize the research design that I used in my 2011 article, address some of the criticisms that the paper received, and list my main conclusions. In the final section I discuss the implications of those conclusions for the study of the behavior of the poor.

#### INFERRING VOTE AND VOTERS’ MOTIVATION FROM AGGREGATE DATA

The works of some who view BF as a clientelistic instrument (Hunter and Power 2007; Zucco 2008) contain two sorts of propositions: (1) BF beneficiaries voted for Lula in higher percentages than nonrecipients, causing a massive transformation in this politician’s electoral base of support *after he became incumbent*; and (2) BF recipients voted for Lula at higher rates because they are part of a client-patron relationship.

What is the evidence supporting these assertions? Interestingly, the two works mentioned utilize *aggregate data* to infer both the vote and voters’ motivation.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Hunter and Power use Lula’s vote share computed at the state level, Zucco uses the same indicator aggregated at the municipal level. Despite this difference, the conclusion of both works is strikingly similar: there was in 2006 a “strong interelection swing toward Lula in states that score low on the HDI and the strong swing against the president in Brazil’s most socioeconomically modernized states” (Hunter and Power 2007, 6); “in 2006 Lula performed better in less developed municipalities” (Zucco 2008, 40).

Therein lies one of the three key weaknesses of these studies. Their unit of observation is at the group level (Lula’s vote share in states or cities), but their conclusions pertain to individual behavior (i.e., individual votes), creating a clear case of “ecological fallacy” (Dutton 1994; Matsusaka and Palda 1993; Piantadosi, Byar, and Green 1988; Robinson 1950), which amounts to an enormous leap of faith.<sup>2</sup> What is worse is that both works utilize the same data to make inferences about individual motivations of the vote as well. The higher likelihood that BF beneficiaries would vote for Lula is said to be a “response by voters to direct cash handouts from the government” (Zucco 2008, 35), transforming the 2006 presidential reelection into “yet another unfolding of the old story of using the government to build clientelistic support” (Hunter and Power 2007, 9). Both works

1. Note that both studies provide descriptive statistics from public opinion surveys, but their analyses and main conclusions are *not* based on these data.

2. There are authors, such as Cove and Hughes (1980), who have tried to work on improving individual-based inferences from aggregate data.

caution, though, that BF is clientelism of a new type: the “*clientelism of the kind employed by Lula* is fully representative of a ‘citizen politician linkage,’ not to be diminished or disparaged as being somehow inferior to a programmatically based linkage” (Hunter and Power 2007, 25). Tellingly, Zucco’s study ends by suggesting that nowadays in Brazil the old practice of crafting clientelistic support by “building roads” has been replaced, with the Bolsa Família program, by the practice of distributing “cash to the poor” (Zucco 2008, 49). In sum, group-level observations are highly inadequate for gauging correlations between two variables at the individual level; using aggregate data to infer individual motivation is even more problematic.

A second important weakness of both works pertains to issues of tautology and multicollinearity. If the BF program is well targeted, one definitely should expect a very high correlation between BF scope and a negative HDI (Human Development Index); that is, municipalities (or states) with a higher percentage of poor individuals should have more BF beneficiaries than areas with lower proportions. This is tautological, and perhaps helps explain the high correlations found. Moreover, Zucco’s (2008) models 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 likely suffer from massive multicollinearity, as there likely is collinearity between the variables nonwhite and BF scope, nonwhite and HDI, and local tax and HDI. This is due to Brazil’s racialized poverty and the fact that poor cities, by definition, collect smaller amounts of taxes and therefore have fewer resources to maintain local services to their citizens, which evidently has negative consequences for their HDI scores.

Finally, the proponents of BF as clientelism lack a more extended longitudinal perspective, which does not enable them to examine the alternative hypothesis of gradual changes over time in Lula’s electoral base of support. If the view of a sudden change after incumbency is correct, then one should expect substantial similarities in the profile of Lula’s voters in 1989, 1994, and 1998. However, this bigger longitudinal perspective is absent from their studies.<sup>3</sup>

#### SOCIAL POLICY AND THE 2006 VOTE

How did the shortcomings of these works inform my 2011 article? First, I chose to work with individual-based data from five different public opinion surveys to verify whether the ecological correlations between being a Bolsa Família recipient and voting for Lula found by Hunter and Power (2007) and Zucco (2008) matched the correlations between these variables when they are measured at the individual level. However, my analysis sought to verify only *whether* BF beneficiaries actually voted for Lula in higher numbers than nonrecipients in the 2006 presidential election. I did not aim to assess voters’ motivation, as I deemed that the 2007 LAPOP (Latin American Public Opinion Project) questionnaire did not have the necessary questions to enable one to properly understand *why* individu-

3. Interestingly, both studies utilize this more extended longitudinal perspective to compare a gap between Lula’s vote in presidential elections and the PT’s vote in simultaneous congressional elections.

als voted (or not) for Lula. Relying on this specific survey, I argued that BF recipients already supported Lula in the 2002 presidential election and that they voted for him in the 2006 contest at the same rate as nonparticipants.

Second, I introduced a longitudinal perspective. I compared Lula's base when it comes to gender, age, education, and income in five surveys from different points in time (1989, 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2006) and showed that some of the changes in Lula's electoral base were gradual (such as among voters in the 35–44 and 45–59 age brackets, and among low-income individuals). Other changes, in contrast, were definitely swift: for instance, "senior citizens, who had always been reluctant to vote for the PT's candidate, supported Lula massively during his reelection, that is, when he ran as incumbent" (Bohn 2011, 64).

Third, given that the 2006 survey items did not enable me to gauge the motivations of the vote of BF participants and therefore to test the BF-as-clientelism view with individual-based data, I reasoned that if the CCT policy were essentially a clientelistic tool, then it should work in similar ways across the Brazilian territory. This reasoning led me to test the degree of homogeneity of a pro-Lula vote across regions over time among the poor. This analysis pointed to statistically significant differences across regions when it comes to the likelihood of a pro-Lula vote among the poor in 2006. Moreover, these statistically significant differences were also visible in previous electoral disputes, particularly the presidential elections of 1989, 1994, and 1998. In my view, these differences raise important questions in relation to the assessment of BF as a quintessentially clientelist instrument. Even though I cautioned that my analysis did not rule out the possibility of the political use of the BF program, particularly pertaining to "the recruitment of participants or in the expansion of cash benefits or program coverage" (Bohn 2011, 72), I specifically emphasized the need to examine rival explanations for voters' motivation (such as retrospective and prospective voting). I will take up this point again below.

In response to this analysis, Zucco and Power (2013, in this issue) make three main criticisms. First, according to them, my 2011 paper argues "that there was no major shift in Lula's constituency between 2002 and 2006" (Zucco and Power 2013, 2). The excerpts below show that this last assessment reflects a rather hasty reading of my paper:

First, the comparison of the profile of Lula voters in the five presidential electoral cycles in which he participated . . . reveals that his quest to go beyond his and his party's traditional base has been in course since at least 1994. The shift in Lula's electoral base might have been more dramatic in 2006 than in 2002, but it was under way much earlier than that. (Bohn 2011, 56)

Third, Lula's voters became more concentrated around the lower end of the income spectrum. (Bohn 2011, 66 and 67)

Second, Zucco and Power (2013) maintain that there are problems with an important independent variable used in my 2011 article to identify Bolsa Família participants. The survey question that I used has the following wording: "O(a) sr(a) participa do programa BF1A. Bolsa Família do governo federal?" (Do you participate in the BF1A Bolsa Família program of the federal government?) According to Zucco and Power (2013, 14), "this poses some conceptual difficulties

Table 1 Pro-Lula vote in the first round of the 2002 and 2006 elections

Presidential election	TSE official results	Survey results <sup>a</sup>
2002 <sup>b</sup>	46.4%	32.5%
2006 <sup>c</sup>	48.6%	54.1%

Sources: <sup>a</sup>Survey results: 2007 survey, the AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), [www.LapopSurveys.org](http://www.LapopSurveys.org)

<sup>b</sup>Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, Resultado da eleição 2002, [www.tse.jus.br/eleicoes/eleicoes-anteriores/eleicoes-2002/resultado-da-eleicao-2002](http://www.tse.jus.br/eleicoes/eleicoes-anteriores/eleicoes-2002/resultado-da-eleicao-2002)

<sup>c</sup>Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, Resultado da eleição 2006, [www.tse.jus.br/eleicoes/eleicoes-anteriores/eleicoes-2006/resultado-da-eleicao-2006](http://www.tse.jus.br/eleicoes/eleicoes-anteriores/eleicoes-2006/resultado-da-eleicao-2006)

from the outset. The program is generally targeted at households, not individuals, so [this] question is somewhat restrictive." This assessment reveals a bit of misinformation regarding the actual functioning of the BF program. The program uses per capita household income to identify poor families and recruit them, and enters their information in the national "unified registry" (*cadastro único*). After the appropriate families have been recruited and enrolled, a single individual from these particular families receives an electronic card with which he or she can access the benefit. Thus, the question selected above is perfectly in line with the official design of this social policy.

Zucco and Power's (2013) third main claim pertains to data quality issues. Interestingly, their direct replication of my analysis confirms the results presented in my 2011 article. However, they argue that these results are not valid (both the results of my analysis and their replication of it) as they are based on inherently weak recall data, which do not accurately match the 2006 presidential elections. My results are indeed based on recall data. In this regard, it is important to mention that, mainly due to the complexities of their political system, Brazilians do suffer from "electoral amnesia," but that this effect is small when it comes to presidential elections (Almeida 2006).

The magnitude of a pro-Lula vote in the survey that I used for the first round of the 2002 and 2006 presidential elections is presented in table 1. Table 1 also compares the survey's pro-Lula vote with the real election results. As one can see, the 2007 LAPOP survey is off by a few percentage points as far as the vote for Lula in the first round of the 2006 election is concerned. It overestimates a pro-Lula vote by 5.5 percentage points. When it comes to the 2002 self-reported pro-Lula vote, the 2007 LAPOP survey actually underestimates Lula's vote. This runs contrary to Zucco and Power's argument, which claims that Lula's popularity at the time of the survey tainted individuals' memory and led them to recall his name at higher rates than the actual election results. This is clearly not the case.

In sum, contrary to what Zucco and Power (2013) argue, my 2011 analysis does identify important changes in Lula's base of electoral support. The variable used to identify BF recipients is perfectly in line with the program's official directives. Finally, there are marginal differences in the recall data on the vote in the first round of the 2006 presidential elections, and the corresponding data for 2002 actually underestimate Lula's share and do not overestimate it.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The most productive ways of advancing the academic debate on the electoral impact of receiving conditional cash transfers certainly do not involve making hasty inferences about voters' motivation using vote shares aggregated at the state or municipal level. Instead, it is necessary to devote serious attention to the poor. This entails reframing entirely the way in which the poor are usually cast as an object of analysis. Rather than seeing them as the centuries-old prey of self-interested, canny political elites from the right or the left, one needs to analyze them as political citizens with agency in the electoral arena and in other dimensions of social life as well. This task can only be accomplished with further studies that, using individual-based data (quantitative and qualitative), are able to unpack the complexities of the impact of poverty on citizens' relationship with the political universe. The complexity of this impact stems primarily from the sheer multiplicity of socioeconomic and financial conditions; different levels of access to cultural goods; and different possibilities, hopes, and aspirations that are embedded in the sometimes useful, sometimes infertile analytical category "the poor."

In practical terms, restoring political agency to the poor means trying to understand the differences that separate completely marginalized individuals from those who are just marginally poor; the rural poor from the urban poor; or the poor in economically developed areas of a country from the poor that remain in areas entrenched in archaic patterns of social relations. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon the academic community also to verify whether there are subnational determinants of attitudes, norms, and beliefs that shape political behavior and that might have greater explanatory power than the condition of poverty itself. In sum, it is necessary to unpack the category *poor* to better analyze the links between this condition and the behaviors that one can detect at the political level.

Finally, as far as the BF-as-clientelism claims are concerned, as I mentioned in my 2011 article (Bohn 2011, 72), one needs to focus on the parties' strategies and not only on the voters' responses. Looking at the political agency of the poor evidently does not preclude one from also examining political parties' agency. However, the latter goes beyond the simple analysis of aggregated shares of voting results. In the particular case of Bolsa Família, a preliminary step would involve studying, among other things, the Workers' Party's strategy of expanding the coverage of the program. For instance, was the expansion of this social policy timed to coincide with the period right before the elections? Is this done on a regular basis—that is, before each electoral season? Does the recruitment of new beneficiaries occur in areas dominated by anti-PT mayors? Do the frontline social workers, responsible for recruitment and enrollment of new members, privilege certain areas of any given city to the detriment of others that have similar pockets of poverty? In other words, is there political partiality in the inclusion of eligible individuals in the program's national registry? The answers to all or some of these questions could indeed be yes. The important point to be made here is that there are absolutely no data in Hunter and Power (2007) and Zucco (2008) that elucidate these issues. Finally, assuming that a case for the political use of the Bolsa Família

program can in fact be made, one would have to examine the individual motivations of the beneficiaries, which, again, cannot be done through the analysis of changes in state-level or municipal-level vote shares.

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