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Research Statement

My research focuses on the politics of poverty and inequality. I am particularly interested in questions of policy responsiveness and social policy. For example, I am trying to understand how governments vary in their responsiveness to different socioeconomic groups and, specifically, when governments are more likely to implement policies that benefit the poor. Likewise, I am interested in the consequences of social policies once governments decide to implement them. Do policies achieve the stated goals and what unintended consequences do they have? My work has largely focused on Latin America, a region where many citizens still remain excluded both from the benefits of periods of economic growth and from political decision making despite the fact that democratic politics has largely taken hold.

Dissertation Summary: Privileged Interests

My dissertation asks under what conditions governments will be more responsive to the interests of lower socioeconomic groups. While democracy should, in theory, entail the “continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals¹,” we know that democracies often privilege the interests of elites over those of other citizens.² Yet, there are times when we observe the implementation of policies that benefit the lower classes. I argue that governments will be more responsive to the interests of lower socioeconomic groups where left parties are in control, electoral environments are more competitive and civil society is stronger. I take a subnational approach in my dissertation, looking at variation among Brazilian states, and make use of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The first chapter of my dissertation is a quantitative analysis of how subnational governments in Brazil allocate their budgets. Specifically, I am interested in when they allocate more money to social policies that disproportionately benefit the lower classes such as public education, health, and social assistance. For this purpose, I created an original data set that includes information on all 26 Brazilian states plus the Federal District from 2002 through 2017. Using time series cross-sectional methods, I find that states are constrained by their economic conditions such as their debt burden, but despite these constraints, politics still matter. I find evidence that the left parties in government, the level of electoral competition, and the strength of civil society are important determinants of increased spending on progressive social policies. I have presented versions of this chapter at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, UNU-WIDER, and the 2020 American Political Science Association Meetings. It is currently under review.

The additional chapters of my dissertation examine the causal links I advance in my quantitative analysis through systematic comparative cases studies of three states. The states I selected, Rio Grande do Sul, Goiás, and Paraná, are similar in terms of their economic structures, wealth and population sizes, but vary on key political variables of interest such as the level of political competition and the strength of left parties and civil society. For these case studies, I draw on

¹ Dahl, Robert. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press.

² See for example, Gilens 2009, 2012 and Bartels 2008.

both comparative historical analysis of the development of each state and interviews conducted during 12 months of fieldwork in Brazil. During my time in Brazil, I interviewed 75 academics, politicians, and civil society leaders to understand better who is able to influence the direction of policy in each state.

These case studies provide significant additional support to my hypotheses. For example, the case of Goiás represents a least likely case of responsiveness due to limited political competition, a weak left, and comparatively weak civil society. My interviewees, leaders of civil society groups representing the lower classes, reported difficulty finding allies in the government and were able to point to few cases where the government followed through with implementing a policy that they pushed for. Rio Grande do Sul, on the other hand, scores high on all three variables and represents my most likely case for responsiveness. In this state, lower class groups noted they had greater access to the state government when the left held power, but that they could exert pressure when non-left parties held power. My final case, Paraná, has high levels of competition and civil society strength, but weak left parties. This provides evidence a strong civil society may be able to serve as a substitute for having left parties in government.

This project makes several important contributions. First, I show that there is important subnational variation in Brazil when it comes to responsiveness to lower class citizens. In particular, I return our attention to the level of states which have recently been overlooked in light of trends towards both centralization and municipalization and growing constraints at the state level. My research shows that states still matter; they pursue different policies and show varying degrees of openness to the inclusion of lower class perspectives in determining what policies to pursue. Additionally, my work contributes to our understanding of partisan politics in the Brazilian context. I find support for an important role of left parties in increasing responsiveness to lower socioeconomic groups

Additional Projects:

In addition to my dissertation, I am working on several other projects. Each of these projects looks at the interconnections between politics and poverty from different angles.

Neopatrimonialism: In an article recently published in *Latin American Politics and Society*, my co-authors and I argue that Latin American governments have been characterized by varying degrees of neopatrimonialism since their return to democracy. While access to power is now governed by democratic rules of the game, once in power, rulers often face limited oversight and are able to appropriate resources for their own benefit. We develop a novel measure of neopatrimonialism and examine how neopatrimonialism has varied across the Latin American region and within individual countries. We then analyze the consequences of neopatrimonial rule for poverty, finding that neopatrimonialism is associated with higher levels of poverty.

Social Investment: In a forthcoming book chapter, Evelyne Huber, John Stephens and I examine the extent to which Latin American social policy has moved in the direction of social investment, that is, towards a focus on human capital development rather than on traditional consumption-oriented policies. We analyze spending in the region showing that there has been a concerted effort to increase investment in social policies since the 1990s, though types of policies pursued

have varied. We find that the degree to which policy reforms pursued have achieved inclusive, social investment goals varied based on the political commitments of the incumbent government and the policy legacies. While governments of both the left and right implemented reforms, reforms led by the left placed greater emphasis on equity and improving quality compared to right-led reforms which focused primarily on expansion of coverage with little regard for equity and quality. Likewise, reforms from both sides of the political spectrum were limited by policy legacies such as private providers or insurance companies with a stake in the existing system.

Conditional Cash Transfers and Political Participation: In this piece, I turn my focus to how social policy affects politics. Specifically, I look at the conditional cash transfer programs that have become so common in Latin America and analyze how these policies affect the political participation of beneficiaries. Making use of inverse probability of treatment weighting to more closely approximate a randomized control study, I find that compared to otherwise similar citizens, beneficiaries of CCTs are more likely to participate in a variety of ways ranging from attending municipal meetings to helping solve a community problem. I argue this increased participation can be attributed to the fact that those who benefit from CCT programs have previously not seen the state as responsive to their interests. Upon receiving a CCT benefit, they gain a stake in politics and see the state as more efficacious. This paper is undergoing final edits for journal submission.

Subnational Responses to COVID-19 in Brazil and Mexico: In this piece, my co-author and I look at the responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil and Mexico, two cases where the national government has negated the seriousness of the disease and failed to take swift national action in line with public health guidance. In both cases, the burden of imposing and enforcing social distancing measures has been left to subnational authorities. In this paper, we examine how subnational governments have responded to the crisis and how variance in these responses affects citizen compliance with public health norms. Specifically, we ask two interrelated questions. First, when do governors choose to contradict the president and implement strict social distancing measures? Second, under what conditions are subnational measures most successful at reducing citizen movement? We find that subnational policy responses are primarily driven by contextual factors, and in particular the severity of the outbreak in each state. Political variables become more relevant, though in different ways in Mexico and Brazil, when we consider citizen responses, as measured by changes in mobility. This paper was presented at the Southern Political Science Association Annual Meeting in January 2021 and shortly will be ready for journal submission.

Future Research Directions:

The first priority of my future research agenda will be extending my dissertation into a book manuscript. One extension I would like to pursue, that will also serve as a stand-alone paper, is an analysis of the states' use of force against its own citizens. In the context of Brazil, the military police fall under the control of the state government, and in my interviews I was told of many instances where the military police were used to silence certain voices. I plan to conduct an analysis of news reports to understand under what circumstances state governments have chosen to respond to citizens, particularly those in lower socioeconomic groups, not with policy, but instead with suppression. This extension will help elucidate the ways in which lower class

citizens are excluded from politics as well as highlight the importance of subnational research for understanding central questions related to violence and citizen insecurity.

In addition to extending my dissertation, I plan to focus on a two-part co-authored project with Ted Enamorado looking at the consequences of electoral rules on cabinet composition.

For this project, we will take advantage of a change in electoral rules that occurs in Brazilian municipal elections when the population crosses a threshold of 200,000. In municipalities with smaller populations, elections are first-past-the-post whereas in municipalities with populations over 200,000 elections follow a two-round system. In the first part of the project, we will test our hypothesis that this difference in election rules should have consequences for who an elected mayor appoints to cabinet positions. Based on the findings that dual-ballot elections result in smaller pre-electoral coalitions compared to first-past-the-post elections, we hypothesize that mayors elected in dual-ballot elections will have fewer commitments to coalition members so will be more able to appoint qualified technocrats to cabinet positions rather than political appointees to satisfy coalition members. We are in the process of collecting a dataset on who mayors appoint to cabinet positions. The second part of this project will aim to understand the policy consequences of having cabinets led by politicians versus technocrats. This paper will engage in the debate over who makes better policy, politicians or technocrats. For example, are education outcomes better when a Secretary of Education has a background in education or when she lacks an education background, but has strong experience navigating the political system?