

# **Buying Out the Poor? Bolsa Familia and the 2010 Elections in Brazil**

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## **Abstract**

Hailed for reducing poverty and inequality in Brazil, the *Bolsa Familia* program (BFP) is the largest conditional cash transfer (CCT) program in the world. Critics, however, have accused President Lula and his party of indirectly ‘buying’ the poor vote through the BFP. Using the theory of clientelism, I investigate the relationship between the BFP and the voting patterns of its recipients in the 2010 elections. Is the BFP an apolitical poverty reduction strategy? Does it influence the formation of political preferences? Based on interviews conducted in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, I focus on the beneficiaries’ own perceptions of the program, as well as how they view politicians and politics in general. I find that the BFP is not consciously utilized as a vote-buying mechanism. However, beneficiaries’ patronage-based views of politicians generated support for the incumbent Workers’ Party in the 2010 elections.

“If, by the end of my mandate, all Brazilians are able to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner each day, I will have completed my life’s mission.”  
– President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, 2003

## I Introduction

In 2010, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (commonly known as Lula) left office as the most popular president in Brazil since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. Although he was constitutionally prevented from running for a third term, Lula enjoyed an 80% approval rating close to his departure from office (Datafolha 2010), a number reflective of his popularity throughout his eight-year administration. Earlier, in 2002, Lula – representing the Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or PT) – had defeated his opponent, Jose Serra of the Social Democratic Party (*Partido Social Democrático Brasileiro*, or PSDB), with a 60% share of all valid votes. In 2006, Lula was resoundingly re-elected with 61% of the valid vote share in the second round of the elections against Geraldo Alckmin, the PSDB candidate.

Explaining Lula’s re-election in 2006 has become the subject of academic and popular debate, primarily because the PT had been plagued by a series of corruption scandals in the run-up to the elections. In June 2005, for example, the *mensalão* scandal implicated several key party members who had given monthly bribes to deputies from allied parties in order to secure their support in Congress (Hunter & Power 2007:2). Subsequently, the discovery of PT’s illegal fundraising scheme (also known as *caixa dois*, or “the second cash-box”) forced Lula’s closest adviser, Roberto Jefferson, to resign from the cabinet (Cason 2006:75). Although Lula’s approval ratings plummeted during the second half of 2005, his popularity ratings started to rebound by December 2005 and even returned to pre-scandal ratings in August 2006, just in time to secure his victory in the October elections of that year (Hunter & Power 2007:4). Lula’s popularity, it seemed, was immune to his party’s reputation.

There is widespread consensus that the *Bolsa Familia* program (BFP) was a significant factor in Lula's re-election (Hunter & Power 2007; Marques et al 2009). Launched by Lula in 2003, the *Bolsa Familia* is a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program that aims to tackle chronic poverty through the distribution of monthly payments to poor families. The rapid expansion of the program from 3.8 million families in late 2003 to 11.1 million families in 2006, and its success in improving the lives of the poor, suggest that the BFP played a major role in Lula's re-election, particularly among poorer voters (Hunter & Power 2007). This claim is consistent with the fact that Lula garnered between 60 and 85 percent of all valid votes cast in the poor Northeast states in 2006 – a crucial shift from the composition of his core support base in the 2002 elections, which largely consisted of more educated voters in the South and Southeast (Hunter & Power 2007:4). Further empirical studies show that Lula was the preferred candidate in the poorest municipalities and/or municipalities with high BFP coverage (Nicolau & Peixoto 2007; Marques et al 2009).

Considering that the BFP may have caused 5 million votes to swing Lula's way in the 2006 elections (Zucco 2008), both public and political opposition have accused Lula and the PT of utilizing the BFP as a 'vote-buying' mechanism (Jovem Pan 2009) in "yet another unfolding of the old story of using the government to build clientelistic support" (Hunter & Power 2007). Former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who implemented the first federal CCT scheme in 2001, has gone as far as to characterize the BFP as "a kind of new clientelism" (Scott 2006:3) in which there is an indirect exchange of votes for benefits. According to this logic, BFP beneficiaries support Lula and the PT because of their status as the self-proclaimed founders and 'owners' of the program. Whether out of gratitude to Lula or to the party, or in the selfish interest of maintaining the *Bolsa Familia* benefits, BFP recipients are therefore more likely to vote for

Lula and the PT at election time. In response, PT defenders argue that the ‘*Bolsa Familia* effect’ that returned Lula to the *Planalto*<sup>1</sup> in 2006 is the result of his successful social policies, including the BFP (Carraro 2007). Nevertheless, there is a real concern that the BFP could act as a “double-edged sword” – improving the lives of the poor in the short term, while increasing patronage in the distribution of economic and social benefits in the long term (Hall 2008).

In this paper, I examine the claim that the BFP functions as a clientelistic mechanism that is used to buy votes in the light of the 2010 presidential elections in Brazil. With Lula’s exit from the Brazilian political scene in 2010, would BFP beneficiaries be likely to vote for Dilma Rousseff, the PT candidate who received Lula’s full backing and support? What might drive them to vote for Dilma’s biggest rivals – Jose Serra (PSDB), or for Marina da Silva from the Green Party (PV) instead? Although statistical evidence indicates that there is a strong positive correlation between the vote share for Dilma and the BFP coverage in 2010, as there was between the vote share for Lula and the BFP coverage in 2006 (Zucco 2011), further qualitative research is needed to illuminate the forces that lead beneficiaries to vote in ways that might favour the incumbent party (PT). Using evidence from semi-structured interviews with BFP beneficiaries in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, I argue here that even though the BFP does not explicitly function as a vote buying strategy, many beneficiaries tend to vote as if they were ‘clients’ in an unequal and unstable relationship with politicians. Thus, they tend to favour the incumbent party in order to maintain the status quo of receiving benefits.

The goal here is not to quantitatively estimate the size of the purported ‘*Bolsa Familia* effect’ in the 2010 elections, but to understand the motivations and thoughts behind individual beneficiaries’ voting decisions. This rationale for investigating clientelism from the “client’s point of view,” through individual narratives, is outlined in Auyero’s ethnographic study of

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<sup>1</sup> Brazilian equivalent of the White House.

Peronist networks in Vila Paraiso, Argentina (1999). Although Auyero's study is different in that it confidently presupposes the clientelistic linkages between beneficiaries and patrons in a small community, the same logic of using 'thick' descriptions to understand the politician-citizen linkage in the BFP applies. While a pre-election poll estimated that 40% of BFP beneficiaries surveyed would vote for Dilma over the other two candidates (Datafolha 2010), numbers alone do not draw the causal picture between being a BFP beneficiary and voting for a particular candidate. Thus, fully delving into 'why' and 'how' receiving the benefits might shape or influence a beneficiary's political preferences at election time requires a more qualitative method of investigation.

However, it should be made clear from the onset that the goal of this study is not to reach generalized conclusions about CCT programs and clientelism, nor to suggest that poor people vote in homogeneous ways (Bohn 2011:74). On the contrary, this study shows that BFP beneficiaries vote differently, with a variety of motivations, thus complicating the construction of a clientelist arrangement. By understanding how beneficiaries' allegiances to particular politicians and parties are formed, consolidated and translated into votes across multiple elections, this research simultaneously enriches and challenges the clientelism claim in relation to the BFP.

At its core, this paper assesses the claim that the BFP program functions in a clientelistic format by analyzing how its beneficiaries relate to politicians and politics in general. First, I review the literature on political clientelism to demonstrate how this concept may be applied to CCT programs such as the BFP. Next, I outline the workings of the BFP in greater detail, highlighting how it is vulnerable to political manipulation in the form of clientelist relationships, despite its impersonal institutional design. Drawing from interviews conducted with BFP

beneficiaries in the Belo Horizonte municipality, I then illustrate some common themes in how beneficiaries' political preferences are formed and translated into votes, and analyze if this politician-beneficiary linkage constitutes a form of clientelism. Finally, I discuss the significance of the BFP as a means of electoral mobilization and outline some implications for the future.

Ultimately, I posit that the BFP is not consciously utilized as a vote-buying strategy, nor does it function in the manner of 'classic' clientelism. However, the beneficiaries' perceptions of the program and the way they perceive politicians consistently put them into a disadvantaged position, and constrain their voting patterns to favour the incumbent party. Given that the BFP has been established as a program implemented exclusively by the incumbent party, PT, most beneficiaries see their votes for PT as a means of maintaining their benefits in the future.

## II Clientelism & Conditional Cash Transfers

The emergence of clientelism dates back to traditional, agrarian societies, where landlord-peasant ties and/or kinship ties often structured everyday life. Regional variants of patronage such as *caciquismo* (Mexico), bossism (Philippines), *coronelismo* (Brazil) generally exhibit the so-called 'classic' model of clientelism, defined as

A special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client), who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.  
(Scott 1972:92)

Three characteristics of the classic clientelist relationship are: a) inequality between the patron and the client, b) the development of personal, face-to-face, ties and c) the evolving, flexible needs and resources of the actors in such an exchange. In addition, there is a strong element of reciprocity in all clientelistic relationships, where the provision of one good is conditional on the

receipt of another from the opposite direction (Scott 1972; Weingrod 1968). Although variations from this model have emerged over time, and in different disciplines, clientelistic relationships are essentially those that are “dyadic, asymmetrical, personal and enduring, reciprocal and voluntary” (Muno 2010). These characteristics are thought to provide a benchmark for measuring and identifying clientelism regardless of time, place and type of society (Muno 2010).

In academic discourse, both anthropological and political science literature on the subject of clientelism have focused on its overwhelmingly negative aspects (Gay 1998; Auyero 1999). With its emphasis on asymmetric relationships and domination networks, the classic clientelist model is portrayed as the ultimate political strategy to dominate, manipulate and suppress the poor. Although clientelism could take the form of a ‘win-win’ situation of reciprocal exchange between client and patron, the “disparity in their relative wealth, power and status” (Scott 1972:93) implies that the client has few resources, and hence few alternatives to supporting the patron. Thus, the client often becomes dependent on the patron for the provision of security, status and material goods, and is never able to rise up through the ranks of society without the help of the patron. As such, patron-client relations are often stronger where most voters are poor and where there is little political competition (Weitz-Shapiro 2010).

Similarly, contemporary public discourse tends to view clientelism as an outdated feature of feudal and monarchical systems (Graham 1997:3). In Brazil specifically, clientelism is negatively associated with “a very specific image of a rural and distant past” (Gay 1998:18), since the term is often associated with the corrupt rule of President Sarney and the oligarchic families that once ruled states in the poor North and Northeast. Moreover, the historical practices of clientelism have led to “the disorganization and marginalization of Brazil’s poor” (Gay 1998:6). Even though the term ‘clientelism’ is used liberally today, it is more often confounded

with corruption and the misuse of political power for personal gain, rather than referring to traditional patron-client ties.

However, clientelism is not a thing of the past. In contemporary democratic societies, clientelism has taken on new and subtle forms, albeit with significant deviations from the classic model outlined above. Clientelism can and does exist in democratic societies (Kitschelt 2000; Scott 1972; Gay 1998), but it is more likely to take the form of “political-party directed patronage” (Weingrod 1968:383) between parties and groups of electoral constituents. It is less personalized and dyadic than the classical model suggests (Gay 1998:14). Furthermore, the political, economic and social changes wrought by globalization and modernization has resulted in “an increasingly voluntary, transactional, and... unstable relationship” between political elites and the masses (Gay 1998:14). This relationship is also less unequal; clients extract personal assistance from a patron by offering their votes in exchange (Scott 1972; Gay 1998). While there is still a relative asymmetry of power between client and patron, there is an increased pressure on the patron to deliver the goods. Viewing clientelism in this way has led some scholars to suggest that clientelism is an enduring feature of politics in general, and of Brazilian politics specifically (Gay 1998; Graham 1997). In Brazil, contemporary examples of this can be seen at municipal level politics, in Congressional and in judiciary decision-making (Graham 1997).

In this context, Bohn (2011) argues that evaluating programs such as the BFP as clientelistic policies leads to overlooking their overwhelmingly positive effects. If clientelism is a means of keeping poor people in their place, as it has traditionally done, then how can a program that helps people escape poverty be clientelist in any way? Using survey data from the 2007 Latin American Public Opinion Poll (LAPOP) in Brazil, he concludes that there is no evidence of a clientelistic relationship in the BFP. Moreover, he reasons that even if the BFP

were to be used as an electoral strategy to buy votes, it would function as “a deficient instrument” because the poor do not vote homogeneously for the same party or the same candidate (Bohn 2011:21).

Although I share Bohn’s view that there are immense variations in the voting patterns of the poor, I view clientelism less as a mechanism of institutional control that oppresses the poor and more of “a relationship that is subject to constant challenge, renegotiation and change” (Gay 1998:2). Clientelism, in its modern context, takes many forms that may not necessarily disadvantage the poor (Gay 1998). For instance, defending the rights of the poor has become a political good in many societies where inequality and poverty are widespread – especially when the poor constitute a large percentage of the voting population, as is the case in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> Thus, clientelism may have “less to do with the exchange of votes for favours, than with the exchange of votes for what political actors would like to present as favours but the least privileged elements of the population demand as rights” (Gay 1998:10). Put differently, clientelism can occur in less direct and less obvious forms that may simultaneously benefit both clients and patrons, depending on how each perceives their role.

Others argue that evaluating CCTs in the clientelist context raises definitional problems. Defining clientelism as “the exchange of discretionary private transfers,” Diaz-Cayeros et al (2008) opine that CCTs do not fall into this category because they are neither “discretionary” nor “reversible” – that is to say, they do not target any particular group of party supporters and they cannot be withheld if voters do not support the party at election time. Instead, CCTs are “formula-based private good allocations” that admit beneficiaries based on socioeconomic data, not political affiliation (Diaz-Cayeros 2008:9). While it is true that the CCTs are not particularistic in a political sense, the high degree of federal control in the program suggests that

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<sup>2</sup> Voting is compulsory under federal law in Brazil and there are heavy penalties for not doing so.

they could be used for political manipulation in a more subtle way. In the next section, I show how even a program like the BFP, that is designed to be neutral and impersonal, is vulnerable to political manipulation. Even if there is no explicit intention to buy votes through the BFP, incumbent and opposition voices compete for the electorate's gratitude and affirmation, hoping to secure votes from this population.

Therefore, investigating CCTs in a clientelist context is not only possible, but also highly relevant and useful to the study of development politics. Given the widespread popularity of CCT programs today, my research is highly relevant to those seeking to understand the electoral effects of CCTs. My intention is not to contest the effects of the BFP or any other CCT program on diminishing poverty and inequality, or in generating positive social externalities. In fact, I view the politicization of a development program and the impact of the program itself as two separate phenomena. While I acknowledge that these are related aspects, I focus solely on explaining how the former works at the individual level. To do so, I construct an "ethnography of political behaviour" (Weingrod 1968:399) from the perspectives of program beneficiaries to explain why the BFP has favoured the incumbent party so far.

### **III Bolsa Familia: Origins, Impact and Design**

Brazil has had a long history of CCT schemes. In 1995, two pioneer CCT programs were launched by two separate political parties: Governor Cristovam Buarque (PT) pioneered the *Bolsa Escola* program in Brasilia, distributing stipends to qualifying families to encourage school attendance, while Mayor José Roberto Magalhães Teixeira (PSDB) launched the Guaranteed Minimum Family Income Program (PGRFM) in Campinas. In 2001, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) launched the Federal *Bolsa Escola* program to encompass

all 5,560 municipalities in Brazil. Cardoso also introduced the *Bolsa Alimentação* program to improve nutrition and *Programa Auxílio Gas*, a financial benefit that offset the increase in the price of gas. None of these programs took off significantly until the end of President Cardoso's second term in 2002, after which he could not run for a third term.

In 2003, newly elected President Lula unified these separate programs with a fourth program, the *Cartão Alimentação* (a food subsidy), into a single cash transfer – the *Bolsa Família* program. He also designated the newly formed Ministry of Social Development and the Fight Against Hunger (MDS) as the federal body responsible for regulating the BFP. The stated objectives of the BFP are to: alleviate current poverty and inequality via direct monetary transfers to poor families; break inter-generational transmission of poverty through incentives for investments in human capital; and help empower beneficiary families by linking them to complementary services (Lindert et al 2007). Under the current scheme, families who earn less than 140 *reais* (about 90 USD) a month receive allowances of 32 – 242 *reais* (20 to 150 USD) per month<sup>3</sup>, on the condition that they fulfil certain commitments to improve their families' health and education. For example, children must receive vaccinations and women must receive pre-natal care, while all children and adolescents aged 6-15 must have a monthly attendance record of at least 85%. Those who do not comply with these 'conditionalities' will have their benefits blocked, suspended or cancelled by the MDS.

That Lula's re-election in 2006 was largely linked to the *Bolsa Família* is not surprising, given the program's impressive achievements in tackling poverty and inequality. In fact, Lula and supporters of the PT often highlight the program's positive effects in response to accusations

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<sup>3</sup> In March 2011, the Rousseff administration increased the minimum value of the benefit from R\$22 to R\$32 (a readjustment of 45%) and the maximum value of the benefit from R\$200 to R\$242, a readjustment of 21%. Interviews were conducted before the readjustment. Source: MDS.

of vote buying and clientelism. Studies have shown that the number of Brazilians with incomes below 800 *reais* (\$440) a month has fallen more than 8% every year since 2003 (Fundação Getulio Vargas 2006), while the Gini index, a measure of income inequality, fell from 0.58 to 0.54 from 2003 to 2006 (Paes de Barros et al 2006). About one-sixth of the poverty reduction from 2003 to 2008 can be attributed to BFP, at the low cost of just 0.5% of Brazil's GDP (Fundação Getulio Vargas 2006). Moreover, the program has left positive impacts on education: a recent study conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI 2010) found that girls from beneficiary families are more likely to stay in school than non-beneficiaries. The impacts of the BFP on health and nutrition are less certain, but generally considered a move in the right direction.

Comparing the design of the BFP to that of previous CCT schemes provides further evidence for the claim that the BFP was not conceived as a clientelistic program. Previously, under the *Bolsa Escola* program, municipalities were solely responsible for identifying and selecting beneficiaries (targeting), monitoring and enforcing conditionalities, as well as implementing direct accountability mechanisms (De Janvry et al 2004:3). In a study of 260 municipalities in four states of the Northeast, local elected municipal officials appeared to have derived clear rewards or punishments from the electorate, depending on their performance as the service provider of these benefits (De Janvry et al 2004:4). In 10 per cent of the municipalities surveyed, one or more members of the legislature were program beneficiaries themselves, leading the authors to conclude that “the allocation of these *bolsas* is used as an explicit element of clientelism and political rents” (De Janvry et al 2004:30). Although allowing municipalities the freedom to manage the program held politicians accountable to their electorate, the

personalization of the *Bolsa Escola* program also made it highly susceptible to political manipulation by these same officials.

In contrast, the design of the BFP strives to circumvent accusations of colonial *clientelismo* by impersonalizing the distribution of the benefits as much as possible. No public intermediaries are involved in the selection process: potential beneficiaries register their personal information at the local municipal office, which then transmits this data to the Federal Government. The MDS enters this data into the *Cadastro Único* database – a unified depository of information shared across all ministries – to determine whether or not a particular family qualifies for the BFP. Centralizing the beneficiary selection process not only improved the coherence of the BFP administration, but also reduced the scope for clientelistic uses of federal money by local authorities to favour specific groups (Lindert et al 2007). Additionally, there are no intermediaries in the delivery of the benefits; instead, beneficiaries access the monthly cash payments via a magnetic debit card at the Caixa Econômico Federal bank. The use of an extensive banking system removes the need for a go-between who may act as a ‘broker’ between the beneficiary and the government and increases the poor’s access to credit (Cunha 2008).

Keen to distance itself from accusations of vote buying through the *Bolsa Família*, Lula’s government took several pre-election measures prior to the 2006 polls. These included barring new beneficiaries from entering the program in the pre-election period from July to October 2006 and abstaining from publishing any formal evaluations or reports pertaining to the BFP during this time (Lindert et al 2007). That year, the MDS also conducted additional audits of the BFP to demonstrate their commitment to accountability and transparency. These measures were maintained in 2010 to counteract any accusations about the politicization of the program.

Nonetheless, other actions by Lula and the PT prior to election time may have indirectly targeted votes from BFP beneficiaries. In April 2006, three months before the first round of presidential elections, the Lula administration raised the maximum income cap for participating families from R\$100 to R\$120 per month, dramatically increasing the number of beneficiaries (Hall 2006). Additionally, Lula's political discourse stressed that the BFP had been solely his party's initiative, essentially claiming all the credit for a program that had its foundations laid by the Cardoso presidency. Similarly, in April 2010, the MDS issued a bulletin to all municipal BFP administrators to caution them that the next federal government could make drastic changes to the program (O Globo 2010a) prompting the PSDB to accuse the PT of engaging in "political terrorism" (O Globo 2010b). Moreover, in January 2011, the Caixa Econômica Federal revealed that 82,595 BFP beneficiaries had mistakenly received a bigger benefit in September and October 2010 due to a system error (Exame 2011). Although this mistake was supposedly unrelated to the elections, as the Caixa claims, it may have inadvertently generated electoral rewards for the PT.

Local politicians have also capitalized on this relationship between Lula and the BFP in order to boost political support. For instance, prior to the 2006 elections, the mayor of Teófiltoni, a municipality in Minas Gerais, revealed that she had sent letters to all BFP and *Luz Para Todos* (Electricity for All) beneficiaries in her municipality to remind them that these social policies were Lula's personal initiatives (Folha UOL 2006). This move, she claimed, had resulted in increased support for Lula (Folha UOL 2006). While there is no explicit vote buying, such measures make it "very clear...to whom the beneficiaries should be grateful for their inclusion in the program" (Sewall 2008). Despite the MDS's efforts to portray the program as

apolitical, promoting the BFP as an exclusively PT-provided good has generated significant political gains for the PT.

With Lula's exit from the polls in 2010, opposition parties tried to challenge the PT's portrayal of the BFP as an exclusively PT-provided good. The PSDB, represented by José Serra, constantly tried to direct public attention to the fact that CCT programs had been introduced by former President Cardoso, and that Lula had merely amplified and consolidated an idea that was already in place. As the biggest contender to Rousseff's campaign, Serra guaranteed continuity of the program and even promised to double the amount of the monthly payments (O Globo 2010c). Marina da Silva, representing the Green Party, said that she would continue to implement the BFP with minor readjustments so that people do not become dependent on the program (O Globo 2010d). A minor contender, Plinio de Arruda, went as far as to promise increasing the benefits fourfold, with the caveat that he would reduce the maximum number of years a family could receive the benefits (Folha UOL 2010). Similar to the 2006 elections, none of the candidates dared to suggest removing the program in 2010 – partially because the program benefits the poor, but also because of the program's significant political clout.

As the following study of BFP beneficiaries in Belo Horizonte shows, a program that is not “discretionary” (Diaz-Cayeros et al 2008) in the political sense can nonetheless be manipulated for political gain. Even if there is “no indication that the federal government allocates funding or selects beneficiaries according to political criteria” (Weyland et al 2010:164), the beneficiaries themselves perceive the PT as their patrons and reward them accordingly with votes. In 2006, the PT ultimately succeeded in framing the BFP as a program whose success is highly linked to their survival as the government of Brazil. What happened in 2010, why and how are questions for the remainder of this paper.

## IV A Case Study: Belo Horizonte

### A. Methodology

To understand the politician-beneficiary linkage in the BFP, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 beneficiaries in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, a city of 2.5 million people in Southeast Brazil<sup>4</sup>. All interviewees were female<sup>5</sup> and had been receiving *Bolsa Familia* benefits for at least one year. Interviews were conducted throughout December 2010 and January 2011, after nationwide presidential elections took place on October 31, 2010.

In order to gain access to BFP beneficiaries, I contacted local coordinators of the BFP throughout the city. Thus, the majority of these interviews took place at local municipal offices and Social Assistance Centers in sub-regions of the Belo Horizonte municipality<sup>6</sup>. Interviewees consisted of beneficiaries who happened to visit the *Bolsa Familia* department in a particular municipal office or the Social Assistance Center to troubleshoot their problems with the program. I also set up several interviews through personal contacts at a local nonprofit association in the Vila Acaba Mundo favela in the Central-South region and at a community project in the Barreiro region. In total, interviews were conducted in 7 out of 9 sub-regions of the Belo Horizonte municipality, with the majority (20 interviews) coming from the Western and Northern offices. Due to the nature of my research and the time limitations that I faced, I used “purposive sampling”<sup>7</sup> (Bernard 2002:182) to select these informants. Although this method

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<sup>4</sup> I chose Belo Horizonte to conduct my research due to the convenience of making contacts during my study abroad semester in 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The BFP designates women as the main beneficiaries in each household where possible, based on the belief that women are more likely to make consumer decisions targeted towards their children.

<sup>6</sup> For administrative purposes, the Belo Horizonte municipality is divided into 9 regions, each with a *Bolsa Familia* office. These sub-municipal offices are responsible for registering potential beneficiaries, disseminating information about the BFP and attending to beneficiaries’ problems or complaints about the program.

<sup>7</sup> Purposive sampling is a method of non-random sampling used in the selection of a few cases for intensive study.

cannot be used to make generalized conclusions about the data, it allowed me to obtain useful information from respondents who had been part of the program for at least one year.

Discussing politics is a sensitive topic for many individuals, even more so for recipients of social welfare who are typically marginalized from any form of political participation. Although I took care to emphasize that I had no political affiliation in any country, and that my research project was purely academic in purpose, interviewees might have been unwilling to discuss which candidate they voted for and why if they were suspicious or fearful that participating in this research would jeopardize their receipt of the BFP benefits. Cognizant of the negative connotations associated with the term *clientelismo* in Brazilian society, I chose to avoid the term altogether in my interaction with interviewees. Instead, I approached the topic of political affiliation gradually.

Although interviews were semi-structured, I established and adhered to a two-part interviewing sequence. First, interviewees were asked to reflect on their relationship to the program: how many years they had been receiving the benefits, how they would rate their experience with the BFP, what aspects of the program could be improved and so forth. Subsequently, beneficiaries were asked if they expected the newly elected Rousseff administration to implement any changes to the program. Mentioning the federal administration opened the door to more politically charged questions, such as: “Did you think about *Bolsa Familia* when you voted in the previous elections?” “How did you decide who to vote for?” and “Who did you vote for in the last elections?” By encouraging beneficiaries to reflect on their relationship to politicians and politics in an open-ended manner, I hoped to elicit honest responses that were not affected by pre-existing prejudice towards the term ‘clientelism’.

Overall, the interview transcripts suggest that the interviewees were able to express their criticism of the program and discuss their political preferences in the presence of civil servants. However, there are two important caveats to the findings. Firstly, my status as a foreign student may have led beneficiaries to feel that they could not trust my motives, or conversely, that they could take the opportunity of my anonymity to complain freely about political mismanagement and manipulation of the program. Secondly, accessing most interviewees through government mechanisms may have led beneficiaries to exercise a certain amount of caution in their responses. This is supported by the fact that beneficiaries were more talkative and bolder in their criticism of BFP administration in closed environments – for example, in a separate room out of earshot of *Bolsa Familia* staff or in a non-governmental setting. In one case, when a beneficiary became suspicious, I turned off the tape recorder and reasserted my lack of political affiliation.

The following sections explore how BFP beneficiaries vote in relation to their identity as recipients of social welfare, and more broadly, how they view their interactions with politics and politicians. After describing the rationales that lead beneficiaries to make their voting decisions, I attempt to characterize the nature of the political relationship between the actors in the BFP and subsequently respond to the claim that the BFP is a clientelistic program.

## **B. Perceptions of the Bolsa Familia Program**

### *i) Impact and importance of the BFP*

Although the interviewees varied considerably in their length of exposure to the BFP (ranging from 1 to 7 years) and the amount of benefits received (ranging from the minimum of 22 *reais* up to 160 *reais* per month at the time), small differences in these variables did not affect their overall satisfaction with the BFP. In this sample, the majority of the beneficiaries

commended the program for having improved their purchasing power and for allowing them to fulfil their children's needs. In particular, beneficiaries cited using the money to buy food, school supplies and clothing for their children.

Interestingly, many beneficiaries used the terms *Bolsa Escola* and *Bolsa Familia* interchangeably, suggesting that they do not view one program as being significantly better than the other. When asked to explain the differences between the programs, one beneficiary said, "the name has changed, but it's the same thing." Although there were institutional improvements with the introduction of the BFP, these beneficiaries did not necessarily regard these reforms as outright advantages. Another beneficiary even commented:

I preferred the *Bolsa Escola* because I received more money then. The *Bolsa Familia* is better for families, but the *Bolsa Escola* amount was equivalent to minimum wage for me.

Even beneficiaries who were able to distinguish between the programs did not view the BFP as being an improvement over the *Bolsa Escola*. For some, the impact of CCT schemes is directly linked to short-term monetary gain, not the long-term human capital that both the *Bolsa Escola* and the *Bolsa Familia* aim to build. Therefore, what matters most is the amount of the benefits.

However, for some beneficiaries, the program has made a difference not merely in monetary terms. Vitoria<sup>8</sup>, one beneficiary from the Western region, explained:

When I entered the program in 1998, I was pregnant and I had another two kids to take care of, mostly by myself because their father was working. They roamed the streets a lot and I was always trying to track their whereabouts. This program changed my life. Now I know that they are in school, and that they have to study. The *Bolsa Escola* is an incentive for them to go to school.

Here, the impact of the BFP appears to be working as intended. For Vitoria, the *Bolsa Familia* is both alleviating short-term poverty and breaking the cycle of poverty through building human

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<sup>8</sup> All beneficiaries' names in this paper have been changed to protect privacy.

capital. Achieving the second objective is not as straightforward as the first, since most interviewees lauded the program for its short-term consumption effects.

Not all interviewees were equally dependent on the BFP. In fact, there were notable differences between a beneficiary who receives the minimum amount, 22 *reais*, and someone who receives at least 60 or more *reais* per month. For the former group, consisting of only two interviewees in this sample, the program was merely an auxiliary allowance that did not make a significant impact on their lives. These respondents were adamant that the BFP did not influence their votes in the 2010 elections. Rafa, a beneficiary from the California region, criticized the amount of the cash transfer for being too little to make a lasting effect on poverty:

I receive 22 reais – does that make any difference to you? *Bolsa Escola* doesn't resolve our social problems. I would prefer it if they cut the *Bolsa Escola* program and invest in health and education.

Given the little impact that the BFP has on her life, Rafa says that she did not vote based on her status as a beneficiary of the program:

I didn't think about *Bolsa Familia* when I voted. I voted based on these principles: health and education first. I thought about the fact that Serra's specialty is medicine, and that he has invested a lot in health...although it could just be a ploy, I voted for Serra.

To Rafa, Lula and any PT candidate are not the only ones capable of managing social policies successfully; in fact, she prefers the model advocated by Serra and the PSDB. Moreover, Rafa was aware that “such programs [CCTs] did not start under Lula,” but under Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB). Since not all beneficiaries view the program as being equally essential in their lives, it would be difficult for any politician to build a loyal base of supporters based on the distribution of BFP benefits.

Although using the BFP as a vote-buying mechanism may fail where beneficiaries do not perceive the benefits as necessary to their survival, it does not mean these beneficiaries automatically vote for the opposition. On the contrary, these beneficiaries can also vote for the

incumbent, but their motivations are different. Paula, another beneficiary from the California region, shares a similar view of the BFP with Rafa:

To be honest, my life has been quite stable for some time, so the *Bolsa Familia* isn't life-changing for me. But I know many people for whom the program is really important.

Asked on how she decided to vote in the 2010 elections, she said:

I didn't vote based on the *Bolsa Familia*. I look at the person's experience and see if they have the capacity to implement good policies.

However, Paula ended up voting for Dilma (PT), whom she perceived as being the most capable candidate to implement “good policies” in general, not just the BFP.

By contrast, interviewees who thought that the program had made a significant difference on their lives admitted that the BFP had influenced their voting decisions. Niselma, a beneficiary from the California region, said that she “felt the difference” (*faz muita falta*) that 140 reais made in her life when her benefits were suspended for six months. Niselma, who was also a beneficiary of the old *Bolsa Escola* program, voted for Lula in the 2006 elections because “after Lula entered the administration, the program improved a lot.” Lula's management of the BFP subsequently influenced Niselma's vote in the 2010 elections. She says:

I voted for Dilma because after Lula came to power, a few things really improved. So I voted for Dilma, because I think that she will bring continuity to Lula's legacy.

Compared to Rafa and Paula, Niselma thinks it is more crucial to maintain the status quo with regards to the BFP, rather than to vote for someone who could potentially remove short-term social assistance programs – even if this was done in order to invest in long-term structural changes.

‘Why’ and ‘how much’ the program matters to beneficiaries are important questions for the analysis of clientelism in the BFP context. From this sample, it seems that if the monthly payments are more essential in the beneficiaries' point of view, or if a high percentage of

household income consists of these benefits, then it is more likely that the beneficiaries' voting decisions are influenced by their desire to maintain the BFP. Moreover, beneficiaries who view the program favourably in its status quo may be more reluctant to support a change of administration. By contrast, those who treated the BFP benefit as a non-essential part of their lives are less likely to base their decisions on the program.

ii) *Relationships with the Federal and Municipal Governments*

Many interviewees were highly critical of the targeting and monitoring aspects of the program. "It's a mess," said one beneficiary from the Barreiro region. "There are people who do not need the benefits, but they receive them. The problem is that they do not investigate [these cases] and they don't identify who really needs [the benefits]." Soraia, a beneficiary from the Western region, complained:

No one has ever visited my house to check if I need the *Bolsa Familia*. Many people who receive it [the benefits] don't need it; they lie about their financial status on paper. There is no accompaniment (*acompanhamento*). There should be a team of people who go and visit the beneficiaries' homes every 6 months to see what the results are, if these people really need the benefits.

Even though the MDS conducts thorough, regular cross-checks of the registry of beneficiaries (Lindert et al 2007) and the BFP is generally lauded for minimal targeting errors, many interviewees echoed Soraia's view that there are no checks and balances in the targeting process. They also acknowledged that there are people who need the benefits but do not receive them, seeing this as a further flaw of the BFP that demands government attention.

These criticisms, however, are not directed at a particular federal or municipal official. In the example above, "they" refers to the government in general. Since the BFP is so highly decentralized, there is no direct link between the federal apparatus and the average beneficiary. Further evidence of this can be seen in the beneficiaries' perception of federal decision-making as fuzzy, inexplicable phenomena over which they have no control. Many beneficiaries claimed

to have “no idea” why the amount of their benefits had increased or decreased over time, nor why their benefits had been blocked or suspended at certain periods of time. The experience of Danielle, a beneficiary from the California region, illustrates this point:

When I enrolled in the program, they [the government] said I would receive 220 *reais*. I received that for two months, then they reduced the amount to 180 *reais*. I don't know why. They don't inform you about the changes to the program...we need more information. They never tell you how much you will receive.

Even though the program guidelines clearly stipulate that the amount that each beneficiary receives depends on how many eligible children there are in the family, beneficiaries such as Danielle could not explain how these decisions were made, nor by whom. The fact that she could not pinpoint a specific individual as the cause of the change implies that there is no personal relationship between her and any of the MDS staff.

Furthermore, all the beneficiaries I interviewed perceived themselves as having little power over the administration of the program, both at the federal and the municipal levels. Many struggled to respond to the question, “If you could change anything about the BFP, what would it be?” Some responded, “I don't know,” while a handful suggested improving the targeting and the monitoring of the program, as previously mentioned. Nonetheless, when asked if they could communicate these opinions in any way to the administration, even these beneficiaries responded in the negative, saying that such decisions depended on the federal government.

Similarly, relations between beneficiaries and the municipal government appeared to be mostly functional and impersonal. Although beneficiaries cited the *prefeitura* (municipal office) as their first point of contact if they ran into issues with the program, not many beneficiaries were on first name basis with BFP regional coordinators, nor any of the municipal staff at the Social Assistance Centers. One exception was Danielle, who mentioned her direct connection to Luisa, the coordinator of the Social Assistance Center in the California region. She said:

Luisa helps me whenever I have a problem with the BFP. She talks to the director of the municipality, so they know that I have a problem and I won't lose the benefits.

While Luisa could very well function as a 'broker' in a clientelist relationship between the beneficiary and the federal government, it is unlikely that this is her role, since Danielle knows that the benefits come "directly from the federal government," not from the municipality.

Additionally, all but one interviewee denied having any knowledge about meetings or consultations about the BFP with the municipality. The interaction between the beneficiaries and municipal staff was limited to troubleshooting problems related to the suspension or cancellation of the benefits. When asked to describe her relationship to the municipal staff, Andressa, one beneficiary from the California region, said:

Usually, when we go to the *prefeitura* (municipal office), we don't even really have a conversation. We just tell them what the problem is and that's it. They don't ask how we're doing in the program.

According to Andressa, she does not participate in any meetings with the municipality about the BFP. She has limited contact with the municipality staff and she knows that they do not take a personal interest in her life. Hence, she views them as intermediaries of the federal government, not people of higher status who can influence the disbursement or the amount of the benefits.

Only Luana, a beneficiary from the Northern region who had been registered in the BFP since its inception in 2003, remembered participating in meetings with other beneficiaries and municipal staff "many years ago." Remembering these meetings fondly, she commented:

The meetings were held in a big auditorium with the administrators responsible for the program. There were scheduled once a month; everyone received invitations to come and we had to go. The meetings were great! Everyone talked about the program; everyone participated. I'd like to know why there aren't any more meetings, but there hasn't been any explanation.

Therefore, the interviewees do not have any avenues to build personal relationships with the administrators of the program at the municipal nor the federal level. Like the federal level

apparatus, beneficiaries also perceive the municipal level administration as a ‘faceless’ entity, with which they interact periodically, but otherwise do not have a personal relationship to.

The lack of enduring personal relationships in the program and the absence of participation mechanisms for beneficiaries suggests that the development of any kind of ‘classic’ patron-client relationship between the beneficiaries and the administrators of the program, whether intentional or natural, is not likely. Additionally, it is perfectly clear to beneficiaries that they are participants in a federally implemented program in which they cannot bargain for a better deal. Even though the decentralized nature of the BFP allows municipalities to have some measure of autonomy in implementing the program, municipal coordinators do not function as representatives of the PT, nor are they seen as such by the interviewees. Given that most municipal coordinators can do very little to influence whether or not a beneficiary receives the benefit, or the amount of the benefit, I conclude that municipal coordinators do not act as brokers or patrons in my case study.

*iii) Unpredictability and Political Change*

One critique of the BFP, commonly raised by the press and other members of the public, is that the program is a form of *assistencialismo* (Lindert & Vincensini, 2010:70) a term that comprises welfare dependency, patronage and clientelism. ‘Welfare dependency’ refers to the concern that beneficiaries might become less willing or motivated to find jobs and instead receive the benefits for their whole lives, thus becoming perpetually dependent on the government. The relationship between beneficiary and government is an indirect form of patronage that generates political gains for the government, since beneficiaries will do whatever it takes to maintain the benefits.

A number of interviewees sought to distinguish themselves from those who depend on the government for the benefits. As one beneficiary put it, “There are people who need the *Bolsa Familia* to survive. For us, it’s different.” These beneficiaries prefer to strive for self-sufficiency, but they point out that not all beneficiaries think and behave in this way. Maria, one beneficiary from the Central-South region, said:

It’s government assistance, not a salary. I work twice a week. The *Bolsa Familia* helps, but there are people who become dependent on it. They don’t want to work because they receive the *Bolsa Familia* salary. I receive the benefit, but when the time comes for the government to take it away, I will not have a problem because I work. But many people do not have this luxury.

Maria agrees with the ‘welfare dependency’ claim, citing beneficiaries who treat the BFP as a source of income. In her opinion, such dependency is undesirable because policies like the BFP are temporary programs that are subject to the discretion of the government, whose intentions and actions cannot be trusted. However, even if she is not wholly dependent on the government’s handouts, Maria still views herself in a situation of precariousness with regards to the BFP. She believes that the government has the power to remove or change the program at any time, and that the government does not represent the beneficiaries’ best interests.

Other beneficiaries’ past experiences with social welfare programs strengthen their perception of the BFP as an unpredictable and temporary policy. Nathalia, one interviewee from the Western region, explained:

There are governments that want to improve [*Bolsa Familia*], there are governments that want to remove it. For example, there was a time when they used to give out coupons for milk; it was really great. Then suddenly they took it away.

Here, Nathalia is referring to the milk distribution program under former President José Sarney (1985 – 1990), whose political career was plagued by accusations of corruption, cronyism and even clientelism. The milk distribution program has been cited in the press as evidence of one of Sarney’s attempts to buy votes through social policy. However, from Nathalia’s point of view,

the abrupt change of social policy was associated negatively with a change in government. To her, social policies are highly vulnerable to political change.

The majority of the beneficiaries I spoke to perceived the BFP as being highly dependent on which party is in power and even on which candidate runs for the elections. Although the cash transfers are debited regularly into the beneficiaries' bank accounts each month, they do not share the academic perception that the BFP has become somewhat of a "political heirloom" that would be difficult for any political contender to challenge (Hall 2006). To these beneficiaries, political changes could significantly alter the fate of the BFP, most likely for the worse:

I don't know what's going to happen next year. They could increase the benefits, or reduce them, I don't know.

I know that the *Bolsa Familia* isn't going to last forever. Nothing does. Now that there is going to be another President – not Lula anymore, but Dilma – we don't know if the program will continue or not.

The first beneficiary views the BFP as being linked to the PT, whereas the second views the program as being intrinsically linked to Lula. For the latter, even if the incumbent party wins, transitions from one president to another are viewed as moments of heightened vulnerability, because the BFP is inseparably linked to Lula and his political power. Even though Dilma is from the same party as Lula and received his full endorsement, Lula's absence casts doubt on the future of the program. This perception is surprising, since neither Dilma, nor any of her rival contenders in 2010, ever suggested cutting back on the program.

Thus, the BFP contains elements of party and personal affiliation. Even if they know that the benefits do not come out of Lula's pocket, or the PT's own funds, many beneficiaries see Lula and the PT as symbols of the BFP. Moreover, they are clearly able to put a face to the program – not just any candidate from the PT, but specifically Lula himself. Mayara, a beneficiary from the Northern region, explained why she voted for Lula in 2006:

The person who started *Bolsa Familia* was Lula. I voted him in the previous elections because he was really a good president. He helped me a lot; he helped many people. He gave us houses, *Bolsa Familia*, this and that...

The provision of material benefits is directly associated with Lula, even though in reality, Mayara knows that these benefits come from the government. Lula's historical connection to the BFP has encouraged beneficiaries like Mayara to foster a personal relationship to him, even though this doesn't quite exist. Thus, election time debates about 'who started the BFP?' encourage many beneficiaries to think about where their loyalties lie. Because Lula is seen as the main provider of social welfare, it is difficult for beneficiaries to imagine another candidate in this position. This association makes them more likely to vote in favour of the incumbent party.

## **C Perceptions of Politicians & Politics**

### *i) Prejudice and Distrust*

Despite Lula's popularity among the beneficiaries, many of them had strongly negative perceptions of politicians' intentions and politics in general. For some beneficiaries, election debates and propaganda do not make a difference in their decisions on who to vote for, because they do not believe that political discourse will lead to political action. Lara, a beneficiary from the Pampulha region, explains why she does not trust politicians:

[Politicians] say that they will change things, but after they win the elections they don't do anything. They just make promises to buy votes. But let's see if they will actually make any changes.

Maria concurs that the election debates are full of politicking:

The problem is that everyone is playing dirty. I didn't see any political proposals that interested me this year. Serra attacks Dilma, Dilma attacks Serra, Dilma attacks Marina...there was nothing about what the government would do for us beneficiaries, nothing!

Similarly, Fernanda, a beneficiary from the Western region, opines that 'all politicians are the same', no matter which party they belong to:

There was a *deputado* (deputy) from Serra's party who said that he would raise the minimum salary by 2 reais per hour. When would that ever happen in Brazil? Never! Even increasing the *Bolsa Familia* by 10 reais involves so much bureaucracy. He said that he was going to impose a minimum salary of 600 reais. If he can do that, Dilma can too. Is there any difference between one and the other? None at all!

Although the PSDB proposal to raise the minimum wage would logically benefit the poor, Fernanda does not think highly of the idea because it is too impossible in her eyes. Because Lara, Maria and Fernanda view politicians as a homogeneous group who do not care about the poor, they are not easily bought by simple promises to raise the amount of the BFP benefits. At election time, these beneficiaries evaluate all candidates' political promises with a high degree of scepticism. This theoretically suggests that they are likely to choose candidates based on factors other than what they say they will achieve.

However, even beneficiaries who see no differences between the candidates are affected by the political discourse. The high degree of distrust that some beneficiaries exhibit towards politicians leads them to reinterpret political discourse according to their own pre-conceived notions of what politicians do. For example, Maria sees Dilma's agenda as being inherently biased against the poor:

Everyone is scared of this government; everyone is scared that they will take away the *Bolsa Familia*. She [Dilma] didn't make any proposals about *Bolsa Familia*. As soon as she got elected, she gave an interview about implementing a tax on checks. If she is taking money away from rich people, who says that she won't take money from those who don't have anything?

This is a prime example of how political discourse that targets poor voters can backfire. Despite the fact that Maria evaluates Lula's government as a generally positive one, and even voted for Lula in the 2006 elections, incumbent party candidates such as Dilma are not spared from her deep distrust of politicians. Here, Maria focuses on the possibility that Dilma might impose a new tax, despite the fact that Dilma made repeated promises to show her commitment to continuing *Bolsa Familia* during her election campaign. Even though reinstating the tax would

only affect the higher income end of the population, Maria inverts the pro-poor logic of ‘taxing the rich to feed the poor’ on its head, by interpreting it as an anti-poor statement, and takes it as evidence that politicians have all the power.

Since beneficiaries do not take politicians’ statements at face value, establishing any sort of clientelistic relationship that can generate votes for a particular party or candidate is tricky from the politician’s point of view. The general distrust of politicians complicates the prediction of how beneficiaries will actually vote. Instead of using votes to reward politicians’ fulfilled promises, some beneficiaries use votes to punish expected unfulfilled promises in advance.

Fernanda explains how her vote is a form of protest against politicians:

What would [politicians] do for us? They say, “I’ll continue with *Bolsa Familia* or *Bolsa Escola*.” I personally don’t buy it, so I just chose the candidate that I think is best. Whether or not things get better, it depends... some even say that they’ll increase *Bolsa Escola*. But I don’t vote for them because instead of doing what they say, they’ll do the opposite. So instead of voting for them, I voted for the opposition.

It is evident from this example that beneficiaries react to these statements about BFP in different and unpredictable ways. Even if politicians make pro-*Bolsa Familia* statements, such as promises to amplify the program, this talk does not necessarily elicit votes from BFP beneficiaries, who do not trust that these promises will be fulfilled. The high degree of variability in how beneficiaries decide which candidate to vote for makes it difficult for politicians to ‘trap’ BFP voters into voting for a particular party; beneficiaries do not always believe in politicians’ promises nor react to them in similar ways.

## ii) *Confusion*

In addition to the variety of interpretations of political discourse, interviewees also presented contrasting descriptions about each presidential candidate in the 2010 elections. There was a significant amount of confusion among beneficiaries about what each candidate had said

about the BFP and what they intended to do with the program if they were elected. For example, two beneficiaries from the Central-South region disagreed on Serra's stance regarding the BFP:

Maria: I didn't hear Serra talk about *Bolsa Familia* very much.

Elena: But Serra said that he would continue with the *Bolsa Familia* program.

Based on their (mis)perceptions of each candidate, Maria ended up voting for Marina, the Green Party candidate, whereas Elena voted for Serra. These beneficiaries made their voting decisions based on imperfect information and ended up voting for candidates other than Dilma. It would be difficult to lure beneficiaries towards a particular candidate or party based on promises to improve the BFP, since there is no way of ensuring that every beneficiary is correctly informed.

Consistent with the bickering between PT and PSDB about the origins of CCT schemes, there was also considerable confusion among beneficiaries about who was responsible for the BFP. Soraia attributes the program and its success to Lula; hence, she voted for Dilma based on her evaluation of Lula's performance:

I thought about it [*Bolsa Familia*] when I voted, because Serra said that he would end the program. I think that's why he lost the elections. It was Lula's party who started with *Bolsa Familia*. I think that's why Dilma won the elections – because Lula did so many good things. One of those good things was *Bolsa Familia*.

Sometimes, however, there is no direct relationship between which party the beneficiaries credit the program to and who they ultimately vote for. Even though Nathalia (mistakenly) thinks that Serra and the PSDB started the program, she voted for Dilma:

This program was created by Serra in São Paulo. Lula brought it to Belo Horizonte. Serra ran for President, but if he had won, he would have ended the very same program that he created to invest in other things, which would have harmed many people. Thank God he didn't win! Dilma won and she will continue with the program.

Apparently, the logic of voting is more complicated than rewarding good politicians for successful policies. For Nathalia, her personal judgement of what Serra will do and whether he will continue with the BFP is more influential than the question of who started the program.

Unfortunately for politicians like Serra, rumour-mongering and differing sources of information about each candidate can strongly influence beneficiaries' decisions on who to vote for, regardless of the quality of proposed policies.

iii) *Personalized Politics*

In Brazil, the political and the personal are heavily intertwined. Politicians' personal profiles are as important as their policies (Graham 1997). For example, Lula's humble origins in a poor working class family in the Northeast have contributed greatly to his self-identification as the "Father of the Poor". This image has given greater salience to his policies against hunger and poverty, such as the BFP (Hunter & Power 2007). Moreover, some beneficiaries' evaluations of Lula and his predecessor, Cardoso, are heavily influenced by the politicians' different personal backgrounds:

I thought Lula was good because he helped many poor people. Before, the poor didn't have houses. The poor didn't TV. The poor didn't have ovens. Now, the poor have everything.

Everything about Lula is good. Fernando Henrique took the side of the rich. He is rich. He didn't care about the poor at all.

These interviewees were more likely to mention Lula in conjunction with CCT programs rather than Cardoso, who was described by more than one beneficiary as "snobbish." For this reason, the beneficiaries I spoke to tended to ascribe their gratitude for the benefits to Lula's administration rather than to Cardoso's, even though both implemented CCT schemes.

Unfortunately for politicians, these personal profiles can also be easily manipulated and misinterpreted by the electorate. Despite Dilma's efforts to capitalize on her background as a revolutionary and a feminist, and her efforts to portray herself as the "Mother of the Brazilian people" (Estadão 2010), Daniela thinks that

Dilma serves the interests of the rich. She is the friend of my employer's brother...my employer (*patrão*) said to me, "Whoever voted for Dilma, less fortunate people will pay the price, because she is only serving rich people."

Daniela's case is interesting because she sees Dilma as being on the 'wrong' side of the wealth divide, even if Dilma represents the PT. Since Dilma does not come from the same poor, humble background as Lula, Daniela does not believe that Dilma will implement policies that favour the poor. Additionally, the fact that her employer – a person of higher status – also thinks that Dilma represents rich interests, further discouraged Daniela from voting for Dilma.

Such a highly personal and sentimental view of politics makes it even more difficult to predict how beneficiaries will vote. Sometimes, not voting for a specific person is driven by no deeper logic than dislike. For example, Mayara said:

I didn't vote for Dilma – not because I have anything against a woman being president. I like the PT very much but I didn't want to vote for them; this year I wanted a change of candidate. So I voted for Serra. I don't like Dilma very much.

Mayara did not have strong grounds for voting against the PT's policies; yet, she opted to vote for Serra simply due to her general dislike for Dilma. Her vote does not reward a particular politician for good proposals, or for being capable of managing the BFP; instead, it is based on a combination of personal factors that are completely subjective. Again, given the difficulty of predicting these factors, using the BFP as a vote-generating mechanism does not appear to be a viable political strategy.

## **D Voting for Continuity**

The beneficiaries' perceptions of the BFP as an unpredictable program that is closely linked to Lula, as well as their highly personal reactions towards politics and politicians, have worked to constrain beneficiaries' votes in certain ways. In the 2010 elections, all presidential candidates vowed to continue the BFP and even promised positive changes regarding the amount of the payouts. Despite these claims, the majority of all the beneficiaries interviewed in this

sample chose to vote for the continuity of Lula's policies over change, even if the proposed changes were positive. Out of all the beneficiaries who voted for Dilma in this sample (84% of the respondents), more than half said that their votes were in order to bring continuity to current conditions. When asked if they thought about the BFP when deciding which candidate to vote for, more than a third of the interviewees responded positively:

I thought about *Bolsa Familia* when I voted. Am I voting for the right person? Is this the person I want to represent me and my children? Because if you vote for the person who will remove these benefits, that will bring difficulties. But I voted for the right person to bring continuity. For me, she is the right person – it's impossible that she would remove *Bolsa Familia*.

It's the first thing we think about. If you vote for just about anyone, you could lose your benefits. If you lose your benefits, what are you going to do? So we think, we analyze, we look at all the candidates – those who are helping the beneficiaries, those who will increase the benefits – and we vote for the right candidate. I voted for Dilma because she said she would improve the *Bolsa Escola* benefits and continue the program. That's what we hope: that the program improves for us.

This concurrent theme of 'voting for continuity' is consistent with these beneficiaries' general perception that the extent to which social welfare programs benefit them depends heavily on who is in power at a given time. Since the majority of the beneficiaries had cited their satisfaction with the BFP and Lula's performance, the logical decision was to vote for Lula's candidate of choice in the 2010 elections.

Crucially, even if beneficiaries were dissatisfied with Lula's government and its administration of the BFP, the fear of the unknown – and of the unpredictability associated with a new government – motivated them to vote for Dilma. As Laura, a beneficiary from the Barreiro region, explained:

The problem is that...let's say, you have the different political parties – PT, PSDB, et cetera. Let's say that PT is in charge of all the projects and plans. If the power shifts from PT to PSDB, everything changes. So for us, we are essentially part of PT, because our project is connected to its administration. We can say that this or that candidate is no good, but if we don't vote for him, there won't be *Bolsa Familia*. There won't be anything.

The ‘project’ that Laura refers to is a co-operative association set up by a local private university in partnership with the local government, aimed to help BFP beneficiaries gain entrepreneurial skills and generate extra income. To Laura, the BFP and any government-related initiatives to help the poor are inherently connected and wholly dependent on the PT administration. Even though the PSDB and other parties have both played important roles in the development of CCT programs in the country, the expansion of the BFP under Lula and PT’s domination of the program have generated a high degree of party loyalty among beneficiaries. Therefore, voting for the PT may not symbolize beneficiaries’ satisfaction with its policies, but simply a matter of maintaining the status quo at the cost of other alternatives, for better or for worse.

This strong desire to maintain the benefits in the short term, above all other priorities, makes some beneficiaries more willing to settle for second best. Ultimately, this may mean compromising on their personal preferences and being more tolerant of the incumbent candidate’s flaws. For example, Laura explained:

Dilma is supporting the *Bolsa Familia* administration and other projects. So, even if she doesn’t live up to her promises [as President], we will try to bear it, because there are still other projects that benefit us, like *Bolsa Familia*. If there are things that benefit us, we maintain them.

The fact that Laura is willing to give Dilma more leeway because of her status as the PT candidate suggests that she sees the BFP as being the sole property of the PT administration. Therefore, regardless of whether she likes Dilma or whether she thinks that Dilma is a capable candidate, Laura sees herself as having no other choice but to vote for her, in the interest of maintaining the BFP benefits.

Even indifferent voters in this sample tended to vote for continuity. Since voting is mandatory in Brazil, with heavy penalties for those who fail to vote or to register as an absentee voter, these beneficiaries vote ‘blindly’ – with little or no interest in each candidate’s agenda.

They view themselves as passive recipients of government action and are generally isolated from politics and politicians' promises. For example, despite the hype surrounding Lula and his *Bolsa Familia* platform, Elena said:

I didn't really pay attention to Lula's campaign about *Bolsa Escola*. I found out about this later because my boys were in school. I didn't vote for him because I didn't even see Lula campaigning. I voted, but I don't even know whom I voted for...it's compulsory to vote, so I voted.

Elena can be classified as an indifferent or an apathetic voter. On one hand, uninformed beneficiaries like her are a challenge to the incumbent; her isolation from political messages led her to vote for a random candidate who was not the incumbent. In this case, no matter how much Dilma or another candidate campaigned to spread the message about respective their BFP stances, it would be difficult to mobilize such voters.

On the other hand, for the incumbent party, apathetic voters can also be an opportunity to obtain votes. Lara does not consider herself well-informed about politics, so she decided to vote to maintain the status quo:

To be honest, I don't really participate in the [political] debates. But considering who I voted for, I think there will be continuity. I hope that she [Dilma] will just bring continuity, because I don't really have anything to complain about Lula's government. Things have really improved with *Bolsa Familia* and other programs. Her tendency is just to give continuity and maybe improve them a little bit.

Regardless of whether the beneficiaries are well informed of the candidates' policies, most beneficiaries tend to vote for continuity over change of the BFP. The insecurity and unpredictability associated with another candidate lead these beneficiaries to vote for Dilma and the incumbent party. Despite Lula's exit in 2010, the PT's ability to establish their claim as the stakeholders of the BFP led to their victory in the elections.

## V Conclusions and Implications

From the discussion above, it is evident that BFP beneficiaries do not vote homogeneously – a result consistent with Bohn’s study (2011) – nor do they all vote with the BFP in mind. Even in a small sample of 31 people, many of which were clustered within similar regions of the city, there is a high degree of heterogeneity in the factors that influence beneficiaries’ voting decisions. In order to understand the complete spectrum of how beneficiaries decide which candidate to vote for and why in the 2010 elections, I have presented a variety of factors that are divided into two categories: a) how the beneficiaries perceive the program itself, and b) how they view politicians and politics in general.

Overall, most beneficiaries’ votes in this sample were driven by individual cost-benefit analyses of which candidate is best positioned to maintain the BFP in its current form. The degree to which they based their voting decisions on the program depended on the importance of the BFP in their lives and whether or not they viewed the program as being an unpredictable or a permanent feature of Brazilian social policy. Judging from the testimonies I have presented, beneficiaries who were more dependent on the BFP benefits and saw the survival of the program as being inseparably linked to the political survival of the PT tended to vote for the continuation of the PT administration. Moreover, beneficiaries who viewed Dilma as belonging to the same mould as Lula and his determination to end poverty were likely to vote for continuity over change as well. The fact that many beneficiaries were confused about Serra’s connection to the program and his intentions to change or remove the BFP also generated a higher degree of support for the incumbent candidate.

From my interviews, I conclude that there are several reasons why the BFP is not a vote-buying mechanism. Firstly, as I outlined in Part III of this paper, the program is designed to be as

impersonal and decentralized as possible, so that the beneficiaries do not form any personal relationships to program administrators at the federal and municipal levels. My interviews with these beneficiaries support this claim, since none of them have direct, personal contact with politicians at the federal level, and most do not have similar links to municipal staff who are in charge of implementing the BFP at the local level. Moreover, the beneficiaries are cognizant of the fact that if they choose not to vote for a particular candidate or party, this will not result in the specific, personal cancellation of their monthly benefits. They know that they are part of a federal program, not a personal relationship with a single patron.

Secondly, the diverse ways in which the beneficiaries interpret politicians' intentions, images and promises, seriously complicate any political efforts to use the BFP in a major vote-getting capacity. As I have shown in Part C of the case study, it is quite difficult to predict how BFP beneficiaries will vote at election time, since any specific strategy to woo BFP voters could backfire. For one, not all beneficiaries take politicians' promises about the BFP at face value. They may also interpret candidates' promises to radically improve the BFP as signs of vulnerability and unpredictability, a factor that supported the incumbent's victory in the 2010 elections. Additionally, they may be misinformed about candidates' platforms or their personal qualities, leading them to vote in random and unpredictable ways. The difficulty of generalizing how these factors work to mobilize votes across 31 beneficiaries, let alone all 12 million beneficiaries, suggests that there are few incentives for using BFP as a vote-buying mechanism.

However, the ways in which beneficiaries perceive themselves in relation to politicians bears a resemblance to certain elements of patron-clientism. Although they have no direct, personal connection to any political figure in the program, many beneficiaries I spoke to had formed an indirect, personal link to former President Lula and his legacy. This could be due to a

combination of his personal strategy to gain popularity, or the fact that Lula is the first president of democratic Brazil to have risen out of a poor upbringing. In any case, the beneficiaries' testimonies reflect their highly personalized images of individual candidates, on which individual voting decisions are often based. With Lula's image as the Father of the Poor and Cardoso's image as a rich snob entrenched in their minds, a significant number of beneficiaries voted for Dilma due to her affiliation with Lula. Other beneficiaries voted based on who could best maintain the BFP for their personal benefit. The outcome was the same: given her status as the incumbent party candidate, Dilma was seen as the best candidate to maintain the status quo of the BFP.

The issue of reciprocity is another characteristic of clientelism, as earlier defined in Part II. While the beneficiaries I spoke to did not see themselves as engaging in an "exchange of votes for favours" when they voted for a particular candidate in 2010, they voted based on the hope that their chosen candidate would implement policies that benefited them directly and immediately in the form of material goods. In other words, beneficiaries had an implicit expectation that their chosen candidate would specifically maintain the tangible, monetary BFP benefits. Many of the testimonies I presented earlier imply that there is an implicit reciprocal exchange at work during election time; beneficiaries who voted for Dilma cited their gratitude to Lula and the PT for their previous provision of BFP benefits.

Furthermore, a number of beneficiaries did not view themselves as having complete freedom on which candidate to vote for in the 2010 elections. Because of their current status as beneficiaries of social welfare and their high degree of dependency on the government, some interviewees saw themselves as being inherently connected to the PT administration, even if they did not support the party. Hence, they felt like they were obliged to vote for the PT candidate in

order to continue receiving these benefits. Beneficiaries who acted in this way reinforced power structures that are not explicitly imposed in a top-down fashion by politicians, but are self-imposed from the bottom-up instead. Thus, these beneficiaries are not likely to exercise their votes in a fully democratic fashion; instead, they vote for the ‘safest’ candidate in order not to lose their benefits. Not unlike a clientelist relationship, these beneficiaries place themselves in a disadvantaged and inferior position relative to politicians, overly conscious of their status as lower-class citizens who are dependent on the government.

My research of how Bolsa Familia beneficiaries voted in the 2010 elections responds to previously mentioned studies of the 2006 and 2010 elections in Brazil, which identify the size of the correlations between the PT candidate’s vote share and BFP coverage. The interview excerpts presented here go one step further by investigating the effects of the BFP at the most micro level possible, i.e. the beneficiary’s mental processes. From my case study, I conclude that what drove this group of BFP beneficiaries to vote for the incumbent in the 2010 elections goes beyond simple explanations of vote-buying. Instead, it is the beneficiaries’ perceptions of their relationships to politicians as moderately asymmetrical, personal and reciprocal, which eventually led most of them to vote in favour of the incumbent candidate in the 2010 elections.

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