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Facing bureaucratic uncertainty in the Bolsa Família Program

Clientelism beyond reciprocity and economic rationality

Flávio Eiró and Martijn Koster

Abstract: Clientelism is often analyzed along lines of moral values and reciprocity or an economic rationality. This article, instead, moves beyond this dichotomy and shows how both frameworks coexist and become entwined. Based on ethnographic research in a city in the Brazilian Northeast, it analyzes how the anti-poverty Bolsa Família Program and its bureaucracy are entangled with electoral politics and clientelism. We show how the program's beneficiaries engage in clientelist relationships and exchanges to deal with structural precariousness and bureaucratic uncertainty. Contributing to understanding the complexity of clientelism, our analysis demonstrates how they, in their assessment of and dealing with political candidates, employ the frames of reference of both reciprocity and economic rationality in such a way that they act as a “counterpoint” to each other.

Keywords: Bolsa Família, clientelism, Northeast Brazil, poverty, reciprocity, social assistance

Scholarly understandings of clientelism are usually divided between those centering on moral values and reciprocity and those based on economic rationality. In this article, by focusing on the point of view of the “clients,” we show how these two understandings are complementary and interdependent. We draw on Benoît de L'Estoile's (2014) work on how rural workers in Northeast Brazil attempt to reduce uncertainty through their social relations. He uses “frames of reference” to mean the cognitive and normative frameworks individuals employ to make sense of their world and to act on, or within, it. These frames of reference, we argue, act as a counterpoint to one another in that while—

or indeed because—they are contrasting, they coproduce social practice. We were inspired by the Cuban social scientist Fernando Ortiz's use of the term *contrapunteo* (counterpoint) in his historical analysis of the critical influence of sugar and tobacco production on Cuban society. The concept, coming from composition theory, applies to the joining of two different melodies that, together, produce a rich musical texture. Ortiz argues the development of different “economic-social phenomena is extremely complex” and that “at times there are similarities that make them appear identical; at times the differences make them seem completely opposed” ([1940] 1995: 97). Drawing on field-



work in the Northeast Region of Brazil, we show how different frames of reference fuse together within the polyphony that is clientelism.¹ We do so by empirically focusing on the local implementation of the anti-poverty Bolsa Família Program (BFP), the world's largest conditional cash transfer (CCT) program in terms of the number of people assisted. In its local bureaucracy, we found, exchanges and promises of a clientelist character were present, especially when elections approached, such as vote buying by local politicians who could influence the distribution of BFP benefits.² Ethnographic research was carried out between 2013 and 2015, for a total of six months, including the election period of October 2014, by Flávio Eiró, in Angico, a medium-sized municipality (population 100,000–500,000), in the state of Ceará. The research focused on the implementation of BFP and its role in local electoral politics. Fieldwork was conducted in Angico's poorest neighborhood, comprising in-depth interviews with 35 BFP beneficiaries and participant observation at the program's local office.

During the research, when clientelist practices occurred or were discussed, we observed how the program's beneficiaries engaged with different frames of reference. This was the case of Claudia,³ a 45-year-old BFP beneficiary we met in her house one year after the 2014 elections. Claudia had been enrolled in the program since 2005 and worked informally on an irregular basis to support her four children. Invited to sit on her couch during a warm afternoon, we discussed the previous elections and her experience with BFP. When Claudia brought up the many politicians who visited her neighborhood—Angico's poorest and most populated—asking for votes, we asked her directly if she had received offers in exchange for her vote, to which she casually answered “yes” and then listed the goods that were commonly offered, such as food or wheelchairs for the elderly and disabled. “And have you received offers related to BFP?” we asked. “No, never, but I know people who have. I wish I would receive an offer like this. I would vote for anyone they wanted, no

problem!” She then laughed and smiled in a satisfied way, as if contemplating her options. Our conversation eventually led to the presidential candidates of the previous year's elections, and we brought up BFP again and asked if it was a factor in her voting choices. Before the end of the sentence, she said: “How could it not be?” With her hands on the table, she pretended to draw circles and lines as she explained:

The program is from Dilma [Rousseff, then candidate for reelection from the Workers' Party (Partidos dos Trabalhadores—PT)]. The others are not going to continue with it, certainly not. But I don't vote for her just because of that. There are people who think that we don't know about politics, that we only vote thinking about BFP. But they don't know everything that has changed in the lives of the poor. Of course, BFP is very good, but that's not all. Everything has changed.

She paused and wiped the sweat from her forehead. “You're too young to remember, but I tell you: if you had come here before, some 10 years ago, I'm sure you can't even imagine the misery we were living in here in the Northeast.”

In Claudia's words, we can easily hear the economic rationale she employs when faced with a hypothetical vote-buying situation. However, she also alluded to her deep-rooted feelings on the transformation of the region as a motivation behind her political support for the PT, the party she saw as responsible for BFP. This example helps us understand how different frames of reference coexist and, indeed, are often inseparable from one another. The BFP beneficiaries we interviewed often expressed an economic rationale, focused on gaining access to resources, in conjunction with their appraisal of reciprocity based on loyalty and the personalization of politics. To approach these views as intertwined frames of reference offers a better understanding of how poor urban dwellers in Northeast Brazil deal with uncertainty and how they integrate politics and clientelism into their lives.

Our study shows how clientelist practices can be understood as a means of lessening the structural precariousness and what de L’Estoile (2014) calls “radical uncertainty” about the future that many poor urban residents live with. In their dealings with the state, they also face high levels of uncertainty, varying from confrontations with a labyrinthine bureaucracy when applying for welfare, to the risk of being arrested at police blocks if they are unable to show identity documents. This article untangles the dynamic interplay between electoral politics, clientelism and the BFP, and shows how the relationships between BFP beneficiaries and politicians are part of clientelist mechanisms in a context of structural precariousness and bureaucratic uncertainty. First, we explain more about BFP and its local implementation in Angico. We demonstrate how uncertainty is a central element of beneficiaries’ experiences with the program’s bureaucracy and how it often gives rise to clientelist practices. We provide an overview of how clientelism, in Northeast Brazil and beyond, has been presented in the literature according to a frame of reference that centers either on reciprocity or on economic rationality. We, instead, move beyond this dichotomy and demonstrate how both frames of reference may coexist and form a counterpoint.

Bolsa Família and bureaucratic uncertainty

In recent years, the number of BFP beneficiaries oscillated around 14 million families, about 50 million people—a quarter of the country’s population. In the past two decades, CCT programs have become popular among developing countries. They center on a direct cash transfer to families who are under a determined poverty line. Monthly BFP benefits vary between roughly \$10 and \$100, depending on the composition of the household. Families must respect certain “conditionalities”—the technical jargon in CCTs—in order to keep the benefit: children must go to school, and all children and pregnant women

must be medically monitored. Nominated cardholders responsible for the family benefit are, whenever possible, women—a deliberate choice related to intra-family women’s empowerment, and the moral expenditure of family resources. Although it is a federal program, BFP is managed in collaboration with municipalities, which are responsible for local staff, registrations, and monitoring the program’s beneficiaries (Gazola Hellmann 2015).

According to the national poverty line used to determine BFP eligibility, Brazil had 55 million people below the poverty line in 2017—more than a quarter (26.5 percent) of the population (IBGE 2018). Almost half these people were living in the Northeast, where we conducted our study: 43.5 percent of the region’s population. The “clients” in our study, BFP beneficiaries who live in Angico’s poorest neighborhood, live in a context of structural poverty. They face a high level of radical uncertainty—the unpredictability and precariousness of life that is beyond one’s personal control, such as the possibility of disease, famine, or natural disasters such as droughts or floods (de L’Estoile 2014). In a 2014 report by the municipal social assistance office (Eiró 2017), the main problems identified in the neighborhood where we conducted our fieldwork were food insecurity, child labor, drug addiction, urban violence, extreme poverty, and sexual abuse against children in their teens. The area is identified as Angico’s main point of drug sale and use, involving many teenagers. Homicides are common on the streets of the neighborhood, and most of these are related to drug trafficking. Most residents live in precarious homes, often with only irregular access to electricity and running water.

Our ethnographic data reveal many beneficiaries experience uncertainty that is enhanced by unpredictable aspects of BFP. First, when federal elections approach, presidential candidates discuss the program’s continuity; some try to claim credit for it, while others promise to make its rules stricter. Second, the program’s bureaucracy contains ambiguities that confuse beneficiaries and generate uncertainties regarding the

stability of monthly transfers (Eiró 2017). In this article, we focus primarily on the latter, the unpredictability that is part of the fabric of welfare programs and urban governance. Beneficiaries' dealings with BFP's bureaucracy were marked by lack of information, inequality, and consequent insecurity regarding the continuity of benefits (Eiró 2019). A study conducted by the ministry responsible for BFP (SAGI 2014) found, in 2010, in the verification processes that all beneficiaries go through, of all those who saw their benefits canceled (272,469), only 29.6 percent had an increase in family income that justified an exit from the program. When asked to explain why their benefits had been canceled, the failure to comply with BFP's rules was explained by "bureaucratic complications" (23.3 percent), as well as misinformation (34 percent). The study found some beneficiaries had not known the benefit was of unlimited duration, so they never tried to resolve the suspension, thinking their benefits had simply ended. Others did not know they were obliged to update their files at the local office. Still others (13.2 percent) were unable to complete the necessary bureaucratic procedures because of health problems or problems with transport, because they did not have the necessary paperwork, or simply because they were reluctant to go to the local BFP office since they had been badly treated on previous occasions. These figures give some idea of the bureaucratic difficulties that beneficiaries face and indicate uncertainty is an inescapable trait of urban life (Simone 2010).

In our research, many beneficiaries expressed uncertainty about BFP's procedures. For example, we heard the story of an elderly woman who, every month when she withdrew her benefit from the ATM, would say aloud, "Thank God, it worked!" We learned that the many stories of acquaintances who had lost their benefits for no apparent reason had taught beneficiaries never to rely on that money. As Célia, a 27-year-old domestic worker with one child, said: "The BFP can end at any time, [so] I don't count on it. We have to get by (*se virar*) independently of it." Another beneficiary, 29-year-old Aline, an

informal domestic worker with two children, saw her benefits blocked. She told us how she did not want to go to the BFP offices to ask why, afraid it would worsen her situation, that she may be required, for example, to pay back previous benefits, to which we asked:

—Have you had any problems with your benefit?

Aline: It has been three months that my benefits are blocked . . . but I don't know why. That's what it says on the receipt that comes out of the ATM. I try every month to see if the problem has been solved, but not yet.

—Have you thought about going to the BFP office to see what they say?

Aline: I have, but I'd rather not go . . . I think it's best to leave it like this. There are people who go there and come back with nothing. Better not to risk it.

—How come? Can they discover other errors with your benefit?

Aline: There is no error with mine, I do everything right, all the conditionalities, everything is fine. It's just that we never know. If we are there, they can always find a reason to stop my benefit [permanently]. It's just better to wait. Everything will be fixed.

The fear or the caution of beneficiaries who preferred not to "count on" the extra monthly income was associated with the acceptance of what they saw as luck or chance inherent to the program. Seen from this perspective, particular exchanges with political candidates become a way to increase the certainty of the BFP benefit. As a result, we found poor neighborhoods' residents would offer their electoral support to candidates in exchange for welfare services. They were used to being approached by politicians, their campaign workers, or city hall employees competing for their votes and offering goods or services in return. Furthermore, as we show

elsewhere (Eiró 2018), social workers involved in the BFP bureaucracy collaborate intensively in electoral campaigns—voluntarily or coerced—and are expected to use their knowledge of and familiarity with social assistance beneficiaries to ask for and buy votes.

Although accepting offers made by politicians was common, the way these offers influenced the support given to a political candidate varied. Residents engaged in and evaluated their relationships with politicians or bureaucrats by using different frames of reference. In their assessments of political candidates, individuals also considered past experiences (personal or those of relatives, neighbors, and friends). Residents engaged in these relationships with different interests and used varied rationales and values to justify and operationalize them. We found the most prevalent frames of reference used to guide those interactions were reciprocity and economic rationality.

Clientelism in Northeast Brazil: Moving beyond the reciprocity-economy dichotomy

In social theory, the often indistinct use of the term clientelism to identify related but different phenomena—such as patronage, vote buying, pork barreling—has rendered its meaning rather imprecise. Inspired by sociological and anthropological studies, we understand clientelism as a social mechanism centered on a personal dyadic relationship, unequal or asymmetrical, relatively durable, and based on reciprocal exchanges or the expectations of such exchanges (Auyero et al. 2009; Hilgers 2011; Kettering 1988; Léna et al. 1996; Medard 1976). This approach distances itself from a political rhetoric that identifies programs or governments (or even countries) as “clientelist,” and focuses, instead, on particular practices (Hilgers 2011). Also, clientelism should be considered not an immutable force but as a relationship subject to constant challenge, renegotiation, and change (Gay 1998).

The political history of Northeast Brazil, too, has given rise to a particular political culture in which clientelism plays an important role. Its origins can be found in a political system known as *coronelismo* that marked Northeast Brazil until the end of the twentieth century, in which local elites and the population were connected to the country’s political structure through a complex network of reciprocal commitments that reinforced private power in a political regime with a broad representative base (Carvalho 1997; Leal 2012). This combination allowed local elites to repress all attempts to challenge the land monopoly. They controlled elections and, in the vast arid regions, access to scarce water sources that were built with public resources (Bursztyn 1990; Faoro 2013). As political rights expanded, a larger and more diffuse electorate emerged, enhancing the federal government’s dependency on the power bases of the *coronéis*. Throughout the twentieth century, most local elites’ resources were diverted from development projects, and no significant structural solutions were implemented to reduce the region’s poverty and vulnerability to drought (Ab’Sáber 1999; Nelson and Finan 2009).

In common parlance, the political relationships of poor *nordestinos* are still often explained in terms of *coronelismo*, portraying the population as powerless victims of such structures in which they are clients of powerful patrons. This view does not take into account the clients’ agency, their systems of negotiation, or how they navigate these unequal power relations, as they try to ameliorate the uncertainty in their lives. To understand “how formal and informal political institutions are mobilized by citizens” (Combes and Vommaro 2015: 39–40), it is important to start from the clients’ point of view and analyze how it is embedded in a wider social fabric. As we show, accessing the client’s perspective allows a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complexity of political clientelism (Auyero 1999, 2000).

Most of the literature on clientelism in Brazil focuses on rural settings (e.g., Collard et al. 2013; Léna et al. 1996; Palmeira 1992; Sabourin

2015). These studies tend to analyze the “classic” clientelist relationships between power holders (often landowners) and a marginalized population (often rural workers). Our study, instead, focuses on the current urban context with its modern institutions and bureaucracy, and with a more fragmented electoral landscape than those generally found in rural areas. Furthermore, in contrast to many studies on clientelism, our study does not deal exclusively with electoral politics and the moment of the elections but uses the case of BFP to highlight how intricately entwined bureaucratic procedures are with clientelist practices. By analyzing the clients’ point of view, we demonstrate how the program is not so much conceived of as a social right or neutral allowances from an impartial bureaucracy but is perceived as a favor, part of a clientelist “gift exchange” between persons.

The literature on clientelism often concentrates on voting behavior and employs a reciprocity perspective. The vote, in this perspective, is the manifestation of a personal bond that commits the individual entirely to the patron (Briquet 1998; Palmeira 1992). In Brazil, the electoral system does not allow the identification of individual voters, so the connection between personalized political relationships and the vote cannot be verified. However, this connection is reflected in a person’s declared support for a political candidate. This support must be visible, usually through campaign materials such as flags, stickers, or T-shirts (Koster 2012). Anthropological studies of clientelism in Northeast Brazil emphasize the reciprocal dimension of personalized political relations that evolve around rights and obligations that are anchored in family values and mutual respect (e.g., Ansell 2014; Palmeira 1992). The distribution of goods, social assistance resources, or the facilitation of public services are an opportunity for political candidates to demonstrate they are “men of their word” (*homens de palavra*), that they are able to fulfill the promises they make. Indeed, their trustworthiness is important for the establishment of a moral “commitment”

(*adesão*) between voters and politicians (Heredia and Palmeira 2006).

Emphasizing the aspect of reciprocity, Aaron Ansell (2014) uses “intimate hierarchy” as an alternative to “clientelism” in the context of Northeast Brazil. Although clientelism also comprises emotional and symbolic traits, Ansell’s term seeks to highlight the existence of moral equality in a context of material inequality. The author observes clients, making use of family values, distinguish between moral and immoral clientelist relations. Clients, in this perspective, play an active role in negotiating the terms of their different relationships with patrons. These relationships, beyond those “intimate hierarchy” would seem to imply, are not always friendly: signs of respect and affection can be feigned, and they do not exclude negative feelings between the individuals concerned (Auyero 1999; Scott 2008). Other studies tend to analyze clientelism by using a frame of reference that centers on economic rationality (e.g., Nichter 2014; Szwarcberg 2013). In this view, clients instrumentally assess political candidates in terms of what they have to offer. They may even try to sell their vote to the “highest bidder.” Those involved try to maximize their gains, without any personalized relationship or commitment.

Analyzing the clients’ point of view, we move beyond the dichotomy that is usually present in the literature, between either a reciprocity or an economic rationality perspective. Taking into account the different frames of reference that de L’Estoile (2014) distinguishes, we understand clientelism to be a polyphonic counterpoint, in which these frames come together. In composition theory, a counterpoint stands for the relationship between melodies that fuse together into a musical whole while also maintaining their independence. The metaphor of the counterpoint allows us to analyze how reciprocity and an economic rationality interplay as different melodies, how they sound together, and how they become amalgamated in the everyday lives of low-income Brazilians and their dealings with politicians and state bureaucracy.

Poor residents establish relationships with politicians whom they consider reliable. Although these relationships are shaped by moral values, they also have an instrumental economic dimension, in that the former can offer their allegiance to the latter in return for material or monetary benefits. Overall, scholars have studied the different frames of reference as distinct tunes: the melody of reciprocity or of economic rationality. We are interested in the productive tension between the two—in the consonances and dissonances of their simultaneous melodies. We will further analyze, first, the melody of reciprocity and, second, that of economic rationality, and then show their interplay.

Reciprocity, morality and personalized commitment

The urban poor of Angico employ the frame of reference of reciprocity when they assess the quality of the political candidates in terms of their trustworthiness and honesty and measure this in the promises they have made and fulfilled. In residents' perceptions, as we show in the following examples, politicians have a moral obligation to help those in need. Moreover, the residents argued this aid should not be limited to the electoral period. Since the needs are permanent, they argued, the elected representatives' concern for their constituents should also be permanent. They are supposed to "look after" (*tomar conta*) the needs of their voters. Vote-buying attempts that are not accompanied by longer-term actions are, as such, seen as negative. Francisca, a 28-year-old homemaker and a BFP beneficiary since 2007, told us she votes only for candidates who are "worth something" (*que prestam*). When asked what she meant, she said:

Those who promise things and do not fulfill them, who only appear at election time, they do not get my vote twice. That's why I like the mayor. He knows those who are suffering, the poor. He never abandoned us. He does not care about his

situation, even when he's full of problems. If we need to, we can go to his house and he'll never close the door for us.

Francisca was referring to the mayor of Angico, who was known for the uninterrupted distribution of goods and services to the poor. He did so through the institutions of the city hall, but also using private resources. Several of Francisca's neighbors would visit the mayor at home when they found themselves in need. The mayor's availability to personally receive the poor on a continuous basis gave him a good image. Several residents expressed how their loyalty to the mayor was unrestricted because: "He is the only one who does something for the poor." Elsewhere, we related these values to a broader structure of "familialist poverty regulation," in which poverty is addressed through a distribution of resources based on family-like relations with patrons who look after their clients (Eiró 2017). This is accompanied by a dynamic of reciprocity that shapes people's understandings of the political world, of democracy, civic responsibility, and public policy (Ansell 2014).

The prominence of family values also "dampens" the negative image associated with corruption. Eric Sabourin (2011) shows how, in Northeast Brazil, voters reward a politician's aid, even if that politician is seen as a "thief." Furthermore, research has shown how public investment reduces the negative effect of corruption on the reelection probability of mayors, even when voters are aware of their involvement in corruption (Pereira and Melo 2015). The common saying "steals but does the job" (*rouba mas faz*) is telling. We found in Angico, in addition to public investment, the distribution of goods and services to individuals has a similar effect. Suspicions regarding the mayor's acts of corruption were widespread, but residents had positive feelings toward him because of his willingness to "help the poorest." His distribution of goods was, as one resident said, considered a sign that "he is the only one who knows what poor people go through." It also gave him an image of someone who keeps his promises.

Therefore, when the residents of Angico assess their political candidates, the distribution of goods and services to individuals is not a negative criterion when such practices are accompanied by a perceived “real concern for the poor.” When asked how she had decided who to vote for, Fátima, a 31-year-old BFP beneficiary and domestic worker, made sure to distinguish herself from others who, according to her, “sell their votes cheap, without thinking whether the candidate is good or not.” We sat with her in her small house. Its one and only window, together with a small and noisy ventilator, could not expel the afternoon’s heat. Fátima explained how she sometimes accepted offers for her vote. “How could I not?” she said while pointing to the sheet hanging from the ceiling that works as a wall separating the living room from her bedroom. Anticipating a possible judgment, she emphasized: “But I do not promise my vote to anyone! They give me things and hope that I will like their candidates better, but that’s not how I choose. We talk together with the relatives and decide whom to vote for.” These talks, she explained, were like assessments to decide who would do more for the poor. Referring to practices and postures that make a good politician, she said: “That’s why I do not like a candidate who tries to buy votes on election day. We know that after that they will disappear.”

Many other beneficiaries we spoke to talked about this decisive temporal dimension. If efforts to garner the support of poor voters are seen as vote buying—and political candidates are perceived as apt to “disappear” after election times—then this practice can backfire and become a negative factor in their assessment. The nature of goods offered are also revealing of candidates’ intentions. Ansell (2014), for example, found the distribution of cash and alcohol instead of more sustainable resources (such as construction materials) was also a negative factor in the assessment of political candidates. Those who were already known for breaking their promises were seen as mere sources of emergency funds during election periods. Francisca, who said she voted only for “decent

candidates,” explains her voting rationale in the following terms: “The problem is that there are people who forget these things [that candidates disappear after electoral periods] very easily and vote for them again in exchange for a food basket. But my vote, they will not have. We need a lot here, a food basket every four years is nothing.”

The evaluation of political candidates was thus based on their availability and willingness to help. Regarding public services and social assistance programs such as BFP, the dominant view among the residents we studied was that they were an act of “compassion” and “kindness,” identified with the people who had created or were administering them. Such direct linking of welfare programs with individuals was exemplified in the widespread practice of making first ladies responsible for the municipal welfare offices and by the example of former President Luiz Lula da Silva, who is often portrayed as the “father” of BFP. This perspective was emphasized by residents who intended to vote for Lula’s successor, Rousseff, *because* she would continue the program. Especially given the context of a widely shared fear of losing BFP benefits at any time, as expressed by most beneficiaries interviewed, voting for the candidate who would carry on with BFP was another way of dealing with insecurity. When asked if she knew the presidential candidates’ position on BFP, Fátima explained her preferences according to this same logic:

I’ve heard a little of everything, but I don’t believe in these things. I’m so afraid the BFP will be terminated. To be sure, I vote for Lula’s party because they will definitely continue the program. It was Lula who created it, so I know that Dilma will keep it. She even increased the [benefits’] value these last years. There are people who do not like her, who think she’s worse than Lula, but I’m happy with what she did with the BFP. The other [candidate] we don’t know well. I don’t think he would end the program, but he might not con-

tinue to increase the [value of the] benefit. I don't know. To be sure, I don't think twice: my vote went to Dilma [in the first round] and will go to her again [in the second round].

Economic rationality

As we have shown, clientelist practices are embedded in shared values and reciprocity. We also argued people employ different frames of reference, including ones that instrumentally concentrate on securing resources. The following anecdote helps us understand this strategy. A political candidate pays a visit to a poor family and offers them one shoe in exchange for their support. “If I win,” says the candidate, “you will receive the other shoe.” This story, part of the collective memory of *nordestinos*, shows how the candidate's economic incentive urges the family to vote for him. The hope of getting the other shoe is what motivates the family, as, without it, the first shoe is useless. If we analyze this interaction through the lens of reciprocity, we would wonder why the gift was not given in its whole to strengthen the relationship and serve as an incentive for—or a reminder of—the political support of the family, or even why the candidate did not ask for support and promise to give a pair of shoes after winning the elections. Such questions imply some kind of relationship, whereas this story lacks any personal or intimate dimension we would expect if we were to consider this as a reciprocity-guided interaction. As the story ends, however, a twist is revealed: the candidate is actually giving a shoe to one family, and the corresponding shoe to the next family. The first part of the story illustrates our point; the second part, demonstrating the candidate's lack of accountability, can be understood as a general criticism of politicians.

Our research found BFP beneficiaries also drew on an economic rationale to assess political candidates and to deal with bureaucratic uncertainty. They actively sought the best offer from different political candidates and gave their support to those who offered the goods or

services with the highest value. This instrumentalization of relations with political candidates can be seen as a form of detachment: instead of engaging in a relationship of loyalty with political candidates, residents make use of the relationship's material dimension. They give their support to politicians “who are willing to do the most” for them. They accept all offers and negotiate with their candidates and campaign workers to maximize their gains.

In this scenario, bureaucratic uncertainties also play a central role. In the case of BFP, being “helped” in the enrollment in the program or having someone who can “solve a problem with BFP” represents a greater benefit than isolated goods normally received. Marlene, a 40-year-old beneficiary who had been in the program since 2005, had her benefits cut for several months. We met her at her house, and sat and talked on her veranda a few days before the second round of the 2014 elections. When we mentioned BFP, Marlene sighed heavily. She started recounting how often she had experienced problems with the program's bureaucracy, such as having her benefits blocked, as they had been for several months at the time of our conversation. When we asked her how she sought to resolve this situation, she said: “I've been to the BFP office several times to solve my problem, but nothing comes out of it. They say the benefit will be unlocked, and then nothing.” Marlene could not explain the reason for the block. She said no one had given her a reason. Looking skeptical, she said she had received a visit from a welfare office employee that same week: “[He] asked me if I had any problems with my benefit. When I explained it to him, he told me that he could solve it if I vote for the mayor's candidate for governor.” After a short pause, she added: “Now I'm waiting, and I'm going to vote for him.” We asked the name of the candidate and whether she thought he was a good candidate, to which she answered: “Not better or worse. They are all the same. I just need to unblock my benefit.” Exposing her practical approach to the matter, Marlene made it clear she did not care about the candidate's moral worth or about anything re-

lated to him personally or to his political career. She cared only what her vote, as promised by that employee, could achieve.

Since the feeling of insecurity regarding the BFP benefit was high, beneficiaries were more willing to accept a politician's guarantee to protect them from these uncertainties. This was the result of their perception of how the program was implemented, and of the fact that the BFP rules were not always respected by the local office. Elisa, a 33-year-old beneficiary and an informal domestic worker who had been enrolled in BFP since 2008, revealed how BFP social workers used the fragile institutional perception of the program to mobilize votes. We asked her if someone from the welfare office or the BFP office had come to her house asking for support for their candidate. Without changing the expression on her face or the tone of her voice, she said: "Yes, a BFP social worker came here. She asked me to vote for her candidate to ensure the continuation of the work of the BFP office." Her casual tone came as a surprise, as she had previously made clear her belief that BFP was her "right." We asked her whether the social worker had said that if her candidate did not win the election, Elisa could have problems with her benefit. The answer was no. Elaborating, Elisa said she had never had problems with her benefit and that she was not afraid because she had not done anything wrong. She added: "But I know a lot of cases that we don't know why the benefit is lost. So I voted for her candidate because she is the person who can cut my benefit off." Elisa decided her vote based on a strictly utilitarian reasoning: the power the social worker held to solve her problem. This does not imply a lack of morality; indeed, as we have argued, different frames of reference may play a role. Here, patrons, or their employees, such as the social worker, who do not live up to their promises have their credibility hurt. Beneficiaries can refuse to vote for them even when they are offered money or high-value goods. Indeed, several residents of Angico told us they would accept money, for example, but nonetheless refuse to vote for candidates who were known for

not fulfilling longer-term promises and therefore considered not to be prioritizing the poor's needs.

For some beneficiaries, this feeling was so intense that they said they were indifferent to such exchanges, arguing such offers and the distribution of goods and services did not affect their choice of whom to support. This did not necessarily imply a rejection of receiving goods from politicians. For example, Rosangela, a 30-year-old woman who had been a BFP beneficiary since 2010, said: "I accept all the offers, of course, because I need them. But I think it's ridiculous that people idolize politicians . . . The things they give me do not influence my vote at all. In fact, I do not have much hope that politicians can change anything in my life." Examples such as Rosangela's enable us to observe how residents might accept the offers of more than one candidate while not feeling any obligation to actually vote for any of them. Economic rationality shapes their dealings with political candidates: sometimes they exchange their vote for benefits, and sometimes they simply take whatever they can without any commitment. While the literature on clientelism tends to see reciprocity and economic rationality as separate explanatory frameworks, we have shown how both coexist and are, indeed, entwined. Our analysis aims at thinking clientelism beyond the reciprocity *versus* economic rationality divide by using the counterpoint metaphor. Our study has demonstrated how the urban poor use different repertoires, sometimes more instrumentally focused on "getting the goods" and at other times centered on support that emerged from loyalty and personalized commitment.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the interplay between the Bolsa Família Program, its bureaucratic procedures, electoral politics, and clientelism. We showed how poor urban beneficiaries, who face structural precariousness and uncertainty, engage in clientelist relationships and

transactions to reduce the uncertainty. However, our analysis challenges theories that attempt to relegate clientelist practices exclusively to the economic or the reciprocity framework. Indeed, we have demonstrated that people employ different frames of reference simultaneously. Drawing on the metaphor of the counterpoint, we see how clientelism consists of different melodies that, in the consonances and dissonances of their interplay in people's everyday lives, fuse into a rich and multilayered composition. As such, clientelism may imply maximizing gain by supporting the candidate with the best deal, and take into account long-term loyalties to a candidate who has "taken care of" the needs of the client's family.

More generally, our study contributes to a better understanding of how government social assistance programs and their bureaucracies enter into a dynamic interplay with electoral politics and clientelism. Currently, in Brazil, studying such an intertwinement is all the more urgent, as the current president, Jair Bolsonaro, has emphasized the importance of stricter targeting of BFP. In consequence, more intense monitoring and sanctioning of its beneficiaries are to be expected, which is sure to increase uncertainty among the poor. Bolsonaro's argument, shared by many non-beneficiaries, is that too many "nonpoor" people benefit from the program and that, in general, it makes people lazy. It is important to note that resentment toward previous administrations' attention to the poor, especially via BFP, was a big factor in Bolsonaro's election. Keeping an eye on pending changes is essential, as these may not only affect poverty and BF procedures but may also impact electoral politics and the way people engage with the networks of clientelism.

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Notes

1. Flávio Eiró conducted fieldwork for this article. Martijn Koster has previously carried out research on clientelism in another Brazilian city. Both authors carried out analysis and the writing of the article.
2. To date, suggestions (and accusations) of clientelism within large-scale anti-poverty programs in Latin America are based on correlations of votes for the ruling parties with increased expenditure in federal social programs (Bohn 2011; Zucco 2013). We have previously shown that politicians involved in the local implementation of BFP, rather than its central administration, are also involved in vote-buying strategies (Eiró 2018).
3. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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