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The politics of sanctioning the poor through welfare conditionality: Revealing causal mechanisms in Uruguay.

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Abstract

What explains the ‘punitive turn’ toward more stringent conditionalities in welfare policies? Answering this question is crucial in a region such as Latin America, where cash transfers have proven politically consequential for incumbents. Our argument emphasizes the role of electoral competition in shaping a government’s decision to adopt a more punitive approach to conditionalities. We use process tracing to test our argument in a case involving a change from relatively lax to more stringent conditionalities in Uruguay’s system of conditional cash transfers (CCTs). We also test other explanations from the welfare conditionality and the welfare and policy change literatures. We find that, as public opinion increasingly turned against state assistance to the poor, the opposition politicized the issue of non-enforcement of conditionalities. This led Uruguay’s left-wing government to shift to more stringent enforcement of conditionalities to avoid alienating members of its electoral base who were not CCT beneficiaries. Our findings contribute to the current debate on why and how governments choose to sanction welfare recipients as a response to political dynamics, both in developed and developing regions.

Keywords: welfare conditionality; conditional cash transfers; electoral competition; process tracing; Latin America; Uruguay.

1. Introduction

What explains the ‘punitive turn’ toward more stringent conditionalities in welfare policies? Welfare conditionality has become a central feature of welfare states around the world. The increasing use of conditionalities and the trend toward making them more stringent have been characterized as a ‘punitive’ (Fletcher & Wright, 2018) or ‘disciplinary’ turn (Soss et al., 2011) and even as a ‘sanction epidemic’ (Casey, 2012). In developed countries, there has been an expansion of behavioral requirements and an increase in the sanctioning of non-compliers in the administration of various welfare policies such as unemployment benefits, minimum income schemes, and housing provision (Fletcher, 2020; Handler, 2004; Knotz, 2018, 2019; Moreira, 2008; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Outside the developed world, there has also been a surge in the adoption of welfare conditionalities. In Latin America, for example, during the 2000s, most countries introduced conditional cash transfers (CCTs), which in the aggregate covered around 130 million vulnerable people (Cecchini & Atuesta, 2017). CCTs are social assistance programs that give cash to poor families conditional on the family’s compliance with requirements such as school attendance and health checkups (Cecchini & Madariaga, 2011; Fiszbein & Schady, 2009). This use of conditionality in all Latin American CCTs is based on the idea that governments can demand that recipients do something in exchange for the transfer and can sanction those who do not comply with these obligations.

The few studies that analyze the political drivers behind the punitive turn in developed countries identify partisanship and adverse economic conditions as the main factors (Horn et al., 2020; King & Ward, 1992; Knotz, 2019, 2020). Surprisingly, the

classic explanations of welfare and social policy change in the literature have not been considered in efforts to account for the toughening of conditionalities. In particular, the role of electoral competition, despite its prominence in the welfare literature (Abou-Chadi & Immergut, 2019; Häusermann et al., 2013; Picot, 2013), has received little attention in recent discussions regarding the politics of welfare conditionality.

In this paper, we develop and test a theoretical argument that seeks to capture the causal complexity behind the punitive turn in conditionalities. Our theoretical argument focuses on the causal mechanism through which electoral competition produces changes in welfare conditionality: When electoral competition is high and the public is less willing to support social assistance to the poor, the opposition may increase the political salience of welfare conditionalities and push governments to deviate from their original position. For example, more stringent conditionalities may appeal to middle- and high-income voters who conceptually distinguish between “deserving” and “undeserving” benefit recipients. This distinction may take on added importance when governments face intense electoral competition and fear losing support from these middle- and high-income voters, leading governments to make conditionalities more demanding, even if doing so is at odds with their ideological preferences.

Electoral competition may be an especially relevant factor in explaining punitive developments outside the developed world. In Latin America and similar regions, for example, conditional policies such as CCTs are both highly visible and are associated with intense electoral competition (De la O, 2015; Garay, 2016; Pribble, 2013). On the one hand, previous evidence shows that the creation of conditional social assistance programs, such as CCTs, may reward governments with increased support from poor voters (Manacorda et al., 2011; Zucco, 2013) at the expense of decreased popularity among middle- and high-income voters (Corrêa & Cheibub, 2016). On the other hand,

recent studies show that conditioning social transfers to the poor helps governments overcome resistance from middle- and high-income voters (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009). Non-beneficiaries prefer cash transfers to be conditional because the behavioral requirements increase the perceived “worthiness of beneficiaries” (Zucco et al., 2019, p. 4). However, no studies have attempted to elucidate how electoral competition for the support of middle- and high-income voters explains punitive shifts in welfare conditionality.

We carried out rigorous empirical testing of this argument. To do so, we focused on one case: the sudden decision to move from lax to stringent conditionalities in Uruguay’s CCT program (*Asignaciones Familiares, Plan de Equidad*) under the center-left government in 2013, eight years after the government adopted conditionalities as a mere formality.

We use process tracing to study the causal process that led to this outcome. This method allows us to make strong causal inferences by testing several general hypotheses in one single case to explicate the processes that led to our outcome of interest. To carry out the analysis, we collected pieces of evidence by systematically reviewing articles in the press, documents from various state institutions, public records of legislative debates, and in-depth interviews with experts and politicians. Our extensive methodological appendix compiles the process-tracing design for both our main and alternative hypotheses as well as the evidence we reviewed and its relevance for testing our argument. The presentation of the results includes specific cross-references to the appendix.

We find substantive support for our electoral competition hypothesis: The Uruguayan government introduced more punitive measures only after the opposition politicized the issue of non-enforcement of conditionalities. Importantly, this shift

occurred in a context of declining public support for aiding the poor. The government, fearful of losing middle- and high-income voters, began enforcing conditionalities and sanctioning non-compliers.

Our study highlights the importance of broadening the search for possible explanations of a government's decision to toughen conditionalities. Whereas previous studies have focused on macro-determinants such as partisanship and the economic context, our approach highlights the importance of electoral competition and public opinion regarding the poor to explain the punitive turn. In this sense, our study helps elucidate the causal political mechanisms that link contextual conditions with governments' choices regarding conditionalities. In addition, it offers empirical evidence about how different causes can combine to trigger a shift toward more stringent conditionalities. Ultimately, the paper contributes to theory building in the literature on welfare conditionality. Our study of the Uruguayan case also constitutes a first step in the effort to reveal the political causes underlying the toughening of conditionalities outside the developed world.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss the literature concerning the political drivers of governmental decisions to toughen conditionalities, and we present the causal mechanism we derive from our theory. Next, we describe our methodological strategy and the data we used. Thereafter, we present the results of our in-depth case study and assess alternative hypotheses. In the final section, we discuss the implications of these findings and offer some concluding remarks.

2. Electoral competition as a driver of the punitive turn in welfare conditionality.

A growing literature addresses the surge in the attachment of conditionalities to welfare benefits in the developed world. These studies analyze the role conditionalities play in the design of welfare policies (primarily those related to active labor market strategies and cash transfers) and how conditionalities affect policy results (Barker & Lamble, 2009; Immervoll & Knotz, 2018; Sage, 2019; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Nevertheless, within this literature, only a few studies focus on the punitive trend observed across time and the political drivers behind governments' decisions to toughen conditionalities (Horn et al., 2020; Knotz, 2019; Knotz, 2020; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). While these studies take a first step in elucidating whether the punitive turn is shaped by politics, they overlook some of the most classic political factors the welfare literature has posited to explain social policy change.

In this paper, we argue that one of those factors, electoral competition, is crucial for understanding the punitive turn in welfare conditionality. Prior work has defined electoral competition as the anticipation of a significant vote shift that could threaten a party's position.¹ This anticipation varies over time and within a given political system. These changes in perceived electoral strength are relevant for social policy decisions. In contexts where electoral competition is low, parties might prefer to pursue policies consistent with their ideological preferences (Abou-Chadi & Immergut, 2019). However, when electoral competition increases, parties might be forced to pursue vote-seeking strategies by trying to reach beyond their core constituency. Hence, increased

¹ For a discussion of this concept, see Abou-Chadi & Orłowski (2016).

electoral competition might prompt parties to change their policy preferences (Abou-Chadi & Immergut, 2019; see also Picot, 2009).

Policy shifts engendered by electoral competition reflect the dynamic relationship between rival parties regarding specific policy issues. That is, a party's original position regarding a particular policy issue might change in response to other parties' positions on the same issue (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015). The issues that become part of this competition dynamic are related to public opinion shifts (Adams et al., 2004) and to prevailing notions of moral "deservingness" (Laenen, 2020; Van Oorschot, 2000). Prominent public debate over particular issues creates the opportunity for parties to organize their vote-seeking strategy around these issues (Abou-Chadi, 2018).

This line of reasoning has already been applied to address policy choices in welfare conditionality. For instance, Moreira et al. (2014) focus on the Portuguese case to highlight the central role political competition plays in explaining the changes to conditionality in minimum income schemes. In the context of political instability, Portugal's approach to welfare conditionality changed as a result of electoral competition and according to the ideology of the party in government. Due to this political dynamic, the government strengthened work obligations and sanctions associated with the country's minimum income policy (Moreira et al., 2014). Similarly, Kvist & Harsløf (2014) argue that, in Denmark, political pressure from the right-wing populist party, which supported the Liberal-Conservative government, led to the imposition of more stringent conditionalities on non-nationals.

While these accounts offer an initial foray into the study of how electoral competition explains changes in welfare conditionality, they do not provide systematic

evidence that can reveal the complete causal mechanism that produces this outcome or can rule out alternative explanations.

Building upon these prior accounts, we argue that electoral competition helps explain why governments decide to toughen conditionalities. Specifically, we propose the following hypothesis:

H: Intense electoral competition for middle- and high-income voters, combined with a context of declining support for public assistance to the poor, may trigger a government's decision to toughen conditionalities. This combination prompts the political opposition to pressure the government and advocate for tougher conditionality enforcement. This, in turn, increases the salience of conditionalities in the public debate, causing the government to fear that maintaining lax conditionalities may alienate its middle- and high-income voters.

Our hypothesis pays special attention to electoral competition which, when combined with an adverse public opinion toward social assistance, can trigger a change in the model of welfare conditionality. In this sense, the causal chain starts when electoral competition becomes more intense. However, to produce a change in the government's approach to welfare conditionality, an adverse public opinion toward social assistance must also be present. Absent this context, the intensification of electoral competition alone is not expected to lead to a change in welfare conditionality.

To be clear, our goal is to explain the change in welfare conditionality across time within a particular case, rather than the variation in the punitiveness of conditionalities across cases. Also, our argument concerns the tightening of conditionalities; we make no claims regarding shifts toward more lax conditionalities.

Alternative explanations

Other possible explanations of the punitive turn have been offered. First, the literature on welfare conditionality features two main arguments. On one hand, it has been argued that the choice of lax or tough conditionalities is driven by the preferences of different partisan coalitions in government, an argument consistent with the literature that recognizes the critical influence of partisanship on social policy options (Korpi, 1983; Stephens, 1979). For example, right-wing parties tend to choose stringent conditionalities so that welfare recipients will have responsibilities and obligations with which they need to comply in order to “deserve” benefits (Horn et al., 2020; King & Ward, 1992; Schram et al., 2008; Wacquant, 2009; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Wright et al., 2020). By contrast, leftist parties tend to prefer lax conditionalities (King & Ward, 1992; Lødemel, 2001; Soss et al., 2001) that prioritize the goal of poverty alleviation or social inclusion.² On the other hand, prior work also claims that the punitive turn results from governments’ efforts to cope with increasing demands for social protection in the context of adverse economic conditions (Knotz, 2018). In contexts of economic crisis, the public “mood” regarding generous social spending shapes governments’ decisions about conditionalities, such that governments opt for tougher sanctions to “signal to voters that the costs of social protection are at least contained, but without harming the ‘truly deserving’” (Knotz, 2019, p. 3).

² Nevertheless, some studies show that the toughening of conditionalities has also taken place under left-wing governments whose legitimacy rests on their defense of the welfare state (Bonoli, 2013; Clasen, 2000).

While these two explanations each have a certain appeal, the empirical evidence to support them remains inconclusive. More importantly, they do not account for those cases in which the imposition of more stringent conditionalities takes place in the absence of significant changes in governing party or economic conditions.

Second, beyond the welfare conditionality literature, the broader literature on social policy and policy change suggests three other possible causes for the punitive turn. The first is *intra-party electoral competition* (see Ceron et al., 2019; Marx & Schumacher, 2013). While some party factions may highlight the importance of employing stringent conditionalities to build human capital or cut public expenditures, others may advocate for lax conditionalities or no conditions at all to avoid excluding the more vulnerable recipients. Thus, governments may decide to toughen conditionalities because of a change in the relative strength of factions aligned with these two competing visions. A second proposed cause is *policy learning* (Hall, 1993; Hecló, 1976), where governments shift from a lax to a stringent approach when they conclude that the policy is not working as intended because conditionalities are not being enforced. Finally, a change in social policy could be attributable to a change in *state capacity* (Grindle, 1997; Repetto, 2004). For example, an increase in administrative capacity to effectively enforce conditionalities could explain a government's shift from a lax to a more stringent approach to conditionalities. Based on these possible causes, we formulate the set of alternative hypotheses as follows:

HA_1: Government ideology determines whether lenient or strict conditionalities are chosen. Accordingly, a change in government ideology explains the punitive turn.

HA_2: Conditionalities are made more stringent by governments in response to economic crises. The choice to make conditionalities more stringent signals to voters that the policy change targets the “undeserving” poor.

HA_3: Within the governing party, there are competing factions with different preferences regarding conditionality. A government’s decision to toughen conditionalities responds to the increasing strength of a fiscally conservative or pro-human capital faction inside the governing party.

HA_4: The punitive turn is attributable to a policy-learning process among government officials. Government officials learn from program evaluations and make adjustments so that the policy will work as intended.

HA_5: A change in state capacity to enforce conditionalities explains the punitive turn. A government’s decision to toughen conditionalities results from new administrative capacity to monitor and sanction noncompliance.

We consider all alternative hypotheses to be coincident³ with our main hypothesis, since they all offer distinct causal pathways that could lead to the same outcome. We also assume that these various explanations are not mutually exclusive; they could act in combination to explain the toughening of welfare conditionalities.

3. Case and methodological strategy

Several methodological paths could be taken to provide empirical evidence in support of our theoretical argument. Cross-case designs—quantitative or qualitative—could be useful for assessing the various hypotheses in multiple cases. However, rather than assessing the contribution of each hypothesized explanation, our goal is to gain

³ For a detailed discussion on the features of coincident hypotheses, see Zaks (2017).

understanding of the political process that leads governments to tighten conditionalities across time. Moreover, we are interested in opening the black box of government decision-making on this matter. To achieve this goal, we carry out an in-depth study of one particular case, Uruguay, that exhibits our outcome of interest, i.e., a change toward tougher conditionalities.⁴ Given the relevance of electoral competition and politics to the development of cash transfers in Latin America, it is especially important that our case study capture this regional context.

Uruguay is, by many accounts, among the most stable democracies in the region. Its party system has a bipolar configuration, comprising center-left and center-right blocs (Luna, 2004). From the restoration of democracy in 1985 until 2005, the two traditional center-right parties (*Partido Colorado* and *Partido Nacional*) alternated in government. In 2005, the *Frente Amplio* (FA) became the first left-wing party to come to power and was subsequently reelected twice, with a majority in Congress. When the FA first took office, it promoted a transitional two-year conditional cash transfer program, the National Program for Emergency Assistance (*Programa Nacional de Atención a la Emergencia Social*, PANES), to deal with extreme poverty. Later, in 2007, the government adopted a permanent conditional cash transfer policy, the Equity Plan Family Allowances (*Asignaciones Familiares del Plan de Equidad*, AFAM_PE), that targeted vulnerable families. Although in both policies cash transfers were conditional upon school attendance and health checkups, conditionalities were not enforced. In 2013, the government decided to change this strategy by suddenly

⁴ This follows the logic of selecting positive cases for process tracing causal mechanisms (see, for example, Goertz, 2017).

announcing it would start monitoring and sanctioning recipients who failed to comply with the educational conditionality. This was institutionalized in 2015 with a governmental decree that established the procedure to sanction non-compliers. Due to this new strategy, since 2015, between 4% and 13% of program beneficiaries have been sanctioned each year (*El País*, 2016).

We use process tracing to reveal the causal process that led the Uruguayan government to tighten conditionalities in 2013. This method allows us to focus on the causal mechanism that produces our outcome of interest and make strong causal inferences to explain this particular case. This strength comes from the method's focus on testing all possible alternative explanations and on implementing specific tests to draw causal inferences (Bennett & Checkel, 2014).

In process tracing, the testing requires one to carefully define the evidence that would increase or decrease the plausibility of each hypothesis based on the logical connections between the evidence and each hypothesis (Collier, 2011; Van Evera, 1997). These tests classify evidence based on whether it confirms (*smoking gun* test) or disconfirms (*hoop* test) a hypothesis. There is also a type of evidence that supports the plausibility of a hypothesis, but is too weak to either confirm or disconfirm it (*straw in the wind* test).⁵

Evidence supporting the electoral competition hypothesis (H) would indicate that increased electoral competition for middle- and high-income voters and public opposition toward cash transfers to the poor both preceded the change in welfare conditionality in Uruguay. There should also be evidence of pressure from the political

⁵ For more detail on the logic of process tracing tests, see Collier (2011) and Van Evera (1997).

opposition to compel the government to enforce conditionalities, reporting or commentary on the issue in the media, and evidence that the government yielded at least somewhat to these pressures. Absence of political contention concerning the enforcement of conditionalities would disconfirm this hypothesis.

Following the same logic, we provide a detailed account of the specific pieces of evidence that would allow us to confirm or disconfirm each alternative explanation enumerated above. For HA_1 to hold, Uruguay's shift in conditionalities should have been preceded by a shift in government ideology. An absence of this shift would disconfirm the hypothesis. Similarly, for HA_2 to hold, adverse economic conditions should have been present before the government's decision to toughen conditionalities in 2013. Failure to observe this evidence would suggest that HA_2 should be discarded. Evidence supporting HA_3 would be the presence of competing factions within the ruling party with different preferences on conditionality and a change in the relative power of a pro-human-capital faction before 2013. Absence of this evidence would suffice to refute HA_3. To confirm HA_4, we should find evidence of government officials expressing concerns regarding the program's impact and a learning process that attributes disappointing program results to weak enforcement of conditionalities. This, in turn, would be followed by new beliefs regarding the importance of conditionalities and the need to enforce them. Finally, to support HA_5, we should find evidence that (i) the government had limited or no capacity to enforce conditionalities during the first years of PANES and AFAM_PE and (ii) specific actions were taken to build capacity within the institutions responsible for enforcement and significant changes in institutional capacity occurred immediately preceding the toughening of conditionalities in 2013.

The evidence we used to test all these hypotheses are casual process observations (CPOs) that refer to the context and the specific processes involved in each hypothesis (Brady & Collier, 2010). Our empirical work was based on several sources, including press and legislative records, program documents and evaluations, and in-depth interviews with key government officials and other relevant actors linked to the programs. In the online appendix, we present the detailed process used to determine the probative value of different types of evidence for confirming or refuting each hypothesis. We also highlight the inferential weight of the evidence in the presentation of the findings.

It is important to emphasize that our causal leverage comes from the within-case inference we make for the Uruguayan case. Thus, we cannot make any empirical inferences or generalizations regarding the causal process that leads to the punitive turn in other countries or regions. However, the theoretical and empirical effort presented here elucidates the causal complexity of the processes that lead governments to tighten conditionalities in other contexts and policy fields. We develop this argument more fully in the discussion section.

4. The politics of sanctioning the poor through welfare conditionality

Electoral competition hypothesis

The FA, with Tabaré Vázquez as its candidate, won the presidential elections of 2005 by large margins, securing victory in the first round with 52% of the vote against the center-right traditional parties' 46%. Although the FA was subsequently reelected twice, electoral competition increased in the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, with the FA only winning in the run-off elections after failing to secure majorities in the first round. Indeed, from the 2009 election on, support for the Left stopped growing and the

FA lost 2.4% of the vote compared to the previous election in 2004 ([CPO1](#) in the appendix).

Specifically, the FA's loss of support in 2009 was concentrated among middle- and higher-income voters who lived in the capital city, Montevideo ([CPO1](#) in the appendix), a segment of the population that was a key component of the party's historic constituency (Luna, 2014).⁶

The tight electoral results produced a competitive electoral scenario and the expectation of alternation between center-left and center-right blocs. According to opinion polls, during the second FA government, the two blocs had similar levels of support through the 2009-2013 period, suggesting uncertainty regarding the outcome of the next national elections ([CPO2](#) in the appendix). A small shift in votes could yield a change in the governing coalition. Also, polls showed that some segments of the middle-class electorate were disenchanted with the government ([CPO1](#) in the appendix).

Along with the increasingly competitive electoral scenario, there was a shift in public support regarding the role of the welfare state and the “deservingness” of the poor. In surveys conducted from 2004 to 2013, there was a significant increase in the percentage of people endorsing the statement that individuals should take responsibility for their own well-being. Yet, while low-income individuals did not change their attitudes regarding the responsibility of government, support for government aid to the

⁶ The FA's support in society comes from the organized working class and the progressive sectors of the middle class, and more recently, from the poor sectors (Lanzaro & De Armas, 2012; Luna, 2004).

poor declined by almost half among middle-income respondents, from 22% to 12%, while high-income individuals' support for aid to the poor always remained low (Latinobarómetro) ([CPO3](#) in the appendix).

Also, perceptions of the poor were changing. Between 2006 and 2011, there was a nontrivial increase in the percentage of people who endorsed the belief that the poor are lazy. Although there was an increase in this belief across all social groups, the increase was more significant among middle-socioeconomic-status individuals (from 26% to 47%) and high-socioeconomic-status individuals (25% to 38%) ([CPO3](#) in the appendix). Finally, there was a significant decrease in the proportion of people espousing the belief that the state should implement strong policies to reduce income inequality. Though the differences among income groups on this item are less striking, the middle class still showed the largest decline in support, from 80% in 2008 to 64% in 2014 ([CPO3](#) in the appendix).

Some of the newspapers most frequently read by the political elites published articles about these changes in public opinion ([CPO7](#), in the appendix). This shows that the public opinion shift was part of the public debate.

In this context, the political opposition began pressuring the government, advocating for tougher conditionality enforcement. In February 2012, a legislator from the opposition—Ana Lía Piñeyrúa—formally and explicitly asked the government whether they were enforcing AFAM_PE conditionalities and, if so, how. She also called the Minister of Social Development (Daniel Olesker) to appear before the Special Commission on Population and Social Development (March 15), arguing the following: "We have learned through the press that monitoring of school attendance among

children who receive family allowances is not being done, as established by law."⁷ She considered the explanations given by the minister insufficient and pursued an interpellation process in Congress on May 15, 2012.⁸ This event received considerable media coverage ([CPO4](#) in the appendix).

An official from the Ministry of Social Development (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, MIDES) confirmed this changing public mood: "We were being criticized for giving money to the poor and not asking anything of them in return. Then began a critical juncture regarding the role of the transfers in social assistance, and the role of the opposition in this sense" ([CPO5](#) in the appendix).⁹

Although presidential elections were still two years away, the possibility of the FA losing votes among the middle- and high-income classes was already a concern. In November 2012, President José Mujica announced that he would gather his cabinet ministers to discuss how to improve the monitoring of AFAM_PE's conditionalities. One particularly revealing piece of evidence is the speech made by President Mujica in his weekly radio appearance, reacting to the opposition's claims: "The political will to redistribute in favor of the weakest is questioned (...), questioned by the opposition and questioned by middle-class people based on reasons that we do not share, but we understand. Yes, we understand why these middle-class people might think: 'Ok, but dude, you tax me, and then you are giving [to the poor].'" He then complained about

⁷ Semanario Patria, 17/2/2012.

⁸ Congress can call ministers to the floor to answer questions if at least one-third of the members of Congress vote in favor of doing so. Congress may also vote to censor the minister.

⁹ Official from the MIDES, personal interview, November 9, 2016.

government agencies' inability to obtain information on beneficiaries' school attendance. He also argued that, "because of the social conditions, the society makes a sacrifice, but [beneficiaries] must send [their] kids to school and we need to have that certified." He then argued that criticism by the middle class of the government's lack of monitoring capacity was legitimate ([CPO8](#) in the appendix).¹⁰

Rather tellingly, Mujica's declarations regarding middle-class attitudes are an indication that society's changing attitudes toward poverty influenced the government's decision about enforcing conditionalities. An official from MIDES confirmed this possibility when he said that the "2013 juncture was more complex regarding monetary transfers and social assistance in general. There were no more voices that said, 'Rights are what matters and everything else is irrelevant.' Rather, there were voices saying, 'We need to look after the public's money'" ([CPO9](#) in the appendix).¹¹

In December 2012, shortly after Mujica publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of the middle-class discontent, Minister Olesker once more appeared before the Parliamentary Commission. Once again, Legislator Piñeyrúa questioned the minister on the issue. "The control of conditionalities regarding school attainment and health checkups has been a problem both for the previous administration and for this one," Piñeyrúa said. "In contrast to the minister, I think that monitoring school attainment and health checkups, as required by law, is an element that promotes education, not repression. I think that it is an essential device and those who do not meet that condition

¹⁰ President José Mujica, radio program, 7/11/2012.

¹¹ Official from the Ministry of Social Development, personal interview, November 9, 2016.

should lose the benefit." The media again published articles about the debate regarding conditionalities ([CPO4](#) in the appendix).

In June 2013, the government announced that 32,558 family allowances would be suspended on July 1 because those families were not complying with the educational conditionality. The announcement was made at a press conference by Ernesto Murro, the president of the *Banco de Previsión Social* (Social Security Bank, BPS), which, along with MIDES, is responsible for managing cash transfers ([CPO11](#) in the appendix).

Immediately afterward, several politicians from the opposition claimed that the government's decision was a response to their pressure for the enforcement of conditionalities. Several representatives of the opposition parties commended the government for taking this action but faulted them for the delay in implementing the measure ([CPO13](#) in the appendix).

The institutionalization of the enforcement process was completed in September 2015 with a presidential decree that established that monitoring and sanctions would be carried out twice a year. When asked about the decree in 2016, one BPS director described how the decision was finally made: "I argued that I was not willing to have this discussion every single year, making a mess in the newspapers about whether we must monitor compliance or not. If they want us to monitor, they should make a decree, and if they don't want us to monitor, they should change the law. The government debated on these grounds and made a decree..." ([CPO12](#) in the appendix).¹²

To sum up, the evidence strongly supports the existence of a political dynamic behind the change in the enforcement of conditionalities since 2013. There is clear

¹² BPS official, personal interview, November 29, 2016.

evidence that increased electoral competition for middle-income voters, in a context of public discontent with social transfers to the poor, led the opposition to politicize the issue of non-enforcement of conditionalities. This prompted the government to start sanctioning non-compliers to avoid alienating part of its electoral base among non-beneficiaries. There is also clear evidence that the government announced its plans to enforce conditionalities only after pressure from the opposition became more acute; the government also acknowledged that the decision was related to those pressures. We would not expect to observe these pieces of evidence in the absence of the proposed electoral competition causal mechanism.

Alternative explanations

Partisanship: The partisanship hypothesis states that the policy change toward more stringent conditionalities is due to a transition from a left-wing to a right-wing governing party. This hypothesis is ruled out for the case of Uruguay since the shift regarding conditionalities occurred not only under a government led by a left-wing party—the same party that created these programs during its previous term—but also under a government led by President José Mujica, leader of the *Movimiento de Participación Popular* (MPP), one of the leftist factions within the FA ([CPO14](#) in the appendix).

Economic crisis: This hypothesis also finds no support in our case. It argues that more stringent conditionalities result from worsening economic conditions. However, in Uruguay, the shift toward tougher conditionalities took place in a context of prosperous economic conditions. In fact, during the 2005-2014 period, GDP growth averaged 5%, significantly higher than the growth rate recorded in the preceding decades of around

1% (Che, 2021). In addition, the proportion of the population living in poverty decreased from 34.4% in 2006 to 12.4% in 2012 (INE, 2013, [CPO15](#) in the appendix).

Intra-party competition: The electoral competition explanation is compatible with the hypothesis that a change in intra-party competition among FA factions was a causal factor in the government's shift from lax to more stringent conditionalities. To support the intra-party competition explanation, there should be evidence of competing factions within the FA with opposing views on enforcing conditionalities. The FA comprises various highly institutionalized factions, and the competition between them plays an important role during elections and in the development of public policies (Antía, 2022; Yaffé, 2013). However, there is no evidence of FA factions holding different positions about conditionalities ([CPO19](#) in the appendix) and, thus, the intra-party competition hypothesis is not supported.

Some debate on conditionalities did take place among government officials of the main CCT implementing institutions (MIDES and BPS), yet these actors were not affiliated with specific factions. Initially, MIDES officials advocated for lax conditionalities. They considered conditionalities as a way to encourage beneficiaries to promote their children's health and education rather than as a requirement for beneficiaries to receive the transfer. In addition, there is no evidence of factions or governmental officials taking a position in defense of conditionality enforcement before 2013 ([CPO21](#) in the appendix).

It was only after 2012, when the issue of conditionalities became politicized, that we observe actors in the BPS pushing for enforcement based on legal arguments, i.e. that the law established the need for beneficiaries to comply with conditionalities, and so the government was responsible for enforcing them ([CPO25](#) in the appendix). Again,

these actors were not affiliated with a faction, nor did they justify their views in terms of human capital development, further undermining support for this explanation ([CPO22](#) in the appendix). In fact, these BPS actors' emphasis on enforcing the law supports the argument that the shift operated through a political channel, as this was one of the opposition's main critiques. Considering the timing of the emergence of this position and the arguments it uses—legalistic arguments, the same as those put forward by the opposition—this change in the BPS position seems to have been triggered by the electoral competition mechanism.

Policy learning: If the shift toward more stringent conditionalities resulted from a policy-learning mechanism, we would have expected to find evidence of government officials reacting to the evaluations of PANES or AFAM_PE. The evaluations indicated limited results in terms of health and education and noted that this could be attributable to beneficiaries' limited knowledge of the conditionalities ([CPO26](#) in the appendix). However, there is no evidence, either in the press or in interviews, of any governmental reactions to the evaluations. Nor is there evidence of concerns or internal debate within the government regarding the need to enforce conditionalities ([CPO27](#) and [28](#) in the appendix) . This lack of evidence thus strongly suggests that program evaluations did not trigger a policy-learning process within the government.

State capacity: The state capacity argument does not fully explain the shift toward more stringent enforcement of conditionalities. If the shift were attributable to state capacity, the decision to enforce conditionalities should be directly related to investment in capacity building. Initially, MIDES lacked sufficient institutional capacity to enforce conditionalities due to the lack of an electronic database of educational attendance and medical checkups ([CPO29](#) in the appendix). Later on, state capacity building developed in parallel with the CCT programs, yet this capacity was built for

other institutional objectives rather than to enforce conditionalities ([CPO34](#) in the appendix). By mid-2012, the development of the National Integrated Information System (SIAS) was very much advanced; according to a MIDES official, by this point, the government had accumulated enough technical capacity to enforce the education conditionalities ([CPO36](#) in the appendix).¹³ Nevertheless, the enforcement of conditionalities started one year later, in 2013, casting doubt on the state capacity explanation. However, the monitoring of conditionalities could not have happened without the availability of this tool. In other words, administrative capacity building might have enabled the change, but it was not enough to trigger the outcome, which, we argue, resulted from an electoral competition causal mechanism.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we develop a theoretical argument to explain punitive shifts in welfare conditionality and test it in a single case: Uruguay's 2013 shift toward more stringent enforcement of conditionalities in its main cash transfer program, AFAM_PE. Our study supports the hypothesis that electoral competition for middle- and high-income voters, combined with a context of declining support for public assistance to the poor, led the political opposition to exploit this popular discontent with public assistance programs and push the government to deviate from its original lax enforcement of conditionalities.

In terms of theory, our study shows the need to widen the scope of the search for possible causes of the punitive turn. While the literature on welfare conditionality has

¹³ Official from MIDES, who was a member of the AFAM_PE design commission, personal interview, November 9, 2016.

well documented the existence of this turn in social policy, the explanation of the shift remains incomplete. Moreover, beyond offering general arguments regarding partisanship and adverse economic conditions, this literature had said little about the political processes that explain the shift. We claim it is important to address the causal complexity behind this outcome and identify the mechanisms shaping governments' decisions to toughen enforcement of conditionalities. To that end, it is useful to consider classic explanations of social policy development and change from the welfare literature. More specifically, we develop a detailed argument that emphasizes how electoral competition leads governments to shift from lax conditionalities to more stringent ones.

This argument improves our understanding of how partisanship combines with electoral incentives in shaping governments' decisions to toughen conditionalities. In fact, in Europe, where unemployment benefits have figured prominently in the literature on welfare conditionalities (Knotz, 2018; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018), electoral competition has not been systematically explored as an explanation for punitive shifts. Equally important, we also make an effort in this study to cast a wide net, that is, to identify all possible alternative explanations (Bennett & Checkel, 2014) for punitive shifts. Our approach yields an explanation not only of why electoral competition matters to the punitive turn in welfare conditionality, but also how it works and how it relates to other possible causes. In sum, our theoretical framework offers a new set of explanations to the existing, limited theoretical discussion of the political factors that account for changes in governments' strategies towards conditionalities. Our theory-building effort lays the groundwork for further theory development and theory testing in the literature on welfare conditionality.

Empirically, our rigorous study of the Uruguayan case shows that competition for middle- and high-income voters plays an important role in driving punitive enforcement choices, particularly after the opposition politicizes the issue, thereby altering the electoral incentives that the government faces. Our empirical testing allows us to identify a causal mechanism and rule out alternative explanations, thus making our inferences stronger. The testing of several alternative explanations not only strengthens this inference, but also offers empirical evidence of how different causes may combine as part of a complex causal process that leads to a punitive shift. The process tracing we carry out for the Uruguayan case allows us to unpack this causal mechanism and elucidate the concrete combination of possible causes in practice. Although our single-case study is theoretically important, it does not allow us to make any empirical generalizations outside this case. Further research should focus on testing the complex set of explanations we develop in this paper using cross-case methods that can overcome these limitations.

Our paper also constitutes an important first step in the study of the punitive turn in welfare conditionality outside the developed world, a phenomenon that the welfare conditionality literature has generally overlooked. The welfare conditionality experience in developing countries is important not only because of the large population covered by conditional programs such as CCTs, but also because it can provide new insights concerning the different causes that may lead to punitive policy shifts. For example, research has shown that conditionality enforcement has varied over time in several CCT programs across Latin America (Antía & Rossel, 2021). Also, a recent study of the backlash against one of the most important CCT programs in Latin America, Brazil's Bolsa Familia, attributes the backlash to the widespread idea that the program was benefitting non-poor families and suggests public opinion shaped governments' punitive

decisions regarding conditionalities (Borges, 2022). Future research, therefore, might study whether, or to what extent, the electoral mechanism explains shifts in conditionality enforcement beyond the Uruguayan case.

Our argument may be also relevant to the study of punitive shifts in other policy domains. In Latin America, for example, the experiences of some of the most prominent left-wing governments during the 2000s are similar to that of the FA. Although those governments initially adopted a progressive criminal policy discourse and attempted to advance policies that focused on a more inclusive approach to crime prevention, they later adopted harsher criminal measures as a response to the political opposition and media pressure for increased security and punitiveness (Iturralde, 2019).

Finally, although the drivers of public support for welfare policies have been studied in the developed world (see, for instance, Buss, 2019; Fossati, 2018; Van Oorschot, 2000), this literature remains incipient in developing regions. Because our hypothesized mechanism highlights the role of public opinion, further research should also explore whether the shift toward more stringent conditionalities increases support for welfare policies and translates into electoral benefits for incumbents.

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