

Debate / Controversy

# The Contentious Politics of Social Policy expansion in Latin America

## *Protestas y expansión de las políticas sociales en América Latina*

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### ABSTRACT

Latin America witnessed a resurgence of protests during the 1990s and early 2000s. Citizens took to the streets to protest against the liberalization of public services and rising levels of inequalities and poverty. This situation partly changed in the decade of the 2000s when the region experienced a period of sustained social policy expansion intended to extend protections to formerly excluded groups. Did popular mobilization have an influence on the turn toward universalism in Latin American social policy? This paper explores this question by looking at the relationship between protest, the strength of the Left and the adoption of expansive reforms in healthcare, conditional cash transfers and non-contributory pensions. The findings bring support to the idea that protest is a relevant aspect of the politics of social policy reform, although its effects are both sensitive to other characteristics of the political environment and the particular policy dimension considered.

**Keywords:** Welfare state; social movements; reform; inequalities; universalism.

### RESUMEN

América Latina presenció un resurgimiento de las protestas durante los 1990s y principios de la década siguiente. Las personas salieron a las calles para oponerse a la liberalización de los servicios públicos y a niveles crecientes de desigualdad y pobreza. Esta situación parcialmente cambió en la década de 2000, cuando la región experimentó un período de expansión de las políticas sociales que extendió protecciones a grupos antes excluidos. ¿Qué rol tuvo la movilización popular en el giro al universalismo en las políticas sociales latinoamericanas? Este artículo explora este tema observando la relación entre la protesta, la fuerza electoral de la izquierda, y la adopción de reformas expansivas en salud, transferencias condicionadas, y pensiones no contributivas. El análisis ofrece evidencia de que la protesta es un aspecto relevante de las reformas de las políticas sociales, aunque sus efectos son sensibles a otras características del contexto político, y a la dimensión específica de la política considerada.

**Palabras clave:** Estado de bienestar; movimientos sociales; reformas; desigualdades, universalismo.

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## INTRODUCTION

Latin America witnessed a resurgence of social movements and protests during the 1990s and early 2000s (Almeida, 2007; Silva, 2015). While in the 1980s citizens demanded the end of military rule and the reestablishment of democracy, in the 1990s mobilizations targeted the political elites who had endorsed the neoliberal doctrine of the Washington Consensus. In several countries, citizens took to the streets to challenge the privatization and liberalization of pensions, healthcare and education and to manifest their discontent with rising inequalities and poverty rates. This situation began to change in the decade of the 2000s when the region experienced a period of sustained social policy expansion intended to increase social protection for the many social groups outside of formal employment and not covered by contributory social insurance (Garay, 2016). The magnitude of change was striking, and several authors have described this period as a turn toward universalism (Franzoni & Sánchez-Ancochea, 2016; Pribble, 2013). Almost every country in the region introduced some form of basic social assistance, healthcare, pension and education (Cecchini & Atuesta, 2017). Between 2002 and 2014 poverty rates in the region fell from 45.9 percent to 30.7 percent and the Gini index decreased on average 5 percent (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe [CEPAL], 2018).

Did popular mobilization influence the “turn toward universalism” in Latin America? Social policy analyses have rarely considered the effect of protests and social movements on social policy reforms. For this literature, the key factors in the study of policy change fall in the institutional arena, in particular in the dynamics of electoral competition and the political ideology of political parties. However, an emerging strand of the literature has shown an influence of social organizations and protest campaigns on the creation of programmes for vulnerable social groups. Case studies demonstrate a significant involvement of trade unions and organizations of the unemployed throughout the process of inception and design of the *Renta Dignidad* in Bolivia (2008) and the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar* in Argentina (2001) (Anria & Niedzwiecki, 2016; Garay, 2007). This literature shows that innovation in social policy was driven by popular movements, and that the alignment of popular demands and government’s agenda was a difficult and time-consuming process involving negotiations both within and outside political institutions.

Latin American countries have a long, recurring history of popular movements demanding greater equality, inclusion and democratization (Almeida, 2007). The latest of such protest waves occurred at the turn of the century. Scholars of the left turn in Latin America have focused on the electoral victories of left-wing parties and coalitions across the region started with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, relating these outcomes with widespread social discontent towards the liberalization of the 1990s (Arditi, 2008; Beasley-Murray, Cameron, & Hershberg, 2009b; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Silva, 2009). Some authors have interpreted this period as the struggle for (re)incorporation of those groups that suffered exclusion during the heyday of neoliberalism (Rojas, 2018; Rossi, 2017), while others have seen the governments of the left turn as more willing to undertake social welfare roles (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Overall, the main goal of this literature was either to explain a certain political outcome –the electoral victories of the Left– or political process –the rise of grassroots movements–, but the social policy dimension was not central or was regarded as a by-product of political change.

The aim of this paper is to extend current theoretical frameworks used to explain the inclusive turn in Latin American social policies by incorporating protest. We argue that social policy reform is shaped by the broader configuration of the polity, in particular by the ways in which contentious and institutional politics interact and shape each other (Fourcade & Schofer, 2016). Thus, we do not contend the relevance of electoral dynamics and political

parties, but rather that differences in the ways in which institutional and contentious politics combine affect the policy process and the very chances of some reforms to be considered and implemented. The paper is organized as follows: first it elaborates on the mechanisms linking protest and expansive social policy reforms; it proceeds by presenting empirical data on contention in the region in the period 1990-2010 and the relationship between protest, the strength of the left and social policy outputs in healthcare and social assistance (conditional cash transfers and non-contributory pensions). The final section offers concluding remarks about the role of protest in the politics of social policy reform in the region.

## THE CONTENTIOUS POLITICS OF SOCIAL POLICY REFORMS

Studies of the inclusive turn of the 2000s in Latin America stress the importance of a combination of economic, institutional and political factors, in particular the increase in governments' resources due to the rise in commodity prices and the strength of the Left across the region (Huber & Stephens, 2012; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). These factors are important but only look at political dynamics within the electoral arena. In this section we make a case for expanding these theoretical frameworks to incorporate the influence of protest on the decision of governments to expand social protections for marginalized social groups.

Social policy reforms are the outcomes of power relations and political struggles. Political parties are crucial actors in policymaking, and parliaments are one of the main settings where social conflict is mediated, popular demands accommodated and diverging interests negotiated. However, formal institutions are not the only arena of political exchange, and Latin America provides strong evidence of the power of contentious politics (Almeida, 2007; Silva, 2015). It is not uncommon in the region for protests to scale up into large episodes of unrest (e.g. the uprising in Chile of October 2019, the December 2001 protests in Argentina, or the water wars in 2000 in Bolivia). These can undermine the capacity of authorities to govern and might lead to systemic impacts such as transformations of the party system. Furthermore, groups such as the poor, the young, the unemployed and those in the informal economy are often comparatively less inclined to vote and to join political parties, thereby reinforcing a trend of underrepresentation of their interests in political institutions (Offe, 2013). Compared to electoral politics, the protest arena is more open to political actors who lack regular access to institutional channels, and thus enhances political participation among traditionally excluded constituencies (Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, & Giugni, 1995). As such protest is an important channel for outsiders to make demands for more egalitarian social policies.

Drawing on studies on the outcomes of social movements, we identify a two-way relationship between collective mobilizations and social policy (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, 2010; Giugni, 2008). On the one hand, social policies create categories of people (the beneficiaries of a programme, those excluded from social security). Over time these categories can solidify in collective identities and organizations which mobilize to further their interests. On the other hand, scholarship suggests a number of mechanisms through which protesters can force governments to take their demands on board. Governments can be induced to negotiate with protesters because they have an interest in reducing social conflict and maintaining peaceful societies. Protests also serve as signals that indicate pressing, unresolved issues that must be addressed by governments. Governments will be more open to consider these issues either because of their ideological proximity to protesters, or because they mount an electoral threat – by withdrawing electoral support or by endorsing political challengers (Ciccía & Guzmán-Concha, 2018; Hutter & Vliegenthart, 2016). The extent to which these effects occur depends on the size and frequency of the protests, but also on the capacity of protesters to sway public opinion in their favour, forge

alliances with institutional actors (e.g. trade unions, political parties), develop coalitions with other civil society organizations, and sustain and expand these linkages over times<sup>1</sup>.

The policy impact of protest can be direct, indirect or deferred. By *direct impact*, we refer to short-term responses of authorities such as changes in the policy agenda of political parties, the adoption of new measures by governments, the inclusion of representatives of social movement organizations in the policy process (e.g. in parliamentary hearings or committees overseeing policy implementation) (Amenta et al., 2010; Giugni, 2008). While protest can sometimes produce short-term impacts, many effects of protest on policymaking take time to materialize. By *indirect impact*, we refer to effects that occur in the middle to long-term as a result of protests disrupting patterns of electoral competition. In relatively consolidated democracies, social movements can become threats for officeholders and/or improve the chances of challengers. Other indirect effects concern cultural changes produced by protesters as a result of them entering into public opinion battles –with protestors using their visibility and legitimacy to persuade growing numbers of people (Giugni, 2008). Indirect impacts also include potential spill-overs effects whereby protests initially targeting a specific policy sector (e.g. education, poverty relief) produce changes in other sectors or a larger impact on the whole system of social protection. Finally, *deferred impacts* refer to policy changes that occur long after the initial unrest was initiated. These effects can be gauged through the historical processes of co-transformation of protestors and the political milieu in which they act. Some of these effects occur because activists transform existing parties from within by taking its agenda and/or leadership (Skocpol & Williamson, 2016), or enter the political arena with their own political platforms, thus securing a stable, autonomous voice in the institutional arena (Anria, 2018; Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017).

Although social movements mobilise to achieve their goals, reforms can be blocked by other groups who see their interests or goals threatened. Also, issues might lose relevance over time, and unforeseen events such as economic downturns can reduce governments' room for manoeuvre and increase competition for available resources. This highlights how the effect of protests on social policy reforms is mediated, i.e. it depends on other components of the political environment (Amenta et al., 2010). Therefore, the shape and extent of social policy reforms is dependent upon changes in the sites of decision-making, including governmental offices, parliaments, corporatist institutions and policy communities. Protest movements are more likely to obtain concessions when they are able to produce significant changes in the existing balance of power. In Latin America power holders tend to see social movements more as threats than as signals of unresolved social problems. Partly, this can be attributed to problems of democratic consolidation, and to a longstanding tradition of strong presidentialism, which poses obstacles to the development of the civil sphere (Alexander & Tognato, 2018). Scholars have noticed that presidential regimes exacerbate political polarization and instability (Linz, 1990) and might radicalize protests as movements can avail of fewer points of access to the state (Kriesi et al., 1995).

## PROTEST, THE LEFT AND SOCIAL POLICIES IN 18 LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

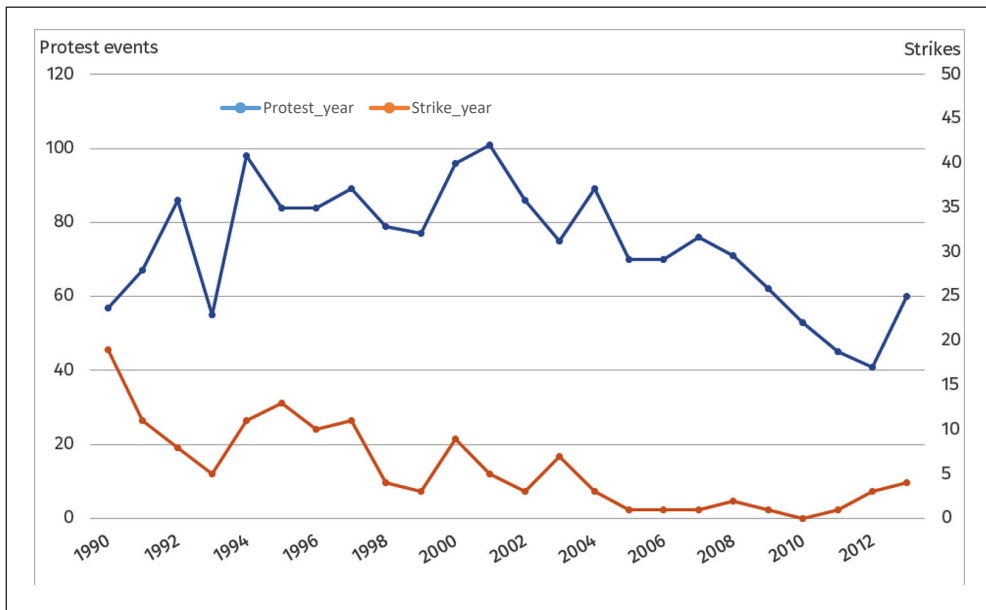
In this section, we show trends in contention across the region in the 1990s and 2000s and present an exploratory analysis of the relationship between protest, the strength of the Left and the adoption of reforms expanding social protection for previously excluded groups. We focus on three policies – healthcare, conditional cash transfers and non-contributory pensions – which have been the object of intensive legislative activity aimed at extending the coverage of social protection in the 2000s.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Tilly's WUNC display (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment) partially addresses these aspects (see e.g. Wouters & Walgrave, 2017).

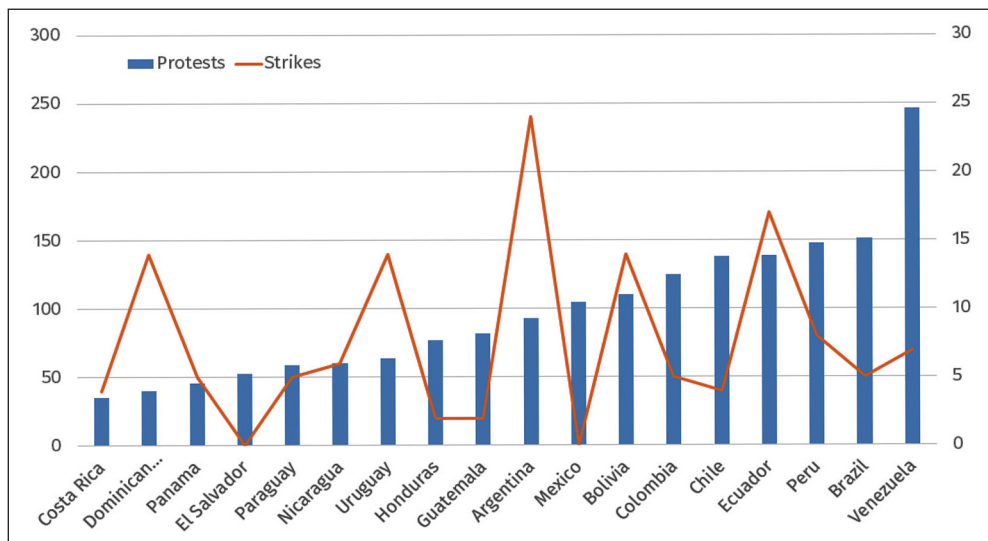
Figure 1 summarizes trends in protests and strikes between 1990 and 2013. We observe that the number of protests grew all through the decade of the 1990s and started to decline in the second half of the 2000s. The 1990s were probably the most convulsed years, but in several countries (Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia and Argentina) levels of contentions remained high across the two decades, while in others such as Chile discontent became apparent only in the 2000s with the rise of student protests (Guzman-Concha, 2012). The number of strikes in turn followed a descending trajectory throughout the period. Every peak after 1990 locates at a lower level than the preceding one. Trade unions in many Latin American countries are traditionally weak and similarly to other regions their strength has been further declining in the last decades.

Despite these common trends, not all countries exhibited similar trajectories of social conflict. As many as 14 per cent of 1,825 total events of protest occurred in Venezuela, which experienced a very convulsed quarter of century in the aftermath of the Caracazo of 1989.<sup>2</sup> According to Lopez-Maya (2003), this “was a turning point in Venezuela’s political history, producing an irrevocable change in the relationship between state and society, above all in the way Venezuelans gave expression to their demands and feelings of malaise”. It is also worth noticing that Chile exhibited rather high levels of protest despite being often depicted as an exemplar of stability in the region because of sustained economic growth and its successful transition to democracy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2008). Other countries with a relatively high frequency of protests are Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia, Mexico. The lowest levels of contention (below 3 percent) are instead found in countries located in Central American and the Caribbean (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Panama).

Figure 1. Cumulative frequency of protests and strikes in 18 Latin American countries, 1990-2013



2 The Caracazo refers to the popular protest which broke out in 1989, with unprecedented violence in Caracas and surrounding towns in the context of economic recession and scarcity of basic food products.

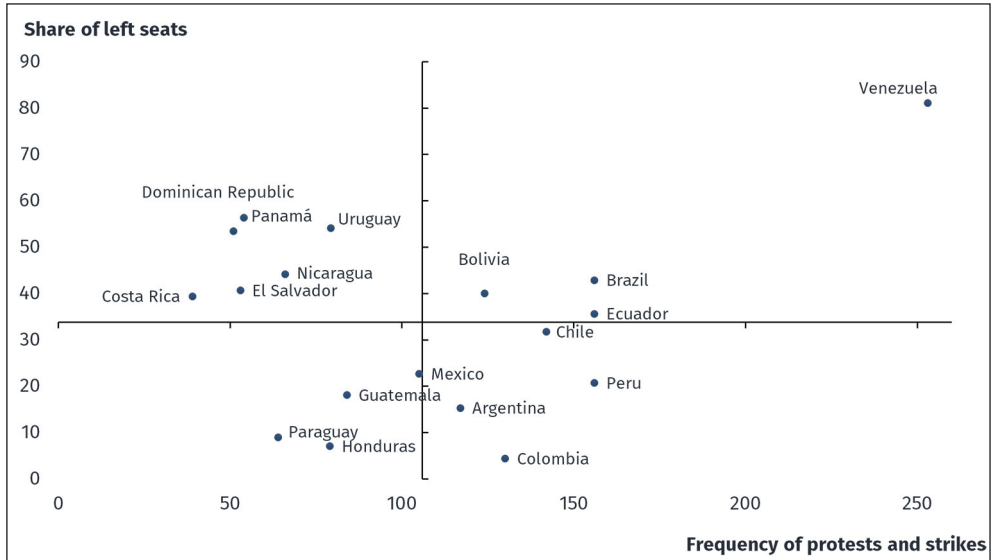


Source: Own elaboration based on [Clark and Regan \(2019\)](#) and [Banks and Wilson \(2016\)](#)

As shown in [figure 1](#), countries with a low (or high) frequency of protest do not generally coincide with those with low (or high) frequency of strikes (correlation=0.04). Comparing the number of strikes and protests shows that unions have retained a central role as initiators of large-scale collective mobilization against political authorities in Argentina, Uruguay and Dominican Republic. The case of Argentina is emblematic of this phenomena. The country shows a relatively low number of protest but one of the highest number of strikes in the region. In the second half of the 1990s, community and territorial associations and organizations of unemployed workers developed close relationships with labour unions ([Niedzwiecki, 2014](#)). [Garay \(2016\)](#) talks about the emergence of social movement unions to refer to cross-sector alliances between social movements and labour unions which led to the formation of alternative labour-union confederations. By contrast, in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua, unions have shared centrality with other civil society organizations, in particular with associations of indigenous people and rural workers.

We now turn to the political contexts of protests. The political ideology of governments has been shown to play an important role in determining their responsiveness to protest ([Ciccía & Guzman-Concha, 2018](#); [Hutter & Vliegenthart, 2016](#)). [Figure 2](#) shows the relationship between the relative power of the Left and levels of contention in the period of emergence and consolidation of the left turn in Latin America. We include information on protests and strikes over a longer period of time (nearly two decades) because the effect of protest on policymaking is generally cumulative and indirect and dependent on other characteristics of the political environment. Conversely, strong parliamentary groups can directly initiate reforms which, if successful, will manifest their effects in the short- to medium- period depending on political and legislative processes.

[Figure 2](#) shows four main groups. The first pattern is characterized by the presence of a strong Left and relatively low levels of contention (Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama and Uruguay). The second group includes countries (Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador) with high levels of contention and a strong presence of the Left in parliament. This group includes some of the most paradigmatic cases of the left turn in the region. Contention levels were high also in Colombia, Argentina, Peru and Chile where the Left was relatively weak. Finally, Paraguay, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico show relatively low levels of contention and a weak Left in parliament.

**Figure 2.** Contention (1990-2008) and left-wing seats in parliament (1998-2008)

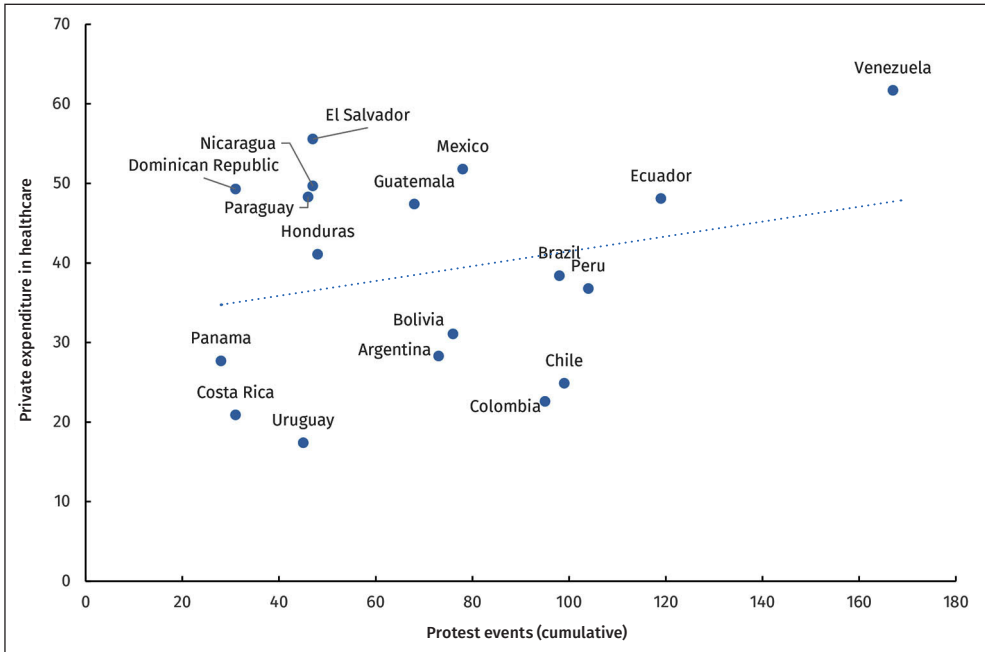
Source: Own elaboration based on [Clark and Regan \(2019\)](#) and [Huber and Stephens \(2012\)](#)

To explore the relationship between protest, the prevalence of the Left and social policies, we looked at two sectors: healthcare and social assistance. The data on protest does not allow to assess direct effects since it does not distinguish events based on the type of issue raised. However, the cumulative frequency of protests provides indication about the extent to which contention represented a regular feature of political participation across countries, and how this affected trajectories of policy reform.

In much of the literature on outsiders in advanced economies, a pessimistic view prevails on their ability to engage in coordinated action and influence national policies. In the face of extensive mobilizations in several Latin American countries, it is important to identify conditions which favours the emergence of such movements. One such condition is the presence of social programmes that create grievances and provide a common target for demands across societal sectors ([Garay, 2016](#)). Widespread mobilization is more likely to coalesce around universalistic programmes such as healthcare. Therefore, we first looked at the relationship between the cumulative frequency of protests and the share of private health expenditure at the beginning of the period to see if social policy legacies influenced levels of contention. Out-of-pocket expenditures have traditionally been the most important source of financing healthcare, suggesting both insufficiency and inequity of provision ([Mesa-Lago, 2008](#)). [Figure 3](#) provides some evidence that several countries with higher levels of private health expenditure have experienced more frequent protests ( $r=0.26$ ).

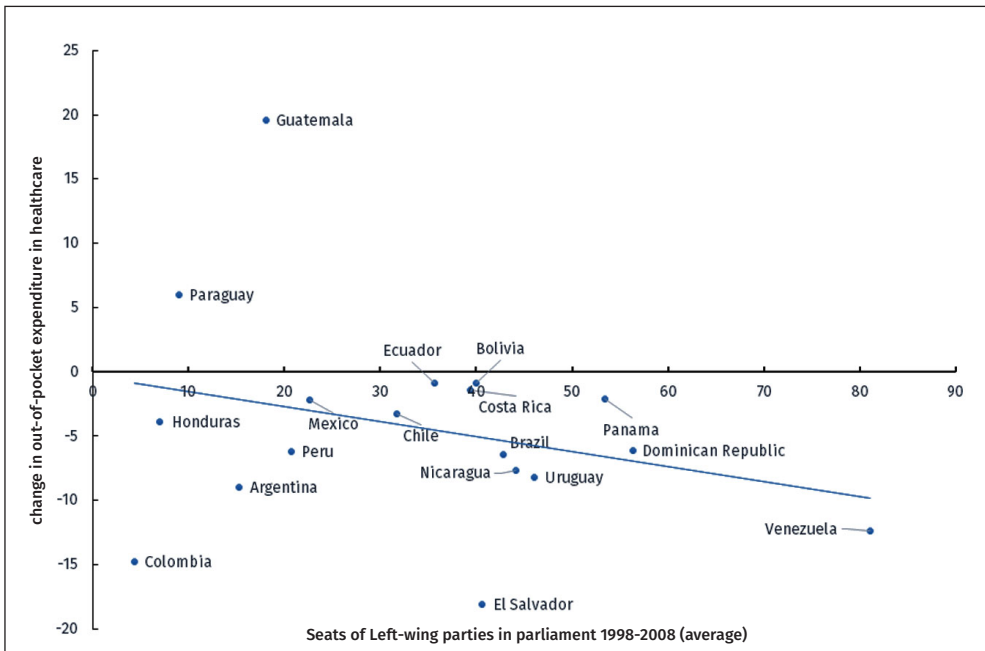
By 2008 sixteen countries had successfully reduced the share of private health expenditure, and only in Paraguay and Guatemala it had risen (respectively, +6.0 and +19.6 percent). In Costa Rica the healthcare system already offered universal coverage to all citizens (including illegal migrants), which explains the small reduction in private expenditure ([Franzoni & Sánchez-Ancochea, 2016](#)). Bivariate analysis suggests that both protest ( $r= -0.21$ ) and the share of left-wing parties ( $r= -0.28$ ) in parliament were positively associated with larger reductions in private expenditure in healthcare between 1998 and 2008 ([figure 4](#)).

**Figure 3.** Relationship between share of out-of-pocket expenditure in healthcare (1998) and frequency of protests in 18 Latin American countries, 1990-2009

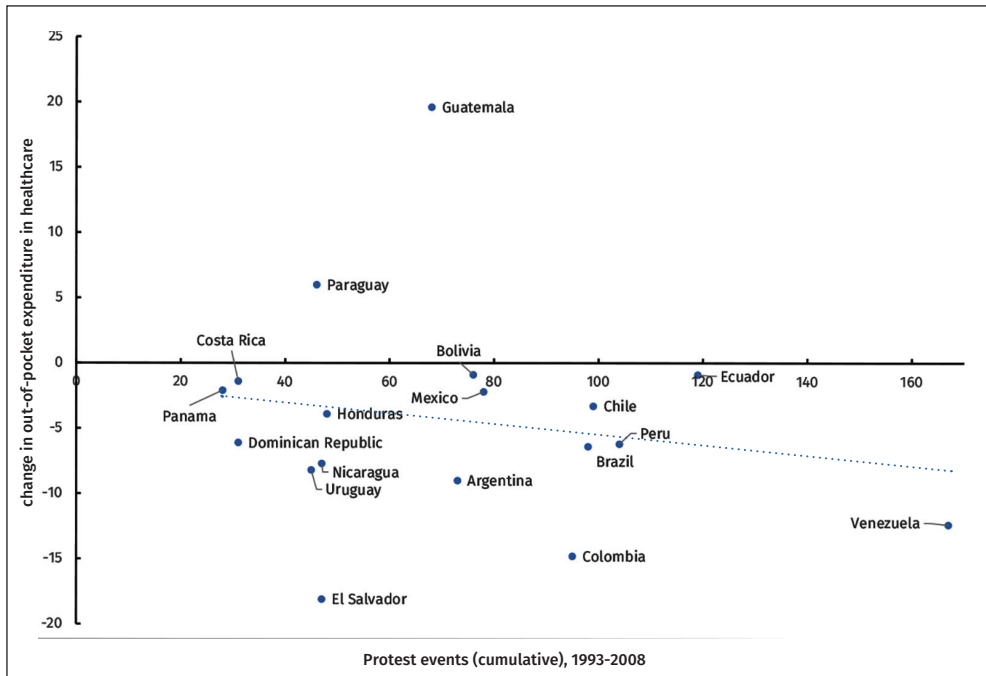


Source: Own elaboration based on [Clark and Regan \(2019\)](#) and [CEPAL \(2019b\)](#)

**Figure 4.** Relationship between protests and left-wing seats in parliament and change in share of out-of-pocket expenditure in healthcare, 2010







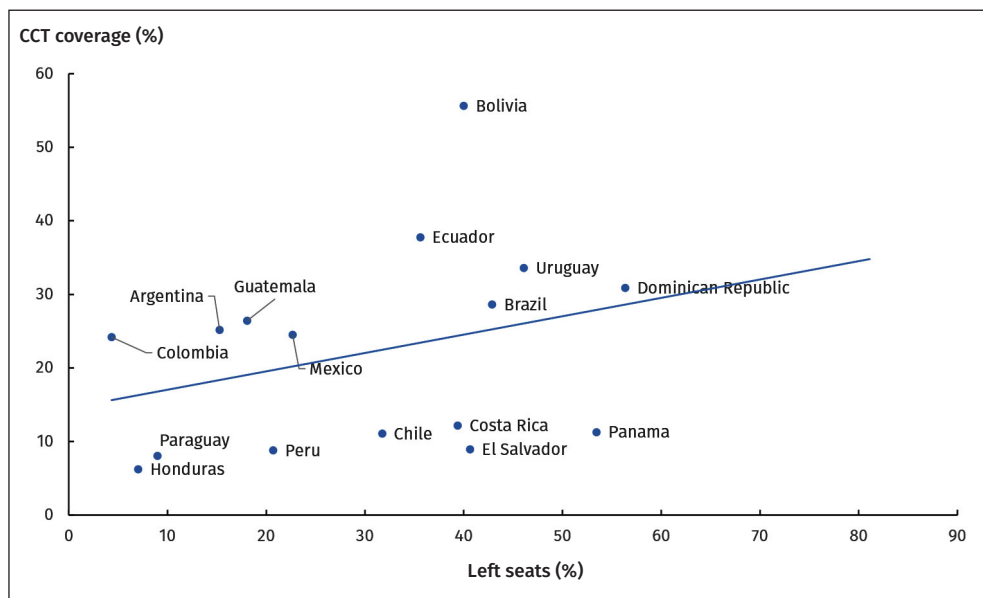
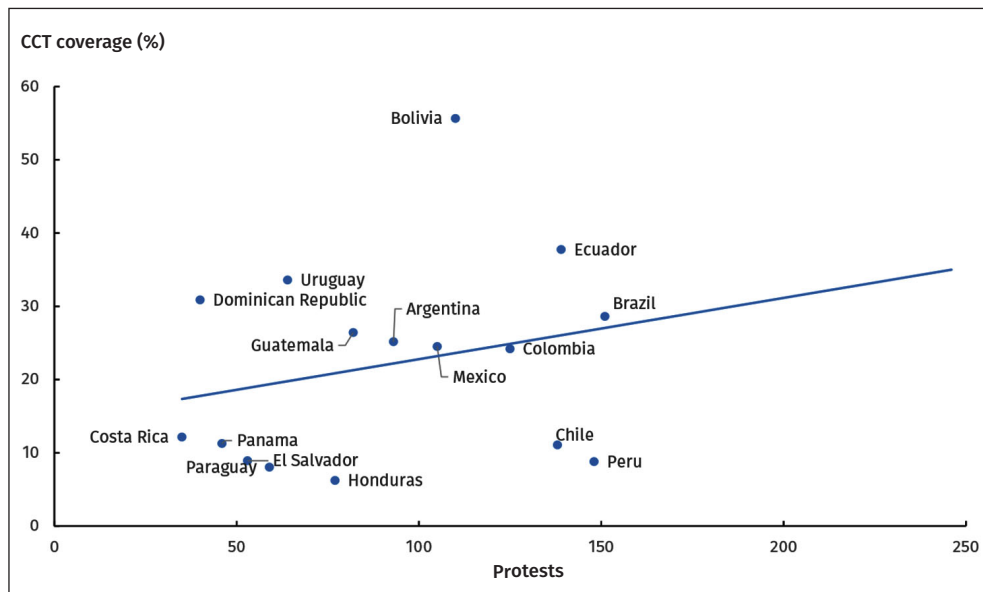
Source: Own elaboration based on [Clark and Regan \(2019\)](#) and [Huber and Stephens \(2012\)](#)

Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) are often considered the centrepiece of the inclusive turn in Latina American social policies. CCTs combine targeting and human development goals such as improving children access to education and health. By 2015 there were as many as 31 such programs in the region covering 20.9 percent of the population ([Cecchini & Atuesta, 2017](#)). [Figure 5](#) shows that the CCTs coverage in 2010 was positively related to both protest levels and the share of left-wing seats in parliament. Indeed, the correlation coefficients are similar for both independent variables (0.30), which can be interpreted as evidence that when protests are more frequent *and* the left controls parliament, CCTs reach wider populations.

Looking at the levels of benefits ([figure 6](#)), we observed a correlation with the share of left-wing seats in parliament (0.35) but no relationship with the frequency of protest (-0.01). This suggests that while protests were influential in shaping the inclusion of a higher number of social groups (coverage), the electoral strength of the Left was an important condition determining the generosity of CCTs. However, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Bolivia showed very dissimilar levels of benefit despite a similar share of left-wing seats in parliament, indicating that further conditions were necessary to produce this outcome.

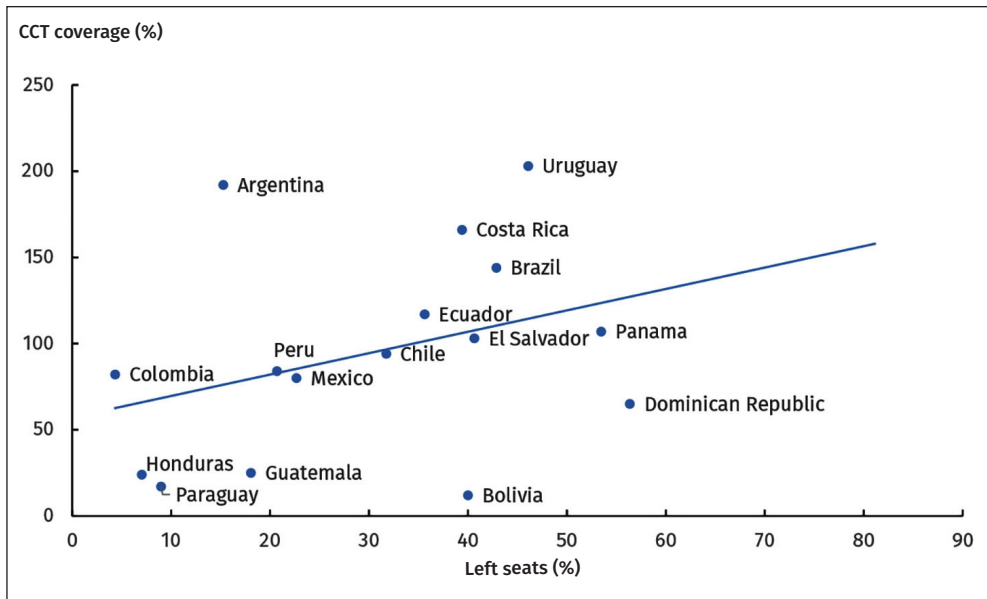
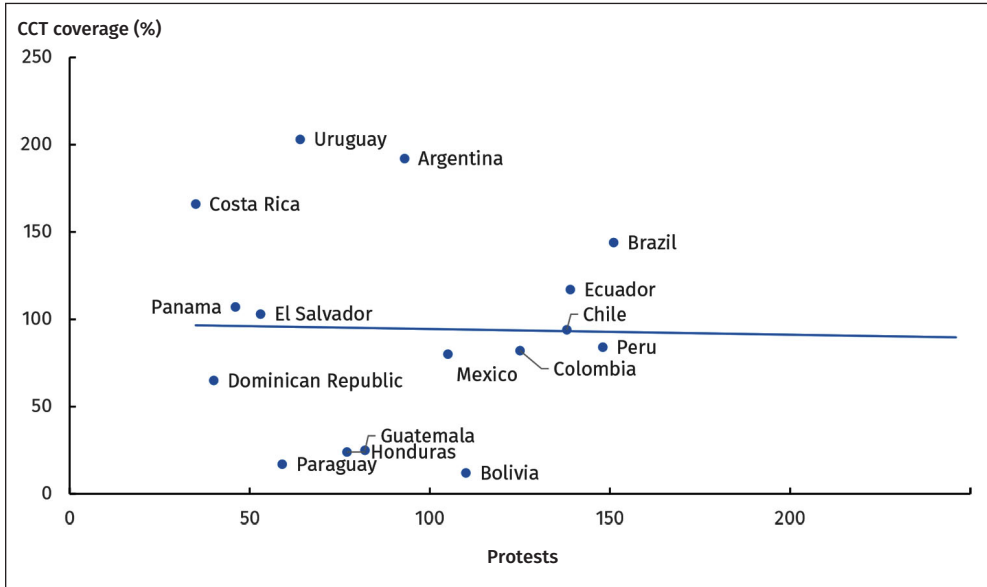
Non-contributory old-age pensions is another area where there has been considerable policy innovation in the 2000s. [Figure 7](#) shows that both the frequency of protests ( $r= 0.21$ ) and the share of left-wing parties in parliament ( $r= 0.24$ ) had a positive influence on pension coverage. The more frequent the protests and the higher the share of parliament held by the left, the larger the increase in coverage. Bolivia stands out here for providing nearly universal coverage, although other countries with similar levels of protests (Argentina) and presence of the left in parliament (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Uruguay) presented limited coverage.

**Figure 5.** Relationship between frequency of protests 1990-2009, share of left-wing seats 1998-2008 and coverage of CCTs, 2010



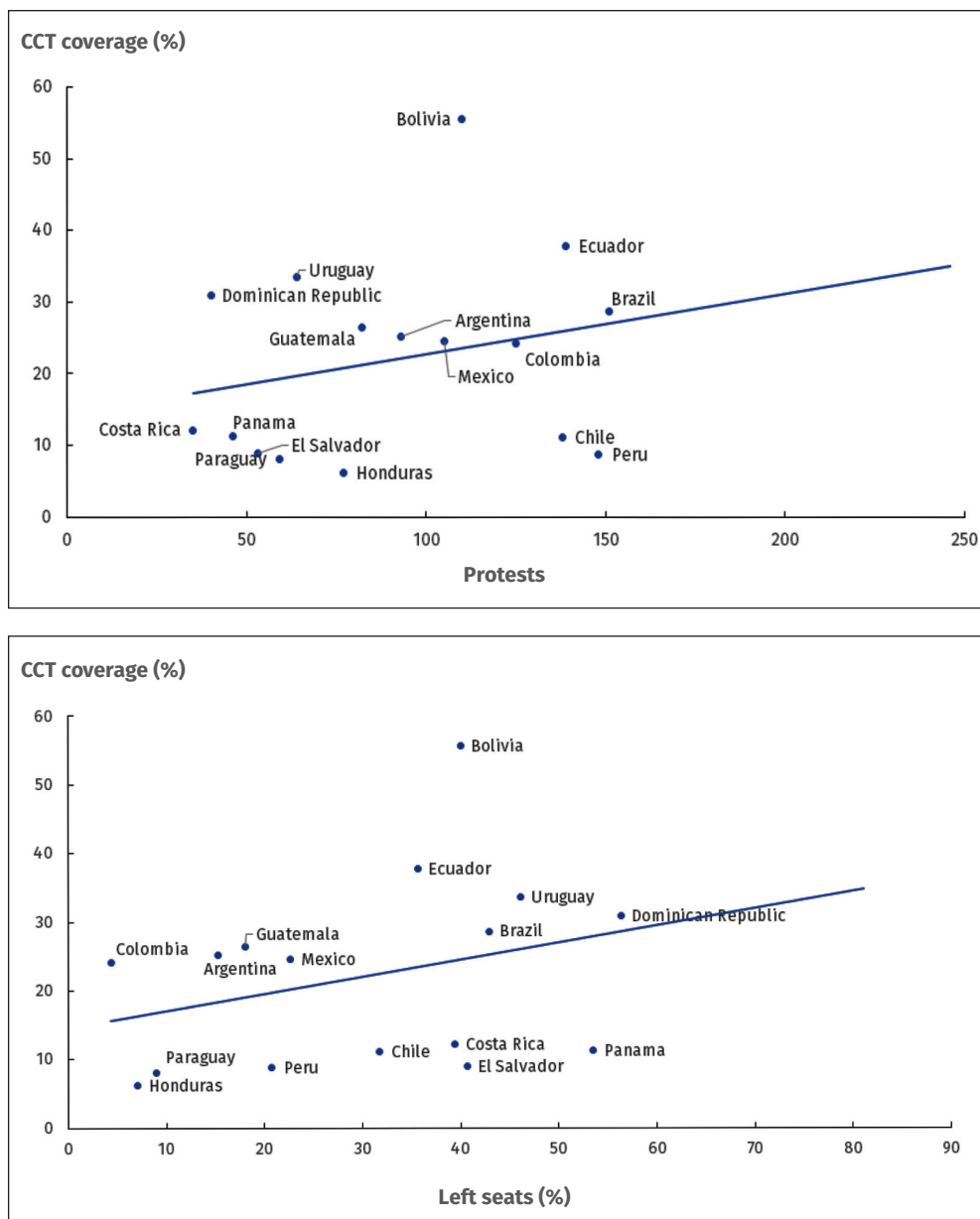
Source: Own elaboration based on [Clark and Regan \(2019\)](#), [Cecchini and Atuesta \(2017\)](#) and [Huber and Stephens \(2012\)](#)

**Figure 6.** Relationship between protests 1990-2009 and left-wing seats 1998-2008 in parliament and maximum benefit per capita of CCTs, 2010



Source: Own elaboration based on [Clark and Regan \(2019\)](#), [Cecchini and Atuesta \(2017\)](#) and [Huber and Stephens \(2012\)](#)

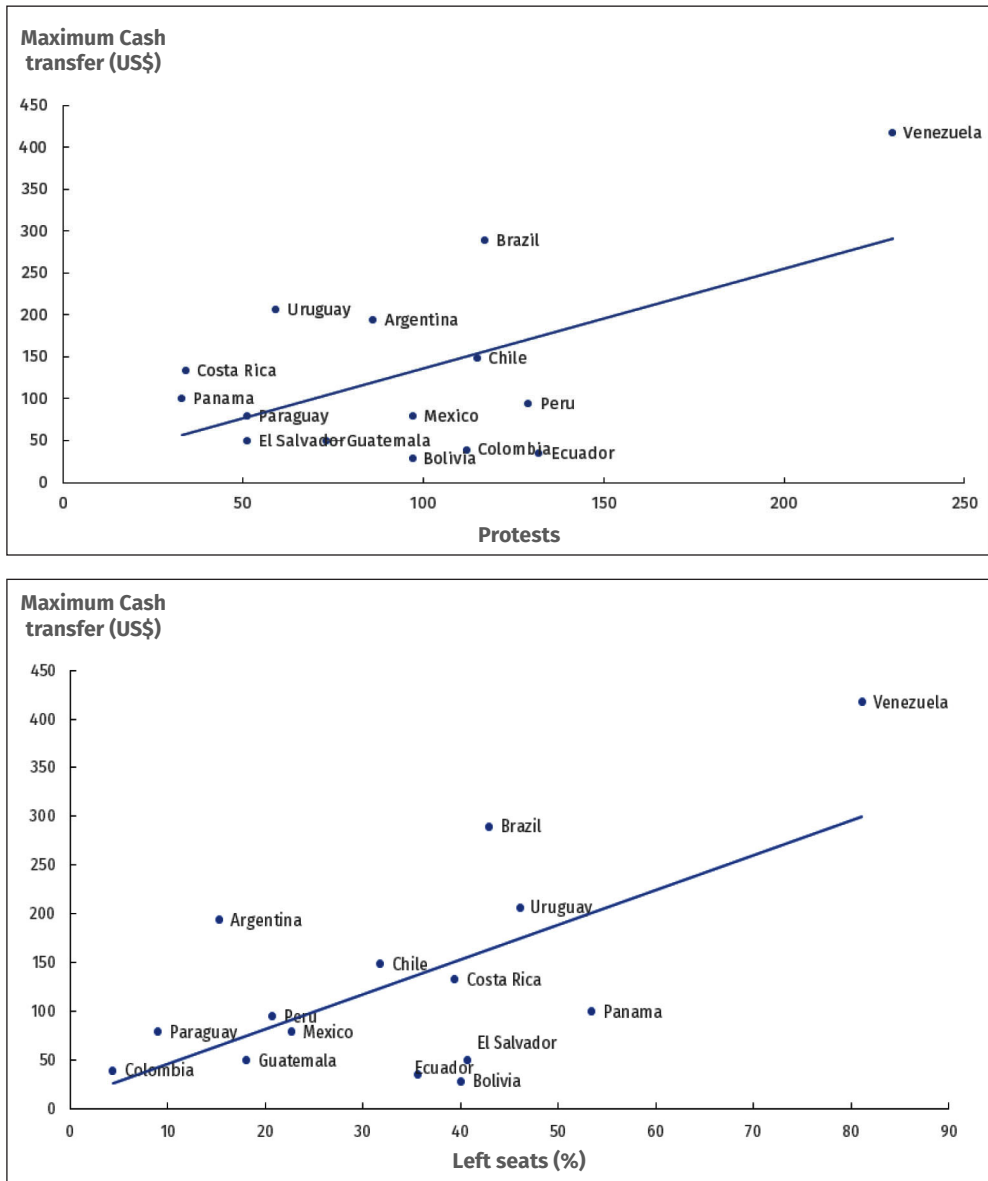
**Figure 7.** Relationship between protest 1990-2009 and left-wing seats 1998-2008 in parliament and coverage of non-contributory pensions, 2010



Source: Own elaboration based on Clark and Regan (2019), Huber and Stephens (2012) and CEPAL (2019a)

To conclude this analysis, we look at benefit levels of non-contributory old-age pensions (figure 8). We observe a strong positive relationship between the maximum amount of benefits and both protest levels ( $r= 0.55$ ) and the share of left-wing seats in parliament ( $r= 0.64$ ). This suggests that the generosity of benefits has been generally higher in countries where protests have been intense and parliaments exhibited a higher presence of left-wing politicians.

**Figure 8.** Relationship between protest and left-wing seats in parliament and maximum benefit per capita of non-contributory pensions, 2010



Source: Own elaboration based on [Clark and Regan \(2019\)](#), [Huber and Stephens \(2012\)](#) and [CEPAL \(2019a\)](#)

## CONCLUSIONS

Almost every Latin American country developed some form of inclusive social policy over the decade of the 2000s, which led to significant reductions in poverty rates and inequality across the region. The rich literature aiming to explain this universalistic turn has generally emphasized the role of electoral competition and the ideology of governments, but did not generally look at the effect of sustained levels of contentions in the decades of 1990s and early 2000s. In this article, we have offered evidence that sustained levels of protests are related to essential characteristics of these programs such as generosity levels and coverage. Overall, we observe that higher levels of contention are associated with reductions in out-of-pocket expenditure in healthcare, higher coverage of CCTs and more generous non-contributory pensions. Furthermore, we observe that while protest levels did not strongly relate to the generosity of CCTs, a stronger left is generally associated with a higher level of benefits. These findings suggest that contentious politics is especially relevant in shaping the extension of social programs (i.e. the groups covered by particular measures), while a stronger presence of left-wing parties is more important in determining their generosity. Further research using multivariate and case-based methodology would be needed to clarify these relations and their underlying mechanisms.

More generally, broader systemic transformations occurred in countries where protests were more intense and the Left stronger. In some countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, the struggles of the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in the collapse of the old party system and the emergence of new populist parties winning presidential elections. A number of activists assumed governmental positions which allowed the development of innovative policies in a wide array of areas from social protection to environmental protection. Brazil followed a similar dynamic of political change, although the process was more gradual than in the aforementioned cases. By contrast, in Argentina the old established political parties have been more relevant in delivering the reforms. While massive protests ousted President de la Rúa in 2001 amidst a severe economic and social crisis, the strong ties of the *Partido Justicialista* (Peronist) with trade unions and labour-based movements fostered a shift from the neoliberal orientation of the 1990s to the social-democratic one of Presidents Néstor (2003-2007) and Cristina Kirchner (2007-2015).

Contentious politics can arguably be a factor that impinge upon the dynamics of party competition also in countries that did not experience a turn to the Left in the 2000s such as Colombia and Mexico. In these countries, social movements prospered and, aided by a context in which threats of military coup or authoritarian reversal were at historic lows (which was to change in the following decade), put pressure on the old conservative parties to expand their agenda and address issues of social protection.

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