Optics of the State:
The Politics of Making Poverty Visible in Brazil and Mexico

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Abstract: Sociological studies stress how state legibility serves as a form of populational control. Often overlooked are how states differ in their will to control, and how this variation shapes legibility projects. This article proposes a three-dimensional analytical framework to study legibility from a comparative perspective that seeks to account for this variation. I illustrate the usefulness of this framework through an in-depth analysis of how Brazil and Mexico rendered poor individuals visible in order to implement conditional cash transfer programs (or CCTs). In the mid-1990s, these two states implemented the same policy, facing very similar challenges; yet, they adopted different solutions for governing their respective CCT programs and making poor families visible. Drawing on the analysis of approximately 10,000 pages of official documents, 100 in-depth interviews with bureaucratic and political elites, and 18 months of fieldwork in Brazil and Mexico, this article reveals the political and governance effects of distinct methods of *seeing like a state*. Specifically, I show that the differences and consequences of legibility projects depended on the politics of legitimation of each CCT program and had the unanticipated effect of making the state itself visible to broader publics and thus subject to intense scrutiny.

Keywords: Legibility, States, Poverty, Cash Transfers, Data Politics, Latin America.

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Introduction

Scholarship on modern statecraft typically assumes a positive correlation between information-gathering activities and state power. The more a state knows about its population, resources, and land, the better equipped it is to intervene in social life (Tilly 1975, Foucault 1980, Mann 1984). Much of this discussion focuses on what James Scott calls “legibility,” or the process of transforming “complex, illegible, and local social practices” into an “administratively more convenient format” (1998, 2-3). Projects of state legibility—such as censuses, maps, and standard units of measurement—are considered crucial for modern statecraft, because they allow state agents to see human activity largely through simplified, stylized facts that facilitate administrative, regulatory, and extractive tasks. For James Scott, furthermore, “legibility is a condition for manipulation,” since it allows states to pursue ambitious developmental goals, through attempts to redesign social life to fit the grand visions of state leadership (*ibid.*, 183).

The notion of legibility has stimulated a prolific research agenda that examines the various ways that states see their populations, as well as investigates the stratifying consequences and disputes over official categorization that accompany these projects of seeing (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999, Nobles 2000, Loveman 2014). These studies demonstrate that there is not a single way in which states see society, since projects of legibility are inevitably shaped by nationally specific political struggles (Curtis 2001, Rodriguez-Muñiz 2017, Powell and Moraes Silva 2018). Relatedly, scholars who have compared official knowledge-making institutions have shown that the ways states see society are closely coupled with the historical organization of the

academic, political, and policymaking regimes in which projects of legibility take place (Rueschmeyer and Skocpol 1996, Fourcade 2009, Campbell and Pederson 2014). Yet, we know less about why and how projects of legibility differ, or about the effects of these differing projects on the capacity of states to intervene in society (Wyrzten 2017, 207). What happens when two states that have different political histories initiate similarly-oriented projects of legibility? Do they see the same thing? How do different institutional configurations of information-gathering activities affect the ability that states have to see and to intervene in social life?

To answer these questions, this paper provides an in-depth, comparative analysis of how Brazil and Mexico made poor individuals visible in order to implement conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs)—*Bolsa Familia* and *Progresas*, respectively.¹ CCTs were targeted anti-poverty programs, in which the state transferred small amounts of cash only to families that were classified as poor, but conditioned receiving this cash on families following certain requirements, such as taking their children to the hospital and to school. The idea, then, was to combat poverty in the short term, while creating the conditions to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty in the long term. In practice, however, to achieve these goals, the Brazilian and Mexican states had to create new ways of finding, categorizing, transferring cash to, and monitoring poor families. These legibility tasks were made even harder because a large portion of the target beneficiary audience for CCTs circulated in the informal sector and lacked identity cards that would make them easily visible to the state.

Although these two countries adopted their respective CCT programs around the same time (1995 in Brazil, 1997 in Mexico) and faced similar implementation challenges, they

¹ *Progresas* was initially implemented in 1997; its name was changed to *Oportunidades* in 2000, and to *Prospera* in 2012. To avoid the extensive acronym of *Progresas-Oportunidades-Prospera*, I refer to it simply as *Progresas*.

adopted different solutions to render poor individuals visible and CCTs governable. In Mexico, the federal government developed a system to identify the poor and implement *Progresa*, which aimed to define poverty status with accuracy—33 variables were used to predict if a household was poor or not. The CCT was implemented through a centralized and insulated administrative structure located within the federal government. In Brazil, on the other hand, the federal government developed a targeting system that was less focused on verifying poverty status in precise terms, instead using only income per capita, a variable that was self-reported by individuals. *Bolsa Família* was decentralized, with municipalities playing a key role in the CCT implementation.

In order to understand the differences in the Brazilian and Mexican projects of making poverty legible and governable, I propose a three-dimensional framework for studying projects of legibility from a comparative perspective which can be also applied to institutional domains beyond CCT programs. Specifically, this framework aims to capture the categorical features of legibility, the problems of legitimation they confront, and the unanticipated effects that projects of legibility potentially have in making the state itself legible and into an object of scrutiny. In doing so, this framework provides analytical categories that can be used to unpack similarities and differences in legibility projects across national contexts.

I demonstrate that each country developed legibility tools to track the behavior of the poor that were shaped by distinct legitimation strategies. While Mexico aimed to project an image of *Progresa* as efficient and anti-political by prioritizing comprehensive targeting; Brazil aimed to portray an image of *Bolsa Família* as inclusive and politically impartial by adopting a simpler targeting strategy. In both contexts, however, these choices changed the politics around CCTs in ways that were unanticipated by the main political actors, with long-term effects for the

implementation of the two programs. In Mexico, similarly to what Scott (1998) termed the “high modernist blindness,” the top-down legibility scheme implemented to find and monitor poor families resulted in an opaque system, in which the state could not track the dynamic character of poverty on the ground. In Brazil, on the other hand, the bottom-up project of legibility was accompanied by a strategy of high visibility of state action, resulting in a system that generated information about poor families frequently, but at the cost of making *Bolsa Família* more vulnerable to criticism from other domestic stakeholders.

To date, the sociological study of state legibility has looked at knowledge-making efforts mostly from the perspective of disciplinary control and surveillance (Foucault 1980, Murray Li 2007, Lara-Millan 2017). While this focus has provided fertile ground to explore the often invisible, fuzzy and internalized ways that the state classifies and creates groups of people (Hacking 2002, Menjivar and Lakhani 2016, Sweet 2019), it has, nonetheless, overlooked how states might vary in their drive to discipline, and how these variations shape legibility projects. In contrast, in this paper, I respond to Tanya Murray Li’s call to study legibility as a “continuum that ranges from the more to the less coercive, and that encompasses a range of tactics and techniques” (2005, 387) to show that not all states prioritize creating a synoptic view of society, aimed at imposing control and order. Rather, depending on the logics of their legitimation strategies, some states develop greater tolerance for imprecision in measurement, impacting how they see and are seen by broader publics.

By conceptualizing poverty targeting as a form of state legibility, this research contributes to recent scholarship that investigates how distinct poverty governance agencies, such as police departments or welfare offices, see their subjects and are seen by them (Brayne 2014, Stuart 2016, Fong 2020, Greenberg 2021). I demonstrate how, in contemporary states,

projects of legibility of the poor started by one agency can create new scrutinizing opportunities by other public agencies inside the same state, changing the politics of accountability of poverty governance programs. This is because once databases about poor families are created, other actors can use this information to scrutinize policy decisions, requiring state agencies to frequently change their operations in response to external evaluations. Furthermore, the conceptualization of CCT targeting as a form of state legibility contributes to our understanding of the politics of cash provision to poor families. At a time when public and private agencies have the capacity to collect individuals' personal data with higher speed than before (Fourcade and Hailey 2017, Brayne 2017), my findings reveal how intra-state disputes surrounding "data of the poor" are key to securing the political viability of transferring resources to poor families in the long run. Thus, this paper argues that the effects of legibility depend not only on state's intentions and society's reactions, but also on official information-gathering infrastructures and how they mediate bureaucratic politics.

I. State Projects of Legibility and the Question of Variation

In *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott seeks to uncover the dynamics and consequences not only of state vision, but also of state blindness. On the one hand, Scott (1995, 42) suggests that state projects of legibility and simplification serve as powerful tools of modern statecraft by making "the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision far more legible, and hence, more susceptible to careful measurement, calculation and manipulation." For Scott, this "narrowness of the field of vision" is consequential not solely because the top-down view of the state simplifies a complex reality, but mostly because state officials attempt to transform the population, space, and nature under their jurisdiction into predictable, standardized categories to

facilitate tasks of observation and control. In Scott's argument, therefore, legibility matters because these official categories become the "authoritative tune to which much of the population must dance" (ibid., 57).

However, as Tilly (1999, 331) correctly notes, for Scott, when projects of legibility succeed, they generally lead to social disasters. Although Scott qualifies that these disasters are more likely to happen when four circumstances coincide—an authoritarian state, an administrative ordering of nature and society, a high modernist ideology, and a prostrate civil society—he ultimately argues that, in the long run, local complexity subverts all official efforts to render life legible. This is because state abstract knowledge is never able to capture what he calls the *mètis* – the sort of practical and ever-changing knowledge required to understand local practices (Scott 1995, 74-79). In this sense, projects of legibility are, in Scott's definition, always double-edged. They create both vision and blindness, allowing states to see and intervene in society through certain pre-defined categories, and to not-see the richness of local complexity, which can thus lead to failure in state intervention.

The notion of seeing like a state places knowledge production at the center of the analysis of modern statecraft and has attracted great scholarly attention to the ways that state projects of legibility stratify societies (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017). Yet, the concept of legibility can be broader and more useful than the specific claims that Scott makes about the pitfalls of seeing under a modernist hubris. As put by anthropologist Tanya Murray Li (2005, 389), "It is not the case that an 'up there,' all-seeing, systematizing state both promulgates and observes rules, which a 'down there' populace tries to resist." In the same vein, sociological scholarship has long portrayed a more nuanced view of national states than Scott's conceptualization of the state as a top-down force interested in manipulating social life, by illustrating how states can differ both in their

capacity and in their willingness to intervene in society (Clemens and Cook 1999; Morgan and Orloff 2017). Scholars would agree that states may choose different strategies to balance synoptic visions of society and capture movement and the complexity of local dynamics (the *mètis*) in their legibility projects, but this variation has not been the focus of most studies on state knowledge-making.

It should be noted that some scholars have acknowledged that legibility projects may differ, contrasting specifically how nation-states construct census categories or the ways that certain categories become politically salient (e.g., O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999, Paschel 2016, Emigh, Riley and Ahmed 2016). Such research, however, typically focuses on differences in the political goals associated with efforts to make populations visible, rather than on the reasons that legibility toolkits differ when states strive toward similar purposes. For example, Loveman (2014) demonstrates how the interplay of domestic and international politics determines when and why Latin American countries adopted, or not, racial and ethnic categories in their censuses. However, the question of variation remains: When states strive toward similar goals, such as targeting poor individuals (i.e., making poverty visible at the individual level), why do they choose to see and reach their populations in different ways? Why are some legibility projects more coercive than others? What analytical categories should we use to compare similarly-oriented legibility projects, considering that states have different political, cultural and policymaking histories and institutional arrangements?

The Problem of Legitimacy

One possible explanation for the question of variation relates to differences in the legitimization strategies that states adopt to implement similar political projects. In his work about

the politics of identity in colonial Algeria and Morocco, Wyrzten (2015) explains how the formal legitimization framework adopted by the French Empire—the ruling of subjugated societies as either colonies or protectorates—directly affected how legibility was practiced in each case. Colonial rule imposed harsher categorical divisions on Algerian society, while protectorate rule aimed to respect Moroccan native categories. As summarized by Wyrzten, “How a colonial state wanted to be seen (how it justified colonial rule to these audiences) affected how it saw the social (indigenous and settler), the spatial (urban and rural), the territorial, and the temporal” (2017, 212).

The legibility-legitimation linkage proposed by Wyrzten (2017) provides a useful starting point for the comparative study of legibility, since it directs our analytical attention toward one source of variation—legitimation strategies, even when states have seemingly similar political goals. Conversely, attempts of legitimating legibility projects are not central to Scott’s analysis, perhaps because it is limited to cases marked by both authoritarian regimes and high modernist ideology. Nevertheless, from the vast literature on early modern attempts to implement censuses, we know that whenever legibility projects were seen as illegitimate (Loveman 2005) or were associated with political risks (Choldin 1994), populations attempted to boycott them, and state officials adopted multiple measures to guarantee their implementation (Loveman 2007). Yet, the obstacles to implement legibility efforts are not restricted to a distant past. The perceived necessity of on-going efforts of “consent-building” in orchestrating legibility projects—even in 2010 in the United States (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017)—attests to the relevance of examining how such legitimating efforts shape legibility projects in different contexts.

To address this question, we need to adopt a framework that takes into account that democratic contemporary states are not composed of one unified bureaucratic apparatus; rather,

they operate under complex modes of governance and need to coordinate many discrete state agencies that sometimes cooperate and other times compete with one another (Morgan and Orloff 2017). For the French Empire, for example, the relevant audiences for the legitimization strategies of colonial ruling were “the broader international community, the metropole, and the local populations ruled by the colonial power” (Wyrzten 2017, 212). But in contemporary democratic states, such as Brazil and Mexico, state agencies responsible for implementation must address not only the broader international community and local populations, but also Congress, political parties, academia, social movements, and, crucially, other public agencies inside the state (e.g., auditing and budgeting agencies). In other words, to fully understand how legitimization strategies influence legibility in contemporary national states, we have to examine which domestic and transnational audiences were relevant for the implementation of distinct public policies, as well as how policy-makers justified their policy choices to these multiple audiences. We have to ask: Legibility for whom?

To answer this question, it is useful to consider how different public agencies construct their organizational image and reputation to legitimate their actions and to attain certain political goals. Organizational reputation, as Carpenter (2010, 33) has explained, is a “multifaceted concept that comprises a set of beliefs about an organization’s capacities, intentions, history, and mission that is embedded in a network of multiple audiences.” Carpenter demonstrates how state agencies continuously cultivate their reputation to attain higher levels of autonomy and material and symbolic resources, and to differentiate themselves from other governmental stakeholders, especially in highly contested policy arenas where the risks of hostile intervention are high. However, Carpenter also contends that attempting to manage a positive organizational image

among different constituencies will always involve trade-offs, considering that the multiple audiences involved in any state project are likely to have contradicting interests and views.

Building on the concept of organizational reputation to investigate how different legitimization strategies shape legibility efforts is useful for understanding legibility projects in comparative perspective for two reasons. First, it entails mapping the organizational field involved in the implementation of a given policy to investigate which audiences matter the most for public managers in each context. As stated earlier, contemporary nation-states are formed by multiple, competing state agencies. To study a legibility project initiated by one public agency, we have to understand how intra-state disputes over resources, prestige, and jurisdiction, and the influence of these disputes on legibility, may or may not differ across national contexts. Second, this perspective involves examining the different levels of transparency and ambiguity that characterize how each agency is viewed by their multiple audiences, because, although state officials aim to cultivate a particular organizational reputation, different constituencies will interpret this image in diverse ways, imposing distinct reputational rewards or penalties on an agency's behavior.

Thus, for comparative purposes, examining how state agencies responsible for implementing legibility projects attempt to legitimate their actions and cultivate a favorable reputation among multiple domestic and international audiences is important because it re-centers the analysis around the contrast between distinct political environments and state structures. As I argue below, it is only by contextualizing legibility projects in their political and institutional settings that we can have a full picture of what is at stake in the relationship between official knowledge-making and state action.

The Consequences of Legibility

The analytical focus on how state agencies cultivate their reputations and on how they legitimate their legibility projects raises an additional point. If seeing like a state depends on how a state wants to be seen, how do the different audiences actually see the state and with what consequences? In Scott's work (1998, 342), legibility efforts, especially those implemented by what he calls "visionary, planning states," usually lead to failure and human suffering. The vast literature inspired by his work has also shown how the implementation of official categories can reorganize societies in unintended ways, by stimulating the emergence of new types of social movements (Paschel 2016, Loveman 2014) or politicizing notions of collective identity and claim-making long after the initial legibility projects are over (Wyrzten 2015). Relatedly, scholars have demonstrated how states' knowledge-making efforts can impose disciplinary control on its subjects, who need to respond to the way the state sees them in order to become legible as, for example, domestic violence survivors (Sweet 2019), "deserving" immigrants (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016), or "good families" (Reich 2005). In other words, scholars have focused on the consequences of legibility for the local populations in which these projects of seeing are implemented and less for the states that implement them.

Yet, as Skocpol (1992, 57-60) reminds us, new policies usually transform subsequent political processes, and we should expect legibility projects to have feedback effects that restructure bureaucratic politics and state capacities for intervention as well. This is because the same knowledge infrastructure and political categories that are created for legibility purposes will shape and mediate the ways in which a policy will be known and evaluated by different audiences (Breslau 1998), creating feedback effects between legibility, state action, and audience reactions (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Put differently, the consequences of legibility are not a one-way road, in which the ways that a state sees solely affects the social object that is being

seen. The same legibility infrastructure that is created to render populations legible can also be used to make the governance of the state itself visible to different types of constituencies, which will then shape what this state can see and do (Mettler 2012).

While some scholars have considered this relational dimension of legibility, they have done so by focusing on how states are seen by one type of audience—i.e., by unearthing the perspective of the populations that states seek to govern. In his earlier work, for example, Scott (1990) demonstrated how subordinated groups developed a deep understanding of how they were seen by dominant groups as a means of articulating “hidden transcripts” of resistance. Bridging Scott’s insight and the literature on poverty governance, Forrest Stuart (2016, 21) has shown how individuals living in overpoliced areas developed what he termed a “folk ethnography of policing” in order to “reimagine their worlds through the eyes of officers” and thus avoid excessive surveillance. In a similar fashion, Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, and Véron (2006) have contributed to the study of the relational dimension of seeing like a state by documenting how poor individuals in India actually see the state. The authors explain, “Sightings of the state that poorer people make are never straightforward or unitary. None of us see the state in a direct and unmediated fashion. We always see the state through the eyes of others, and with close regard for past memories, accounts that circulate in the public sphere, and how we see other people getting on or being treated” (2006, 8).

To further specify this notion that the view of the state is always mediated by others, we must first consider how the same infrastructure, categories, and instruments that are created to see society also shape the possibilities for viewing and evaluating state policies, rendering them subject to careful examination. For our purposes, this involves investigating how the legibility tools of “marginalized groups”—e.g., the beneficiary datasets, the lists of welfare recipients in a

given area, or the official records of prisoners in a state—can be used to make the governance of a policy visible to other stakeholders. Second, we must study how the effects of these “sightings of the state” vary, especially in terms of their consequences for state legitimacy and for bureaucratic politics. Since contemporary nation-states are made up of discrete public agencies, it is also crucial to interrogate how legibility projects started by one agency create new views and scrutiny opportunities for other public agencies inside the same state, as well as for other domestic and international stakeholders. Only by incorporating an analysis of whether and how state legibility projects create new possibilities, objects, and metrics for seeing and assessing state policies, can we understand the consequences of these projects.

Toward a Comparative Legibility Framework

Building on the discussion above, I outline a three-dimensional analytical framework to study projects of legibility in comparative perspective. Specifically, this framework seeks to connect legibility projects to their differing political, institutional, and social arrangements to fully examine how legitimation strategies and their multiple audiences shape state action and vision. As Loveman (2014, 13) has explained, projects of state legibility do not occur on a “blank slate” but are embedded in existing social structures and political histories. These broader structures, I argue, shape the forms and consequences of legibility projects by making certain schemes and legitimation strategies seem more viable than others—especially at the initial definition stage of these projects—and constraining the range of possible actions taken by each state over time.

By focusing on structural and political differences, my goal is not to suggest that every project of legibility is idiosyncratic and thus incomparable. Instead, I propose that the study of

legibility in comparative perspective should involve unveiling similarities and differences in three analytical categories that can be used to unpack the dynamics of legibility in distinct national contexts. In other words, I provide analytical categories that assist with contextualizing the relationship between legibility projects and state action.

The first dimension is categorical and builds directly on Scott (1998) and the vast literature inspired by his work to examine what each state sees. It involves asking questions such as: What is the logic and organization of information-gathering projects? By prioritizing simple or complex systems of legibility, which societal characteristics become visible or invisible in each context? Here, existing political sociology and science and technology work provide fertile ground for investigation by highlighting the importance of looking at the infrastructural work (Bowker and Star 2000, Curtis 2001), the categories adopted (Alonso and Star 1985, Timmermans and Epstein 2010), and the techniques and tools that characterize legibility projects (Latour and Weibel 2005, Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007, Eyal 2013). Specifically for the comparative study of poverty legibility, it is crucial to unpack not only the distinct measures of poverty, but especially the practical ways in which states operationalize their poverty data systems.

The second dimension is symbolic and entails linking legibility projects to their legitimation strategies. It involves examining: What were the political challenges and organizational vulnerabilities of the state agencies initiating projects of legibility? How did they intend to be seen by multiple audiences, and which audiences mattered the most in each context? Answering these questions involves mapping the political environment and organizational structure of states to identify both the relevant intra-state audiences (e.g., the auditing, regulatory and control agencies responsible for the oversight of public policies; political parties, the courts)

and external audiences (e.g., international organizations, the media, academia, social movements). It also requires assessing how policymakers present and justify their policy choices to these different groups, especially in the early phases of implementation. Considering that “just giving money to the poor” is always politically contentious (Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2013), when comparing poverty legibility efforts, it is also important to investigate how legibility tools are used to secure the political viability of cash transfer programs.

Finally, the third dimension is relational and shifts the longer-term consequences of schemes of legibility to the center of the analysis. It involves investigating: How do projects of legibility create new dimensions along which state action can be evaluated? How do legibility schemes inform bureaucratic coordination and/or disputes, and how do these affect state capacity for intervention? Here, the goal is to examine how the legibility schemes that are used to render state subjects legible—already unpacked in the first categorical dimension—create or hinder new lines of vision into the state, which can potentially be used by different audiences to scrutinize public policies. And, crucially, since reputational strategies are likely to differ in their levels of transparency (Mettler 2012, Carpenter and Krause 2012), the internal functioning of legibility projects will be more or less visible to outsiders, accordingly. The different degrees of opacity of state structures should also be uncovered by the analysis.

In what follows, I build on this analytical framework to examine how Brazil and Mexico rendered poor individuals legible for the purposes of implementing conditional cash transfer programs. Before doing so, I present my methods and data.

II. Methods and Data

This paper adopts a comparative-historical approach to explain the differences in projects of legibility of the poor in Brazil and Mexico between 1995 and 2017. Through an in-depth, interpretative lens (Geertz 1968, Barkey 2008, Fourcade 2009), I juxtapose the experience of two similar countries that adopted two similar policies in a similar context of political and social uncertainty, but that adopted distinct solutions to make poverty visible. I use what Skocpol and Sommers (1980, 178) call the “contrast of contexts” method of comparative historical analysis to analytically flesh out the causes and consequences of different projects of legibility.

The choice of Brazil and Mexico is particularly suitable for this type of comparison. First, they were the first two countries in the world to implement conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) as their main instrument to combat poverty (Fiszbien and Schady 2009). Brazil initially experimented with municipal-level CCTs in 1995, and Mexico had its first pilot CCT in the same year. By 2016, approximately 65 countries in the world had adopted CCTs, benefiting an estimated 1 billion individuals globally. It is commonly acknowledged, however, that Brazil and Mexico have the only two CCT programs to be considered locally rooted, in the sense that they were designed independently of each other and financed without the support of international organizations (Lindert et al 2007, Tomazini 2017). At the time of initial program implementation, therefore, these two countries did not have a blueprint for how to make CCTs work, so they had to “find the poor” by building on their previous experiences with poverty programs.

Second, these two countries have historically shared multiple socioeconomic characteristics, as well as comparable population size, regional diversity, and economic development (Magaldi and Maldonado 2014, Fernández, Amorim Neto, and Ortiz 2005), which together allow for a considerable amount of control over other influences on legibility decisions,

especially state capacity. Table 1 compiles three key indexes produced by international organizations, illustrating the initial comparison of the socioeconomic and state characteristics of both countries. Although these indexes have limitations (Ravallion 2012), they succinctly demonstrate that, in addition to Brazil and Mexico being the first and second largest Latin American economies based on GDP, respectively, they also receive comparable scores and rankings in global indexes measuring social development (HDI), quality of governance (WGI), and corruption perception (CPI). In comparative terms, these scores put Brazil and Mexico in a similar category to other “Upper-Middle Income” countries, such as Turkey and South Africa.

Table 1 about here

Third, and relatedly, Brazil and Mexico shared a history of state-led economic development, corporatism, and political clientelism (Ferraro and Centeno 2018), which imposed similar organizational and political challenges for the legitimation of their CCTs. As I will elaborate further in the empirical analysis, in these two contexts there was great fear that distributing cash to the poor would facilitate corruption and that CCTs would be used for electoral purposes. This meant that both cases were marked by substantial bureaucratic politics, involving agencies competing with one another for control, resources, and prestige, as well as competing claims for credit for positive poverty alleviation results. Finally, both CCTs were implemented after the 1980s economic crisis that severely hit many Latin American countries (Ocampo 2014) and was accompanied by structural reforms that imposed severe fiscal adjustments and sought to reduce the size of the state (Fourcade and Babb 2002). When CCTs were implemented, therefore, Brazilian and Mexican policymakers faced very similar fiscal constraints.

There were, of course, many differences between Brazil and Mexico, especially as it relates to the political trajectories and institution-building of these two states. For example, since 1930, Brazil has experienced great political discontinuities, alternating between democratic (1930-1937; 1945-1964; 1985-present) and dictatorial regimes (1937-1945; 1964-1985). In Mexico, on the other hand, a single political party—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—was in power for 71 consecutive years (1929-2000) (Ackerman 2020). Moreover, after 1988, Brazilian municipalities and states were granted more autonomy and resources (Arretche 1996); while in Mexico the federal system was still very centralized within the federal government, even after many attempts at decentralization (Diaz-Cayeros 2016). These differences inform my analysis and are especially relevant to explaining the link between the strategies of implementation and legitimation of each CCT, which I will discuss next.

To implement this comparative framework, I triangulate three data sources: official documents, 100 interviews of bureaucratic and political elites, and 18 months of ethnographic observation in Brasília and Mexico City. First, I examined a rich set of policy documents, academic papers and legislation about social policies in general, and *Bolsa Família* and *Progres*a in particular (n=10,000 pages), in order to trace the institutional configurations and policy decisions that shaped Brazil and Mexico's projects of legibility. Adopting a systematic qualitative design, I initially coded all references to poor families' identification that appeared in the official documents about each program and inductively traced the historical trajectory of each policy targeting choice. After situating the differences between the two countries in the relevant sociological and political economy literatures, I then returned to the official documents and re-coded them, taking legibility more systematically into consideration.

Second, my comparative analysis relies on 100 in-depth interviews conducted with high-level bureaucrats and political and academic elites in Brazil and in Mexico between 2015 and 2017. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes. Sampling occurred in two steps. First, I selected those state officials that historically had occupied the highest positions in the main state agencies involved in poverty management in the two countries (across a 15-year period for *Bolsa Familia* and a 20-year period for *Progresas*), which amounted to 16 individuals. I complemented this initial list with the authors of the most-cited scholarly publications about the two programs. Second, I asked these interviewees to point me to other officials and academics that had been or were involved in the debates and decision-making about poverty in each context. Through this snowball sampling method, I interviewed a total of 100 members of the policy and academic elites of Brazil and Mexico. Descriptive statistics of my interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.

I used interviews to understand the political and epistemological rationale behind the adoption of each strategy of legibility of the poor, as well as to investigate their perceived consequences. To do so, I adopted a semi-structured interview schedule, with differential probes at specific moments of the interview, in accordance with previous publications or public statements about the programs made by each interviewee. This strategy allowed me to “follow the controversy” about these programs (Latour 1987) but also collect systematic data to reconstruct the rationale behind the political choices underlying each project of legibility. Similar to the document analysis, I also systematically coded my interview data, first inductively tracing the justifications that policymakers gave to their legibility project choices, and then refining my coding scheme after engaging with the relevant sociological literature.

Finally, I spent a total of 18 months conducting fieldwork in Brazil and Mexico (2014-2017), where I was a visiting researcher at public agencies involved in generating poverty knowledge in the two contexts: The Institute of Applied Economic Research in Brasília (IPEA) and the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics in Mexico City (CIDE). Through these institutional affiliations, I did close observation of what Latour (1987) termed the “back-door of science-making”: I attended policy and academic events and observed how state officials presented their poverty-targeting choices to distinct audiences. I took notes of the moments of controversies regarding CCTs and had informal conversations with state officials located in different parts of the state about the programs.² While I systematically analyze this ethnographic material elsewhere (Author 2019), in this paper, I draw on it to contextualize parts of the documentary and interview data.

The combination of official document analysis and interviews with bureaucratic and political elites provided me with a clear view of what James Scott (1990) has called the “public transcripts” of each legibility project, i.e., the official stories that were told about knowledge-making efforts, politics, and power. On its own, this data was useful for uncovering the official “ethnographic discourse” of state officials and how they shaped intra-elite disputes over representations of the poor (Steinmetz 2007), as well as for understanding how state officials perceived the political risks of implementing CCTs and how their academic training influenced these perceptions (Babb 2001, Dezaley and Garth 2002, Montecinos and Markoff 2010). The ethnographic observations attempted to capture what Scott referred to as the “hidden transcripts”

² I spent Summer 2014, Summer 2015 and Fall 2016 in Brasília (12 months total), and Spring and Summer 2017 in Mexico City (6 months total). During this period, I participated in 6 press events in Brazil and 2 in Mexico that were closed to the broader public, attended bi-weekly internal poverty seminars held by IPEA and CIDE and attended all public events I had access to that were held by other relevant stakeholders in the two countries, such as seminars about poverty governance auditing in Brazil and the international policy evaluation week in Mexico.

of power—i.e., the gestures, words, and folktales that help not only the subordinate, but also the dominant groups, to “keep-up appearances.”

Yet, two limitations followed from this methodological strategy. First, by privileging official documents, narratives, and observations of policy elites, my account favors “the history of the winners”; I may have missed the silences, underlying disputes, and motives influencing legibility decisions (Cousin, Kahn and Mears 2018). This problem is particularly salient when interviewing political and bureaucratic elites, who already produce sophisticated representations of themselves and their policy choices and are trained to reproduce particular styles of official discourse (Bourdieu 2014). By triangulating three data sources, I have tried to minimize this issue, since I could juxtapose the explanations that policy elites tell about themselves with information from official legislation and my own observations of their actions (Benzecry, Deener, and Lara-Millán 2020). The second and perhaps more important limitation of my methods is that I did not collect data on how CCT beneficiaries perceived the state; thus, I do not have a firsthand account of how the Brazilian and Mexican states became visible to their subjects. As a result, my analysis privileges the disputes around legibility “from the top.” To minimize this issue, I build on the work of scholars in the two countries that have investigated how *Bolsa Família* and *Progresá* became visible to their beneficiaries (Cohn 2011, Rego and Pinzani 2013, de la Rocha 2006, de la Rocha and Escobar 2012). Even with these limitations, my comparative strategy and diversity of data on the workings of state legibility at the level of the federal government suggest an original, unique viewpoint of legibility. It is to the analysis of this data that I now turn.

III. The Categorical Dimension of Legibility: Seeing Poverty Like the Brazilian and Mexican States

In 2018, the *Bolsa Família* (BFP) and *Progresa* programs were the two largest conditional cash transfer (CCTs) programs in the world, benefiting 20 million families, or almost 90 million individuals, combined. They were both based on the same principle: 1) to reduce poverty through a provision of a minimum level of income (on average US\$50/month) *only* for families categorized as poor, and 2) to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty by conditioning these transfers on meeting certain requirements, such as school attendance, vaccinations, and pre-natal visits. See Appendix 2 for a comparative-descriptive analysis of the main features of each CCT.

In the mid-1990s, when Brazil and Mexico initiated what some have called a “development revolution from the Global South” by implementing the BFP and *Progresa*, policymakers could not anticipate the impact these programs would have on global poverty governance (Halon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2010). While CCTs were initially met with skepticism, by 2016, “they seemed to be everywhere” and 65 low-and-middle income countries had at least one CCT program in operation (ODI 2016, 6). CCTs have been credited with reducing the rate and, above all, the intensity of poverty (Medellin et al. 2015), reducing income inequality, and boosting school enrollment (Fiszbein and Schady 2009), leading the Director of the Center for Global Development to call these programs “as close as you can come to a magic bullet in development” (Adato and Hoddinott 2012, 4). As has been documented in the comparative political economy literature, this quick diffusion of CCTs is commonly attributed to what has become considered the success of *Progresa* and *Bolsa Família* (De La O 2015, Sugiyama 2013)

Yet, since the Brazilian and the Mexican programs were the CCT pioneers, these countries had neither a blueprint of how they would implement their CCTs nor official sources of information about poverty at the individual level, which was needed in order to identify beneficiaries. Until then, Brazil and Mexico estimated poverty rates by using the census or national household surveys, and poverty specialists used this information to calculate poverty lines, produce academic studies, and monitor, at the aggregate level, the impact of social policies on poverty outcomes. Although this type of data made poverty visible for the goals of policy-making (e.g., it allowed state officials to know that “40% of the Mexican population is poor” or that “Brazil’s poverty levels have diminished in the last 10 years”), it did not help these states to answer the organizational and informational questions necessary to implement CCTs. Who were these 40% of Mexican (or Brazilian) poor individuals? Where were they, and how would the state locate them? Once the state found these individuals, how would it distribute cash and monitor their behavior?

Considering that these two countries shared a history of local-level political clientelism (Hilgers 2012, Stokes et al 2014) and thus a similar fear that CCTs would be used for electoral purposes, determining how the poor would be identified and monitored was seen as a key aspect for the legitimation and successful implementation of both programs. Yet, in the two contexts, a large part of the target audience for these programs did not have an identity card and circulated mostly in the informal sector, making the task of “finding the poor” particularly challenging (Hunter and Sugiyama 2014). Hence, to implement the CCTs and render poor individuals visible for policy purposes meant that in practice the Brazilian and Mexican states had to: 1) create a targeting system to find poor families, 2) generate detailed information about these families at the individual level, and 3) create beneficiary datasets to manage this information. Faced with the

same challenge, the Brazilian and Mexican states chose different solutions for targeting their policies, and poverty became visible to policymakers in different ways across the two contexts.³

Mexico's Progresas: Geographical Targeting and Accuracy

In Mexico, the categorical dimension of legibility was characterized by an attempt to see poverty through a geographical and material dimension and thus in great detail, but infrequently. To identify poor families, *Progresas*'s team first used census data to identify poor localities in Mexico, where the probability of making targeting mistakes (i.e., including non-poor individuals in *Progresas*) was lower. In other words, the Mexican state first identified the places where, for example, there was a high percentage of the population living without indoor toilets, electricity, or access to water, among other variables.⁴ In 1997, when the program was launched, 6,344 poor localities were identified (3.15% of total localities in the country), and this number would increase to 86,091 localities by 2005 (42.8%) (Levy 2006, 26-28). It is worth noting that this initial focus on poor *regions* meant that the Mexican government initially turned a blind eye to poor families that were located in areas that were not considered poor on average, such as most urban areas in the country; these families were only incorporated into the program later (Orozco and Huber 2019).

Second, *Progresas*'s staff traveled to these poor localities and implemented a census-like survey in all households, asking questions about household demographics and composition,

³ In this section, I present the targeting schemes as they were implemented in the initial years of both programs. As these systems evolved and became more complex, some minor changes occurred, but without fundamentally changing the logic and organization of Mexico's and Brazil's legibility projects.

⁴ Mexico defines poor localities as those that fall below an Index of Marginalization. Mexico's National Council of Population calculates the Index of Marginalization by "considering the % population age 15 and older who are illiterate; do not attend elementary school; live without indoor toilets, electricity, or access to water; live with overcrowding, dirt floors, or in localities with less than 5,000 inhabitants; and have a household income lower than 2 minimum wages."

quality of housing, access to public goods, and schooling and educational levels, among others. With a comprehensive set of information in hand from all households in poor localities, 33 variables were used to run discriminant analysis (or proxy means testing) to predict which families fell under a multi-dimensional poverty threshold.⁵ Only after this decision was made were the families categorized as poor offered to join *Progresa*. Families that joined the program were then entered into a database of beneficiaries, in which identifiable, individual-level data was collected to track their behavior and monitor their compliance with health and education conditionalities.

At first, the *Progresa* team decided that, as long as health and education requirements were met, all beneficiary families would remain in the program for three years without further verification of their economic status. After three years, all beneficiary families would be interviewed again, using the same initial survey questionnaire, after which either their poverty status would be recertified or they would be transitioned to a partial benefit scheme. However, after the initial challenges with family recertification in the early years of the program, it was decided that the economic status of families would be re-verified after six to eight years (Davila 2016). The result was that in Mexico, the state used *Progresa*'s beneficiary dataset on a regular basis to monitor beneficiaries' compliance with conditionalities, even though the federal government only re-verified poverty status every six to eight years (Medellin et al 2015). In practice, then, whenever there was an implementation problem or *Progresa*'s team was required to defend the targeting of the program, they were left in a vulnerable position because their main

⁵ Mexico's multi-dimensional poverty index includes the following dimensions: income, educational gap, deprivations due to access to health services, social security, housing quality and spaces, access to utilities in households, and food access. As an official poverty metric, this measure allows an appreciation of the lack of income dimension of poverty (similar to Brazil and the US), but also includes a more comprehensive view of poverty resulting from social characteristics of the places where families are located (Coneval 2016).

source of poverty information suffered a temporal lag. As a result, *Progresas*' staff had to constantly mobilize organizational efforts and resources to overcome this temporal blindness of the poverty status of its beneficiaries.

Under this legibility scheme, municipalities had no formal role in the targeting or implementation of *Progresas*, and the program had a centralized and insulated structure located within the federal government. Since its inception, *Progresas*' model of operation deliberately reduced the number of intermediaries between the federal government and poor households (Levy 2006), and thus it was *Progresas*' staff, located mostly in the federal capital, Mexico City, that was responsible for all information-gathering activities related to the program. The centralization of *Progresas*' governance at the federal level meant that the program did not have an official, state source of information about the poor that was collected at the local level. This top-down feature of Mexico's project of legibility of the poor resembled Scott's characterization of the synoptic, distant view of the state from "the full reality that [state] abstractions were made to capture" (1995, 55).

Brazil's Bolsa Família: Targeting by Families and Simplicity

In Brazil, the categorical dimension of legibility did not feature such a comprehensive system to find the poor. Contrary to Mexico, the federal government used the census not to identify poor localities in the country, but to estimate how many poor families there were in all regions of Brazil, using a simple measure of income per capita to estimate how many families fell under Brazil's poverty line. Through this strategy, the Brazilian state planned to find poor families even in localities that were *not* considered poor at an aggregate level. From this national target, the Ministry of Social Development (MDS)—responsible for implementing the BFP—

estimated a target population at the municipal level to determine baseline quotas to be used for selecting beneficiaries in each municipality. In contrast to Mexico, therefore, where only 14.5% of municipalities were part of *Progresa* in its first year, in Brazil 99.4% of municipalities joined the BFP already in its initial year (author's calculations, using MDS 2016).

Second, MDS instructed municipalities to register all low-income families that fit a “broader poverty profile”⁶ in *Bolsa Família*'s beneficiary dataset on an ongoing basis. In the registration process, families self-reported their income and the numbers of individuals living in the same household. These numbers allowed the federal government to identify the potential audience for the BFP, since it would also include families with income above the poverty line (Soares, Ribas and Osorio 2010). Although more information was collected at the moment of registration, it was only income per capita that was used by the *Bolsa Família* team to select eligible families that fell under the program's poverty line. This means that, contrary to Mexico, the Brazilian government focused exclusively on income per capita to categorically see the poor, turning a blind eye to the lifestyle deprivations these families faced or to the local infrastructures they had access to.⁷

Since the *Bolsa Família* targeting strategy increased the risk of patronage and fraud (Handa and Davis 2006), the federal government required that all data entered into the BFP database be updated every two years or whenever there was a change in income, family composition, or address (Mostafa and Satyro 2014), allowing the Brazilian state to recertify their

⁶ Measured as 50% of the minimum wage per capita, which was considerably higher than *Bolsa Família*'s poverty threshold—around 25% of the minimum wage. See Appendix 2 for details.

⁷ The poverty measures used in the *Bolsa Família* program were similar to the United States' Official Poverty Measure (OPM): Poverty was measured by comparing a family's income to a set poverty threshold or minimum amount of income needed to cover basic needs. People whose income fell below the threshold were considered poor. As Brady (2009) explains, this type of OPM is usually unable to capture material deprivation or social exclusion that goes beyond income insufficiency. The Mexican and *Progresa*'s poverty measures accounted for these additional factors.

poverty status—and include or exclude beneficiary families—with frequency. Moreover, the *Bolsa Família* team constantly cross-checked BFP data with other federal databases in search for inconsistencies in declared income, in an effort to improve the income per capita variable as declared by the families.

Under this legibility scheme, the central government gave municipalities a key role in the implementation and targeting of the BFP, since the 5,570 Brazilian municipalities were responsible for identifying and registering poor families in the program and database. However, regarding opportunities for controversy and political clientelism (i.e., selecting who were the beneficiaries), municipalities were not formally involved in the decision-making process. Rather, decisions were made independently at the federal government level (Sugiyama and Hunter 2013). Even so, compared to Mexico, the Brazilian federal government developed a looser strategy for avoiding political clientelism since it depended on municipalities' ability to register families. Nevertheless, this legibility arrangement did allow the Brazilian state to have a constant, official source of information about poverty at the local level. In its categorical dimension, therefore, Brazil's legibility scheme was designed to capture changes in the economic status of families and featured greater tolerance for errors in income measurement.

Different Pictures of Poverty

Through these different strategies for identifying poor individuals, the Brazilian and Mexican states generated official information that made poverty visible in categorically different ways and with distinct frequency in each context. In Brazil, the state developed a bottom-up informational system that portrayed a very simple image of poverty, based solely on self-declared income per capita. The Brazilian system, however, was designed to capture movements

in and out of poverty frequently, by requiring that individuals constantly update their information in the BFP database, thus allowing policymakers to capture income fluctuations better. Yet the fact that income was self-declared necessitated the *Bolsa Familia* staff to regularly develop ways of identifying instances of manipulation by the beneficiaries. In Mexico, on the other hand, the state developed a top-down informational system that captured a comprehensive portrait of poverty at the initial moment of entry into the program, categorizing poverty not solely based on income, but also as a series of lifestyle deprivations. However, it was harder to track changes in poverty status, because it required *Progresas*'s federally-based team to return to each poor locality to implement the same initial survey, which was both complex and expensive.

The different projects of legibility of the Brazilian and Mexican poor reflected distinct choices regarding which categories would determine poverty status and directly affected the amount and type of information to be collected from each individual beneficiary. The frequency of data collection also reflected political and technical judgements about the rate of change in poverty and the value of up-to-date information. Whereas poverty in Mexico was measured primarily by material household characteristics and lifestyle deprivations that fluctuate less than income, reflecting an understanding of poverty as something that is more permanent, in Brazil, poverty was measured by income per capita, which can oscillate much more, indicating an understanding of poverty as a condition that can be more transitory. Table 2 summarizes the differences between the two projects of legibility.

Table 2 about here

Why did Brazil and Mexico develop such different systems to make poverty legible and governable? To answer this question, in the next section, I will introduce the symbolic dimension of legibility to show how the choices regarding poverty information systems were shaped, to an

extent, by the legitimation needs perceived by state agencies responsible for implementing these programs. Or, to borrow Scott's conceptual toolkit, I will explain how *seeing like a state* depended on the disputes over *how the state would be seen*.

IV. The Symbolic Dimension of Legibility: Projecting an Image of the State

In a much-cited paper, Amartya Sen (1995,1) compares policy targeting to combative strategies. "The use of the term 'targeting' in eradicating poverty is based on an analogy—a target is something fired at... The problem is not so much that the word 'target' has combative association. The more serious problem lies elsewhere—in the fact that the analogy of a target does not at all suggest that the recipient is an active person, functioning on her own, acting and doing things." In this passage, Amartya Sen highlights the importance of thinking about the poor as active agents rather than as passive policy recipients, and he nicely summarizes the challenge that CCT targeting faces: Policy beneficiaries are moving targets rather than static ones that are waiting to be "hit" by a policy. Creating an information system capable of finding and tracking the behavior of these moving targets is not an easy political or technical task. Policymakers are constantly facing a trade-off between missing the target (i.e., excluding eligible beneficiaries) or hitting the wrong target (i.e., including ineligible individuals either by mistake or because of data manipulation). As with every trade-off, there are rewards and penalties associated with each option, which create different reputational dilemmas for the programs, and require different strategies for the creation of information systems that will project an image of objectivity, precision, and political neutrality (Carpenter 2010).

The strategies adopted by Brazil and Mexico to make *Bolsa Família* and *Progres*a governable and poor individuals visible reflect the choices made by each state agency regarding this trade-off. These choices, in turn, also reflect the diverse set of audiences to which

policymakers directed their legitimation strategies in each national context. Building on the qualitative analysis of official documentation and interviews with policymakers who were involved in decisions about each programs' targeting mechanisms, next I show that, in Mexico, the federal government privileged convincing international poverty experts and key members of Congress and subnational governments of the merits of its targeting model. In Brazil, *Bolsa Familia* staff directed its symbolic efforts mostly toward domestic poverty experts and other state agencies.

Mexico: Portraying an Image of an Efficient and Anti-Political State

In Mexico, when deciding how to find poor Mexican families, policymakers prioritized hitting the right targets (i.e., minimizing inclusion mistakes), which was considered crucial to legitimating *Progresa* in a political environment marked by general suspicion of poverty-alleviation efforts. As argued in section I, to fully understand this decision, we have to situate it in Mexico's political and institutional context, on the one hand, and identify its intended audiences, on the other. Starting with the former, decisions regarding *Progresa*'s initial targeting mechanism were made between 1995 and 1997, in the midst of a severe economic crisis in Mexico and during the tenure of an unpopular President, Ernesto Zedillo, who was facing multiple political crises—including inside his own political party, PRI—and under public pressure for greater democracy and transparency (Yaschine and Orozco 2010). Furthermore, policymakers faced the challenge of differentiating *Progresa* from previous anti-poverty programs in Mexico that were broadly associated with political clientelism, inefficiency, and corruption (Cornelius, Craig and Fox 1994).

As part of what became known as the “technocratic group” of the PRI, Zedillo recruited experts with a similar academic training to his own in economics at Yale University, especially at the Finance Ministry, the agency that would be responsible for taking the Mexican economy out of the 1994 Pesos Crisis (Maldonado 2012). Initial decisions about *Progresa* were made by this team, under the leadership of Santiago Levy, an economist trained at Boston University who came to the federal government after having written an influential World Bank report that called for drastic changes to Mexico’s anti-poverty policy (Levy 1991). The group of economists at the Finance Ministry was joined by a mix of demographers and social scientists from Mexico’s Population Council, mostly trained in Mexican universities, who brought demography-oriented considerations to *Progresa*’s targeting decisions (Cortés and Rubalcava 2012).

These actors aimed to project an image of *Progresa* as both *efficient* and *anti-political*. Cultivating this reputation involved institutional and technical decisions. First, there was a concern for institutionally protecting the program and insulating it from what were considered the usual corruption schemes in poverty-alleviation efforts by other state agencies. To show that they would change business-as-usual in Mexico, *Progresa* was not affiliated with the Social Development Ministry, which was associated with local-level political clientelism, and the program had insulated, centralized operations in Mexico City (Graizbord 2017). In addition, a series of administrative measures—such as the annual publication of *Progresa*’s Operation Rules and the distribution of beneficiaries’ cash through banks and the telegraph company—were taken to “insulate the day-to-day running of the program from political pressures by state or municipal governments to change eligibility criteria, operations and size of benefits” (Levy 2006, 101). These strategies also intended to create transparency regarding the governance of the program.

On the technical side, the adoption of a very comprehensive means-testing system to determine poverty status was intended to signal that *Progresa* would be economically sustainable and fiscally responsible, which was particularly important to those policymakers from the Finance Ministry (Agudo Sanchíz 2015). Indeed, targeting was framed not simply as a way of reaching the extreme poor, but as a way of combating poverty in *efficient* ways, transferring resources solely to those that really needed it without incurring big deficits (Levy 2006).

Yet, at this symbolic level, the rigid targeting scheme allowed *Progresa*'s high-level staff to see themselves as, and attempt to transmit an image of being, anti-political. Contrary to the professed attitude of professional neutrality in bureaucracies—the expectation that policy decisions will be based on technical rather than political terms (Weber 1978)—an “anti-political” image includes an understanding of the state and state actors as inherently interested, and also a keen sensitivity to the limitations and built-in pitfalls of state action (Author 2020). It therefore involves taking active measures to resist these perceived limits of the state (Ferguson 1990, Murray Li 2007). As a poverty expert working for *Progresa* explained in an interview, “We would not select which families would benefit from this program. The discriminant analysis would do it.” The power of numbers in their narratives was used as a legitimization strategy against the risk of political clientelism at the local level, but also against the risk of potential disruptions of trusting bureaucratic judgement. As another staff member said, “We did not trust the municipalities. We knew we would fail if we counted on them, so we invested a long time in formulating our statistical model, in a way that not even we could influence the targeting results. It was important to let the numbers decide.”

To interpret this decision, it is worth considering that “trust in numbers” is a political strategy expressing relative weakness rather than strength, as convincingly shown by Porter

(1995). It is only a group of experts who perceive that they are under intense scrutiny that will try to minimize reliance on their own expert judgement and “let the numbers decide.” In this sense, the choice of minimizing targeting errors (even at the cost of excluding potential beneficiaries, such as those poor families that lived in wealthier localities) was informed by a perception that only in this way would *Progresa* be able to differentiate itself from the corrupt poverty-alleviation efforts that had characterized Mexico’s social policy trajectory.

This strategy of legitimation spoke to domestic and international audiences. Internally, the goal was to legitimate *Progresa* in technocratic terms to an audience of key academics and politicians, in order to demonstrate the program’s independence from the PRI (De La O 2015). To do so, before launching the program, *Progresa* staff organized countless briefings with high-level “strategic” politicians and bureaucrats and “information [about the program] was directly communicated to key actors in Congress, subnational government, academia, and interested parties... The public information campaign kept a low profile” (Levy 2006, 110). Additionally, by perfecting a means-tested targeting system following what at the time were considered international best practices, *Progresa* secured its legitimation with international multilateral organizations and academics that celebrated Mexican policymakers’ commitment to methodological excellence (Agudo Sanchíz 2015). As Babb (2009) has shown, for mid-developing countries like Mexico and Brazil, guaranteeing the backing of international organizations, such as the World Bank, can go a long way toward signaling approval of a social policy for domestic audiences, too.⁸

⁸ The Mexican strategy of legitimation of *Progresa* involved maximizing what Santiago Levy calls the “credibility” of the targeting results. As explained by Levy (2006,41), “there always is a subjective element in assessing credibility, but efforts need to be made to reduce any doubts to the minimum possible. In the case of *Progresa*, the efforts consisted of [...] relying on a mix of national and international academic researchers and domestic and foreign institutions to perform evaluations.” Accordingly, these academics were enthusiastic to participate in the evaluation of a major social policy which included an effort to implement proxy-means testing to predict poverty-

In sum, in Mexico, the symbolic dimension of Progresa's legibility scheme involved portraying an image of *efficiency* and *anti-politics*, which shaped the decision to create a comprehensive targeting scheme to make poor families visible, which was designed to minimize inclusion mistakes. This decision was made by a centralized high-level staff that focused its efforts on convincing key domestic and international audiences of the merits of its targeting choices. This strategy was designed to work in the particular context of Mexico in the 1990s, which has been described by Fourcade and Babb (2002, 561) as a "single-party system, coupled with weak democratic institutions, strong corporatism, and a powerful centralized presidency," in which policymakers were relatively insulated from pressures from social movements, other political parties and the media (Centeno 1994). As we will see next, this was not the case in Brazil.

Brazil: Manufacturing an Image of an Inclusive and Politically Impartial State

In Brazil, the bureaucratic groups implementing *Bolsa Familia* understood their role and worked to project an image of being *inclusive* and *politically impartial*. This is reflected by the choice to place less emphasis on verifying poverty status prior to entering data into the poverty information system—everyone that fit a broad poverty profile would be included, and only then the federal government would select beneficiaries. There was a greater emphasis placed on missing targets (or on avoiding the exclusion of poor individuals).

To understand this choice, it is crucial to contextualize it. The BFP was consolidated during the tenure of Brazil's first leftist president after the end of the military dictatorship (1985), in a period of economic growth and public optimism, and after almost 10 years of policy

status, which was considered the gold-standard of targeting by American academics and the World Bank at the time (Yaschine 1999).

experimentation with different versions of CCTs.⁹ Specifically, the Brazilian CCT gained momentum under President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, who gained power by pledging that “every Brazilian [would] have food to eat three times a day” (Hall 2006). Building on this political message, the federal government invested great effort in creating strong partnerships with municipalities and transferring resources to the local level in order to increase the territorial reach of the program very fast (Bischir 2011). As a BFP staff member explained, “[The idea] was not to be the police, checking if the poor is really poor or not—this we could do later. First we had to find these people that had always been invisible to us.” Under this premise, asking municipalities to register all low-income families under a very loose definition of poverty status made sense, since it allowed policymakers to collect information about many families quickly and shape social policy efforts accordingly.

Similar to Mexico, in Brazil, there was great concern about politically shielding *Bolsa Familia* from corrupt politics, but the Brazilian case differed in that it did not require institutional insulation of the program from existing social policy agencies. Instead, state bureaucracies within the Ministry of Social Development focused on recruiting “the right people” to shield *Bolsa Familia* from party politics and legitimate the program in the eyes of domestic audiences. They did so by recruiting federal managers from the most prestigious civil servant careers in the country (Araujo 2013) and a diverse set of respected social scientists specializing in poverty studies. As such, the group of actors involved in the Brazilian targeting decisions differed greatly from the majority of foreign-trained economists in the Mexican case.¹⁰ Not only were their

⁹ The Brazilian path toward *Bolsa Familia* began in January 1995 with the first two municipal-level CCTs, implemented in Campinas and Brasília. Federal-level CCT programs were implemented in 1996 (the Eradication of Child Labor Program) and 2001 (School and Health grants). In 2003, with President Lula’s election, all of these programs were consolidated into the BFP. The targeting system that is described in this paper began implementation at the federal level in 2003, building on the previous efforts that were started since 2001.

¹⁰ See Appendix 1 for the academic profile of my interviewee sample: while 71% of Mexican respondents got their PhD degrees abroad, in Brazil only 34% did so.

academic expertise different—economics versus public administration, but also their professional audiences were different; while in Mexico the international economics community was central for legitimation purposes, in Brazil, other domestic bureaucratic groups and experts were prioritized. Accordingly, the Brazilian group of experts and state officials understood that the legitimation of the program would come from finding and reaching those 13 million poor Brazilians that had historically appeared in the census but had been continuously excluded from safety nets (Cohn 2011).

A second difference between the reputational images that state agencies sought to project in the two countries is that Brazilian policymakers rejected the anti-politics discourse, instead valuing their bureaucratic judgement and abilities, which they believed was sufficient to portray their political impartiality and professional objectivity. Both in interviews and in official documents, these actors maintained that making Brazil more inclusive was the main purpose that stimulated the design of *Bolsa Família* and the creation of a new information structure about poverty in Brazil (Paiva, Falcão and Bartholo 2013). The main reputational challenge was to demonstrate that the program was politically impartial, despite its loose targeting mechanism, and nonpartisan. To secure the program's reputation, the BFP staff adopted several measures similar to those in Mexico. For example, cash transfers were done by a public bank through debit cards, and municipalities were given quotas determining the maximum number of beneficiaries, based on census estimates. Unlike Mexico, Brazilian federal managers cultivated transparency in their governance decisions and made organizational, identifiable data about the beneficiaries easily accessible to other stakeholders inside the Brazilian state—a strategy I explain in the next section. Following Porter (1995), this choice reveals the institutional, academic, and political

strength of Brazilian policymakers, who at this particular historical juncture enjoyed a great deal of bureaucratic and public prestige.

At the symbolic level, therefore, the Brazilian project of legibility sought to secure domestic legitimacy by showing that for the first time in Brazil's history, "the poor would finally be put at the center of social policies and would not be left hidden in the most remote, rural parts of the country," as a BFP director explained. This image resonated well within the party coalition led by the Worker's Party, as well as with labor unions and social movements linked to agrarian issues, food security and popular education, which also had been historically associated with the Workers' Party (Garay 2016, 157-161), raising suspicion among other stakeholders that the BFP would be used for electoral purposes. Hence, since its inception, the *Bolsa Família* staff had to walk the fine line of managing a program that was designed to be "popular," but that could easily be labeled as "populist" (Thomé 2013). Furthermore, in the initial years of the program, this choice came at the cost of great international skepticism, since *Bolsa Família* did not follow international standards of poverty targeting or program evaluation. As another staff member said, "The disagreements with the World Bank were radical... In the beginning, they thought that our approach of including as many poor families as possible in the program was a scandal." To reiterate the point made earlier, Brazilians policymakers responded to this international skepticism by emphasizing their objectivity and impartiality as civil servants. Objectivity was to be guaranteed not by numbers per se, but by the integrity and professional norms of the BFP staff—a stark contrast with Mexican officials stating that "not even us could influence the targeting results."

Considering these political legitimization strategies and the ways they affected the format of each project of legibility, how did *Progres*a and *Bolsa Família* become seen by other poverty

governance stakeholders domestically and internationally? How did the knowledge infrastructure that was created to make poor families visible produce or conceal new perspectives into these programs, and with what consequences? To answer these questions, in the next section, I introduce the relational dimension of legibility by explaining how, in Mexico, the perceived need to insulate *Progresa* from what was considered corrupt politics also insulated the program from the dynamic character of poverty on the ground. Brazil's project of legibility, on the other hand, created new and unanticipated views into the state, which improved the capacity of the program to continuously monitor poor families but made its governance more vulnerable to criticism. Or, to continue with Scott's conceptual analogy, I will explain how *seeing like a state* can also *make the state visible*.

V. The Relational Dimension of Legibility: Making the State Visible

So far, we have seen two dimensions of Mexico and Brazil's projects of poverty legibility. First, I presented the different ways that *Progresa* and *Bolsa Familia*'s policymakers made poor families visible for the purposes of implementing their programs—this represents the categorical dimension of legibility. Second, I explained how these legibility schemes were shaped, to a great extent, by the strategies of political legitimation and the audiences prioritized by each program, thus highlighting the importance of also studying legibility through its symbolic dimension. In this section, I will explain how any project of legibility that aims to make a population legible also has the potential to create novel lenses into the state, since it can open or hinder new pathways for other political actors to evaluate state action—this represents the relational dimension of legibility.

To date, scholars investigating the relational dimension of legibility projects have mostly directed attention to how marginalized populations learn the categories of state programs in order to fit themselves into bureaucratic systems (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016, Sweet 2019), and how this process of learning official categories also makes the state visible to marginalized groups in a particular way. For example, Fong (2020) shows how families that become legible to child protective services in the US end up seeing the state with fear, distrust and disengagement. Corbridge et al. (2006) find instead that encounters with the state can lead to better understandings of how government works and to a sense of citizen empowerment.

As explained earlier, this emphasis on the relationship between seeing and being seen by the state misses how legibility projects can make the governance of the state visible to broader publics and directly impact bureaucratic politics. In particular, by focusing on micro-level interactions between state officials and state subjects, and then on how these interactions shape citizens' perceptions of the state, this literature is unable to capture the political importance that legibility tools of the poor have in intra-state disputes. The significance of these tools was well explained to me by a Brazilian state official, "Our dataset can be understood as a poverty census, since now practically all low-income families in the country appear in it. This is great because we can know a lot about income fluctuation and poverty. But this can be potentially dangerous because, contrary to a census, we now have identifiable micro-level information of all these families, so everybody wants to have access to it." In what follows, I further elaborate on the strategic importance of legibility tools of the poor by showing how these instruments made the agencies implementing *Progresa* and *Bolsa Família* visible (or not) to other poverty stakeholders, the consequences of this visibility or opacity for bureaucratic disputes around CCTs, and finally how these disputes affected the governance of each program.

Mexico: The Opacity of Efficiency

In Mexico, since *Progresas*'s inception, policymakers were very careful with which aspects of the program would become visible to outsiders or not. In the name of transparency and accountability, *Progresas* staff produced its own program reports and stimulated the implementation of multiple external evaluations, as a means to legitimate the program and provide information about its operation (see Parker and Todd 2017 for a summary of the evaluation findings in Mexico). Moreover, other state actors, such as control and auditing agencies responsible for the oversight of federal programs, invested great energy in examining the accuracy of the poverty maps that *Progresas* developed to identify poor communities. Poverty experts, external evaluators, and civil society organizations, in turn, also focused on scrutinizing the targeting model and the merits of the discriminant analysis that was used to determine the poverty status of families—a process that was characterized by Vithayathil, Graizbord, and de León (2018) as “retreat to method,” in which Mexican political elites channeled substantive public debate into abstruse disputes over methodology. A former *Progresas* director described the scrutiny of the program's proxy-means testing in the following terms, “It was very hard for people to understand that you put information in what they considered a black box, which then determines who is poor and who is not. So, there were many, many questions about our statistical model: Why do you have 30 questions and not 60? ... We were scrutinized by everybody when it came to that model.”

Crucially for our purposes, however, *Progresas*'s staff did not deem necessary the facilitation of external access to *Progresas*'s main legibility tool of the poor—i.e., the program's beneficiary dataset—and there was a lot of resistance to sharing micro-level information about beneficiaries with other state agencies. Had *Progresas* chosen to share its beneficiary dataset, it

could have served as a strategy for making the governance of the program visible to other state actors and to a broader public, rather than requiring stakeholders to evaluate *Progresa* through external, aggregate reports or smaller, sample-based surveys with beneficiaries. My interviewees attribute this resistance to sharing information in *Progresa*'s beneficiary dataset to what they saw as the risk of political use of poor families' information, especially by local-level politicians, and to an understanding that this was organizational data, not legible to other public agencies in Mexico:

“It would be hard for outsiders to understand it [information in the beneficiary dataset], because they don't know how our data management systems work—our data would make no sense to them. And, to be honest, I also don't know how they would use this information... Maybe they have other political interests, and this is not under my control, so I am not sure why I would share my data with them.” *Progresa Manager*

This means that, in Mexico, federal oversight agencies, such as the Federal Auditing Office (ASF), local-level welfare offices, academics, and civil society organizations lacked direct access to *Progresa*'s complete beneficiary dataset, which could have been used to increase the program's horizontal visibility to other actors within the federal government. To understand the opacity of the relational dimension of Mexico's legibility project, it is crucial to remember a point made earlier about *Progresa*'s institutional insulation inside the Mexican state. The continuation of this insulation, even after Mexico implemented sweeping political accountability and transparency reforms between 2000-2004 (Cejudo, Lopez, and Ríos 2012, Graizbord 2017), allowed *Progresa* staff to set the terms of the visibility of its main legibility tool, shielding the program from constant inquiries from other stakeholders about their governance choices and helping them to secure *Progresa*'s reputation with different audiences domestically and abroad.

The unintended consequence of this choice was that policymakers in Mexico received little to no feedback from other state actors about what was happening to poverty on the ground.

And because they adopted such a comprehensive way of identifying poor families (recall that federal actors used 33 variables collected at the local level to find the poor and only re-evaluated this information after 6-8 years), they had a hard time monitoring changes in the economic status of poor families after the initial targeting survey was implemented, making it difficult to include or exclude families depending on fluctuations in their socioeconomic status. Many times, the combination of a centralized, insulated program and fear of political intervention led to serious operational mistakes. To cite one example, a former staff member narrated to me a case that was all too common in my interviews and fieldwork, “[Progresa staff] did not include all families living in a poor neighborhood in the program. The families lived inside abandoned railroad cars,” but when a federal government surveyor collected the information, “these train wagons were computed as houses with solid walls, so our model estimated that these families were not poor, and they received no money. Since we were in Mexico City, it took us a while to arrive in Coahuila, but when we finally did, we saw how poor they were, and only then could we fix our mistake.”

Furthermore, the perceived need to insulate from politics the program and all the information that it generated about the poor resulted in significant opacity to other stakeholders; in the few instances that other actors were given access to part of *Progresa*’s dataset, they simply could not find beneficiaries (PNUD 2016). This is how a poverty expert explained the problem:

“The dataset that *Prospera*¹¹ staff provided to us was not updated, or it was just wrong. When we went to marginalized communities to interview beneficiaries, we simply could not find them... We could not find 53% of beneficiaries... Maybe they had moved to another place, but *Prospera* just doesn’t know. I do not think that this is a sign of corruption; probably it is just very poor management of that dataset. However, I was shocked to find out how disorganized they can be because we always study their targeting model, and we thought that it was quite good.” *Poverty Researcher from an International Organization*

¹¹ In this quote, my interviewee references *Prospera* because this interview took place in 2017, when *Progresa/Oportunidades* had already been renamed *Prospera*.

One consequence of this institutional opacity was that *Progresa* continuously had a difficult time including poor families in the program in the long run. According to World Bank estimates, in 2010, among Mexico's extreme poor population (those living under US\$3.00 dollars a day), 56.3% were *Progresa's* beneficiaries, and in 2016, 54.7% (ASPIRE 2018). This means that almost half of Mexico's extreme poor individuals were not included in the program in 2016, even if the goal of a CCT is precisely to include the most marginalized populations. In comparison to other Latin American countries, in 2016, these numbers put *Progresa* behind *Bolsa Familia* (73% of extreme poor were beneficiaries of the program), as well as CCTs in Peru, Panamá, and Paraguay.

In Mexico, therefore, control agencies, civil society organizations and poverty researchers focused primarily on scrutinizing *Progresa* through its targeting statistical model and not through its beneficiary dataset. On the one hand, this protected *Progresa* staff from explaining in detail its internal operations to outsiders and from responding to implementation criticism— as we will see next, this is something the BFP team was constantly required to do. However, *Progresa's* legitimacy project did not benefit from the positive side of constant scrutiny, and it did not have a constant, official source of feedback on what was happening to poor families at the local level. As exemplified above, *Progresa* staff had to mobilize substantial organizational resources to detect even simple changes in poverty status, which often left program staff unable to respond to demands about the operations of the program. Ultimately, the perceived need to insulate *Progresa* from politics made capturing the dynamic character of poverty more difficult. It also made it difficult for actors inside and outside of the Mexican state to directly oversee program

operations and understand the dynamics of poverty in Mexico at the micro-level.

Brazil: The Transparency of Politics

In Brazil, on the other hand, the strategy of finding and including as many poor families as possible into *Bolsa Familia* increased the fear that the targeting of the program would be easy to manipulate. Conscious of this risk, the BFP staff had to find ways to continuously calibrate and improve the information that was collected from families, and to verify that municipalities were following through with their responsibilities. Internally, at the Ministry of Social Development (MDS), this was done by comparing descriptive statistics from the *Bolsa Familia* database with census data and other administrative databases in order to identify inconsistencies or errors in the information provided by the families. For example, between 2007-2015, MDS realized 11 data crosschecks of the BFP dataset with administrative datasets of nine other state agencies, leading to a request for re-verification of the poverty status of 16.7 million beneficiary families (Vilwock 2019). Moreover, MDS created multiple financial incentives for municipalities to invest in their data-gathering activities, such as the Decentralized Management Index (IGD), which rewarded local governments that had valid, updated, and complete information about beneficiaries (Hellman 2015).

Yet, these internal validation and monitoring mechanisms were not considered enough to guarantee the legitimacy of the program to other poverty stakeholders and audiences. To achieve this goal, federal managers made the *Bolsa Familia* beneficiaries' dataset easily available for evaluation by academics and other public agencies inside the Brazilian state. Initially, my interviewees reported that this strategy was seen as risky, yet it was deemed necessary to show that the program was not being manipulated for electoral purposes. On the one hand, facilitating

the evaluation of the BFP beneficiaries' dataset by other agencies could create backlash if used by rival groups inside the Brazilian state to expose operational mistakes of *Bolsa Família*. On the other hand, systematic data scrutiny and the possibility of doing crosschecks with other federal administrative datasets could facilitate a reflexive process—i.e., a process of self-examination about its governance choices—that would ultimately improve BFP's beneficiary targeting. In Brazil, even at the risk of political backlash and vulnerability, policymakers opted to make access to the BFP beneficiary dataset as easy as possible to guarantee its continuous improvement:

“I cannot protect the *Cadastro* [BFP dataset in Portuguese] from external evaluation. What we want is to improve the quality of information in the *Cadastro*. I want other researchers to tell me what I might be doing wrong, so I can fix it... Some people inside the Ministry did not want to publicize the auditing results, which showed irregularities in the income of two, three million families... They thought that it would criminalize the poor. But I always tried to argue that we needed to do it, because our society is conservative, so sometimes to legitimize a good path, you need to give some blood to people.” *Bolsa Família Manager*

As the quote above suggests, by making their beneficiary data accessible, federal managers intended to show that they were not reluctant to share their organizational data, and that if discrepancies were found, they were keen to act. They also intended to stimulate a reflexive process about what they were doing and receive feedback on their mistakes, which federal managers could then report to municipalities to investigate and correct them in an expedited manner. The combination of a bottom-up legibility infrastructure and the scrutiny of other stakeholders ultimately made *Bolsa Família*'s information system stronger. To cite another data point from the World Bank, in 2016, among Brazil's 20% poorest population, in rural areas 85% were legible to the Brazilian state as *Bolsa Família* beneficiaries, and in urban areas 50%. In Mexico, the same numbers were 63% and 29% (ASPIRE 2018).

At the same time, however, *Bolsa Família* staff became exposed to criticism and scrutiny from other agencies inside the state. In Brazil, it is common for auditing and control agencies to use Brazil's legibility of the poor tool—the BFP dataset—to evaluate the merits of the program and to search for incidents of fraud. Among the federal oversight agencies, my document analysis revealed that the Federal Audits Court (TCU) used data from the Ministries of Labor, Finance, and Planning to scrutinize the *Bolsa Família* beneficiary dataset in 2006, 2009 and 2016, and the General Controllers Office (CGU) evaluated the dataset annually from 2005-2017. From 2012 onwards, the Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) also joined in the scrutiny efforts. A federal prosecutor that started an operation called “The X-Ray Bolsa Família” to evaluate the internal validity of the BFP dataset explained both her motivations to start this investigation and the positive effect she believed her efforts had on the quality of targeting:

“The goal of our project was not to clean a dataset. Our goal was: ‘If you find any irregularity, even if it's a mistake, they need to send it to the locality, and the locality solves it.’ We have found people that were considered dead but are alive, people that had their social security number used by someone else, and the person would say ‘Oh my god, I had no idea!’... Today municipalities think, ‘The federal prosecutor's office may come here,’ and they do their jobs better because of this.” *Brazil's Federal Prosecutor*

To reiterate a point made earlier, similar systematic exercises examining beneficiary data were not part of the CCT governance in Mexico, nor was the widespread use of CCT data by other state agencies. In contrast, the *Bolsa Família* team shared its dataset with 38 other federal welfare programs that relied on the BFP legibility tool to reach and monitor their own beneficiaries (Direito, Koga, Silva, and Chaves 2016). In turn, these agencies also informed the BFP staff whenever they found inconsistencies in poor families' income data. Finally, poverty researchers within the Brazilian state also used the BFP dataset to scrutinize the program with the intent of assisting in its governance (Souza, Osório, Paiva, and Soares 2019). While the majority of stakeholders engaging with Brazil's legibility tool of the poor were other state actors,

the media also played a key role in making the results of the evaluations of the BFP beneficiary dataset visible to broader publics.¹² These practices not only had no parallel in Mexico, but when I shared this information about Brazil with a Mexican social policy evaluator, she made clear to me a point I heard from multiple poverty stakeholders in Mexico: “Even if nothing happened, the fear that by sharing beneficiary datasets these would be used for other [corrupt] purposes would always be present... As a state, we are not ready for that.”

In Brazil, therefore, the main instrument that was created to make poor individuals visible—*Bolsa Família*’s beneficiary dataset—was also used to make the governance arrangement of Brazil’s CCT more visible. Other state agencies could use this information to directly see the characteristics of poor individuals that were part of the program, rather than indirectly through official reports or descriptive statistics as is done in Mexico. In this process, whenever there was a sign of error or fraud in the data, these actors required a response from the multiple local, state, and federal BFP staff, which ultimately made the program’s governance structure more transparent to outsiders. It also improved the ability of the BFP staff to quickly generate information about beneficiary families, and to both include and exclude families from the program depending on changes in their poverty status, even at the cost of greater vulnerability to criticism. At the relational dimension, therefore, the Mexican system was characterized by opacity and superior protection of the program, while the Brazilian legibility project resulted in both strategic transparency and greater organizational vulnerability.

¹² A systematic analysis of media articles about CCTs in Mexico and Brazil was not part of my research. In my interview schedule, however, I asked questions about the role of the press for each CCT legitimation and asked respondents to name particular articles that were extremely detrimental to their reputation. While only 2 out of 45 Mexican interviewees could name one article, 48 out of 55 Brazilian interviewees could name one or more articles. While these are imperfect measures, they signal a more intense public scrutiny around CCTs in the Brazilian case.

VI. Conclusion and Implications

In this paper, I have analyzed Mexico and Brazil's projects of legibility of the poor that were created to implement the *Progresa* and *Bolsa Família* programs. I have demonstrated that, in its categorical dimension, creating instruments of legibility to see poor families and to track their behavior involved a trade-off between extending policy coverage and improving efficiency in targeting. In relation to the symbolic dimension of legibility, I have argued that the choices made by the Mexican and Brazilian states regarding this trade-off reflect the political legitimization strategies that were adopted in each case and that these strategies created different challenges and opportunities for the reputation of the programs. Finally, regarding the relational dimension of legibility, I have argued that the same information systems that were created to make the poor visible changed the bureaucratic politics around these programs. In Brazil, multiple domestic actors evaluated *Bolsa Família*'s beneficiary dataset, while in Mexico, policymakers prioritized protecting their organizational data, with distinct governance consequences for the programs in the long run. Table 3 below summarizes the main findings and the three dimensions of legibility that I have presented in this paper.

Table 3 about here

Studying legibility through the three analytical dimensions proposed in this article has broader implications for the sociological study of states and poverty governance. First, while most scholars have focused on legibility through the lenses of order and control, the comparative framework proposed here invites more analysis on how states might *differ* in their intent to control populations—and on the consequences of these differences for the legitimization and bureaucratic politics of legibility projects. I have shown how Mexican and Brazilian policymakers faced trade-offs that involved defining if their legibility projects of the poor would

1) categorically prioritize breadth or accuracy, 2) symbolically portray inclusivity or efficiency, and 3) relationally aim for protective opacity or transparency. These analytical categories can be used to study variation in other types of legibility projects. For example, recent scholarship has highlighted how countries differ in how strictly they treat undocumented immigrants and how becoming legible to the state as a “legal immigrant” is often associated with increased surveillance (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016, Asad 2020, Gowayed 2020). My research suggests that to understand differences in approaches to immigration and surveillance (the categorical dimension of legibility), the analysis should investigate how each state aims to legitimate its immigrant policies for distinct audiences (symbolic dimension), and which consequences follow in terms of visibility of the governance of immigration agencies (relational dimension). By adopting such a framework, we can start to unpack, for example, why Canada has taken a much more inclusive approach to undocumented immigrants and refugees, while the US is characterized by more surveillance (Gowayed 2022).

Second, the focus on the symbolic dimensions of legibility directed attention towards the critical role that the orientations and intentions of policymakers play in the design and legitimization of projects of seeing populations. While in Mexico state officials believed that it was important to limit the reach of political decision-making and invested in a technocratic legitimization of *Progresas*, in Brazil, bureaucrats were invested in the political project of making Brazil more inclusive. Here, my findings connect to a point that has been made in the political sociology literature about the importance of the *type* of state official promoting new state policies (Babb 2001, Fourcade 2009, Ferraro and Centeno 2018). Pushing this idea forward, my work also demonstrates the importance of identifying the audiences to which state actors direct their actions in different contexts (Carpenter 2010, Eyal 2019). Future work will benefit from

continuing to specify the reputational trade-offs that policymakers face when designing legibility projects. It will be particularly important to specify how different audiences reward or penalize legibility projects that are considered more or less coercive. Such analysis will allow a deeper understanding of the feedback effects between legibility, state action and audience reactions in distinct policy realms.

Third, this article opens up more terrain for the sociological study of poverty governance in the US and globally. Scholars of urban governance in the US, for instance, have shown how the use of sophisticated individual data-collection techniques increased inequalities regarding who is subjected to state intervention (Brayne 2017, Fourcade and Healy 2017). These scholars often highlight how the interorganizational production of surveillance reinforces the burden on certain marginalized groups that end up being monitored by a wide range of institutions (Fong 2020). Adding to this debate, my research directs attention to how projects of legibility of marginalized populations can render the state agencies themselves visible to other stakeholders, who can then scrutinize these agencies. The importance of state visibility is particularly salient in associational forms of policy (Maryl and Quinn 2016, Clemens and Guthrie 2010), where legibility tools of beneficiaries can also potentially be used to expose the boundaries between private and public actors. The recent use of administrative data to make the work of police departments across the US visible is an example of how the relational dimension of legibility can make legible to broader publics both the patterns of racial discrimination in police departments as well as the boundaries between public and private surveillance agents (Legewie 2016, Greenberg 2021).

Furthermore, this research contributes to recent scholarly conversations about the politics of expert knowledge for advocating solutions to “the poverty problem” (Breslau 1998,

Rodríguez-Muñiz 2016, Popp-Berman 2022). The comparative framework proposed here seeks to provide analytical categories that can also be used to contextualize the making of poverty knowledge “as a part of historical trends in ideology, politics, institutions, culture, and political economy far more than a disembodied story of learning about poverty’s ‘causes’ and ‘cures’” (O’Connor 2002, 8). As such, my work highlights how poverty knowledge also depends on the administrative registries of prominent welfare agencies, as well as on whether, how, and to whom these agencies choose to share their “datasets of the poor.” In doing so, this article invites more research that seeks to open the black box of how datasets of poor populations are not only created (O’Neil 2016), but also updated and circulated inside states, as well as their consequences for social inequality. Recent scholarship in this direction has shown how public agencies are in constant negotiation with one another over how to classify ordinary citizens and to determine which agency might best intervene in their lives (Lara-Míllan 2017). My findings suggest that to understand the politics of “people exchange” inside states, the analysis should focus on the legitimation trade-offs policymakers face, and how legibility of marginalized populations can make the governance of the state visible. More research on how these legibility dynamics play out in distinct historical and national contexts has the potential to further the dialogue between state theory and poverty governance literatures.

Finally, my findings have consequences for policy debates about which methods of transferring money to the poor are preferable. The take-away from this research is that you cannot answer this question without taking into consideration the political and institutional context in which decisions about welfare programs were initially made, as well as the implications that different knowledge infrastructures have for the politics of legitimation of anti-poverty programs. As has been demonstrated by multiple scholars, giving money to the poor is

always politically contentious (Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky 2016, Hulme et al. 2012). This paper shows that a crucial but understudied aspect of securing the political viability of cash transfer policies is their knowledge production, and it provides a model to understand the impacts of knowledge-making on the governance of welfare programs. My findings serve as a powerful reminder that bureaucratic decisions over measurement have real consequences for poor families because they shape the social distribution of power and knowledge inside the state, and hence how policymakers handle anti-poverty programs.

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Table 1. Socioeconomic, State and Political Similarities between Brazil and Mexico

	Population (2000), millions	Human Development Index (2000)¹³	Governance Indicator Score (2000)¹⁴	Corruption Perception Index (2000)¹⁵
Brazil	194.95	High HDI (0.68)	Average Governance Quality (0.09)	High Corruption (3.9)
Mexico	113.42	High HDI (0.70)	Average Governance Quality (0.24)	High Corruption (3.3)

¹³ The Human Development Index (HDI) aggregates data from a number of socioeconomic indicators, ranging from 0 (very low HDI) to 100 (very high HDI). In 2000, Mexico ranked 77 and Brazil 79 out of 188 countries. See <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/trends>, accessed on June 15, 2018.

¹⁴ The Worldwide Governance Indicator (WGI) captures perceptions of experts on the quality of public services and the degree of its independence from political pressures. The Government Effectiveness component of this indicator ranges from -2.50 (Poor Governance) to +2.50 (Good Governance). In 2000, Brazil was ranked 61 while Mexico 64, out of 175 countries. See <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi>, accessed on October 21, 2021.

¹⁵ The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) aggregates data of experts' perception of the level of corruption in the public sector. The index ranges from 0 (high corruption) to 10 (low). In 2000, Brazil ranked 49 and Mexico 59, out of 90 countries. See https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/cpi_2000/0, accessed on June 15, 2018.

Table 2. Different Images and Governance of Poverty

	Implementa- tion	Initial Census Filter	Poverty Visualization	Legibility Tools	Poverty Targeting
Mexico	Centralized	Identification of Poor Localities	Top-down; High Resolution (33 variables); Static View	1. Targeting Survey; 2. Beneficiary Dataset	Precise and Rigid
Brazil	Decentralized	Estimation of number of Poor Families	Bottom-up; Low Resolution (1 variable); Movement	1. Beneficiary Dataset	Loose and Dynamic

Table 3: The Three Dimensions of Legibility in Comparative Perspective

	Dimension	Mexico	Brazil
Seeing Like a State	Categorical, Informational	Top-down, Multidimensional View of Poverty, Precise & Static	Bottom-up, Unidimensional View of Poverty, Loose & Dynamic
Projecting an Image of the State	Symbolic, Reputational	Efficiency Main Audience: International Experts	Inclusivity Main Audience: Domestic Bureaucrats
Making the State Visible	Relational, Evaluative	Opacity, Protection of <i>Progresa</i>	Strategic Transparency, Vulnerability of BFP

Appendix 1 – Descriptive Statistics of Interviewees Sample

	Brazil	Mexico
Gender	Female: 27%	Female: 56%
	Male: 73%	Male: 44%
Highest Educational Level	PhD: 60.4%	PhD: 20.6%
	MA: 25%	MA: 67.6%
	BA: 14.6%	BA: 11.8%
Field of Study Undergraduate	Economics: 40%	Economics: 35%
	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 25%	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 15%
	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 6%	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 21%
	STEM: 19%	STEM: 24%
	Others: 10%	Others: 3%
Field of Study Graduate (highest level achieved)	Economics: 49%	Economics: 30%
	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 27%	Soc. Sciences/ Hum: 43%
	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 15%	Politics/ Pub. Admin: 17%
	STEM: 5%	STEM: 7%
	Others: 5%	Others: 3%
Foreign Degrees	PhD: 34%	PhD: 71%
	MA: 20%	MA: 33%
	BA: 4%	BA: 6%
Total (N):	55	45

Appendix 2 – The main features of the *Bolsa Familia* and *Progresa* Programs

	Bolsa Familia (BFP)	Progresa/Oportunidades
Size	2003 (creation): 3.6 million families 2008: 10.5 million families 2012: 13.9 million families 2016: 14.0 million families	1997 (creation): 220,000 families 2002: 4 million families 2012: 6 million families 2016: 6.1 million families
Size/Population	2016: 26% of the Brazilian population	2016: 23% of the Mexican population
Target group and official poverty classification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor and extreme poor families; Extremely poor families: monthly per capita income < R\$77.00(US\$20.38); Poor families with monthly per capita incomes between R\$77 (US\$20.38) and R\$154 (US\$40.83). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families living in extreme poverty; Poverty Index based on six social goods (education, health, social security, housing, utilities, and food) and basic income to satisfy basic needs or well-being; 2012 Poverty Line (PL) set at US\$2.9 per day (rural areas); US\$4.0 per day (urban areas).
Cash transfers	2003 (from US\$16 – US\$61) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Basic</i> (US\$16) – For families in extreme poverty <i>Variable</i> (US\$5 to 15,00) – \$15,00 for each child, up to 3 children (under 15 years old) 	2003 (from US\$14 to US\$146) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Basic</i> (US\$14) – Fixed monthly nutrition grant <i>Variable</i> (US\$9.5 to US\$60 per child) – Variable grants according to gender and school year of each children.
Targeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National target of number of poor families to determine municipality quotas; Self-declared income registered in <i>Cadastro</i>, in all municipalities; Federal Government selects family below PBF poverty lines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Geographical targeting at community level (marginality index derived from census data); Surveys in <i>all</i> households in eligible communities are carried out; Proxy-means testing at federal level determines who are beneficiaries.
Coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2006: 63.7% of poor households 2016: 72.6% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2008: 24.7% of poor households 2016: 54.7%
Poverty Gap Reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2009: 22.2% (World Bank estimates) 2015: 50.7% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2008: 37.3% (World Bank estimates) 2014: 39.1%
Role of Federal Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defines total target audience and quotas for municipality; Grants benefits and undertakes monthly payments to beneficiaries via a Federal Bank; Coordinates and develops management instruments for the <i>Cadastro</i> to be used by municipalities, states and federal government. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible for all aspects of management and operation; Grants benefits and undertakes bimonthly payments to beneficiaries via direct cash transfer and via a Federal Bank; Responsible for contracting out external evaluations of the program.
Role of Municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify low-income families and register them into the <i>Cadastro</i>, update their info at least every 2 years; Ensure the monitoring and oversight of PBF initiatives in the community; Oversees conditionalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Municipalities have no official role other than help with logistics; POP has 32 offices (1 in each MEX state), with regional customer service units that serve target population;
Budget	2003 (creation): US\$1 billion 2013: US\$10.5 billion, 0.41% GDP	2004: US\$2.5 billion 2014: US\$5.6 billion, 0.39% GDP

Source: Produced by the author.