

Zoila Ponce de Leon

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
Department of Political Science
300 Hamilton Hall CB 3265
Chapel Hill, NC 27599 (USA)

Phone: (919) 869-0153
Email: zoilapls@live.unc.edu
Homepage: <http://www.zoilaponcedeleon.com>

Research Statement

My research focuses on the politics of social policy and how the political process behind the formation of policy affects the legislation enacted and its implementation. In order to understand the role that political parties and other important actors such as technocrats have as policy makers, I focus on contemporary healthcare reform processes in Latin America. My secondary research interest is the connection between representatives and those whom they represent. I study representatives' connection to the policy positions of citizens in Latin America, as well as their responsiveness to citizens' requests in Europe and Latin America. I use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to develop my research agendas.

Dissertation

Reforms seeking to universalize access to social benefits promise to alleviate social inequality and have the potential to improve people's living standards. The political process behind the formation of these reforms can severely affect the prospects for tackling these disparities. Entitled *Policy Reform, Political Parties and Organized Interests: Universalization of Healthcare in Latin America*, my dissertation examines how the political process behind policy formation affects the quality of legislation and its implementation.

Over the last decades, several Latin American countries have attempted to universalize access to healthcare and thus ameliorate a system that discriminates based on the socioeconomic status of their citizens. Existing literature has focused on the responsibility of strong left-wing parties for the expansion of social benefits. Such an approach has overlooked the development of reforms in countries where, instead, non-left parties supported and implemented reforms seeking to universalize access to healthcare. The comparative analysis I conduct includes two processes of reform that took place with right-leaning parties in power (Mexico and Peru) and one under a left-wing coalition (Chile). Thus, my research shifts the focus of social policy studies away from left-wing parties and their spending patterns and towards features of parties apart from ideology that influence the quality of legislation and implementation.

Through this comparison, I demonstrate how the programmatic commitments of parties affect the quality of key healthcare reform legislation and its implementation. These commitments are only present when a party has core values that unite its leaders and a policy issue relates to the core values uniting the party. I argue that the programmatic commitments of parties shape the specifications of a reform regarding implementation and funding. In turn, the participation of political parties in defining these key specifications forges a commitment of these same actors to implementing the reform, which determines its feasibility and sustainability. I show how, when

parties lack core values or such values do not relate to the policy, legislation may still pass but technocrats without partisan ties dominate the process. Given the lack of commitment from the main political actors, this leads to a policy poorly designed for effective implementation. More broadly, my research demonstrates the need to bridge the literature on social policy and political parties, and the relevance of careful analysis that disentangles the mechanisms through which parties affect policy.

My dissertation is based on 12 months of extensive field research in Chile, Mexico, and Peru, during which I conducted over 150 in-depth interviews with political elites, policy makers, technocrats and leaders of interest groups. In addition, I include quantitative measures of the implementation of the reforms. I have completed two of four empirical chapters of my dissertation, and have advanced drafts of the other two.

The **first** empirical chapter studies the policymaking of AUGE in Chile. I show that the programmatic commitments of the parties, which were present because this policy issue related to the core values of both left- and right-wing parties, shaped the specifications of the reform. I also find that the programmatic participation of political parties in the definition of specifications forged a commitment of these same actors to the reform's implementation, which determined its feasibility and sustainability. The **second** and **third** empirical chapters show the impact of the lack of programmatic commitments to the reform in Mexico and Peru, respectively. The presence of core values uniting the leaders of Mexican parties was not enough for the development of programmatic commitments to Seguro Popular. I show that the absence of connection between the policy issue and their values led to a lack of commitment to the reform. In Peru, parties that lacked core values uniting their leaders and had no commitment to the AUS reform did not care for the definition of its specifications regarding funding and implementation. In that context, technocrats dominated the process of policy formation, which accompanied by the lack of commitment from the main political actors, led to poorly specified policy and deficient implementation in Mexico and Peru. The **fourth** empirical chapter disentangles the causal mechanisms through which the programmatic commitments of parties affect the quality of the reforms via a comparative analysis of the processes in Chile, Mexico, and Peru. I have enclosed it as my writing sample.

I expect to defend my dissertation in March 2018. Following my defense, my first priority is to transform my dissertation into a book manuscript for submission to a leading university press. I have a wealth of field research material that extends further than the questions posed by my dissertation. I will conduct supplementary fieldwork in the summer of 2018 and update my research on the implementation of the reforms I study.

My interest in policymaking was sparked by a solo-authored paper published by *Politai Revista de Ciencia Política* on how public opinion and media pressure define agenda setting, as well as a co-authored book on the changes that drug and prison policy have experienced in Peru.

Political Representation

Aside from my dissertation, I am engaged in other research projects on representation, political parties, and gender. I work on the relationship between party-voter congruence and clientelism in Latin America. Using elite and mass survey data from 17 Latin American countries, I develop congruence scores for 53 political parties on seven policy issues and evaluate whether clientelism is compatible with party-voter policy congruence. I show how, against conventional wisdom, party-voter policy congruence and clientelism can be compatible. The higher the level of clientelism of a party, the higher the level of congruence it displays on issues regarding the public provision of excludable benefits. This is because citizens engaged in clientelistic exchanges support the state as primarily responsible for the provision of benefits (such as jobs) as it allows access to them through their proximity to the party. At the same time, clientelistic representatives favor state provision of these benefits as it enables them to allocate the goods to their targeted populations. This manuscript is under review.

I am also developing a co-authored project, with a UNC graduate student, on legislators' responsiveness to citizens, and how gender and electoral institutions interact with it. We analyze this relationship with the first truly comparative field experiment on representation conducted with political elites. The experiment is carried out in 11 countries across two regions: five in Europe (France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, and the Netherlands) and six in Latin America (Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia). We selected these countries based on their differences in terms of electoral systems (majoritarian, open-list PR, closed-list PR, and mixed systems) and proportion of elected female members of parliament (MPs), which allow us to maximize variation in terms of MPs' extrinsic motivations and female representation. In the experiment, a citizen alias -whose gender is randomized to be either female or male- sends a message via email to MPs to ask for help to access unemployment benefits in Europe and healthcare services in Latin America. We find that gender does matter: female aliases receive significantly more replies than male aliases. This effect is due mostly to the behavior of female MPs, who are more responsive to female aliases. Male MPs also responded more to female aliases, but to a lesser extent. We are submitting the paper for publication this November.

Future Research Agenda

In the next few years, I will maintain an active research program exploring the ways in which the political process behind the formation of social policy affects the legislation enacted and its implementation. I will conduct research on the impact the programmatic commitments of parties and the role of technocrats have on other social policy issues such as education reforms, as a further test of the argument I advance with regard to healthcare.

I also aim to broaden my focus by drawing on new questions that emerged during my field research. First, I have begun exploring the variation in the development of the private healthcare sector and its impact on the quality and accessibility of healthcare across time and countries. I do so by examining the coexistence between the public and private sectors in the provision of services as well as insurance in Mexico, Chile and Peru. This manuscript has been committed for publication in *The Oxford International Handbook of Public Administration for Social Policy*, edited by

Merike Blofield, Camila Arza and Fernando Filgueira.

Second, I will explore how the theory developed in my dissertation helps to explain economic reforms in order to assess the extent to which the programmatic commitments of parties and the role of technocrats can shape the quality of legislation in other policy areas.

Third, I plan to study the effects of citizens' recognition of the existence of social policy programs and of who is responsible for them. As the literature on the expansion of social benefits discusses, citizens' attribution of responsibility for a specific program to a specific political leader can have a relevant impact on the leader's political future. Citizens do not recognize all social programs. Whereas some programs are widely known, citizens are unaware of the existence of others. Understanding the factors that explain this difference is a key starting point. I plan to then explore the process through which citizens not only recognize a program but also attribute credit to specific political leaders. As a final stage, I will analyze the impact of this credit-giving on political careers as well as the survival of social policy programs.

Last Updated October 2017