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THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

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The Politics of Social Protection during Times of Crisis

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Abstract: In 2020, as Latin American countries shuttered their economies, it became clear that effective lockdowns would require states to provide income support. In a region that has historically struggled to build systems of social protection, the effort to expand benefits was notable. Policies varied in scope and generosity, but in what seemed to signify a new era of state-building, Latin American democracies demonstrated a nearly uniform commitment to providing assistance to the poor. Why did some countries implement broader and more adequate programs than others and why did countries vary in their ability to sustain support over time? This Element argues that three factors explain cross-national and cross-temporal differences in policy effort: policy legacies, unified/divided government, and fiscal space. The Element shows that in settings of crisis, the democratic politics of social policy expansion shifts, with traditional factors like ideology and electoral competition playing a less central role.

Keywords: social protection, cash transfers, COVID-19 pandemic, Latin America, welfare policies

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