
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

PROMOTING AND PREVENTING POLITICAL CHANGE THROUGH INTERNATIONALLY FUNDED NGO ACTIVITY

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Abstract: A growing percentage of international aid is distributed through local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Scholarship is divided on how that aid affects domestic politics. One side argues that aid to NGOs reinforces the status quo. As NGOs become dependent on external funding, they lose sight of their original goals. The other side contends that channeling funds to NGOs generates associational activity, producing political change by empowering previously marginalized groups. We test these competing hypotheses in Rondonia, Brazil, measuring the impact of internationally funded NGO activity on voting behavior. We find that the impact of aid varies with the institutional environment. At the state level, more votes for the conservative governor came from municipalities whose NGOs received project money. In contrast, the same municipalities registered a

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significant shift to leftist candidates at the presidential level. The findings have broad implications for the impact international aid has on political competition, political change, and democracy.

INTRODUCTION

A growing percentage of development assistance provided by organizations like the United Nations, the World Bank, and the European Union is channeled through local NGOs. Between 1990 and 1994, the percentage of European Union relief aid channeled through NGOs grew from 47 percent to 67 percent (*The Economist* 2000). More than 70 percent of World Bank-supported projects approved in 1999 involved NGOs in some way (World Bank 2000).

Scholars largely agree that empowering NGOs affects local politics but are divided about the direction of those effects. Some argue increased funding of NGOs helps effect political change, while others argue external funding compromises efforts at political change (Clarke 1998a; Clarke 1998b; Fox 1996; MacDonald 1997; Ndegwa 1996). Some argue both outcomes are possible and that political change depends on NGO leadership (Clarke 1998a; MacDonald 1997; Ndegwa 1996) or political context (Fox 1996; MacDonald 1997).

We seek to contribute to this rich literature by evaluating the political effects of a World Bank program (Planaflo) that distributed development funds to local NGOs in the Amazonian state of Rondonia, Brazil. Our study differs from many others by our systematic definition of NGO activity and political change; we measure the latter in terms of the change in vote percentage for leftist political candidates between 1994–1998 in the presidential and gubernatorial races, and we measure the former in terms of money disbursed to local NGOs in each municipality during the same time period.

We find a major difference exists between changes in voting patterns found previously at the presidential level (Brown, Brown, and Desposato 2002) and voting patterns at the state level reported here. Previous work found a strong positive correlation between program funding and voting for leftist presidential candidates. We find the opposite pattern at the state level: program funding is correlated with support for more conservative candidates. The contrasting results are explained, we argue, by the institutional design of the Planaflo project that allowed the governor to claim credit for the funds distributed to local communities. Our conclusions hold important implications for the design and implementation of NGO-centered development programs not only in Rondonia, but in Latin America as well.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the Planaflo program and considers its potential to affect political change.

In the third section, we report regression results for the impact of NGO activity on voting behavior. Section four provides an explanation for the results followed by the conclusion where we discuss our findings and consider implications for other contexts.

PLANAFLORO

The Planaflo program resulted from the intersection of several forces. By the early 1990s, the World Bank had been harshly criticized for its role in the 1980s-era Polonoroeste development program in the states of Rondonia and northwestern Mato Grosso in the Brazilian Amazon. That program involved large-scale road building and agricultural colonization that displaced local communities and led to land conflicts, rural violence, and deforestation. The Planaflo program, implemented in the state of Rondonia, was intended to address these and other concerns in part by encouraging greater involvement of local NGOs in project development, monitoring, and implementation (World Bank 1992). Grants were made available to local NGOs in hopes they would implement sustainable community development projects. An important component of the project involved the development of social capital. A Planaflo document identifies a major goal of the grants: "Contribute to the social and political organization of rural communities and traditional peoples, strengthening the qualities of those movements, stimulate the process of democratization for the exercise of citizenship" (Rondonia 1996, 5). The grant programs marked the first time that World Bank project money was placed directly in the hands of NGOs in Rondonia to carry out specific components of a larger development program. By 1995, NGOs had applied to subprojects within Planaflo called *Projetos Inovadores* (PIs) or Innovation Projects, and *Projetos de Iniciativa Comunitária* (PIC), Community Initiative Projects. The overarching objective was to raise rural living standards, conserve rain forest resources, and build civil society.

During the same year, however, a newly organized Rondonia NGO Forum called for a formal review of Planaflo by the World Bank's inspection panel, based upon observations of numerous irregularities in project implementation and the lack of substantial involvement of civil society in the project (Millikan 1995; Millikan 1997; Keck 1998; Rodrigues 2004). NGOs and the Rondonia state government finally agreed to reformulate the Planaflo project and redirect the remaining project funds. US\$22 million were allocated for a new round of decentralized development projects called *Projetos de Apoio às Iniciativas Comunitárias* (PAICs), or Community Initiative Support Projects, to be financed by the bank. The new program called for community groups to apply for grants of up to \$150,000 in order to pursue their own rural-oriented health, education, conservation, and agricultural production-related programs.

By 1998, over \$6 million had been disbursed to more than 200 groups, ranging from indigenous community organizations to small farmers' cooperatives.¹ Projects funded constructing meeting halls and purchasing vehicles, telephone equipment, and computers. It also funded environment-friendly production activities like beekeeping, agro-forestry, fish farming, along with promoting environmental and health education.

ANALYSIS

How does funding local NGOs affect politics in Rondonia? Politically, Rondonia is a conservative state where patronage-based groups of politicians are the central actors (Ames and Keck 1997). The literature on NGOs' political effects implies three possible outcomes in Rondonia. First, NGO effects might be limited to the purely developmental goals of the World Bank, with no discernable changes in political behavior. Second, resources might be captured by existing hierarchies and used as an additional source of patronage to further strengthen their position. Third, NGOs might mobilize and politicize voters and create space for new political actors. In the case of Rondonia, a correlation between project funding and a shift leftward supports the third possibility.² To measure the impact of the Planaflo program on political change and mobilization, we compare voting behavior before and after the program's implementation. Voting behavior does not directly measure the extent of organization, mobilization, or party formation—but it does directly measure the impact of such activities where they count most in any democracy—at the ballot box.

Our model tests the relationship between funding for local NGOs and electoral returns in presidential and gubernatorial elections in Rondonia. Specifically, we estimate the impact of NGO dollars on changes in voting behavior from 1994 to 1998.³ We measure political change by comparing

1. Grant awards were not correlated with pre-program voting behavior (1994). Many of the NGOs were formed after the program announcement by communities that wanted to obtain a share of the resources. The PAIC projects were approved by a *Grupos de Análises Técnicas*, or GAT (UNDP workers / *técnicos*). After approval, the request was forwarded to PAIC management (Planaflo office) and then finally approved by what is called the *Comissão Deliberativa do PAIC*. The process is described in detail in Brown et al. (2002).

2. Our independent variable is dollars per capita of funding per municipality, but we understand that the funds themselves do not entirely create an effect of political change. Funds themselves were disbursed sporadically during the period 1994–1998, with most of the funding entering the bank accounts of NGOs in 1998. Even so, the funds act as a reasonable and systematically measurable surrogate for NGO activity as a whole. Each NGO had to mobilize its membership in several meetings to discuss project plans, gain training in submitting a proposal, vote on project priorities, and submit bids for any contracted work or purchase of durable goods.

3. We are aware of no previous analysis that correlates NGO activity with changes in voting behavior.

the change in vote share for leftist and for incumbent political parties.⁴ The comparison of 1994 and 1998 election results is particularly useful given the similarity of the two elections in both the presidential and gubernatorial races. The two front-running presidential candidates, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ("Lula") and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), were the same in both elections, running on nearly identical platforms in both years. Lula, a well-known union organizer and leader of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT), ran for president in 1989 and was narrowly defeated by Fernando Collor de Mello. Although an academic and a world-renowned Marxist scholar, FHC represented a centrist position on the political spectrum.

In 1994 and 1998, FHC ran on—and Lula ran against—the success of the Plano Real. The Plano Real was a fairly orthodox neoliberal economic stabilization plan FHC formulated as finance minister before resigning to run for president in 1994. One of the plan's central features involved setting very strict limits on the valuation of a new currency, the *real*. Although in the 1994 election FHC benefited from increased consumption during the first phase of the plan, the Brazilian populace became fully aware of the more painful aspects of the program by 1998: high interest rates and growing unemployment. Consequently, there was a distinct choice between the center of the political spectrum (FHC) and the left (Lula) in both contests.⁵

The Rondonia gubernatorial races of 1994 and 1998 were more tightly contested. In both 1994 and 1998, PMDB candidate Valdir Raupp de Matos was forced into a runoff election, failing to garner the required 50 percent in the first round. In 1994, Raupp won the second round over a candidate from the PDT (Partido Democrático Trabalhista), Francisco José Chiquilito Cimbres Erse. In his 1998 reelection campaign, Raupp was forced into a runoff by José de Abreu Bianco ("Bianco") of the PFL (Partido da Frente Liberal) and was eventually defeated. Raupp's inability to stem rising crime in the countryside, his privatization of state-owned companies that showed no immediate benefits, his failure to resolve the problems associated with a chaotic system of state tax collection, and an eleventh-hour split with coalition party members at the federal level were all factors that led to Raupp's demise.

4. Why not measure mobilization in terms of turnout? Voting is mandatory in Brazil. Even so, some voters abstain and others cast spoiled ballots. However, it is not clear that such behavior is an appropriate measure of politicization. For example, it is difficult to ascertain whether casting a spoiled ballot reflects alienation and nonparticipation, or a protest against the political system (Cardoso and Lamounier 1975; Kinzo 1988). Regardless, in 2002, 83 percent of Brazilians went to the polls and 87 percent of those voting cast valid votes in the presidential race. In Rondonia, turnout was similar (79 percent) and valid voting even more frequent (91 percent).

5. In 1998, Lula and FHC captured 88 percent of the vote in Rondonia. In 1994, the two candidates captured 85 percent of the votes cast in Rondonia.

With electoral data and data on the amount of money disbursed to local NGOs in each municipality, we specified a model testing the impact of local NGO funding on political change in terms of the change in vote share for leftist candidates.⁶

$$\text{Vote Change (1998–1994)} = a + b_1(\text{Dollars per capita to NGOs}) + b_2(\% \text{ rural}) + b_3(\% \text{ govt. employed}) + b_4(\text{logged } \% \text{ migrant}) + b_5(\text{education}) + b_6(\text{Mayoral Ideology}) + e.$$

The coefficient of interest is b_1 , which estimates the correlation between NGO funding and voting behavior. Several controls possibly shaping changes in voting behavior are included: the percentage of the population living in rural areas, the percentage of the labor force employed by the government, education, the size of the immigrant population, and the party affiliation of the municipality's mayor. Variables in the model and identification of leftist parties follows the coding scheme adopted by Brown, Brown, and Desposato (2002). Given that the dependent variable is measured in change from one election to the next, and the contextual variables are measured as levels, the estimated control parameters can be interpreted as capturing how different kinds of municipalities responded to political events between 1994 and 1998.⁷ One might expect, for example, that privatizing the state sector (a policy emphasized by FHC) had a pronounced political effect in municipalities with large numbers of federal employees but a relatively small influence on rural municipalities.

STATISTICAL RESULTS

Results are presented in table 1, showing the relationship between NGO funding and electoral returns at the presidential and gubernatorial levels. Model one replicates previous work (Brown, Brown, Desposato 2002): there is a strong positive correlation between the amount of money allocated to a municipality and the success of the leftist presidential candidates.

Not only is the result statistically significant, but there is an important substantive impact. To calculate the predictions below, all control variables were held constant at their mean values while Planaflo spending was allowed to vary from its minimum value to its maximum. The estimates from model one indicate there is an 18 percentage-point difference in support for the left between municipalities that received no money (Corumbiara, Cacaúlândia, Cabixi, Monte Negro, and Seringueiras) and

6. Between 1994 and 1998 some redistricting took place among Rondonia's municipalities. The changes were accounted for in the data.

7. An alternative model specification would include the same independent variables expressed in elasticities (change over time). Unfortunately, there are no data: although data exist for 1996, comparable data do not exist for an earlier time period. We were able to calculate the change in each municipality's rural population from 1996 to 2000. Including it in the regression model did not effect our results.

Table 1 OLS Regression of the Change in Electoral Returns (1994–1998) on Planaflo Spending and Control Variables.

	Presidential Left %	Gubernatorial Left %
Planaflo Spending	0.005	-0.004
in U.S.\$ Per Capita	(0.001)**	(0.002)*
% of Population in	-0.049	-0.063
Rural Areas	(0.116)	(0.170)
Head of Household	0.001	-0.000
Years in School	(0.000)*	(0.001)
% of Population	0.003	0.092
that are Migrants	(0.021)	(0.031)**
% of Workforce	-0.004	-0.030
Employed by Govt.	(0.046)	(0.068)
Mayoral Ideology	0.019	0.009
	(0.019)	(0.028)
Constant	-0.494	-0.348
	(0.259)*	(0.380)
Observations	40	40
R-squared	0.69	0.33

Standard errors in parentheses * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%. Dependent variables: (1) Left party candidates at the presidential level; (2) Left party candidates at the gubernatorial Level (first round).

the municipality that received the most (Candéias do Jamari). In cities receiving no money the leftist presidential candidates typically reduced their vote totals by 5 percentage points from 1994 to 1998 (95 percent confidence interval: -8 to -3). Where spending was at its maximum, the model predicts a gain of 13 percentage points (95 percent confidence interval: 10 to 39). Although the leftist candidates did rather poorly throughout the state, the differences in left support among well-funded municipalities and those that received no funding is substantial.

Model two depicts the relationship between the Planaflo money and the change in votes for the leftist gubernatorial candidates in the first round. A striking difference exists between models one and two with respect to the Planaflo money variable. The positive relationship between Planaflo spending and the success of leftist presidential

candidates becomes negative and statistically significant in model two. In towns that received no money, leftist gubernatorial candidates in 1998 typically lost 31 percentage points from their 1994 totals (95 percent confidence interval: -35 to -27). Where the maximum amount was spent, the model predicts a much larger drop—a 46 percentage-point decrease (95 percent confidence interval: -58 to -34). Put simply, while at the presidential level the Planaflo money is correlated with political change, voters at the gubernatorial level rewarded politicians who represented the same center and right candidates that have always led the state government. Put simply, the NGO activity that increased votes for the left in national elections was simultaneously having the opposite effect at the state level!

UNRAVELING THE PUZZLE

Why would NGO activity increase support for the leftist Workers' Party in a presidential election, and at the same time weaken leftist candidates at the gubernatorial level? During two separate trips in 2001 and 2002, we interviewed more than 50 participants in the Planaflo projects, in addition to rural union organizers, government workers, and local politicians. Our interviews confirmed the contrasting patterns in the gubernatorial and presidential elections. They also suggested several explanations for the specific mechanisms that support political change and entrenched interests simultaneously.

Most interviewees explained that while the governor did not control who received the money, he could control when it was released. As projects were completed and funds released, the governor made appearances to claim credit for delivering funds to communities. For example, in Ouro Preto do Oeste, the Governor showed up personally to hand out the keys to the new buses an NGO purchased with World Bank funds to take children to school in the city. Some of these political events also included the participation of other state and local politicians. Community leaders consistently told us that participants gave much of the credit for the project to the governor. These interviews were corroborated by examining back issues of local newspapers in Rondonia. Our content analysis found that, to the casual reader, Governor Raupp was responsible for the Planaflo community projects and the resources Planaflo delivered to communities. The example below is typical:

Leaders like the president of the Organization of Rubber Tappers of Rondonia, José Maria, took advantage of the opportunity to thank the governor for the support he has given needy communities, which are generally excluded from participation in official credit programs. In the words of Raupp, "it is an opportunity for the government to contribute to the rights of community citizenship." (*Diário da Amazônia* 1996)

Finally, when asked who received credit for a Planaflo community development project, a government employee admitted that “the political machine” made sure that the governor received credit for the projects. A leftist leader and successful candidate for federal deputy in the 2002 elections conceded that the left had lost the propaganda war, allowing the governor to claim credit for the good deeds of Planaflo.

In contrast, the President never engaged in any such credit claiming. Two main reasons explain why. One is quite general in that no Brazilian presidential candidate has much incentive to visit remote, rural, less-populated regions to claim credit for a relatively small program. Some 81 percent of Brazilians now live in urban areas, mostly in the Southeast. Indeed, almost 22 percent of the population lives in the state of São Paulo alone. Rondonia, by contrast, has less than 1 percent of Brazil’s population. Moreover, the logistics of a presidential campaign make credit-claiming for small projects in isolated towns an inefficient strategy. The different kinds of candidate strategies fit well with what we know about scale and campaigns. For example, Cox (1987) showed how increasing district size in England led to a focus on policy issues and the development of strong British parties. Geddes (1994) showed how Brazilian legislators, with their smaller constituencies, focus on pork barrel politics while presidents focus on broader policy outputs. Thus, FHC never appeared at any Planaflo inaugural events, never passed out keys to new trucks and busses, and never visited any of these small rainforest communities to claim credit for bringing resources to those communities.

The second reason for a lack of credit-claiming at the presidential level has to do with the particular institutional design of the Planaflo program. The federal government never asserted control over the program or sought involvement in the distribution or disbursement of funds. While Planaflo as a whole was financed by a World Bank loan to the federal government, project management and resources were turned over to the Rondonian state government, giving the incumbent governor Raupp the opportunity to claim credit for the community development program.

This suggests the answer to our puzzle: the proximity of local politicians to developments on the ground facilitates and even mandates their self-insertion into the process. Governor Raupp successfully created the perception he was responsible for Planaflo projects in Rondonia. Voters rewarded him for that.

At the same time, Planaflo activity mobilized support for leftist presidential candidates. Association leaders spoke proudly of using Planaflo funds to construct new meeting halls and community buildings, some located in quite distant and previously isolated communities. Such places helped give a sense of structure to what were relatively weak social movements. It was finally possible to hold meetings in comfortable surroundings

and the buildings helped attract new members. All association leaders told us that while meetings were held to discuss the technical details involved in the implementation of their particular projects, discussions often turned to politics, spanning local, state, national and international issues: ecological zoning of rural properties, rescheduling their own rural debt payments, free trade, the price of the *real*, and in some cases which political candidate the group should support. Farmers previously uninvolved with the activist orientation of the Rural Workers' Unions began taking part in direct actions to improve collective interests. One important example was a statewide milk production strike against milk processors in hopes of raising the farm gate price for milk throughout the state. The increased visibility of the unions, brought about by their participation in Planaflo activities, helped their organizing efforts on this particular front. Subjects interviewed noted that while their association included members and leaders from all political persuasions, successful implementation of the projects helped strengthen broader organizational efforts of the PT.

Finally, most leaders noted an increase in participation and membership. After farmers saw their mobilized neighbors participating in reforestation projects, obtaining free seedlings, participating in cooperatives, and gaining access to agricultural machinery, they became active participants. The newly formed organizational wherewithal demonstrated by previously impoverished leftist organizations generated new interest in their capacity to lead and mobilize support. In many associations, leaders and members with whom we spoke noted that while they had previously supported incumbent FHC from the center-right, many of their members were now strong Lula voters.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we sought to contribute to the growing literature on NGOs' impact on politics in the developing world. We found that community-based development espoused by the international NGO community has a dramatic impact on the politics of the communities with which they interact. The nature of that impact, however, may be affected greatly by institutional design of projects, especially with respect to whether candidates for office are able to claim credit for development funding. In more local political arenas, local NGOs and the increased associational activity they bring can strengthen existing clientelistic elites. In the national political arena, local NGO resources and increased associational activity can create space for previously excluded political currents and empower new forms of political participation.

This rather counter-intuitive finding holds important implications for how programs like Planaflo are evaluated and implemented. Most studies of grass-roots organizations examine their effects at the local

level. Our findings indicate that various levels of the political arena must be examined to determine whether change is occurring or not. If the effects of increasing grassroots activity are first registered in national level politics, concentrating exclusively on phenomena at the local level will underestimate the impact local NGOs have on domestic politics.

Similar projects have been implemented across the developing world; how do our results speak to other programs and other countries? In many ways, Planaflo is typical of the New Policy Agenda program: significant World Bank funds were transferred directly to local NGOs for small-scale community-led development in poor, clientelistic environments. In addition, Planaflo took place in the context of a natural experiment—between two very similar elections. But several characteristics of the Rondonian and Brazilian political environments, however, are unique and could limit our theory's generalizability. Low levels of partisanship in Brazil make the disparate effects possible. In systems where all voters have strong party attachments, it is unlikely that voters' preferences could simultaneously swing toward leftist national parties and rightist local parties. In Argentina, rural Mexico, or pre-Chavez Venezuela, a similar program might be quickly and completely captured by a local party machine. In such a case, we would predict even more rewards to incumbent parties at the local level and parallel change at the national level.

In addition, Rondonia is a rapidly growing frontier state, and most voters are recent arrivals. The fact that many Rondonia voters were new to that state might only exacerbate low partisanship. New to the state, lacking strong partisanship, and not established into political machines, Rondonian voters had very few cues to help in their vote choice. In most contexts, voters have partisanship, or at least familiarity with personalities to help them choose candidates. In Rondonia's political arena, voters had neither. Lacking partisan and familiarity cues, voters would have to look to other sources of information to pick candidates. One such indicator would be provided by Planaflo. Consequently, our observed effects—and their divergence across different political arenas—may be greatly magnified over what would be observed in other contexts.

But at least in Rondonia, our research shows that with increased NGO activity, citizens became activated and began to express diverging political preferences. To the extent that local NGO activity depends on cooperation or acceptance by local and regional officials, the beneficiaries of these programs will reward the traditional politicians that have their feet firmly planted in the local political scene.

Appendix A
Parties Classified as Left

Acronym	Name of Party
PPS	Partido Popular Socialista
PDT	Partido Democrático Trabalhista
PT	Partido Dos Trabalhadores
PV	Partido Verde
PSB	Partido Socialista Brasileiro
PSTU	Partido Socialista Dos Trabalhadores Unificado
PMN	Partido Da Mobilização Nacional
PCB	Partido Comunista Brasileiro
PCO	Partido Da Causa Operária
PC do B	Partido Comunista Do Brasil

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