

# 2º SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL SOBRE DEMOCRACIA E DESIGUALDADES

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## **Um país de todos? Poverty and Inequality in Brazilian Newspapers**

**Matias López**

**Abstract:** According to the literature, high levels of inequality should relate to threats to elites, ultimately affecting democratic rule. This article argues that, if indeed inequality pressures elites, this should be reflected in elites' public debates. In South America, poverty and inequality became important political topics since democratization. As the press assumes an active role in the public debate, opinion leaders from different elite sectors often use the press in order to communicate with each other. This article focuses on this inter-elite communication through the press in Brazil. It approaches elite framing of poverty and inequality in the press, content analyzing opinion articles signed by leaders from different fields in the main newspapers. Mixed methods analysis indicates that despite previous elite surveys showing that elites perceive poverty and inequality as social and political threats, opinion articles signed by elites in the press tend to give less attention to such threats. In Brazil, where inequality should pressure elites, poverty was only marginally framed as a source of threats. Brazilian elites coincide in framing poverty and inequality in terms of stateist political values.

**Key words:** press, elites, poverty, inequality, South America

### Introduction

‘[...] the intellectual pressure that people make through newspaper articles [...] is valid because one starts redirecting state action. Quite often, they [state bureaucrats] are [just] sitting there in their glory, and they think that they are trying to solve problems in the best way possible, but [...] they don't know the communities, they don't even know everybody inside the state. Therefore, the most articulated layers of society, the ones that are able to make diverse pressures in an efficient way, are the ones that will be first and foremost benefited.’

Extract from an in-depth interview with a

Brazilian corporate leader<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The interview with this corporate leader is part of a round of in-depth interviews with political, corporate and civil society elites in five countries, carried out by the Interdisciplinary Network for the study of Social Inequality. See Reis and Moore (2005).

This article explores elite framing of poverty and inequality in the press in Brazil. It relies on the content analysis of editorials and opinion articles signed by elites in prestigious newspapers. The concept of 'elites' in elite theory is based on the notion that every society holds a ruling minority, a group that controls and disputes the main sources of political, economic and symbolic power (see López, 2013a). Elites are persons occupying the top of powerful organizations and movements, thus capable of affecting political outcomes both substantially and regularly (Higley and Burton, 2006). Usually, elite studies focus on elite-to-elite relationships, yet elites are also reactive to non-elite behavior.

I analyze elite framing of poverty and inequality following the works of de Swaan (1988), Reis (2000, 2011) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2004), who point to political consequences of elite reactions to poverty. These authors argue that elites may promote welfare tools and embrace or improve democracy in order to shield their interests from negative externalities of poverty, such as criminality and political radicalness.

Inequality plays a major role in this schema, because poverty itself is not likely to pressure elites. It is not logical to expect demands for distribution if everyone is poor and there is not much to distribute. In underdeveloped, yet more egalitarian countries, such as Bangladesh, elites tend to see the poor as harmless and even as benevolent (Hosseini and Moore, 2005). According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2004), without the high social pressures brought by inequality elites lack the incentive to sponsor democratic development.

South American cases are certainly appropriate to test that argument. The region's extreme inequality affects elites in various ways. It affects elites politically because it may encourage radical leadership. It affects elites economically both in positive and in negative ways: elites benefit from low-cost labor yet loose market opportunities due to the lack of an educated labor force and to the low consuming power of the population. Finally, elites need to guarantee that their households are safe from robbery and even kidnaps, which are not rare in several of South American wealthiest urban areas. According to de Swaan (1988), Reis (2000, 2011) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2004), if elites acknowledge that their interest is at stake, they are more likely to support welfare measures and democratization.

Most studies on elite attitudes toward poverty and inequality use survey data and in-depth interviews as metrics of elite's interests and attitudes (e.g. Clarke and Sison, 2003; Hoffmann-Lange, 2010; Hossain and Moore, 2005; López, 2013b; Reis 2005, 2011). This article proposes a different approach. It focuses on public statements in the press, i.e.

spontaneous insertions of elites in the public debate. In elite theory's literature, this is often understood as a form of *soft power*, i.e. the capacity of channeling decision making without acting as a decision maker (Williams, 2012).

The opening quote in this article illustrates elites' own perception of that type of influence. In it, a Brazilian corporate leader states that, if left alone, the state would be incapable of diagnosing actual needs. He also argues that elites are likely to benefit from channeling state action toward the 'right direction'. In sum, I assume that if inequality generates externalities that pressure the elites, this should be echoed in their public statements in the press.

### *Why the press?*

Elite theory often relies on elite's interest as a key variable in order to explain elite action and, consequently, state action. What it misses is that sharing interests imply a complex set of inter-elite communication. Political regimes and social policies may be shaped by interest-based elite settlements, as argued by authors such as Higley and Burton (2006), yet leaders do not present their arguments using mathematical models based on game theory. Leaders present their cases through arguments, ideas, values, and ideologies. In other words, those issues are framed through a certain lens and opinions are shared by elites before decisions are made. Therefore, leadership of opinion could be seen as a form of soft power (Williams, 2012). Regarding opinions, the news media plays an important role.

Although networking is an important source of elite power (Yamokoski and Dubrow, 2008), elites are more distant from one another than the 'elite club' image suggests. One may think of opinion leaders as an important part of the mechanism that makes that interconnectivity work. Opinion leaders help to build communication channels among the elites, spreading views and framing topics within certain perspectives. Elites who are active in the press help to frame subjects in a certain way and ultimately influence decision making. It is important to note that elites do not shape the media's perspective: they use the media to transmit their own.

During South American military regimes (especially in the South Cone), a great deal of former political elites used the news media as a way to stay active in the public sphere. Throughout democratization, the media was an important resource for shaping debate and

introducing new leadership. As Tomaselli and Tomaselli (2008) argue, the contribution of the media's critical perspective was often an important source of internal opposition in partially open authoritarian regimes. Meanwhile, as democratization succeeded in South America, the free press, new and old political leaders, corporate leaders, and the emergent civil society organizations still found themselves struggling with major social problems. Thus, public debates in the press remained heated.

The elites who play the role of opinion leaders are likely to be decision makers as well, so why do they wish to print their opinion? Different elites may look forward to printing their opinion in prestigious newspapers for different reasons. For instance, political elites may be looking after support, bureaucratic elites may wish to publicize policy success, business elites may want to criticize 'over-taxation', and so on. They use the press because they realize that other elite members are likely to end up receiving their message. In sum, one could define opinion leaders as elites whose prestige and perceived professional background allows them to generate public debates and to influence decision making.

As for the press, it could be seen as both a source of political power and merely part of the political environment (Kunelius and Reunanen, 2012). Several measurements have pointed to both the elite shaping of media coverage and media shaping of elite attitudes (Valenzuela and Arrigada, 2010). Beyond the 'who shapes who' debate, it is certain that elites and the press are interconnected, primarily because media owners are themselves part of the elite.

Hughes and Prado (2011) argue that mass media in Latin America is controlled by a small group that uses its power to further a set of class and family based interests, as well as ideologies that help to maintain inequality. In fact, media carries political power because it is linked to powerful corporate groups, powerful families, or directly to the state. However, apart from big owners who could be thought of as corporate actors, and apart from hired journalists, there are other actors who have an active voice in the press, radio, and television.

In South America, it is quite common to observe economists, prominent lawyers, politicians, top bureaucrats, and so on, writing opinion articles in important newspapers and magazines, on several subjects. They are an important part of political life and their views are being published because they carry social prestige. In contrast, Bourdieu (1996) argued that the media uses experts' opinions with the sole purpose of legitimizing its own. That can be closer to the truth concerning television, where time is a problem and the exposition of ideas depends on technical skills that are usually unfamiliar to non-TV-professionals. That is also

likely the reason why the profile of experts' and leaders who are willing to talk on television is rather different from those who write in newspapers and magazines, particularly those directed to the upper class.

There is a considerable amount of space in the printed media that is occupied by opinion leaders. Besides, editors themselves, through editorials, publish opinion articles and can have a significant impact in political life. Yet one could argue that newspapers' owners will only allow the printing of convenient opinions and therefore the actual powerful and influential agent would be the newspaper itself, not the leaders who eventually publish in it. While it is true that media corporations have tremendous power, it would be hard to say who is using who if, for instance, the finance minister wants to publish an article on a given issue. For this reason, in my analysis I give equal status to media elites (in this case, editors) and to other elites.

Overall, my main interest is to reveal how elites frame poverty and inequality in their public speech. As Matthes (2012) argues, frames are selective views on issues, and as such they shape reality in a certain way. As Reese (2007) puts it, frames consist of principles that structure the interpretation of the world. Overall, the framing research literature strongly emphasizes a causal link between framing of social problems and the treatment they end up receiving (e.g. Entman, 1993). Yet, since Goffman's (1974) introduction of the term, 'framing' is often criticized for its conceptual vagueness (Scheufele, 1999). Indeed 'framing' is not a very restrictive concept and this is probably why it is so widely used. Frame analysis in communication studies usually targets news coverage in order to identify news media's position on any given subject. I use frame analysis in opinion articles and editorials in order to explore elite construction of meanings of poverty and inequality in public debates.

Opinion articles are not regular opinions, but one might say they are active opinions. They help to create references to certain topics in the public sphere. Of course they are not the only tool elites have to communicate. Top elites (especially top political elites) have their opinion echoed by the media in a daily bases. The important aspect of the opinion section in newspapers is not that it expresses the most powerful tool of opinion leadership. Rather, it reveals a communication tool shared by many elites in different sectors, who aim toward educated upper class audiences. I deliberately did not included news coverage in order to restrict the analysis to intentional, authorial and direct communications from elites.

## Methods

Previous elite studies indicate that the level of inequality should be associated with elite reactions to poverty. In countries with high inequality, elites should be more sensitive to externalities of poverty. Therefore, should we expect Brazilian elites to express over poverty. Brazil is a 200 million inhabitants country, with a record of extreme inequality (current Gini of 0.51). According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2012), in 2011 around 21% of Brazilians were extremely poor and 6% were indigent.

### *Data*

Content analysis in this article uses data from the project ‘Public and Private Strategies Toward Poverty, Inequality and Difference’, coordinated by the Interdisciplinary Network for Studies of Inequality (NIED) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. The data consists of editorials and opinion articles written by frontrunners from diverse fields and published in the opinion section (not the reader’s section) of the main newspapers in Brazil, totalizing 124 opinion pieces.

A clipping services was hired and asked to survey *all* opinion articles and editorials (meaning opinion articles signed by newspaper editors) that included the words ‘poverty’ and/or ‘inequality’ anywhere in the text. The clipping service was able to gather articles from 2008 to 2011.

The newspapers analyzed were O Globo (37,1%), Folha de São Paulo (21%), Estado de São Paulo (19,4%), and Valor Econômico (22,6%).

Despite being often critical of the government, Brazilian newspapers do not have an official political or ideological affiliation, preferring to present themselves as neutral.

It is noteworthy that the total amount of articles does not mean a total of opinion leaders, given that authors often published more than one piece in that period. In Brazil, apart from the newspaper editors who naturally signed all the editorials, the most frequent publisher was a journalist who signed nine articles. The second most frequent publisher is a senator from

PDT (a leftwing labor party) who signed seven articles. The third most frequent publisher signed four articles and is a senator from the Workers Party (the governing leftwing party).

### *Coding*

The primary coding<sup>2</sup> targeted authors' institutional belonging, gender, and party affiliation (if suitable). The editorials were excluded from this coding because they are officially signed by the newspaper, not the editor. Ten female authors were identified. Most of the Brazilian female leaders belonged to the top bureaucracy (ministers, state secretaries, and so on), followed by the intellectual sector (mostly journalists). Only one female leader belonged to the political sphere, a senator from the Workers Party (PT). I divided the articles' authorship into five elite sectors (see Table 1). Congressmen and party leaders are grouped in the category 'politicians'. The category 'bureaucrats' includes non-elected public officials that belong to governmental agencies or international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. The category 'businessmen' groups leaders that belong to the corporate world. The category 'civil society leaders and intellectuals' groups journalists, professors, economists and free thinkers. This category is not related necessarily to the idea of organized civil society (e.g. NGOs), but to actors outside of the state and market who are active in political life. Finally, the category 'editorial' groups articles that were signed by the newspaper itself.

**Table 1 – Authors Distribution**

<b>Politicians</b>	<b>Bureaucrats</b>	<b>Businessman</b>	<b>civil society leaders and intellectuals</b>	<b>Editorials</b>	<b>Total</b>
23 (18,5%)	26 (21%)	8 (6,5%)	36 (29%)	32 (25,8%)	124 (100%)

<sup>2</sup> The articles were coded using the software Atlas Ti

The main structure of the code book used in this database was elaborated previously to the analysis, based on former qualitative and quantitative results on that subject (see López, 2013b; Reis, 2011). Content analysis of the articles was carried on following three code families:

- a) mentioning of consequences of poverty and inequality;
- b) mentioning of responsible/causal agents and spheres;
- c) mentioning of means to solve social problems.

Family 'a' aimed for statements about negative consequences of poverty and/or inequality, such as criminality, immorality, health issues and so on. Family 'b' aimed for statements about the social actors that should do something about poverty and/or inequality, those mentioned as responsible actors or institutions. Family 'c' aimed for statements on what is proper to do with the poor, which policies to follow, and so on.

I counted with a second coder. To test for intercoder reliability a used Cohen's Kappa to measure agreement in a sample of 15 randomly selected articles which were coded by the two coders. The level of agreement found was .79, with significance < .0005.

After prior exploratory qualitative analysis, code frequencies were used to build a co-occurrence matrix of subjects. Naturally, the topics of 'poverty' and 'inequality' were excluded once articles were sampled through them. Afterward, the matrixes were used to build a subject network<sup>3</sup>. The network reveals how different subjects relate, allowing to classify topics as closely related, barely related, or unrelated. After building the network, I engaged in qualitative speech analysis on those subjects which grouped a greater amount of other topics (powerful topics).

## **Results**

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<sup>3</sup> The networks were built using the software UCINET 6.



Elite surveys in South America show that during democratization, a significant amount of Brazilian elites feared that poverty and inequality could endanger the maintenance of democratic institutions. Considering a nation's elite as the sum of those occupying top positions among the political, economic, and civil society institutions, survey<sup>4</sup> results suggest that some 50% of Brazilian elites considered poverty to be the cause of urban violence (López, 2013b). Meanwhile, elite theory and further empirical research suggest that elites may react to poverty (and often do) in order to protect themselves from political and social threats such as radical demands for distribution and urban violence (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2004; Blofield, 2011; de Swaan, 1988, De Swaan et al, 2000; Reis, 2011; Reis and Moore, 2005; Stevens et al, 2006).

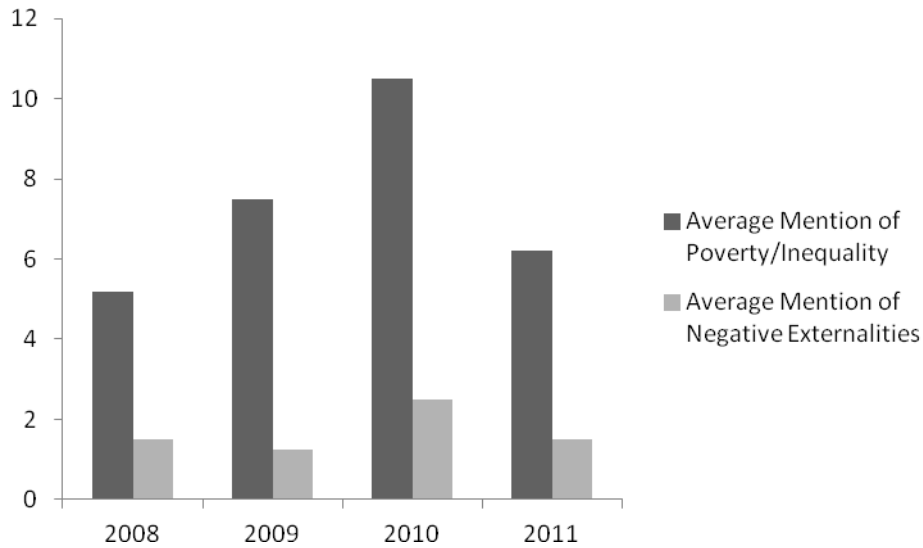
According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2004), inequality generates important externalities to elites, who then tend to expand democratic rule in order to shield their interests. Also according to Acemoglu and Robinson, where inequality is low, demands for distribution also tend to be low and elites have less or no reasons to feel threatened by the poor. Therefore, elites should be engaged in debating the effects of poverty in Brazil.

In average, 31 opinion articles per year in Brazil mention poverty and/or inequality. Also, an average of 6.7 articles per year relate poverty to negative externalities in Brazil. Therefore, poverty and inequality are in fact publicly debated among Brazilian elites, as seen in figure 1.

### **Figure 1 – Distribution per year**

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<sup>4</sup> The survey mentioned was carried out by former IUPERJ (currently IESP). It covered political elites, bureaucratic elites, corporate elites, and union leaders. See López (2013b).



Just about 10% of articles and editorials mentioned criminality as a consequence of poverty, 4.8% framed poverty as a threat to development, and 8% mentioned other negative consequences of poverty, totaling 23% of all articles framing poverty and inequality as a source of threats.

In previous studies, the rate of Brazilian elites relating violence and poverty reached over 50% (López, 2013b; Reis, 2000, 2011). Yet the framing of poverty in the press does not mirror this result. Elites' public statements in the press indicate that the framing of poverty as a source of threats in fact occurs.

**Table 2 – Mention of threats related to poverty and/or inequality**

	Politicians	Businessmen	Bureaucrats	civil society leaders and intellectuals	Editorials	Total
Criminality	2	0	3	7	0	12 (10%)
Economic Obstacle	2	0	2	1	1	6 (5%)
Other consequences	1	0	1	2	5	9 (7%)
No Mention	18	7	20	26	26	96 (77%)

*n* = 124

Among elite sectors, civil society leaders seem to be more active in framing poverty as a source of negative externalities, as seen in Table 2.

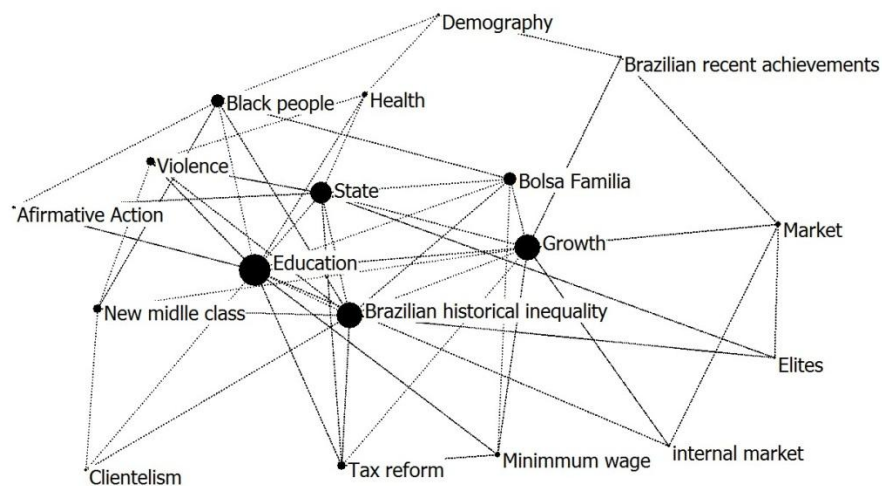
Politicians and top bureaucrats are shy in relating poverty to other problems and businessmen do not emphasize this linkage at all.

Elite framing of poverty and inequality in the press is fairly homogeneous in moral terms. The notion of ‘inequality’ is often referred to as a historical wound that should be healed. Leaders do not blame the poor; they blame the nation. Brazilian elites often framed poverty and/or inequality as something that embarrasses the country and holds down its development. Yet the majority of articles did not framed poverty and/or inequality as a source of externalities.

*Political culture and opinion leadership*

Elite surveys suggest that political and business Brazilian elites tend toward stateist political values. Particularly the need of state-induced growth is present among over 50% of the Brazilian business elite (see López, 2013b).

**Figure 2 – Subject network**



\* The spheres represent the frequency of citation and the lines represent the connection (co-occurrence) between two topics. The original matrixes were built using the Atlas Ti and the networks were built using Ucinet.

Among political elites this emphasis drops to about 40%, yet it is still majoritarian according to survey data.

Nevertheless, the use of closed questionnaires may induce political elites (particularly left-wing political elites) to highlight the need for social policy, rather than an economic/developmental policy. Political elites are used to defend ‘social causes’ and are thus likely to feel uncomfortable giving priority to the economy in their answers. In public statements, they are free to inter-relate those subjects and the picture changes dramatically. The result is a state centric frame of poverty, where growth plays a major role and distribution plays a minor role, as seen in figure 2.

**Table 3 – Mention of responsible actors or social sphere**

	Polititians	Businessmen	Bureaucrats	civil society leaders and intellectuals	Editorials	Total
State	10	5	12	13	15	55 (44.4%)
market	0	0	5	5	3	13 (10.5%)
civil society	0	0	3	0	0	3 (2.4%)
elite	2	0	4	0	0	6 (5%)
The poor	0	0	0	0	0	0 (0%)

*n* = 77

Figure 2 shows how subjects in the opinion articles and editorials are related to each other, thus providing an image of frames in each case. The notions of ‘state’, ‘growth’, and ‘education’ play a major role, indicating similar stateist frames of poverty and inequality.

The distribution of topics in Figure 2 illustrates how elites frame poverty and inequality through economics, while arguing that the state is the one that should act on it. Moreover they seemed to frame the state as responsible for poverty and social inequality, rather than the market or civil society, as seen in Table 3.

Civil society seems to play a minor role, even according to civil society leaders. The initiative of NGOs, for instance, was practically ignored. The articles that blamed the market for poverty and inequality related those problems with economic threats and the government response to the 2008 economic crisis. Top bureaucrats and one business leader were among

the few who mentioned elite responsibility and none of the articles blamed the poor for their condition.

Overall, state responsibility seems to be a premise among those who mentioned desired solutions to poverty. Consequently, arguments tended to highlight state-driven solutions. Education and economic growth were the most frequent solution pointed to by leaders and editorials.

Very few ideas of what to do regarding poverty could be related to redistribution measures, reinforcing the idea that poverty, not inequality, should be the main concern. Opinion leaders seemed to imply that wealth should not be redistributed. Instead, leaders argue that more wealth should be created. Regardless of leftwing/rightwing positioning or institutional belonging, there is a predominant premise that true development comes from economic growth and therefore the state should focus on it.

The notion of 'growth' is linked to several economic subjects (e.g. tax reform, minimum wage, internal market, and so on). Yet it was also linked to 'Bolsa Familia' (a cash transfer program) and to Brazilian recent achievements. This connection was pulled by top governmental officials who argued that part of Brazilian economic success is owed to poor relief programs. By fighting poverty, they argued, the government has created new consumers, consequently strengthening the economy.

*Is inequality really a problem?*

Despite picturing poverty and inequality as national problems that need to be solved, Brazilian elites hardly ever implied that this has to do with elite action or with wealth concentration. Society is framed as 'unequal' because it contains too many poor, not because it contains a few wealthy men. Although some leaders pointed out the need to increase taxes for the upper class, a greater amount actually stated that there should be fewer taxes.

Brazilian narratives tended to exclude the wealthy from the problem of inequality. The following statement from an editorial exposes the idea that inequality should only drop if that means that the poor rise up, without compromising elites:

‘The social elevator that allowed millions of people to ascend last year also functioned for others to descend. About 4.7 million Brazilians that in 2006 belonged to classes A and B [upper class] have fallen to class C [lower middle class]. That means that inequalities reduction was motivated also by the losses of those in the superior part of the social pyramid and not exclusively to the gains of those in the bottom, as it should be.’

(Editorial, O Estado de São Paulo, March 3, 2008)

Paradoxically, leaders use the term inequality but not in a relational way. They highlight that there is a national problem because some people are not getting the chance to work hard and progress in life, while others do. In fact, quite often distribution is presented as a fictitious way to solve inequality because it punishes the individuals who exemplify what should be done, i.e. working hard.

Elites imply that in an ‘ideal world’ - where everyone has an opportunity - inequality should not be a problem because it would reflect merit. Brazilian elites tend to frame the gap between the poor and the non-poor as moral problem because it reflects state failure and the lack of opportunities at the bottom, not the excess of resources at the top.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Elites have good reasons to worry about poverty and inequality in South America. Beyond the obvious implications of poverty to the poor, poverty and inequality also became a threat to powerful groups. Traditional and rightwing political leaders felt threatened once leftist parties started to gain votes and space through ‘poverty speeches’. Poverty also became a threat to business leaders as it compromised political and economic stability. Moreover, continuous research has shown that South American elites felt increasingly affected by violence and tended to relate it to poverty (Reis, 2000, 2011).

Several elite studies suggest that inequality is an important variable in explaining elite reactions to poverty (Swaan, 1988; de Swaan et al. 2000; Reis, 2000, 2011; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2004). They argue that inequality generates important externalities that are felt by elites, who may then promote more efficient welfare tools and democratization in order to shield their interests. This study aimed to compare elite framing of poverty and inequality in the press in two South American cases with similar elite configuration and political values, but with opposite records of inequality.

I argued that elites use the press to frame topics according to their interest. Thus, the effect of negative externalities should be mirrored in elites' public statements in the press. According to the literature, high inequality in Brazil should result in a framing of poverty as a source of externalities.

Nevertheless, in relative terms the amount of opinion articles that related poverty with externalities was low. Altogether, elites' frame poverty and inequality as something to be solved by the state, through state sponsored growth, rather than distribution. Elites' public statements suggest that, despite current political changes, *stateism* remains as a shared premise. Stateism accounts for state-oriented development, underplaying the roles of both the private and the third sectors.

One possible explanation is that elites prefer to respond privately to the externalities of inequality. Gated communities, private schooling and private security are just some of the resources elites can mobilize in order to insulate themselves from the poor. Meanwhile, they lack the capability that the state has for directing economic life in their favor. Brazilian powerful groups have historically benefited from big states. Thus, elites may prefer to demand state economic action, rather than sponsor distribution or democratization as means to guarantee a safer social environment.

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