

# Policies Make Politicians: Intermediaries, State Benefits, and Political Entrepreneurship in Brazil

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If policies make politics, can they also make politicians? We argue that being a bureaucrat with discretion over policy benefits can catalyze political ambitions and boost electoral success. As agents of the state rather than parties or interest groups, such bureaucrats wield a broadly accepted political currency. We examine the political careers of Brazilian bureaucrats who issue DAPs, a document granting benefits to small farmers. Leveraging a panel analysis from 2004 to 2020, we show that as bureaucrats issue more DAPs, they are more likely to become candidates, gain votes, and win election. DAP issuers run for office at higher rates than other public-facing bureaucrats with less control over policy benefits, suggesting that discretion is the key political currency, not social status or public contact. Our analysis underscores how the adoption of means-tested social policies can create new sources of political capital and brokerage in areas long dominated by traditional elites.

A long-standing tradition of research in political science, dating back to Schattschneider (1935), argues that “policies make politics.” Not merely the objects of political contestation, public policies can also generate new political dynamics, often with feedback implications for the durability of the policy itself (Campbell 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2014; Pierson 1993). The introduction of new redistributive social policies often creates new stakeholders and organized interests or alters the voting behavior of beneficiaries in ways that favor these policies’ long-term survival (Campbell 2003; Hacker 2002; Pierson 1994; Skocpol 1992). Social policies can also empower citizens, enhancing their participation in politics and public life (Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005). The canonical examples from the policy feedback literature consist of broadly accessible or universal policies in North America and Europe. Yet similar arguments have been advanced with respect to means-tested policies in the developing world,

including conditional cash transfers such as Brazil’s Bolsa Família (Hunter and Sugiyama 2014).

In this article, we argue that policies can also make politicians. When social policies are means tested, involve conditionality, or are otherwise nonuniversal, getting access to benefits involves an application process and approval by a gatekeeper charged with determining eligibility. If gatekeepers exercise potential discretion in granting access to valuable policy benefits, they enjoy a source of leverage that can serve as a springboard to a political career. The social status and regular contact with the public that accompany their positions also constitute significant resources when running for office. Being a gatekeeper for a valuable policy benefit can translate into a political career even if the selection process for policy administrators is meritocratic rather than politicized.

We illustrate these arguments by examining the political careers of issuers of the Declaração de Aptidão ao PRONAF

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(DAP, or Declaration of Eligibility for the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture), a document granting benefits to small farmers in Brazil. DAPs, and the administrators who issue them, serve as a gateway to several valuable benefits for Brazilians living in rural areas, including crop insurance and subsidized loans from state-owned banks. These benefits are means tested, and farmers must meet additional criteria such as deriving at least 50% of the family income from agriculture. Eligibility is determined by agents of the state's agricultural extension service—our empirical focus in the current analysis—or employees of the local rural workers' union who are certified to issue DAPs.

Our analysis goes beyond the existing literature on bureaucrats and policy implementation by focusing on how discretion over the access to benefits can be leveraged into a successful political career. Prior studies of street-level bureaucrats' discretion over policy implementation either adopt a Weberian conception or view them as rent-seekers who are interested in extracting immediate economic gains (Duvanova 2012; Lipsky 2010; Meyers and Nielsen 2012). Yet with the widespread adoption of means-tested social programs in developing democracies, discretion over how to apply eligibility criteria, particularly in contexts with loose organizational control mechanisms, can become a powerful electoral resource for street-level bureaucrats with longer-term political ambitions. This is particularly true in a context like rural Brazil, where both norms of reciprocity and the will to survive incline voters toward the support of politicians who can provide them with ongoing tangible benefits.

We show that as agents of the state agricultural extension service issue more DAPs, they are more likely to become candidates, gain votes, and win election. DAP issuers are much more likely to run for office than other public-facing bureaucrats with less control over policy benefits, suggesting that discretion is the key political currency, rather than social status and public contact. Our empirical focus is on Brazil's Northeast region, a drought-plagued part of the country where 78% of DAPs are issued and where the policy benefits they confer are particularly generous. We supplement our quantitative results with insights drawn from qualitative fieldwork in this region, including interviews with a number of DAP issuers and local politicians.

In addition to highlighting the conditions under which policies may generate politicians, our research speaks to the origins of brokers in developing democracies, a topic that has received scant attention in the burgeoning literature on clientelism and vote buying. We argue that becoming a gatekeeper for a valuable policy via meritocratic selection or career advancement presents a solution to the chicken-and-egg problem whereby brokers need popular support to gain influence

with politicians and influence with politicians to gain popular support (Auerbach and Thachil 2018).

## THEORY

Given its origins in the study of advanced democracies, the literature on policy feedback has focused on programs where frontline administrators do not wield significant discretion in the awarding of benefits. Oftentimes these are broadly accessible or universal social policies such as Social Security, the GI Bill, and the UK National Health Service, where determining eligibility is simply a matter of verifying permanent residence, age, employment history, or status as a veteran (Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005; Pierson 1994). Policy feedback arguments have also been applied to means-tested social programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children in the United States (Soss 1999), where eligibility criteria and program rules are clear, binding, and not subject to manipulation by program administrators. Benefits under these programs accrue to the entire national population or to large, functionally defined groups rather than to individuals with political connections, so the constituencies that emerge to defend them tend to be functionally defined as well. In advanced democracies, policies tend to make programmatic politics.

Yet policy design cannot completely eliminate frontline administrators' discretion in the delivery of benefits, even in advanced democracies (Lipsky 2010). Organizational contexts and social networks both matter for the exercise of bureaucratic discretion (Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks 2017). Multiple eligibility criteria for a program considerably increase bureaucrats' workload when assessing individual cases. Local organizations are often understaffed, administrators may lack explicit guidelines for resolving unclear cases, and they may be subject to few control mechanisms. Such conditions make the use of discretion more common. Moreover, strong ties to a community can reduce the costs of acquiring information about program participants, especially when service provision is based on frequent repeated interactions. As bureaucrats accumulate knowledge about the status and living conditions of policy beneficiaries, they are likely to spend less time assessing each case.

In developing democracies, bureaucrats are even more likely to rely on discretion in the application of social policies—something that can potentially be leveraged for political gain. Given limited economic resources, especially following austerity programs that shrink the scope of social assistance programs, policies tend to be means tested and conditional rather than broadly accessible or universal. Multiple eligibility criteria and red tape increase the potential for frontline policy administrators to exercise discretion when awarding benefits and to extract rents (Dasgupta and Rizzo 2018). Bureaucrats

may seek bribes in exchange for speeding up or approving an application, but they also may trade policy benefits for political capital that they can leverage for other rewards—serving as a broker for higher-level politicians or pursuing their own political career. As in advanced democracies, means-tested and conditional social programs in the developing world can be designed to be resistant to explicit clientelistic manipulation, as with Brazil's Bolsa Família (Frey 2019; Fried 2012). However, there are many programs for which citizens expect that frontline administrators can facilitate their individual access to benefits.

The phenomenon of bureaucrats leveraging policy discretion to become politicians or political intermediaries speaks to the origins of brokers in developing democracies. According to Auerbach and Thachil (2016, 7), most studies of brokers “take their presence as a functionalist constant, an axiomatic product of poverty, state unresponsiveness, and vote-chasing politicians. Brokers are introduced into models of clientelism at a point at which they have already built a public following and ties with political elites.” Although the basis of this public following is not typically theorized or empirically analyzed, one can identify several sources of broker authority in the literature.

One type of clientelistic broker consists of traditional elites, or “patrimonial brokers” (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015), who leverage a source of authority that is exogenous to mass politics and often predates it. Brazilian *coronéis*—large landowners who served as intermediaries between subject populations and state or federal politicians (Leal 1948)—are a classic historical case; more recent examples include African chiefs or local religious leaders (Baldwin 2013, 2016; Koter 2013). Because they draw on traditional authority, patrimonial brokers are not dependent on any party, candidate, or interest group for their public following. As a result, they can act as free agents, negotiating the best deals for themselves or their clients in exchange for political support.

Other brokers serve as agents of an organization with explicit political goals, such as a political party or interest group. Brokers as agents mobilize votes on behalf of their sponsor, typically using material resources provided explicitly for this purpose. The *punteros* of Argentina's Peronist Party are a classic example (Levitsky 2003; Stokes et al. 2013; Szwarcberg 2015). Brokers as agents can also act on behalf of interest groups, such as street vending or peasant organizations (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015). While agential brokers may be recruited by parties or organizations on the basis of their preexisting community ties (Zarazaga 2014, 26), their popular following is at least partially derived from their organizational affiliation. Brokers as agents are valued precisely because of the organization-sponsored benefits they can

deliver, such as access to social programs controlled by a mayor from the party. Because the source of their following is endogenous, their partisan alternatives are limited. Party brokers cannot easily switch parties and expect continued success in delivering benefits to clients. Interest groups can potentially negotiate deals with multiple parties, but their options may be limited to those that are ideologically akin (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015). Moreover, individual brokers working for interest groups are constrained by the larger organization's political commitment.

A third route to brokerage, starting from a position as a state bureaucrat or policy administrator, has remained largely unexamined in the literature.<sup>1</sup> Bureaucrats as brokers build a following out of their contact with the public in the course of their professional duties and their ability to resolve problems, cut through red tape (Dasgupta and Rizzo 2018), and exercise discretion in granting access to benefits. As with party and interest group brokers, bureaucratic brokers serve as agents, and their source of authority is endogenous; an ex-bureaucrat who loses control over policy would also be expected to lose his clients. Yet as agents of the state rather than parties or interest groups, they potentially have greater freedom to choose different political alliances. This is particularly true when their political ambitions lie at a different level of government than their bureaucratic position.

We argue that being a bureaucratic broker offers a particularly promising route into electoral politics. Brokers of all sorts sometimes enter politics themselves in addition to serving as intermediaries between voters and higher-level politicians. Traditional Brazilian *coronéis* often served as mayors of their municipalities. Party brokers frequently seek a political career; Szwarcberg (2015, 7) defines brokers as “office-seeking party activists interested in becoming candidates.” Yet the ranks of traditional or party brokers-turned-politicians should be limited. The social groups that give rise to traditional brokers—large landowners, chiefs, and religious leaders—are inherently small in number. There may be more party activists in a given society, but their options to enter politics are limited by their party commitment and the finite number of elected positions that a party can contest. By contrast, bureaucrats exist in greater numbers, especially in developing democracies with large state sectors, and their partisan options are much more open. This is particularly true in a fragmented party system such as Brazil's, where aspiring candidates have numerous partisan alternatives for running for office at any given level.

1. Grindle (1977) examines lower-level bureaucrats as brokers, but between individuals and the state not individuals and parties or candidates.

In highlighting the likely pathway from policy administrator to broker or politician, our research provides another answer to the chicken-and-egg problem facing brokers in the developing world (Auerbach and Thachil 2018). To gain a popular following, brokers need to show that they can deliver benefits for their clients, but to convince higher-level politicians to provide those benefits, brokers need to show that they have a following and can deliver votes in return. Policy administrators with discretion over program access are able to cut into this circle because they have control over benefits that do not require negotiation with higher-level politicians. This control can be used to build a following that convinces political superiors of one's value as a broker. In this sense, it serves a similar purpose as informal selection of community leaders by local residents, which can also be used as independent evidence of popular support (Auerbach and Thachil 2018).

### AGRICULTURAL BUREAUCRATS AS BROKERS IN BRAZIL

The process of issuing DAPs in rural Brazil began as an effort to combat clientelism by putting bureaucrats rather than politicians in charge of a valuable policy benefit.<sup>2</sup> Responding to growing pressure from unions and the Landless Rural Workers' Movement to address socioeconomic challenges in rural Brazil, the federal government created a subsidized agricultural credit program, the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar, PRONAF), in 1996 (Bianchini 2015; Favareto 2006; Grisa and Schneider 2014). A goal of the program was to make credit more accessible to small farmers by simplifying the process of applying for a loan. However, identifying the eligible population for these loans was a challenge because most small farmers had little contact with the state and minimal knowledge of how the public bureaucracy functions, and many lacked even basic identification documents and property registries. In the early days of the program, farmers effectively filled out their own DAP, stating that they met the eligibility criteria.

Self-declarations of eligibility opened up the potential for manipulation by local politicians, prompting a decision to put bureaucrats in charge. Given the dominant role of mayors in many rural municipalities and their frequent efforts to insert themselves into the process of distributing federal policy benefits, the "mayorization" (*prefeiturização*) of PRONAF was a major concern of policy makers during the program's early

days (Abramovay and Veiga 1999). Starting in 1997, therefore, the federal government granted rural workers' unions and state agricultural extension agencies (Empresas Estaduais de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural, or EMATERs) joint responsibility for issuing DAPs. Both organizations were embedded in many of the communities targeted by the program and were potentially insulated from pressure by local politicians. Each also provided a check against political capture by the other, since a valid DAP required the signature of both the local rural workers' union and the EMATER representative.

Requiring approval from both a union and a state agency aimed to prevent abuses in the administration of PRONAF loans, but it also created significant bottlenecks and inequities. Many municipalities lacked either a rural workers' union or an EMATER office, so farmers would have to travel to another town, at their own expense, to obtain signatures. Banks would also require additional documentation and some form of collateral to approve credit. Consequently, the first years of PRONAF saw a concentration of loans in the more developed South and Southeast regions of Brazil, where small farmers had more resources and were more unionized and EMATERs had better territorial coverage. From 1996 to 2002, around 80% of all loans were concentrated in the southern states of Brazil (Belik 2017, 229). Meanwhile, farmers in the Northeast received only 8% of all PRONAF loans through 2000, even though about 75% of the 2 million households classified as low-income small family farmers were located in this region (Mendonça 2008).

In an effort to expand access to the agricultural credit program in poorer, less developed parts of Brazil, the Workers' Party government sought to simplify the process of obtaining a DAP and a PRONAF loan—in the process, granting greater discretion to issuers. Starting in 2004, the double signature requirement was eliminated, so a DAP could be issued directly either by a union or local EMATER. From this point on, a small farmer only needed to present basic identification documents, and it was the responsibility of the DAP issuer to require additional documentation or schedule property visits to verify eligibility. Additionally, banks started to issue loans based solely on the presentation of a DAP without further documentation or collateral, and the federal government assumed the financial risk in the event of a default. These changes made DAPs both more valuable and easier to acquire. They also facilitated significant growth of PRONAF in the Northeast region, which accounted for 60% of all PRONAF loans in Brazil by 2006 (Belik 2017).

During the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10), the introduction of new programs specifically targeting the Northeast made the DAP an even more valuable document in this region. The first, Garantia Safra (Harvest Insurance), aims to compensate small farmers for losing staple crops due to

2. All our empirical analysis refers to DAPs issued to low-income small farmers, formally known as type B DAPs.

harsh climactic events. Enrollment has steadily increased, especially after DAPs became more widely accessible in the Northeast (DGR/SPA 2019).<sup>3</sup> A second Northeast-specific program consists of a tailoring and expansion of PRONAF. In 2005, the state-owned Northeast Bank of Brazil (Banco do Nordeste do Brasil, BNB) created a microcredit program, Agroamigo, with the same eligibility criteria as PRONAF loans. The program grants small loans to low-income farmers at the highly subsidized fixed interest rate of 0.5% per year. By comparison, the interest rates for regular PRONAF loans range from 2.5% to 5.5% per year, while microcredit loans offered by commercial banks in Brazil have average rates of 2% per month. In addition, farmers who make loan payments on time can have a substantial portion of their debt forgiven. By January 2018, BNB had issued a total of US\$3.4 billion in Agroamigo credit since the start of the program.

DAP issuers thus serve as gatekeepers for a variety of valuable programs for farmers, especially in the Northeast region. One of their major responsibilities is to verify that applicants meet the eligibility criteria for these targeted programs, including means testing. DAPs are issued only to applicants that meet the definition of a small farmer: the size of the property cannot exceed a municipality-specific threshold, most of the labor force must consist of family members, the family must directly manage the property, and most of the family income must come from agriculture. Moreover, the most valuable benefits of holding a DAP, including *Garantia Safra* and the subsidized interest rates and generous repayment terms of Agroamigo loans, are only available to farmers with annual incomes of less than R\$20,000 (about US\$4,000).

The requirement that DAPs be periodically renewed also makes them a revocable benefit, in contrast to some other policies targeting the Northeast, such as government-funded rainwater collection cisterns (Bobonis et al. 2022; Frey 2022). The validity period of the DAP has progressively shortened, from six years initially, to three years starting in 2014, to two years from 2017 onward. The federal government has justified the need for more frequent renewals as a way to increase control and reduce fraud, but it also empowers issuers, who regularly get to decide whether recipients will retain access to valuable policy benefits.

As gatekeepers for a variety of valuable policy benefits, DAP issuers can exercise discretion in terms of who gets access. In small, rural municipalities, these bureaucrats are invariably inserted into local social networks, and they rely on their familiarity with program applicants when issuing the documents. Officially, a DAP issuer is supposed to visit a farmer's

property to verify that it meets the necessary conditions. In practice, such visits are rare, as issuers often know many applicants personally or use their experience to render judgment. As one agent affirms: "Normally, I know these people. Know where they live, know their families, what they have produced last year. So, I rarely go to check their property, especially if they are applying for a renewal. However, when someone that I do not know comes here and I see that the person has never used a hoe, I become suspicious and start to ask questions and schedule a visit."<sup>4</sup> Understaffed agencies and bureaucrats who are responsible for vast expanses of territory also disincentivize in-person visits. In some municipalities visited during fieldwork, like Sento Sé in Bahia state, rural communities could be located up to 200 kilometers away from the main urban center.

Given the discretion granted to frontline administrators, it is common for DAPs to be issued to people who are ineligible to receive one. A 2017 audit by the Tribunal de Contas da União, the main oversight agency of Brazil's federal government, found evidence of irregularities in 11% of the DAPs issued to rural families from 2010 to 2017. Eighty percent of these improperly issued DAPs involved cases in which recipients failed to meet income-targeting criteria (Tribunal de Contas da União 2017).

Figure 1 presents additional evidence that DAPs are routinely issued to people who do not meet eligibility criteria. Using Brazil's 2006 and 2017 rural censuses, we calculated the number of properties per municipality that were small enough to qualify for a DAP and compared them to the number of unique DAPs issued by EMATER agents, excluding renewals (see the appendix for more details on the construction of this measure). From 2000 to 2006, there were fewer DAPs issued in most municipalities than our estimated number of eligible recipients; from 2007 to 2020, DAPs were overissued in many municipalities by a factor of 3–5.

To a large extent, overissuing reflects the lack of institutional oversight of DAP issuers. Aside from occasional audits by agencies like the Tribunal de Contas da União, there are few control mechanisms to catch instances of improperly issued DAPs, so agents can exercise discretion with a good deal of impunity. At the local level, the Municipal Council for Sustainable Rural Development (Conselho Municipal de Desenvolvimento Rural Sustentável), an elected body of civil society representatives, is supposed to verify that families being issued DAPs meet the program criteria. However, canceling DAPs issued to local farmers means fewer federal government resources circulating in the municipality, and

3. After 2012, *Garantia Safra* was expanded beyond the Northeast region.

4. Authors' interview with EMATER agent in São Vicente Ferrer, Pernambuco, August 29, 2017.

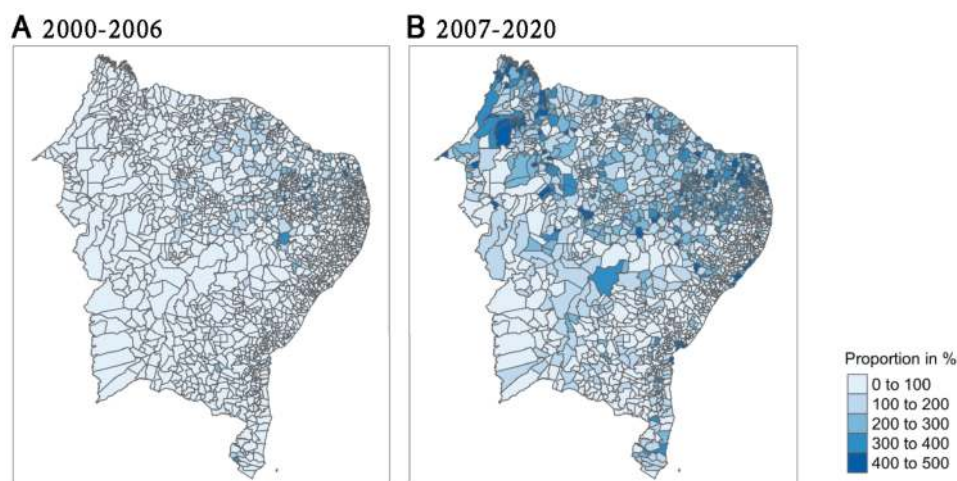


Figure 1. DAPs issued per eligible property by municipality

the economies of many small, rural municipalities depend heavily on these funds. Moreover, there is no mechanism for punishing municipalities that fail to exercise appropriate oversight. As a result, few DAPs are canceled because of the efforts of these local councils—only 626 in all of Brazil between 2014 and 2017 (Tribunal de Contas da União 2017).

Given DAP issuers' role as gatekeepers and potential to exercise discretion, many low-income family farmers treat them as if they were personally responsible for granting access to program benefits, even though they are administering a public service that is free of charge. During our fieldwork, we often observed the sense of respect that small farmers show toward officials who issue DAPs. It is common to offer a small gift, such as a hen, a basket of fruit, or a home-baked cake, as a sign of gratitude for receiving one. The social prominence of DAP issuers was evident every time we asked for directions when arriving at a small rural municipality—virtually everyone knew where the EMATER office was located.

While there are numerous opportunities for fraud in the issuance of DAPs, the selection process for EMATER agents is meritocratic, meaning that would-be candidates are unlikely to pursue this career path as a means to winning local elected office. Like many Brazilian bureaucrats, EMATER agents are chosen through public competitions, or *concursos públicos*, in which candidates must hold relevant technical or bachelor's degrees—normally in agricultural sciences or zoology—and pass written exams administered by an independent organization. For EMATER positions, the process is organized at the state level, considerably reducing the potential for local interference; mayors, for instance, cannot request specific EMATER agents to be assigned to their municipality. A rural resident with local political ambitions is unlikely to go earn a degree in agronomy, apply for a competitive civil service position, and

accept a posting anywhere in the state as a means to getting on the city council or running for mayor in their hometown.

Yet once established in their career and embedded in local social networks in a particular town, being an EMATER agent may catalyze political ambitions where they did not previously exist. As gatekeepers for a variety of highly valuable, means-tested programs for small farmers, EMATER agents are in a position to extract politically valuable rents from their work. Some may take advantage of an implicit or even explicit *quid pro quo*—that residents who support them will receive preferential access to DAPs and their associated benefits even if they do not meet formal program criteria. Moreover, even without manipulating access to the DAP for political gain, EMATER agents are likely to have a pathway into politics by virtue of their name recognition and local social prestige. Their jobs bring them into regular contact with local residents, and they are a source of valuable expertise on new farming techniques and crops, as well as on the requirements for applying for various federal and state programs that benefit farmers.

Given EMATER agents' electoral potential, local political elites often recruit them as candidates or invite them to serve in the municipal administration, a potential springboard to elected office. In the municipality of Caiçara in the northeastern state of Paraíba, EMATER agent Edinardo Medeiros Pessoa first moved to town after starting his job at the agency. His wife's family had been involved in local politics for decades, and they invited him to run for municipal councilor in 1996. He served in that position until 2004, when he ran unsuccessfully for vice mayor; his wife subsequently served several terms on the municipal council (authors' interview, April 24, 2018). Pessoa has sought openly to exploit his EMATER connection when running for office; in the 2000 election, his

official electoral name (*nome de urna*, the name used on the electronic ballot and typically in campaign materials) was “Edinaldo de EMATER.” Another example is EMATER agent Marcelo Motta in Limoeiro, Pernambuco. After working for years in the region, he was invited in 2013 to be municipal secretary of agriculture; he then ran successfully for vice mayor in 2016 (authors’ interview, August 21, 2017). Not all agents accept such recruitment efforts; some decline invitations to run for office or join municipal administrations in order to steer clear of political disputes. However, local political elites clearly recognize the value of recruiting these agents into their networks.

Moreover, those EMATER agents who choose to stay out of electoral politics may do so precisely because of the intense politicization that surrounds their jobs. After a DAP issuer runs for local office, it is common for voters or other politicians from the same local political group to request that DAPs be issued for individuals who do not qualify. Retaliation for denying such requests can be so severe that agents are forced to move to another municipality if they are serious about continuing to do their jobs.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, policy instruments such as the DAP can make for programmatic politics, as is common with many broadly accessible policy benefits in advanced democracies. However, in the case of Brazil’s DAP, such an outcome depends not on features of the program itself but rather on the individual decisions of its frontline administrators. While some may choose a path of bureaucratic autonomy in which they avoid taking sides and prioritize their civil service job, others are likely to be seduced by the possibility of leveraging their position for a political career.

Transitioning from EMATER agent to local elected official is a potentially lucrative proposition. In almost all of Brazil, municipal councilor is a part-time position, usually eight hours a week or less. Councilors need not leave their existing jobs when they take office, so they can potentially combine salaries. By doing so, they stand to increase their income by 60%–420%, given the average salaries for each position across Northeast Brazil, as detailed in the appendix.

Leveraging a bureaucratic position to build a network of potential supporters can favor a local political career in several ways. DAP issuers can serve as brokers for higher-level politicians, pledging the votes of their supporters in exchange for access to the ballot (Novaes 2018; Szwarcberg 2012). Brazilian city councilors are elected at-large via open list proportional representation, and local political bosses, including the incumbent mayor, typically put together the list of candidates. Brokers who can deliver votes for the boss’s mayoral campaign

are heavily favored in this process. And once in the race, a strong network of political supporters can help a candidate win election under the open list system, where the seats awarded to the list go to those with the most personal votes. The longer one has been a DAP issuer, and the more DAPs that they have issued in their career, the more extensive their network of potential supporters and the stronger their political prospects should be.

The nature of voting behavior and the forces sustaining clientelism in rural Brazil also underscore that politicians who have a history of delivering valuable benefits to economically marginalized voters should be favored at the polls. Across a variety of developing democracies, including Brazil, studies have shown that norms of reciprocity influence voters’ decisions (Auyero 2000; Borges Martins da Silva 2023; Finan and Schechter 2012; Gay 1998, 2006; Lawson and Greene 2014; Ravanilla, Haim, and Hicken 2022; Scott 1972). Those who received favors from politicians in the past are likely to reciprocate with their vote out of a sense of moral obligation. Material self-interest also helps sustain clientelism. In a context of economic vulnerability, exacerbated by a harsh climate and an insufficient social safety net, low-income voters in Brazil’s Northeast are likely to demand favors from politicians and vote for those with a track record of delivering individual benefits (Nichter 2018). Both mechanisms of voting behavior, morality and rationality, suggest that issuing more DAPs should favor EMATER agents at the polls.

Given the logic laid out in this section, we hypothesize that issuing DAPs is associated with entry into and success with local electoral politics. Moreover, if granting access to policy benefits catalyzes a political career, individual EMATER agents should be more likely to run for office after they issue more DAPs but not before.

## EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

### Descriptive analysis

As a first step toward assessing these hypotheses, we examine the cross-sectional relationship between issuing DAPs and running for office. We use a database of all DAPs issued in the Northeast region after 2001, including the organizational affiliation and name of the issuer and their national identification number (Cadastro de Pessoa Física, CPF).<sup>6</sup> Using the CPF and name of the issuer, we linked the DAP database to the lists of all candidates for local office provided by the Superior Electoral Tribunal (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, or TSE). After merging these two data sets, we find that a full 10% of the 7,143 EMATER agent DAP issuers ran for local office, most

5. Authors’ interview with EMATER agent in São Vicente Ferrer, Pernambuco, August 29, 2017.

6. For DAPs issued before 2018, we have the full CPF. For subsequent years, we have a partially redacted CPF.

commonly municipal councilor (*vereador*; 89% of candidacies). DAP-issuing candidates are diverse in terms of partisanship, as we would expect with bureaucratic brokers. The most common party affiliations are the center-left Workers' Party (PT), with 14.4% of candidacies; the centrist Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), with 13.7%; and the center-right Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB), with 10.4%.

Our data also suggest that winning election to the city council does not prompt EMATER agents to retire from their bureaucratic careers. Among EMATER agents who issue DAPs, run for city council, and are elected, 33% continue to issue DAPs during the four-year period corresponding to their term in office. Among all EMATER agents, including those who never run for office, the equivalent figure is also 33%. Clearly, many agents leave their jobs over the medium term, presumably for a variety of reasons, but those who win elections are no more likely to do so. Rather, a third of them serve as bureaucrats and elected officials simultaneously—a clear end-run around state efforts to insulate DAP issuance from the influence of local politicians.

EMATER agents vary significantly in the number of DAPs they issue, and if these documents are a potent electoral resource, we would expect more active issuers to be more likely to run for office. The median issuer in our data set issued about 76 DAPs, but some signed fewer than 10, while others gave out tens of thousands.<sup>7</sup> In the appendix, we show that there is a strong positive cross-sectional relationship between DAPs issued and the probability of running for office.

It is possible that the types of bureaucrats issuing a large number of DAPs were already more politically active or even became EMATER agents because of their political activity, rather than the other way around. To rule out this possibility, we examine whether the distribution of DAPs precedes entry into politics. In figure 2, we plot the change in the number of DAPs distributed by each issuer (logged) against the change in the decision to run for office between each municipal election from 2004 to 2020. We find a strong positive relationship between these two variables.

### Panel analysis

To more formally test the relationship shown in figure 2, we construct two panel data sets. The first is an issuer-term data set, which disaggregates candidacies and DAPs issued by electoral term. The second is a municipality-issuer-term data set, which further disaggregates DAPs issued by municipality. The former data set allows us to examine the overall effect of

7. According to interviews with EMATER agents during fieldwork, these outliers are likely situations in which an agent has to cover several municipalities simultaneously and shares login credentials with local assistants.

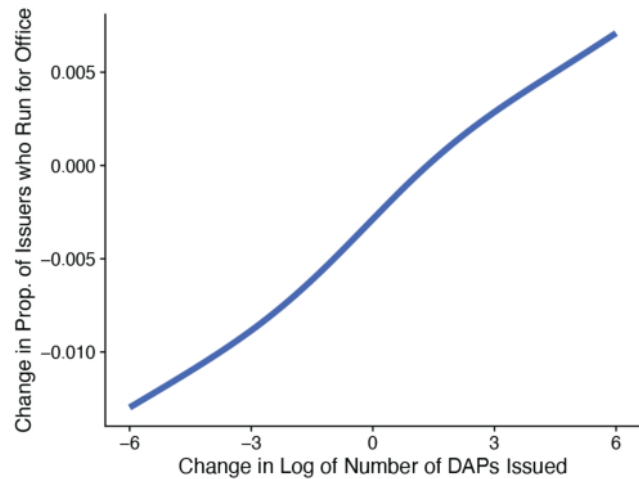


Figure 2. DAP issuers and running for office. Plot line is estimated using a penalized cubic regression spline smoother and shows the correlation between changes in number of DAPs issued and changes in the propensity to run for political office.

issuing DAPs on political ambition, while the latter lets us examine whether issuers act on this ambition in the same municipalities where they issue DAPs. These data sets encompass 7,143 unique DAP issuers, 1,795 municipalities, and the elections of 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020.

In our issuer-term specification, we estimate a two-way fixed effects model with DAP issuer fixed effects and electoral term fixed effects. Our estimating equation is as follows:

$$y_{it} = \beta \cdot \text{DAPs}_{it} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where  $y_{it}$  is a political outcome (running for office, number of votes, or being elected) for individual  $i$  in election  $t$ ,  $\text{DAPs}_{it}$  is the log of the number of DAPs issued in the four years leading up to election  $t$ ,  $\alpha_i$  is an individual fixed effect, and  $\delta_t$  is an election term fixed effect. Standard errors are clustered at the DAP issuer level.

In our municipality-issuer-term specification, we estimate a two-way fixed effects model with DAP issuer-by-municipality fixed effects and municipality-by-electoral term fixed effects. This model specifically tests whether issuers run in the municipalities that they are most active in, as our theory and fieldwork suggest. Specifically, we use the following estimating equation:

$$y_{mit} = \beta \cdot \text{DAPs}_{mit} + \alpha_{mi} + \delta_{mt} + \varepsilon_{mit},$$

for municipality  $m$ , individual  $i$ , and election  $t$ . In this model,  $\alpha_{mi}$  represents the issuer-by-municipality fixed effect, and  $\delta_{mt}$  is the municipality-by-electoral term fixed effect. Because the outcome and independent variables for any specific individual are unlikely to be independent across municipalities, we cluster our standard errors at the level of the DAP issuer.



These models effectively examine whether the change in the number of DAPs issued correlates with a change in the propensity to run for municipal office, receive votes, or win office. The issuer or issuer-by-municipality fixed effect controls for any issuer-specific propensity to engage in politics, while the electoral term fixed effects control for any generalized overtime correlation between the number of DAPs issued and the propensity to run for office. To give  $\beta$  a causal interpretation, we must assume a constant linear relationship between DAPs and political ambition, as well as the absence of time-varying confounders, such as changes in political ambition leading to both the issuing of more DAPs and running for office.

Results from the issuer-level two-way fixed effects models are presented in the top panel of table 1. In column 1, we examine the within-issuer correlation between the logged number of DAPs issued and the probability of running for office. In column 2, the outcome variable is the logged number of votes received in the subsequent municipal election, with 0 imputed for candidates who did not run. In column 3, the outcome is a dummy variable for winning office in a municipal election. For all three outcomes, we find a statistically significant and positive correlation between the number of DAPs issued and the political outcome. A within-issuer standard deviation change in the total number of DAPs issued (1.8 logged DAPs) implies a 7% increase in the probability that a DAP issuer will run for office in any municipality in a given term, relative to the average probability of 3%. The coefficients for

the two other dependent variables suggest effects that are similar in magnitude.

In the bottom panel of table 1, we show the estimates for our municipality-level models. As with the issuer-level models, we find positive and statistically significant relationships between the number of DAPs issued and our measures of political activity. The estimates indicate that a within-issuer-municipality standard deviation change in the number of DAPs issued (1.2 logged DAPs) in the average municipality leads to a 15% increase in the probability that a DAP issuer will run for office there.

Our estimates are robust to a number of alternative specifications or placebo checks, as shown in figure 3. First, we check whether contemporaneous changes in the propensity to run for office are correlated with future changes in the number of DAPs issued, by estimating a model that includes the DAPs issued during the next electoral period (a lead term). We find an insignificant placebo “effect” of future DAPs issued for both issuer-level and issuer-municipality-level models, which supports the assumption of an absence of dynamic confounders.

We also check whether the effect is robust to the inclusion of a richer set of controls. Previous political activity is highly predictive of participation in elections, and if the timing of changes in the number of DAPs issued depended on this previous activity, our fixed effect estimates would be biased. When we include lagged values of the dependent variable to account for this possibility, the estimated coefficients on DAPs issued remains similar in magnitude (row 3 of fig. 3).

Second, we include organization-by-electoral term fixed effects (row 4 of fig. 3). This test only compares issuers who work in the same EMATER agency and consequently relies on the assumption that there are no dynamic confounders among issuers working for the same organization, not necessarily among issuers who work for different organizations. This is a relatively demanding specification given that there are 32 separate organizations in our data set, but we find that these estimates are substantively identical to our main estimates.

Third, we adjust for variables that measure career advancement. If prolific DAP issuers are also advancing rapidly in their careers and achieving local prominence, these agents may leverage their professional success, rather than DAP issuance per se, to run for office. To rule out this potential confounder, we control for the issuer’s average wage and an indicator for changes in job title.<sup>8</sup> Including these variables does not change our overall conclusions, although the estimate in the issuer-level model becomes marginally insignificant (row 5 of fig. 3).

8. These variables are obtained from the Relação Anual de Informações Sociais (RAIS) data set, described in more detail below.

Table 1. Political Returns to Issuing DAPs: Time Series Evidence

	Candidate (1)	Log Votes (3)	Elected (3)
Issuer-level model:			
Log DAPs issued	.0013* (.0005)	.0064* (.0028)	.0005+ (.0003)
Issuer FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Term FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Issuer-municipality model:			
Log DAPs issued	.0009*** (.0002)	.0052*** (.0013)	.0003* (.0001)
Issuer × municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Term × municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered on DAP issuer. FE = fixed effects; issuer-level  $N = 35,915$ ; issuer-municipality  $N = 152,165$ .

+  $p < .1$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

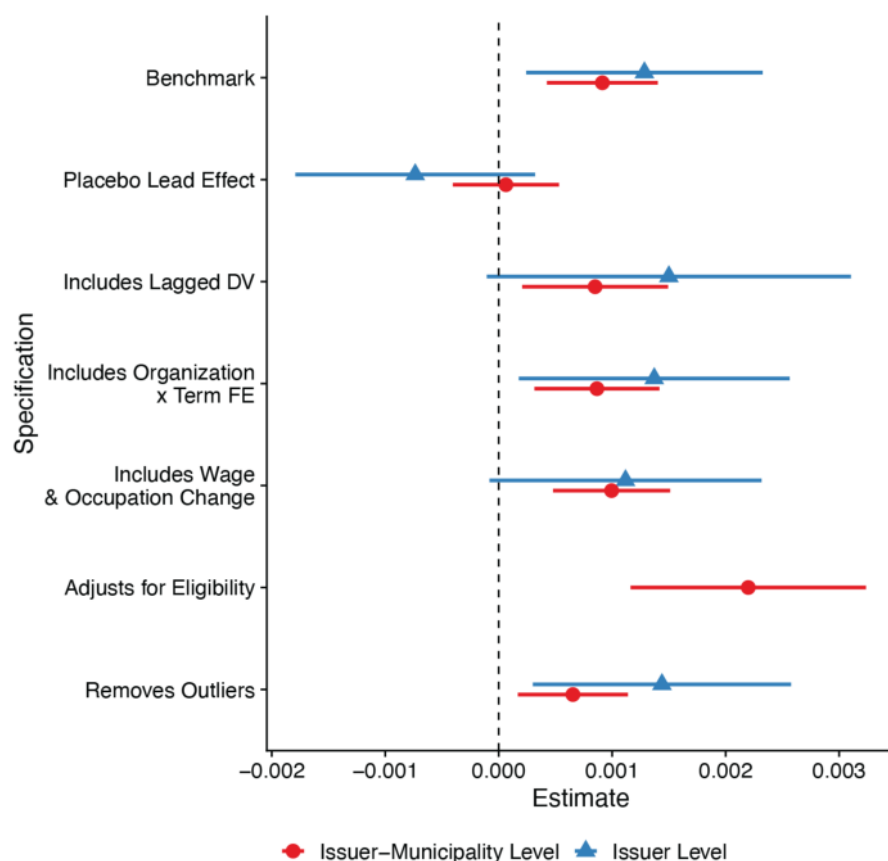


Figure 3. Robustness checks for the panel analysis. Benchmark estimates are reported in column 1 of table 1. All specifications include the same fixed effects as the benchmarks. Dependent variable is run for office.

Fourth, we adjust for the estimated number of properties eligible for the DAP. Our baseline specifications use the log of the total number of DAPs issued as the main independent variable, but the political payoff to issuing DAPs also ought to depend on the number of properties that are eligible; completely satisfying local demand should have greater returns than leaving it half satisfied. To account for this measurement issue, we estimate a version of our issuer-municipality specification in which the independent variable is the number of DAPs issued as a percentage of eligible farms in that municipality (logged). When we do so, our estimate remains positive and significant (row 6 of fig. 3).

Fifth, we include a specification in which we remove issuers with a very high number of DAPs—above the 95th percentile—out of concern that these extreme outliers may reflect measurement error rather than the actual number of DAPs issued. The point estimates remain similar to our benchmark specifications (row 7 of fig. 3).

A potential concern with our models is that the true relationship between the number of DAPs issued and the propensity to run for office might be nonlinear. In the appendix, we estimate a nonlinear Poisson model with the same specification

as the linear model and find substantively the same result. We also estimate a semiparametric model with a flexible regression spline to check for the possibility of a nonlinear relationship between DAPs and candidacy. We find that the relationship is approximately linear, which supports our main specification.

Finally, the models above assume that issuing DAPs only influences an agent's political ambition in the next election, but effects could be more long lasting. To examine this possibility, in the appendix we estimate dynamic models that include both contemporaneous and lagged versions of the number of DAPs issued. We find that issuing DAPs has a positive effect on the propensity to run for office even after two election cycles.

### Testing the mechanism: Comparison to other bureaucrats

In the theory and background sections, we suggested that DAP issuers were likely to have two distinct advantages that could facilitate a political career: discretion over access to policy benefits, and the social status and networking opportunities that come with administering a policy for large

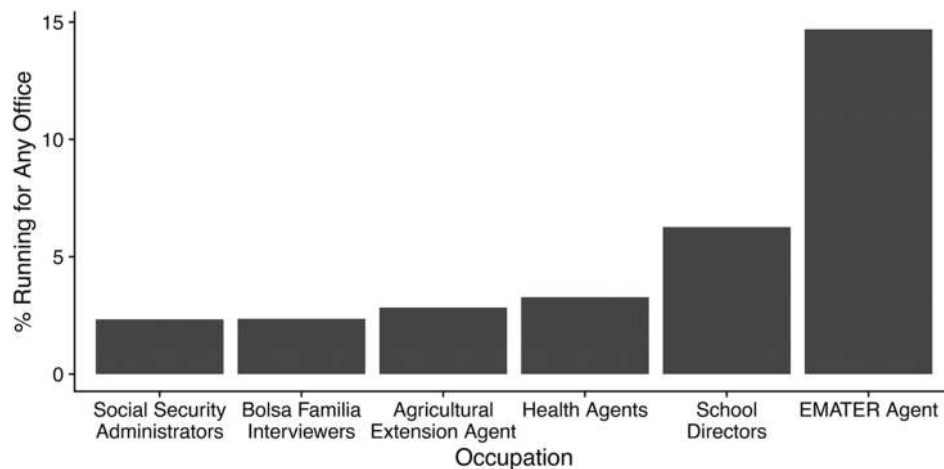


Figure 4. Percentage of bureaucrats running for local office, 2004–20. Data are drawn from RAIS and TSE

numbers of recipients. The second characteristic is shared with a number of other bureaucrats who administer other policies. The first is less common, since it depends on the rules of program eligibility and the specific responsibilities granted to frontline administrators.

On the basis of an analysis of office-seeking by different types of bureaucrats, we argue that discretion over policy benefits is the principal mechanism by which DAP issuers become politicians. We examine several other types of bureaucrats that provide social services and deal directly with the public but are afforded much less discretion in the allocation of public resources: community health agents, Bolsa Família enrollers, school directors, social security administrators, and agricultural extension agents without the ability to issue DAPs. Community health agents (*agentes comunitários de saúde*) are the first line of medical service provision in neighborhoods and small municipalities, and they are responsible for making regular visits to households in a defined area (Lotta 2015; Macinko and Harris 2015). While they offer basic checkups, schedule medical appointments, and provide health information, they have little control over specific health benefits, as individuals can always go directly to a hospital to receive services. Bolsa Família enrollers interview citizens interested in the federal government’s conditional cash transfer program and record their information in a government database. While they serve as gatekeepers for a valuable policy benefit, their discretion is constrained by strict eligibility criteria, although they may have the capacity to bend rules in some instances (Frey and Santarrosa 2022). Social security administrators are gatekeepers for an array of important policies, such as pensions, sick and maternity leaves, and widow’s benefits. However, they have much less discretion than DAP issuers, given the long list of documents and procedures required to approve them (e.g., medical attestation and social

security contributions). We also examine agricultural extension agents who work outside of the EMATER bureaucracies, either elsewhere in the public sector or in the private sector. These agents are likely to have contact with farmers, as with their EMATER colleagues, but they do not issue DAPs.

In addition to bureaucrats with limited discretion over policy benefits, we examine the office-seeking propensity of school directors, who are arguably most similar to DAP issuers. Access to Bolsa Família benefits is partly conditioned on fulfilling school attendance requirements, which school directors verify and report to the federal government (Brollo, Kaufmann, and La Ferrara 2019). School directors can “justify” nonattendance to ensure that cash transfers continue even if a family’s school-age children fail to meet the attendance requirements. Indeed, Brollo et al. (2019) find that Bolsa Família conditionalities are less strictly enforced by school directors with political links to the incumbent mayor. Directors could conceivably use this discretion to launch a political career in a similar fashion as DAP issuers.

To examine these bureaucrats’ propensity to run for office, we take advantage of RAIS, a database collected by the Ministry of Labor and Employment that covers all formal sector workers in Brazil, although we focus on the Northeast region. We use RAIS’s fine-grained occupational classifications to identify each type of bureaucrat, including EMATER agents who are qualified to issue DAPs, and we merge these data with the TSE’s candidate lists by CPF to identify what share ran for local office from 2004 to 2020.<sup>9</sup> As illustrated in figure 4, EMATER agents stand out as much more likely to run for

9. Bolsa Família enrollers are only separately categorized in the RAIS data from 2016 onward, so our analysis of that profession is for 2016–20.

office than other types of bureaucrats who have contact with the public but much less discretion over policy benefits. Even non-EMATER agricultural extension agents, who are professionally most similar to DAP issuers, run for office at low rates. School directors are the second most likely to run for office, which may reflect their ability to facilitate access to cash transfer benefits, but they are still substantially less likely to run than DAP issuers.

As shown in the appendix, bureaucrats of various professions differ from one another in ways that might affect their propensity to run for office, including age, education, gender, salary, length of time in their position, and whether they have permanent or temporary contracts. Yet even after matching on these variables, we find that EMATER agents are much more likely to run for office (12% vs. 7%) than otherwise similar bureaucrats who do not issue DAPs.

## CONCLUSION

What are the sources of capital that can be leveraged in order to build a political career? In much of the developing world, forms of traditional authority—such as socioeconomic status; religious leadership; and racial, ethnic, or kinship ties—have long been a common route to political power. In Brazil, the classic example is the *coronel*, a wealthy landowner who leveraged economic power and control over subject populations into a career as a local politician and a broker for higher-level officials (Leal 1948). In many such societies, the power of traditional elites has declined over time, especially with institutional reforms such as the introduction of the secret ballot (Gingerich 2019), and these changes have paved the way for more programmatic and less clientelistic politics (Hagopian, Gervasoni, and Moraes 2009). Hence, in more recent times, individuals who participate actively in civil society organizations such as labor unions and nongovernmental organizations have been able to leverage their associational ties as a separate route to becoming a broker or building a political career at the local level, challenging the authority of traditional elites (Samuels and Zucco 2015; Van Dyck 2014; Van Dyck and Montero 2015).

This article examines what might be considered an emerging “third wave” of political capital in developing democracies: discretion over access to conditional policy benefits. Starting in the 1990s, Latin American governments began to introduce means-tested and targeted social policies in order to improve the lives of their most vulnerable citizens without straining limited budgets. In tandem with this shift, the push to combat traditional clientelism often entailed putting bureaucrats rather than politicians in charge of verifying eligibility for benefits. The history of PRONAF in Brazil follows this model: soon after its introduction in 1996, state agricultural extension

agents and rural workers’ unions were given control over access to benefits, part of an effort to prevent the program’s capture by traditional elites.

Yet granting frontline bureaucrats the authority to determine eligibility for social policy benefits has the potential to create a new source of political capital that can be leveraged to launch a political career. While the power of traditional elites has declined over time in Brazil’s Northeast, the norms of reciprocity and material needs of vulnerable populations remain. Introducing new technocratic policies in this social context transforms the political landscape in multiple ways, not always as reformers intended. The small farmer who can access subsidized credit and crop insurance may no longer need to rely on the largesse of the paternalistic *coronel* who would look after subject populations in exchange for their political loyalty. But the agent serving as gatekeeper to these programs may be able to partially take his place. Even those who enter the civil service with Weberian aims may find themselves seduced into using their authority as a springboard to elected office.

Focusing on agents of state agricultural extension services, or EMATERs, we show that issuing DAPs in northeastern Brazil is a pathway into electoral politics. Prior political ambitions alone are unlikely to motivate anyone to become a DAP issuer, given the meritocratic recruitment process and the way EMATER agents are assigned to municipalities within their state. Indeed, we find that issuing DAPs has no relationship with having run for office in the past. But once ensconced in a position that entails substantial discretion over valuable policy benefits, issuing DAPs can catalyze a political career, generating electoral ambitions where none existed before. We show that as EMATER agents issue more DAPs, they are more likely to run for office, receive votes, and win elections. Moreover, they run for office at much higher rates than otherwise similar bureaucrats with less control over access to policy benefits, suggesting that discretion, rather than social status and contact with the public, is the crucial political currency. Some of these other bureaucratic positions may also become politicized, as Frey and Santarrosa (2022) argue for the case of Bolsa Família enrollers, although the degree to which they serve as a path to elected office is likely to depend on their level of discretion.

If policies make politicians in Brazil, what are the consequences of electing bureaucratic brokers to public office? In the appendix, we show that winning office does not significantly change an EMATER agent’s rate of DAP issuance or the total number issued in the municipality. Yet even if these overall figures are unaffected, the rate at which DAPs are improperly issued might change, as newly elected agents repay votes with lenient oversight. And there are other ways that bureaucrats-turned-politicians might influence municipal policy in favor of

their support base, such as increasing local agricultural spending or federal transfers earmarked for this purpose. We leave these as important questions for future research.

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