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Social Mobilization and Political Competition in Paraguay's Pensión Alimentaria: Social Policy Expansion Through Rivalry

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Abstract

Paraguay's Pensión Alimentaria para Adultos Mayores, today the country's largest non-contributory social protection program, is often attributed to the social agenda of left-of-center president Fernando Lugo. This article shows, however, that the pension emerged from the interaction between sustained mobilization by elderly organizations and the strategic calculations of Paraguay's traditional political parties operating in a competitive setting, as they sought to regain control over social policy provisioning. Using process tracing based on interviews with key informants involved in the policy process, supplemented by documentary analysis, the research reconstructs the critical sequence of policy choices that shaped the program's development. Elderly organizations pressed their demands for years, framing them in rights-based terms and deploying strategies such as mobilization, lobbying, and alliances with bureaucrats and legislators. Their persistent advocacy kept the issue alive, but political competition ultimately created the decisive opening to pass the pension. After Lugo's unexpected 2008 victory and his plans to expand the conditional cash transfer program Tekoporã, opposition legislators advanced the pension not only to court an electorally salient constituency but also to constrain the executive's capacity to consolidate a political base. The program's endurance, culminating in its universalization in 2024, shows how sustained grassroots mobilization, combined with political competition, can drive social protection expansion even under limited state capacity, stringent fiscal constraints, and clientelism. More broadly, the findings add a strategic, rivalry-constraining mechanism to debates on political competition and social policymaking, showing how elites may adopt redistributive programs to limit competitors as well as to attract voters.

Keywords

Latin America; non-contributory pensions; Paraguay; political competition; social mobilization; social policy; social protection

1. Introduction

Paraguay has long been classified as a country with limited social development, characterized by low social security coverage—concentrated among higher-income groups—and a fragmented social protection system (Serafini Geoghegan, 2025, p. 64). Only 26% of the labor force contributes to social security, and just 14% receive retirement pensions—figures that remain far below the Latin American average and have shown little improvement in recent years (Casalí & Velásquez, 2016; Navarro & Ortiz, 2014). High levels of informality and self-employment restrict coverage, exacerbating poverty risks and disproportionately affecting the elderly, thus posing a critical challenge for Paraguay's aging population.

The Pensión Alimentaria para las Personas Adultas Mayores en Situación de Pobreza (commonly referred to as the Pensión Alimentaria) sought to address this gap through a non-contributory scheme targeted at Paraguayans aged 65 and over living in poverty. Introduced under Law 3728 during Fernando Lugo's administration in 2009, the program began disbursing benefits in 2010, providing a relatively generous monthly transfer equivalent to 25% of the legal minimum wage (around USD 100; Congreso de Paraguay, 2009).

Fifteen years after its controversial launch, it is time to draw the first lessons. Despite its significance as Paraguay's largest social protection program, scholarly analysis remains scarce. The few existing studies of the non-contributory pension focus mainly on program effectiveness (Bruno, 2015, 2018; Molinas et al., 2021; Zavattiero, 2012), with little attention to the political economy shaping its creation. This article offers the first in-depth examination of the politics behind the Pensión Alimentaria. Contrary to interpretations that attribute it to Lugo's social policy agenda, the pension emerged from the convergence of sustained mobilization by elderly organizations and strategic calculations by Congress, which sought to reassert control over social policy. Legislators leveraged the pension as part of a broader maneuver to counterbalance and undermine Lugo's expansion of Tekoporã. In 2024, the Pensión Alimentaria was replaced by a more institutionalized and universal scheme, the Pensión Universal para las Personas Adultas Mayores (Law 7322), which preserved its core features while extending coverage to all elderly Paraguayans without income or a contributory pension (Congreso de Paraguay, 2024).

This analysis builds on original empirical research conducted in Asunción between June and December 2017. Fieldwork included more than 50 in-depth interviews with policymakers, legislators, leaders of elderly associations, and representatives of international organizations. Interviewees were identified through purposive sampling to capture actors directly involved in the policy process, and the pool was expanded through snowball sampling. These insights were supplemented by a review of legislative archives, press reports, and policy documents. Process tracing was used to reconstruct the sequence of decisions, negotiations, and interactions that led to the adoption and implementation of the Pensión Alimentaria.

This study contributes to the literature on social policy in Latin America in three ways. First, it addresses a blind spot in scholarship on the political economy of pension reform, which has centered on contributory systems and privatization while largely overlooking non-contributory benefits. Second, it broadens understanding of Paraguay's non-contributory programs, which have been studied mainly for their outcomes rather than their political underpinnings. Third, it demonstrates how sustained grassroots mobilization, in combination with political competition, can yield durable social programs even in fiscally weak and institutionally fragile contexts.

In doing so, it shows that elites may adopt redistributive policies not only to attract voters, as emphasized by Garay (2016) and Melo (2007), but also to constrain rivals' capacity to consolidate power—adding a novel dimension to debates on political competition and policymaking.

In what follows, the article first introduces key concepts from the literature on social mobilization and political competition that frame the case analysis. It then presents a historical account of the adoption and implementation of the Pensión Alimentaria, followed by an analysis of its unique origins and trajectory. The conclusion synthesizes lessons from the Paraguayan case and reflects on their broader implications for the study of social policymaking.

2. Theoretical Framing

2.1. Competing Explanations

Working from various points of view, scholars have sought to make sense of the origins and development of social policies in Latin America during the 2000s and 2010s. Three recurring arguments stand out in academic and policy literature. The first centers on economic change: It links social policy expansion to the fiscal space created by the commodity boom of the early 2000s (see Campello, 2015; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011) and, conversely, attributes stagnation and retrenchment to the post-boom downturn (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016). The second emphasizes partisan politics, linking expansion to the arrival of left-wing parties in government (see Huber & Stephens, 2012; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017; Weyland et al., 2010) and, more recently, attributing retrenchment to the rise of the right (see Miorelli, 2018). A third explanation highlights the role of external actors in the spread of particular social policy models across countries.

Paraguay's old-age pension trajectory does not align well with expectations derived from economic explanations. The Pensión Alimentaria Law was enacted in August 2009, just as the global financial crisis was hitting Paraguay's economy hardest. By the time Paraguay began to recover in 2010, benefit disbursement was already underway, with 870 recipients enrolled. Economic conditions clearly matter, but they did not determine either the timing or the direction of policy change: The Pensión Alimentaria emerged under stringent fiscal circumstances, precisely when social spending might be expected to contract. As Garay notes:

> Governments faced competing demands for funding from various economic and social actors…[and hence], understanding why governments [have] paid so much attention to [specific social policies] in the context of state retreat, economic crisis, or high levels of growth, requires an explanation that goes beyond the availability of…resources. (Garay, 2016, pp. 11–12)

Partisan explanations are also insufficient to account for the Paraguayan case. The Pensión Alimentaria was not promoted by Fernando Lugo's left-of-center administration; on the contrary, Lugo vetoed the law, while Congress introduced and approved it. Moreover, subsequent right-leaning governments not only maintained the program but expanded it, culminating in its universalization in 2024. As Garay notes, "a focus on the left as the driver of social policy expansion leaves unanswered the question of why right-wing incumbents pursued expansion as well" (Garay, 2016, p. 13). Indeed, existing evidence suggests that "electoral

competition motivates redistribution under left-wing and right-wing incumbents alike" (Fairfield & Garay, 2017, p. 871).

The final competing explanation emphasizes the influence of external actors on policy change. While several authors highlight the role of international financial institutions—particularly the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund—in shaping social protection reforms in Latin America, especially in relation to pension privatization (see Armada et al., 2001; Huber & Stephens, 2000; Madrid, 2003; Orenstein, 2008) and conditional cash transfer programs (see Hall, 2006; Martínez Franzoni & Voorend, 2011; Sugiyama, 2011; Teichman, 2007), the Paraguayan case indicates that international financial institutions played no role in the enactment of the Pensión Alimentaria. According to interviews with policymakers, elderly representatives, and officials from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, the international financial institutions neither promoted nor influenced the adoption of Law 3728. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank became involved only after the law was approved, providing technical assistance for beneficiary selection and supporting evaluation efforts during implementation.

Taken together, the limited explanatory power of economic, partisan, and external-actor accounts in this case points to the need to focus more closely on the mechanisms developed in the next sections—namely, how sustained social mobilization and political competition interacted to create and institutionalize the Pensión Alimentaria.

2.2. Social Mobilization and Policy Change

The role of social mobilization in creating, shaping, and sustaining social policies has been widely studied, especially in the context of welfare regime development in advanced industrial democracies. Classic works show how mobilized constituencies—such as veterans, workers, mothers' groups, and the elderly—have driven policy innovations and resisted state-led retrenchment (Amenta, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Huber & Stephens, 2001; Pierson, 1994; Skocpol, 1995). For instance, Skocpol's (1995) book *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* demonstrates how women's voluntary groups decisively shaped US social policy, advancing measures such as mothers' pensions for widows and protective labor legislation for women in an era resistant to welfare spending. Similarly, Amenta (2006) shows how the Townsend Movement influenced the development of US old-age pensions and social security. Complementing these accounts, Pierson (1994) advances the "new politics of the welfare state" thesis, arguing that once social programs exist, organized constituencies mobilize to defend them, thereby raising the political costs of retrenchment and ensuring their durability.

By contrast, analyses of mobilization and social policy in Latin America's younger democracies remain relatively limited, particularly in less-studied countries such as Paraguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Yet existing research underscores that mobilization is central to the region's social politics. Historically, organized groups have been decisive in expanding rights and shaping redistributive policies—from mid-20th-century labor and peasant movements pressing for social security and agrarian reform, to recent mobilizations around health, education, pensions, and gender equality (Altman & Castiglioni, 2020; Anria & Niedzwiecki, 2016; Ciccia & Guzmán-Concha, 2023; Garay, 2016; Guzmán-Concha & Ciccia, 2020; Huber & Stephens, 2012; Niedzwiecki, 2014; Silva, 2015).

Silva (2015), for example, shows how mass protests in Chile over education and in Argentina over unemployment benefits reshaped policy agendas by signaling issue salience to governments and the broader public. Garay (2016) similarly finds that large-scale social mobilization from below was pivotal for social policy expansion. Anria and Niedzwiecki (2016, p. 308) demonstrate that social movements allied with Bolivia's governing Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party were critical in securing passage of Renta Dignidad, counterbalancing pressures from a mobilized opposition backed by economic elites. Ciccia and Guzmán-Concha (2023), in a comparative study of social pension reforms across Latin America, find that protest was present in nearly all cases of expansion. Likewise, Altman and Castiglioni (2020), using cross-national longitudinal data from 18 Latin American countries, show that equitable social policy expansion is more likely where organized civil society is strong and actively engaged in public affairs. Overall, these studies underscore that organized collective action has been a decisive force in advancing and shaping social policy across Latin America.

2.3. Political Competition and Social Policy: The Political Survival Imperative

Political competition in advanced democracies is often regarded positively, as it fosters accountability, responsiveness, and improvements in the scope and quality of social policies. By contrast, in newer or less institutionalized democracies, competition has frequently been linked to clientelism, patronage, and short-term electoral strategies that can undermine policy reform (Keefer, 2007; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes et al., 2013).

Recent scholarship, however, challenges this pessimistic view. Melo (2007) argues that political competition in new democracies can play a crucial role in shaping the formation, implementation, and sustainability of anti-poverty programs. His analysis highlights that public policy is ultimately made by actors embedded in formal political institutions and driven by concerns over political control and survival. For example, in Brazil, the adoption and institutionalization of Bolsa Familia reflected politicians' survival incentives, which helped ensure both the program's durability and effectiveness. Similarly, Garay (2016, pp. 37–38) finds that incumbents often pursue large-scale, nondiscretionary expansions of social programs when confronted by credible electoral challengers. Comparative studies by Ciccia and Guzmán-Concha (2023), as well as Altman and Castiglioni (2020), further demonstrate that political competition was central to the expansion of social pensions and other redistributive reforms across the region. Likewise, Ewig's (2016) analysis of health care reforms in Brazil, Colombia, and Chile shows that alliances between technocrats and politicians facing competitive elections succeeded in overturning entrenched policy legacies, advancing more equitable outcomes. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that competition can serve as a catalyst for policy innovation, pushing parties to adopt reforms they might otherwise ignore in order to consolidate political support (Pribble, 2013, p. 29).

Comparative research further indicates that competition can create "policy windows" (Kingdon, 1995) in which rival parties promote socially salient reforms to differentiate themselves and attract new constituencies (Garay, 2016; Pribble, 2013). When programs are designed with broad coverage, legal entitlements, and robust administrative frameworks, they become difficult to dismantle and more likely to endure beyond the initiating government's term (Garay, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2008; Huber & Stephens, 2012; Pierson, 1994). Once in place, popular programs generate cross-party incentives for maintenance or expansion, reinforcing their resilience (De La O, 2013).

2.4. The Interplay of Social Mobilization and Political Competition: The Political Mediation Model

Building on these two strands of literature, it is essential to consider how social mobilization and political competition interact. Each perspective sheds light on different dimensions of policy change, but their intersection offers a richer framework for understanding how grassroots actors influence social policy within political dynamics. The political mediation model (Amenta, 2006) provides such a lens, linking mobilization to the incentives faced by political elites, and explaining when and how collective action translates into policy consequences.

The political mediation model defines social movements as "actors and organizations seeking to alter power deficits and to effect social transformations through the state by mobilizing regular citizens for sustained political action" (Amenta et al., 2010, p. 288). Crucially, mobilization is not limited to protests and civil disobedience but also encompasses lobbying, drafting legislation, litigation, and media campaigns (Amenta et al., 2010, p. 288). Rather than focusing on immediate outcomes, the model emphasizes broader consequences—both intended and unintended—that collective action can generate at the macrosocial level. Central to this perspective is the notion of collective goods: advantages or disadvantages from which nonparticipants cannot easily be excluded. These may include material benefits, such as categorical social spending, or intangible ones, such as cleaner air or more dignified social recognition (Amenta, 2006, p. 15). For instance, in his study of the Townsend Movement, Amenta (2006) shows that although senior organizations failed to secure their original pension plan, they nonetheless influenced the trajectory of old-age pensions, laid the foundations for US social security, and advanced the political status of the elderly as a distinct social group.

Equally important, the model analyzes social movement influence across distinct stages of policymaking—agenda setting, legislative debate, passage, and implementation—each offering specific opportunities for intervention (Amenta et al., 2010, p. 291). At the agenda-setting stage, protest raises visibility and compels policymakers to act. During legislative debates, organized groups can directly pressure legislators, while in the implementation phase, they may act as overseers to ensure faithful execution. Influence can also extend through movement participation within the state itself, whether via elections, political appointments, or direct democratic mechanisms such as referendums.

A central contribution of the political mediation model is its emphasis on "that the productivity of the collective action of "state-oriented challengers" is mediated by political circumstances" (Amenta, 2006, p. 8). In other words, strategies must be adapted to the political environment: When circumstances are favorable, challengers may achieve collective benefits with relatively modest efforts, whereas more adverse contexts demand sustained and multifaceted strategies. The broader implication is that mobilization alone rarely guarantees policy influence. Its impact depends on whether political elites perceive strategic benefits—such as coalition-building, electoral gains, or gains in public opinion—in supporting movement demands (Amenta, 2006, p. 24).

The Paraguayan Pensión Alimentaria offers a valuable empirical setting to apply the political mediation model because it is a theoretically informative crucial case (Gerring, 2007, pp. 115–122) of social policy expansion in a context of weak fiscal capacity, limited institutional development, and a deeply clientelist party system—conditions under which such reforms are generally considered unlikely. While large-N

comparative studies are well suited to identifying average associations across cases, a case-oriented, process-tracing approach is particularly appropriate here because the outcome is causally complex and produced by the intersection of multiple conditions and causal combinations rather than by any single factor (Ragin, 1987). Accordingly, the following sections use this framework to reconstruct how sustained social mobilization interacted with political competition to produce—and later sustain—Paraguay's largest social protection program, generating broader insights into the political and societal dynamics behind redistributive policy change where such reforms are least expected.

3. Paraguay's Pensión Alimentaria Para las Personas Adultas Mayores

3.1. Democratic Transition and the Rise of Elderly Rights

As noted above, the introduction of the Pensión Alimentaria was not the result of President Fernando Lugo's social policy priorities. Rather, it emerged from the convergence of long-standing social demands and the strategic maneuvers of Paraguay's traditional parties, which sought to challenge the executive's social and economic agenda and reassert control over state resources. This section examines the grassroots origins of this non-contributory pension, showing how elderly organizations acted as "state-oriented challengers" whose collective action combined public pressure with sustained engagement inside policy-making arenas.

Elderly advocacy efforts began in the mid-1990s within the broader context of Paraguay's transition to democracy. This period marked a profound shift from the 35-year military dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989), during which issues of poverty and rights were largely disregarded by the authorities (Rivarola, 2006, as cited in Lavigne, 2012, p. 7). Following the return to democracy in 1989, the 1992 Constitution established the promotion of quality of life as a universal right and compelled subsequent governments to address poverty as a central policy concern (Lavigne, 2012, p. 7). Article 57 was central to this new constitutional framework and was actively promoted and proposed by representatives of elderly groups—particularly members of retiree associations who held seats in the Constituent Assembly (Interviews with elderly representatives). By explicitly recognizing every elderly person's right to comprehensive protection and mandating social services to meet their needs, Article 57 provided a foundational legal basis for subsequent elderly rights advocacy (Constitución de la República de Paraguay, 1992).

Building upon this constitutional foundation, in 1997, elderly groups began organizing to advocate for their rights, aiming to translate the principles of Article 57 into concrete legislation that would effectively protect them. Various elderly groups from across the country—including elderly pastoral groups, retirees' associations, and institutions dedicated to elderly wellbeing such as the Center for Permanent Education for the Elderly (Centro de Educación Permanente de Adultos Mayores)—came together through the Asunción Elderly Counsel (Consejo de Adultos Mayores de Asunción) to build political power and influence within the Municipality of Asunción (Interviews with elderly representatives). In addition to grassroots organizing, these groups pursued insider strategies: They engaged with the Elderly Affairs Division of the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare (Ministerio de Salud Pública y Bienestar Social) and participated in legislative workshops facilitated by the Pan American Health Organization, which strengthened their capacity to draft legal proposals. With support from key government allies—including officials from the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare and Senator Benigno Perrotta of the National Encounter Party (Partido Encuentro Nacional), himself an older adult and vocal advocate for elderly rights—these groups drafted the first document of what would become

Law 1885 on the Rights of the Elderly (Ley 1885 de las Personas Adultas Mayores) which was approved in April 2002 (Congreso de Paraguay, 2002; Interviews with elderly representatives).

Law 1885 represented a critical advancement toward ensuring elderly rights to decent work, healthcare, housing, food, transportation, and education. It placed particular emphasis on guaranteeing access to healthcare and mandated the allocation of central government and municipal budget resources to support initiatives benefiting the elderly population. Its enactment occurred in a critical socio-political and economic context: It was passed during the pre-campaign period leading up to the 2003 general elections, amid heightened political activity and electoral positioning. The law also emerged in the wake of the 2002 economic crisis, a period marked by growing social unrest and mounting public demands for state responsiveness to social needs. Importantly, the timing of the law coincided with the Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid in 2002, a landmark global event that urged countries—especially in the Global South—to adopt national policies that formally recognized and protected elderly rights.

However, despite the approval of Law 1885, its implementation was hindered by the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms. This limited its translation into concrete policies and curtailed meaningful participation by elderly groups in policy-making processes. Systematic engagement only became feasible with Decree 10068 (March 2007), which provided regulatory guidelines and introduced two key institutional advances: (a) the creation of the Elderly People Directorate (Dirección de Adultos Mayores) within the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare, tasked with developing and overseeing comprehensive protection policies; and (b) the establishment of the Consultative and Engagement Committee of Elderly People (Comité Consultivo y Enlace de Adultos Mayores) as a formal participatory body (Presidencia de la República de Paraguay, 2007). Resolution 781 (Ministerio de Salud Pública y Bienestar Social, 2007) later detailed the committee's operating procedures, consolidating the framework that enabled elderly advocates to participate more directly in policy decisions. In practical terms, these reforms moved the movement beyond campaigning and lobbying by granting formal access to policymaking spaces—where it could influence policy design and later oversee implementation (Interviews with elderly representatives).

Drawing legitimacy from this institutional recognition, elderly groups began actively participating in policy discussions while simultaneously broadening their grassroots base. They reached out to peers across the country, building alliances that culminated in the formation of the National Federation of the Elderly (Federación Nacional de Adultos Mayores), which eventually brought together more than 190 elderly organizations nationwide.

While important strides had been made in advancing health-related rights, elderly leaders soon identified another pressing and widespread challenge: Most older adults in Paraguay lacked a reliable source of income. This concern arose in the context of a historically weak and exclusionary social security system that left the vast majority of Paraguayans without access to pension benefits. As one elderly leader recalled, "We realized that more than 80% of older adults had no income and were condemned to beg from their children to meet their basic needs." In response, elderly organizations mobilized in 2006 to draft a proposal for a non-contributory pension, laying the groundwork for what would become the initial version of the Pensión Alimentaria. By 2007, they had finalized the bill, circulated it widely among elderly associations, campaigned for it through street actions, and publicly presented it at a press conference (Interviews with elderly representatives). Through these efforts, they sought to turn a diffuse social problem into a clearly defined

collective good—an income guarantee in old age—while elevating it on the public agenda through visible claims-making and strengthening recognition of older adults as an organized political constituency.

Rather than pursuing the more burdensome route of introducing legislation through civil society channels—which involved complex procedures and considerable costs—elderly groups adopted a strategic approach. They engaged in direct dialogue and lobbying with members of Congress across the political spectrum, explaining the proposal and seeking support. Their efforts paid off when three deputies from the Authentic Radical Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico, or Liberal Party)—Luis Neuman, Juan Bartolomé Ramírez, and Óscar González Drakeford—agreed to formally sponsor the bill.

As one elderly representative emphasized, "Although there is still a lot of confusion about how this law came about—and many point to the Lugo administration or the legislative front—it was a creation of civil society, led by the elderly movement." Far from being a top-down initiative, the pension bill was the result of sustained grassroots advocacy and years of organizing by elderly communities.

3.2. Turning Social Demands Into Political Leverage

As noted above, the distinctive feature of the Pensión Alimentaria scheme is its origin in strong social demand and the long-standing struggle of elderly groups to secure their rights. This section explains how political actors responded to that grassroots momentum and how political circumstances shaped the productivity of elderly organizations' collective action.

In June 2007, deputies Luis Neuman and Óscar González Drakeford introduced a bill titled That Establishes the Right to an Alimentary Pension for Elderly People Aged 60 and Over (*Que establece el derecho a la pensión alimentaria para las personas adultas mayores de sesenta años*) in the Chamber of Deputies (Congreso de Paraguay, 2007). The initiative was introduced in a politically charged pre-electoral period, just 10 months before the April 2008 general elections. At the time, the ruling National Republican Alliance (Alianza Nacional Republicana, or Colorado Party) was grappling with internal divisions over its presidential nomination, as tensions escalated between President Nicanor Duarte Frutos' preferred candidate, Blanca Ovelar, and his main intra-party rival, Vice President Luis Castiglioni. Meanwhile, the political landscape was shifting with the emergence of Fernando Lugo, a former bishop who renounced the priesthood and declared his presidential ambitions in late 2006. Backed by the Patriotic Alliance for Change (Alianza Patriótica para el Cambio, APC), Lugo's candidacy galvanized opposition forces and mobilized broad segments of civil society. Against this backdrop, elderly organizations seized the moment to advance their longstanding demand for an old-age pension, seeking commitments from presidential candidates and legislators alike. The bill's introduction thus reflected both growing political receptivity to social demands and the tactical alignment of civil society advocacy with electoral opportunity.

The proposed legislation recognized that a large share of Paraguay's elderly population remained excluded from state programs despite constitutional guarantees of comprehensive protection. It called for the creation of a monthly pension equivalent to at least one-quarter of the minimum wage, payable to residents aged 60 and over with limited economic means. However, the bill did not succeed in passing into law in 2007. The vast majority of deputies voted against the proposal. As one of the deputies who introduced the bill recalled:

> We failed….I remember the shock of receiving only 13 votes in favor out of 80 total. Many deputies didn't understand the bill or its magnitude; it was something completely new to them….I remember people from my own party asking me, "Why are you introducing this bill? There's no money in Paraguay for this." And I used to tell them, "But the Executive can find the money—by raising taxes on cigarettes, alcohol, etc."

By the end of 2007, it seemed the bill would be permanently shelved—a deeply discouraging outcome for the elderly movement, which had invested considerable effort in drafting the proposal, campaigning for it, and lobbying across the political spectrum. However, despite this initial defeat, the movement did not give up; its leaders continued lobbying, campaigning, and organizing to keep the issue alive and on the political agenda.

3.2.1. New Political Winds and the Revival of the Pensión Alimentaria: The Rise of Fernando Lugo

A markedly different scenario unfolded during the second attempt to introduce the Pensión Alimentaria bill in 2008. Just 10 months earlier, the proposal had been soundly defeated by the Chamber of Deputies. Yet by April 2008, it was gaining swift traction among members of Congress and would ultimately become law by August 2009. What explains this dramatic reversal in such a short span? Was it a shift in the composition of Congress, or broader political changes that altered the dynamics around elderly rights? This section explores the political shifts that opened the way for this surprising legislative turnaround.

On April 20, 2008, the unexpected presidential victory of Fernando Lugo marked a historic rupture with over six decades of uninterrupted rule by the Colorado Party. For the first time in 60 years, Paraguayans would be governed by a non-Colorado president (Abente-Brun, 2009). Lugo's win profoundly disrupted the country's entrenched bipartisan political order and challenged the longstanding ideological consensus. As a former bishop inspired by liberation theology, Lugo positioned himself distinctly to the left of both traditional parties (Marsteintredet et al., 2013).

Paraguay, alongside Honduras, had long been home to one of Latin America's oldest and most conservative party systems (Marsteintredet et al., 2013, p. 112). Its core was formed by the two historic parties, both founded in 1887: the National Republican Alliance (Alianza Nacional Republicana, or Colorado Party) and the Authentic Radical Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico, or Liberal Party). These parties dominated Paraguayan politics through deeply rooted clientelist networks and persistent factionalism. For decades, the Colorado Party exercised hegemonic control over the state apparatus, while the Liberals maintained influence in localized or secondary spheres. Despite their rivalry, both parties gravitated toward the center-right and shared many ideological characteristics (Marsteintredet et al., 2013, p. 112).

Lugo ran under the banner of the APC, with Liberal Party leader Federico Franco as his vice-presidential running mate. His own political base was the small center-left Tekojoja Popular Party, making his leadership of the APC coalition fragile from the outset. The Liberal Party had garnered about 60% of the coalition's total vote and controlled over 80% of its congressional seats, effectively dominating the alliance. Furthermore, the APC held only a minority in both legislative chambers—falling one seat short in the 45-member Senate and six seats short in the 80-member Chamber of Deputies (Marsteintredet et al., 2013, p. 112). Under these conditions, Lugo faced an uphill battle in advancing any meaningful policy reform.

Remarkably, only three days after Lugo's electoral triumph, the pension bill resurfaced in Congress, but not through the Liberal Party. Instead, it was reintroduced by three Colorado Party deputies: Cándido Aguilera, Juan José Vázquez, and Zacarías Vera. Their proposal sought to amend Law 1885 of 2002 by adding three new articles—Articles 12, 13, and 14—establishing the right to a pension for elderly citizens. It proposed a monthly pension equivalent to the current legal minimum wage for individuals aged 60 and above (Congreso de Paraguay, 2008). While this revival built partly on the elderly movement's continued advocacy and lobbying, it was ultimately enabled by a reconfiguration of elite incentives: In a newly heightened competitive political environment, a demand long cultivated by elderly groups became strategically useful to rival parties.

After several rounds of review and discussion within the Chamber of Deputies, the pension bill reintroduced by Colorado Party legislators was merged with the earlier proposal presented in 2007 by Liberal Party deputies Neuman and González Drakeford, which had marked the first formal attempt to legislate this pension. The unified bill was approved by the Chamber of Deputies on September 25, 2008—less than six weeks after President Fernando Lugo assumed office on August 15. Its approval came at a critical time: just as the 2008 global financial crisis began to unfold and raise alarm across Latin America. It also followed Lugo's unveiling of his 2008–2013 Strategic Economic and Social Plan (Plan Estratégico Económico y Social), which included a major expansion of the conditional cash transfer program Tekoporã as a central component of his social protection strategy.

The Strategic Economic and Social Plan outlined the economic and social priorities of Lugo's administration. On the economic front, it aimed to sustain growth while promoting job creation and a more equitable distribution of income. It also emphasized the diversification of Paraguay's exports, the more efficient use of its energy resources, and the maintenance of macroeconomic stability to ensure a predictable environment for economic decision-making (Ministerio de Hacienda, 2009). On the social front, the plan prioritized health, education, and social protection, with a focus on reducing extreme poverty. It called for higher public spending to expand healthcare access by broadening the coverage of health units nationwide (indeed, the first Family Health Units were created in 2008), improving school infrastructure, and significantly scaling up the conditional cash transfer program Tekoporã—from 14,000 beneficiary families in 2008 to 120,000 by the end of 2009, with a further goal of reaching 200,000 by the close of Lugo's administration (Interviews with high government officials from the Ministry of Finance, the Secretariat of Social Action [Secretaría de Acción Social, SAS], and the Ministry of Social Development; Ministerio de Hacienda, 2009).

The proposed large-scale expansion of Tekoporã raised concerns among traditional parties, who viewed the initiative not only as a social protection measure but also as a potential strategy for President Lugo to broaden his political base. Interviews with high government officials, legislators from both major parties, academics, and leaders of elderly associations suggest that the Colorado Party revived the bill to create political and economic challenges for Lugo's incoming administration. As several interviewees explained—invoking a folkloric Paraguayan expression—the Colorados aimed to send Lugo a *pelota tata*, or "ball on fire," meaning they sought to hand the Executive a politically explosive and fiscally difficult-to-manage issue.

Following its approval in the Chamber of Deputies, the pension bill was forwarded to the Chamber of Senators for review and discussion. The Senate approved the bill on March 12, 2009, after which it was returned to the Chamber of Deputies for revisions. The lower chamber gave its final approval on April 30, 2009, and subsequently submitted the bill to the Executive branch for enactment.

However, President Lugo vetoed the bill. In Decree No. 2050, issued on May 18, 2009, he exercised a full veto, arguing that the legislation failed to specify the funding sources required to guarantee pension payments (Presidencia de la República de Paraguay, 2009). He warned that implementing the law under these conditions would exacerbate the scarcity of government resources, already constrained by Paraguay's very low fiscal burden—among the lowest in the region and, at the time, with no personal income tax in place (see Serafini Geoghegan, 2025)—and would force the Executive to cut spending in areas the administration had identified as priorities. This, he argued, would jeopardize both the government's development plans and the sustainability of public finances. The decree further noted that the Executive was already implementing targeted social protection for vulnerable populations through conditional cash transfers, including additional assistance for families with at least one elderly member. On these grounds, Lugo rejected the bill in its entirety.

Certainly, Lugo's veto occurred within the context of a deepening economic crisis in Paraguay. On one hand, Paraguay, like many other countries, began experiencing a significant economic slowdown during the last quarter of 2008, as the global financial crisis of that year took hold. On the other hand, the country faced a severe and prolonged drought, impacting its crucial agricultural sector. Prior to this downturn, the Paraguayan economy exhibited robust performance from 2003 to 2007, achieving an average annual real GDP growth of approximately 5%. Despite concluding 2008 with economic growth of about 6%, Paraguay began to experience adverse effects from the rapidly deteriorating global economic environment in the second half of that year. These effects were evident through reduced market share in meat exports and a sharp decline in commodity prices, particularly soybeans (International Monetary Fund, 2009).

Nevertheless, Congress rejected Lugo's veto and ratified the bill. This outcome reflected Congress's growing role as a veto player in the post-1992 order: "The 1992 Constitution strengthened the position of Congress vis-à-vis the president," reinforcing its "propensity to operate as a veto player" (Molinas et al., 2006, pp. 27, 33–34). The Pensión Alimentaria Law was enacted on August 24, 2009 (Law 3728), and the Ministry of Finance, through its Non-Contributory Pensions Directorate (Dirección de Pensiones No Contributivas), was designated to implement the pension scheme.

3.3. The Implementation of the Pensión Alimentaria Law and First Vicissitudes

As previously noted, the Ministry of Finance was designated as the institution responsible for implementing the Pensión Alimentaria scheme. Interestingly, this social policy—typically expected to fall under the jurisdiction of a ministry specializing in social affairs—was intentionally assigned to the Ministry of Finance, known primarily as a conservative guardian of fiscal discipline. This decision by Congress was strategic rather than coincidental. Interviews with legislators and senior government officials indicate that Congress deliberately selected the Ministry of Finance due to its reputation within Paraguay's bureaucracy as one of the most robust, professionalized, and least politicized institutions.

At the time, the SAS administered Tekoporã, the country's main cash-transfer program, and was therefore the institution typically expected to implement the Pensión Alimentaria. However, the SAS had become entangled in several clientelism scandals and was headed by a close political ally of President Fernando Lugo. To prevent the pension from being used to bolster Lugo's political base and to avoid further empowering the SAS, the Colorados and Liberals deliberately assigned its implementation to the Ministry of Finance (Interviews). At the same time, legislators preserved political leverage and electoral advantages for

themselves by retaining control over beneficiary registration and certification at the municipal level, as explicitly stipulated in the law.

However, the Ministry of Finance faced immediate challenges. Lacking expertise in social policy administration, it came under strong pressure—from congressional oversight and from elderly advocacy groups that had finally succeeded in their longstanding campaign. The Non-Contributory Pensions Directorate, previously responsible for a modest number of Chaco War pension beneficiaries, was quickly overwhelmed by the program's demands. Implementation was therefore transferred internally to a newly created Social Economy Unit (Unidad de Economía Social), established by Minister Dionisio Borda (Interviews with high government officials from the Ministry of Finance).

The new unit faced two core tasks: securing funding and establishing procedures for beneficiary selection. With limited fiscal space and a conservative approach to planning, the government adopted restrictive measures to contain the program's scope: It set an annual target of 20,000 beneficiaries and used the one-year delay period stipulated in the law to prepare the necessary financial and administrative arrangements.

A key development during this period was the renegotiation of the Itaipú energy agreement with Brazil—one of Lugo's central electoral promises under the banner of hydroelectric sovereignty (Berkhout & Warner, 2023)—which helped create fiscal space (Interviews with legislators, elderly representatives, and government officials). In July 2009, Presidents Lugo and Lula announced an agreement to triple Paraguay's annual payment for ceded electricity from USD 120 million to USD 360 million. It also authorized Paraguay to gradually sell surplus energy directly to Brazilian enterprises at market rates, higher than the previously agreed prices per megawatt hour (Rojas & Arce, 2009). Although widely regarded as historic and crucial for financing the Pensión Alimentaria—and as a precedent for revising the asymmetrical 1973 Itaipú Treaty (Ortigoza et al., 2025, p. 4)—its implementation was delayed until Brazil's Congress ratified it in 2011, enabling the increased payments to begin.

The unit's second task was designing beneficiary selection. With no prior targeting experience, the Social Economy Unit drew on Tekoporã instruments, adopting the Household Questionnaire (Ficha Hogar) and the Life Quality Index (Índice de Calidad de Vida, ICV). To compensate for limited technical capacity, it sought World Bank support, which led to the creation of the Life Quality Index for the Elderly (Índice de Calidad de Vida para Adultos Mayores, ICV-AM), adapted to the elderly pension. Implementation began in mid-2010 with a pilot in marginalized neighborhoods of Asunción, and lessons from the pilot informed national scale-up (Interviews with officials from the Ministry of Finance). To formalize the targeting system, the Ministry of Finance issued the implementing regulation of Law 3728 through Presidential Decree 4542/10 in June 2010, requiring applicants to be enumerated using the Household Questionnaire and classified in ICV-AM categories I or II (poverty), which defined eligibility for the Pensión Alimentaria (Presidencia de la República de Paraguay, 2010).

From the Ministry of Finance's perspective, implementing the targeting system provided a technical and statistical tool to identify beneficiaries effectively and transparently (Interviews with officials from the Ministry of Finance; Ministerio de Hacienda, 2013). Elderly representatives, by contrast, viewed the system as unnecessary and exclusionary. They argued that all older adults who met the age requirement should be entitled to the pension and that, if verification was needed, the Ministry could compile beneficiary lists by

cross-checking existing government and social security databases rather than relying on household surveys and the ICV-AM. In short, organizations representing older adults consistently opposed conditioning the benefit on poverty status and instead advocated for a universal pension (Interviews with elderly representatives and officials from the Ministry of Finance). This contention also shows that the elderly movement continued to shape policy after enactment by contesting the program's scope, design, and implementation—an agenda sustained over time that ultimately pressed for universalization.

As stipulated in the law, local governments played a key role in the beneficiary selection process, participating in two main phases: registration and validation. Registration was carried out at the district council (Junta Municipal), where elderly individuals presented their national ID card to enroll. Registered applicants were then visited at home by enumerators, who administered the Household Questionnaire, with the ICV-AM subsequently calculated from the collected data. In the validation phase, the Ministry of Finance shared the list of potential beneficiaries—identified according to their ICV-AM score—with the municipality and the community, represented through the District Participation Table (Mesa de Participación Distrital). This body reviewed and approved the final list of eligible pension recipients.

Benefit payments began in August 2010, reaching 870 elderly recipients by the end of that year. By 2023, coverage had expanded substantially to 310,609 beneficiaries—approximately 71.3% of the population aged 65 and over. Expenditure on the program reached USD 309.9 million in 2023, equivalent to 0.72% of Paraguay's GDP. This growth positioned the Pensión Alimentaria as the country's largest social protection program by a considerable margin, surpassing even the long-established conditional cash transfer program, Tekoporã (see Table 1 for historical data on beneficiaries, budget allocations, and GDP share).

Table 1. Evolution of Pensión Alimentaria: Number of beneficiaries, coverage, budget, and share of GDP (2010–2023).

Year	Beneficiaries (number)	Coverage (% of population of 65 and over)	Budget (thousands of US dollars)	Budget (% of GDP)
2010	870	0.3%	255	0.00%
2011	24,867	8.4%	9,805	0.03%
2012	48,682	15.9%	42,340	0.13%
2013	88,420	27.8%	84,144	0.22%
2014	126,340	38.2%	118,916	0.29%
2015	133,470	39.0%	138,726	0.38%
2016	138,390	39.0%	129,982	0.36%
2017	184,179	50.2%	167,482	0.43%
2018	191,995	50.6%	202,463	0.50%
2019	202,348	51.5%	197,477	0.52%
2020	219,780	54.1%	206,909	0.58%
2021	253,647	61.3%	229,320	0.57%
2022	278,632	66.1%	261,226	0.63%
2023	310,609	71.3%	309,943	0.72%

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (n.d.).

4. Analysis

Paraguay has historically experienced limited social development. Authoritarian regimes, the absence of a full democratic transition, weak fiscal capacity (including one of the lowest tax burdens in the region), and the predominance of clientelist parties have constrained the country's performance in social policy provision. Yet even within this adverse context, the Pensión Alimentaria was created and successfully implemented. Despite numerous challenges and vicissitudes, it has endured across successive administrations and, even under significant fiscal constraints, has become Paraguay's largest social protection program. In 2024, it reached a historic milestone with universalization, extending coverage to all Paraguayans aged 65 and older regardless of poverty status.

The democratic transition of the 1990s created a critical political opening for the recognition of new social rights, and elderly groups seized this opportunity. Their successful advocacy for the inclusion of Article 57 in the 1992 Constitution—which explicitly guaranteed elderly people the right to comprehensive protection—marked the beginning of a decades-long campaign to secure meaningful policies. This dynamic reflects arguments that democratic transitions can provide fertile ground for embedding social rights in constitutions and legal frameworks, as mobilized groups use new political spaces to shape agendas and institutional commitments (Huber & Stephens, 2012).

Over the following years, elderly organizations pursued a broad repertoire of collective actions, combining grassroots mobilization with insider engagement. They built alliances with ministries, legislators, and international organizations, while also cultivating technical expertise that enabled them to draft substantive proposals. The 2002 Law on the Rights of the Elderly, though weakly enforced, nonetheless provided an important legislative foothold. By 2007, the elderly movement had expanded nationwide, enabling it to lobby Congress directly and secure sponsorship for a pension bill. This trajectory reflects the "synergistic interactions" between grassroots actors and political elites emphasized in Amenta's (2006) political mediation model: Mobilization created sustained pressure, while alliances within state institutions translated these demands into legislative proposals.

The eventual adoption of the Pensión Alimentaria was also shaped decisively by electoral competition. The surprising victory of Fernando Lugo in April 2008 created a political window (Kingdon, 1995) that reconfigured the incentives of traditional parties. Concerned that Lugo's ambitious expansion of Tekoporã could consolidate his political support, the Colorado Party strategically revived the pension bill. As several interviewees recalled, their goal was to hand Lugo a *pelota tata*—a "ball on fire"—by saddling his administration with a politically explosive and fiscally demanding program. In doing so, they embodied Melo's (2007) argument that political survival incentives in young democracies can drive the embedding of redistributive programs, and Garay's (2016) claim that political actors under competitive pressure often pursue nondiscretionary expansions. What began as a maneuver to constrain Lugo's political base ultimately transformed into the institutionalization of a demand cultivated by elderly groups for more than a decade.

Crucially, these dynamics unfolded within an institutional setting in which Congress is a powerful veto player in democratic Paraguay. In Kay's (1999) terms, veto power derives from the institutional "opportunities" that allow actors to block, reshape, or impose policy outcomes. In the Paraguayan case, the legislature constituted the decisive arena through which distributive reforms had to pass and where executive

resistance could be overridden. As Setrini notes, the 1992 Constitution created a "relatively weak executive" and "Congress, conversely, gained substantial policy-making power" (Setrini, 2025, p. 50).

Within this institutional setting, the interaction of sustained mobilization and political competition helps explain both the adoption and the resilience of the Pensión Alimentaria. Elderly organizations provided the initial impetus, framing their demands in rights-based terms and employing a broad repertoire of strategies, from press conferences and public demonstrations to lobbying legislators and even gaining footholds within state institutions. Political actors then amplified these demands, viewing the pension not only as a way to reassert control over social policy delivery, but also as an opportunity to expand their electoral base among the elderly while simultaneously containing Lugo's influence. This is consistent with Amenta's (2006) insight that social movement action is most likely to succeed when political actors perceive benefits in supporting it.

Both traditional parties—the Colorados and the Liberals—stood to reap electoral rewards from supporting elderly claims, as the elderly movement gained public visibility and consolidated itself as a politically salient constituency. The Pensión Alimentaria was also attractive because it did not challenge Paraguay's deeply entrenched and exclusionary social security system, nor disrupt the clientelistic patterns of social provision in which these parties were embedded. Indeed, the pension aligned closely with Paraguay's type of clientelism, which since democratization has undergone gradual institutional conversion: "from a monopolistic form of clientelism to a more competitive and ideologically pluralistic form of clientelis[m]," with "greater room for competition among groups with opposing material and ideological interests for state resources and power" (Setrini, 2025, pp. 44–45).

Within this context, the Pensión Alimentaria enabled both parties to preserve leverage over the allocation process, particularly during municipal registration and validation, where local political intermediaries could influence access to the benefit. It also created opportunities to sustain clientelistic brokerage by channeling pressures toward technocrats—especially within the Ministry of Finance—to prioritize or expedite claims linked to party networks and territorial constituencies in specific departments and districts.

Once institutionalized, the program's legal entrenchment and broad appeal generated strong cross-party incentives for continuity and expansion, ensuring its survival across successive administrations (De La O, 2013). Consistent with Pierson's (2000) account of increasing-returns politics, the pension's consolidation fostered positive feedback: As coverage expanded, it created a large and recognizable beneficiary public and strengthened organized incentives for preservation, raising the political costs of retrenchment and encouraging politicians to claim credit for protecting and extending the benefit. Over time, implementation routines, registries, and intergovernmental coordination reduced the marginal costs of maintaining and scaling the program, reinforcing institutional "stickiness" and increasing exit costs from established arrangements. Moreover, the complexity and opacity of policy effects—combined with self-binding features associated with credible commitments and the pension as a right—further tilted political competition toward continuity rather than reversal. In this sense, the Pensión Alimentaria exemplifies self-reinforcing policy feedback and durable policy legacies (Pierson, 2000).

In short, the Paraguayan case shows that mobilization alone would not have sufficed without the altered political incentives created by political competition, and that competition alone would not have produced reform without the sustained groundwork laid by the elderly movement. It is in their interaction—precisely

as theorized by the political mediation framework—that the Pensión Alimentaria became both possible and durable.

5. Conclusion

The contribution of this article is twofold. The primary contribution is empirical. From a political economy perspective, it explains the critical case of Paraguay, which created and sustained a relatively generous old-age income benefit and universalized it in 2024, despite stringent fiscal constraints. To do so, the article employs a theoretical framework centered on the interaction of social mobilization and political competition to explain both the adoption and the successful maintenance of the Pensión Alimentaria. The analysis shows that the pension did not emerge from executive initiative or technocratic planning, but from decades of persistent advocacy by elderly organizations. These groups framed their demands in rights-based language, secured constitutional recognition in 1992, and continuously pressed for concrete policies, keeping elderly rights on the national agenda. However, mobilization alone cannot explain policy adoption. The failure to pass the pension bill in 2007—despite Liberal legislative sponsorship and a constitutionally grounded claim—shows that proposals and legislative allies are insufficient under unfavorable political circumstances. The same proposal, under a more competitive political scenario, produced a different outcome. Political competition was decisive in translating longstanding demands into law. Lugo's electoral victory in 2008 disrupted Paraguay's entrenched bipartisan order and reshaped party incentives. When the Colorado Party revived the pension bill as a maneuver to contain Lugo's influence, it inadvertently institutionalized a reform that elderly groups had long championed. This pattern echoes Melo (2007) and Garay (2016): Competition in young democracies, far from being purely clientelistic, can catalyze durable redistributive programs when elites perceive survival benefits in adopting them. In this sense, the article aligns with the political mediation model (Amenta, 2006), which argues that movement influence depends on the interaction between sustained mobilization and shifting political opportunities—especially those generated by electoral competition that can translate demands into durable policy change.

The second contribution of the article is to inform debates on the origins and development of social policy in less socially developed countries. Although the Paraguayan case reflects a specific political and social landscape, it underscores how the interaction of social mobilization and political competition can drive social protection expansion even under limited state capacity, fiscal constraints, and clientelism. The implication for social policy and social movement scholarship is that sustained mobilization and a broad repertoire of collective action strategies matter, but their effects are mediated by political circumstances. Social movement action is most likely to yield policy gains when political actors perceive benefits in supporting it, or when movements can facilitate—or threaten—elite goals (Amenta et al., 2010, p. 298). The Paraguayan Pensión Alimentaria case also contributes to debates on social pensions in Latin America. Many non-contributory pensions in the region follow a residual "Means-Tested Poverty Relief" approach (see Arza, 2019) in which benefits are often low, temporary, weakly grounded in legal entitlement, and frequently introduced as part of—or alongside—conditional cash transfer architectures promoted by international financial institutions (e.g., Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru). The Paraguayan experience diverges from this pattern in both conceptualization and political framing. From the outset, elderly organizations conceived the pension as universal rather than anchored in poverty targeting; this was reflected in their sustained contestation of means-tested instruments such as the ICV-AM and their consistent advocacy for universalization. They also pursued a comparatively generous benefit—initially proposed at the level of a full

minimum wage before being reduced in congressional debate to a quarter—and framed the pension as a right: a permanent old-age entitlement established in law rather than by decree or ministerial agreement. Moreover, indexation to inflation prevents benefit erosion over time, a feature rarely observed in social pensions across the region. For these reasons, the Paraguayan experience invites a more ambitious agenda for strengthening social pensions in Latin America—particularly along the three key dimensions highlighted by Martínez Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea (2016): broad coverage, benefit generosity and quality, and equity in coverage and benefits to achieve more progressive non-contributory pensions.

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