Diminished Expectations

redistributive preferences in truncated welfare states

By Alisha C. Holland

In Latin America, the relationship between income and support for redistribution is weak and variable despite the region’s extreme income inequality. This article shows that this condition is rooted in the truncated structure of many Latin American welfare states. Heavy spending on contributory social insurance for formal-sector workers, flat or regressive subsidies, and informal access barriers mean that social spending does far less for the poor in Latin America than it does in advanced industrial economies. Using public opinion data from across Latin America and original survey data from Colombia, the author demonstrates that income is less predictive of attitudes in the countries and social policy areas in which the poor gain less from social expenditures. Social policy exclusion leads the poor to doubt that they will benefit from redistribution, thereby dampening their support for it. The article reverses an assumption in political economy models that welfare exclusion unleashes demands for greater redistribution. Instead, truncation reinforces skepticism about social policy helping the poor. Welfare state reforms to promote social inclusion are essential to strengthen redistributive coalitions.

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