

# **The politics of the emergence of policy laboratories in Mexico: a process-tracing analysis at subnational level**

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## **Abstract**

The idea of "laboratories of democracy" is widely known in federal systems, particularly in the United States. Overall, this idea refers to the ability of states to experiment and innovate in public policy. In Mexico, however, this idea had been practically alien, at least until the beginning of the 2000s. Although Mexico is a federation, which design was actually inspired in the American model, the Mexican political system was very centralized until the 1990s. However, after three decades of decentralization, some states, and particularly Mexico City, have implemented innovative social policies. Nevertheless, in Mexico, the study of social policy innovation at subnational level is almost inexistent. In order to contribute to fulfil these gaps in the literature, this work focuses on answering why policy innovation is actually the case at subnational level, and through what causal mechanisms it occurs, in Mexico. To do so, this work applies process-tracing methods to analyse the introduction of universalistic social program in Mexico City: the non-contributory universal pension for the elderly, which the government of this city introduced in 2001. This subnational social program ignited horizontal and vertical policy diffusion process in Mexico. Moreover, the implementation of this program initiated a national debate that brought back universalistic policy ideas in the national agenda. Among other reasons, this initiative shows the relevance of analysing the innovation process at subnational level. The main objective of this work is to propose a causal mechanism to explain why and how local actors decide to create the non-contributory universal pension for the elderly in Mexico City. This study shows the decisive role that ideational factors played in explaining this policy outcome, in combination with particular context variables.

Key words: process-tracing, social programs, non-contributory pensions, policy change

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## **1. Introduction**

Explaining policy change has remained a constant topic in policy literature. In the past decade, literature has source in different approaches and methods to explain policy change and innovation (Béland, 2016; Howelett, 2014, Huitema, 2014). In the realm of social policy, studies of policy change or innovation have focused on welfare regimes of industrialised countries, at both national and subnational level (Howelett, 2014, Huitema, 2014). In developing countries, such as Mexico, this line of research is still incipient. Nevertheless, policy innovation, in particular, is still a contending concept (Howelett, 2014; Huitema,

2014). In this work, we depart from the perspective of change as inventing process (Howlett, 2014; Huitema, 2014), which has received less attention in the literature.

The focus on policy innovation as inventive process is particular relevant in Mexico. Among other reasons, this is the case because, unlike the welfare systems of industrialised nations, the institutional arrangements of the provision of social services and benefits has failed to guarantee basic welfare to most of population. In this sense, there is a lot of room for improvement in terms of improving both the quality and the coverage of existing social benefits. Furthermore, state government could create new policies to provide some absent social benefits that already exist in developed nations, such as non-contributory pensions or unemployed benefits. This was the case in Mexico at the beginning of 2000s. In 2001, the government of the Mexico City (formerly Federal District) introduced the first universal non-contributory pension for elderly citizens. This was policy novelty in Mexico at the time.

Another reason is that Mexico has a federal system with three tiers of government –federal, state and municipal level. In theory, policy innovation is advantage of decentralized governments or federal systems (Geer, 2010). However, policy innovation was not a characteristic of the Mexican federal system, due to extremely centralized political system that prevailed in the country until the late 1980s. Different process of decentralisation took place since that decade. In this context, policy innovation at subnational level started to be part of the Mexican political landscape. The creation of the universal non-contributory pension is a paradigmatic case that needs to be fully explained in order to better understand process of policy innovation in Mexico.

Hence, this study aims to contribute to this task. The main objective of this work is to analyse the development of innovative policy instrument (a social programme to provide a non-contributory pension to the elderly, which eventually became a local law) in Mexico City (2001-2003). To do so, this work uses causal-process tracing methods (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Collier 2011; Bennett and Checkel 2015; George and Bennett 2005 ). This analysis attempt to open the black box of innovation decision-making at subnational level in Mexico. The proposed causal mechanism proposed to explain the creation of an specific policy

instrument (the universal non-contributory pension in Mexico City) elucidate the specific activities that actors perform and which directly shape the design of such policy instrument. This analysis also explains the influence of contextual variables in contributing for bringing about the policy outcome under analysis.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. In the second section, the main concepts and theoretical insights that guided this work are briefly explained. The methods used in this study are described in the third section. The main results of the analysis are presented in the fourth section. Finally, some conclusive remarks are included.

## **2. Explaining social policy innovation**

### **2.1 The inventive perspective of policy innovation**

Policy innovation –not to mention policy change— remains a contending concept (Jordan & Huitema, 2014; Howlett, 2014). In order to clarify the definition of policy innovation used in this work, we depart from the three well-established perspectives in the literature of policy innovation, which are synthesised by Jordan & Huitema (2014: 717) as follows:

- 1) the invention of policies (and elements therein) that appear to be new, through the activities of ‘policy entrepreneurs’, businesses, and/or ‘leader’ states;
- 2) the policy innovation’s subsequent entry into use via processes of diffusion, transfer, lesson drawing, and adaptation to local circumstances; and
- 3) policy innovation’s emerging impacts, centring on how far ‘innovative’ policies are truly ‘impactful’ (i.e. do they have significant and long-lasting impacts, for whom, and by when?), requiring careful ex post evaluation.

This work is centred on policy innovation as process that “involve the invention of policies (and elements therein) that appear to be new”, particularly through the activities of “policy entrepreneurs” in a given governmental context (Jordan & Huitema, 2014: 717). One conflictive aspect of this perspective is that “the term invention is normally restricted to the development of something that is entirely new – i.e. not used anywhere else in the world before (Rogers 2003: 43, in Jordan & Huitema, 2014). However, as Howlett (2014) suggested, a policy invention described as something that is entirely new is very difficult to find in practically any policy domain (Howlett, 2014). For this reason, Howlett (2014)

suggested to preserve the term invention –and therefore policy innovation from an inventive perspective—“for only a very special type of policy change that is genuinely unique”.

As identifying a “genuinely unique” policy can be challenging, this work takes into consideration two aspects to precise a definition of policy innovation. The first aspect refers to the identification of the actual subject of innovation: a policy paradigm, a policy instrument, or calibrations of a given policy instrument (Howlett, 2014). This work focused on the analysis of the innovation process of a particular policy instrument (e.g. a social programme).

The second aspect used to define policy innovation is the context in which a policy instrument (or goal) is actually considered to be an invention. Jordan and Huitema (2014) also emphasised that policy innovation is contextual, that is, the character of innovative is relative to a given space – is a policy new to the entire world or in a restricted territorial area?— and time –for instance, some policies can be brand new in a country but they could be “invented” before in another country. This study aims to analyse innovation process at subnational level –e.g. state-level—, particularly, in the context of federate systems. Therefore, this study focuses on the process of policy innovation that involves the development of a novel policy instrument (“invention”) at state-level, in a given country.

Hence, in this study, policy innovation is defined as process involved in the creation of a novel policy instrument, that is, a public programme or a piece of legislation, to address a state-level issue (Newton, 2012). This definition tries to capture “policy creativity and leadership among state’s governors” and other relevant actors, particularly those within the state government, to generate a policy instrument that are considered to be innovative. (Newton, 2012: 115-116). Additionally, the new policy instruments may “diverge from federal policy” for several reasons; one of these could be that “states face unique problems requiring customized solutions or, because as states, they are uniquely suited in their jurisdictional authority to offer some specific types of solutions” (Newton, 2012: 116). However, as this study may show the reason for divergence between federal and state-level policy could be due to other factors, apart from the potential uniqueness of local problems. In sum, in this work, policy innovation refers to the process in which policy actors develop (or

“invent”) a policy instrument that is deemed as novelty in their social or governmental context –e.g. their territorial jurisdiction or the national context.

## 2.2 Ideational explanations of policy innovation

Research in policy change and innovation is extensive, and covers from the identification of policy change to the development of theories and its determinants (Béland, 2016; Howlett, 2014, Newton, 2012). This extensive research is bracketed here, but includes explanatory theories belonging to different perspectives –such as rational choice theory, historic and neo-institutionalist approaches, as well as ideational approaches—, in which interests (emphasised mainly by materialistic explanations or rational choice theory), institutions, ideas and actors constitutes the building blocks to construct particular hypothesis of change or innovation.

However, the academic discussion of policy innovation, in the sense of invention, is far less extensive (Howlett, 2014). This may be due to the fact that, the occurrence of policy innovation as a process that involves the development of a novel policy (“invention”) is particularly rare (Howlett, 2014), as oppose to policy diffusion, for instance. One reason for this may be that actors may perceive more risks in put into practice a new idea that nobody has tried before than to replicate one that has implemented by some else before. In fact, policy innovation is “an inherently disruptive process (Lynn, 1997: 96), but is this seems to be particularly true when involves a policy “invention”. In this case, policy innovation clearly “challenges defenders of the status quo”, and for this reason it make it difficult to accomplish (Howlett, 2014). In order to analyses policy innovation from an inventive perspective, this study

## 2.3 Analytical framework

The analytical framework of this study is based on the actor-centred approach to explain endogenous policy change developed by Genieys and Smyrl (2008a; 2008b) and Hessenteufel (et.al, 2010). The main four assumptions of this framework are briefly describe in the following paragraphs. The first assumption is the policy entrepreneurs are at the centre of the policy innovation. A set of identifiable actors promote and materialise policy

innovation; although it may not be possible to identify the ones that bear overall responsibility of the process of change, any given step in it “can and should be personified” (Genieys and Smyrl (2008a: 39). The group of actors who instigate change is usually a rather small group. Genieys and Smyrl (2008a) explained that policy systems are “personified” because the ideas circulated in the public arenas are actually formulated and mobilized by the flesh and bone actors that participate in them; “the clashes of ideas”, and “the conflicts among them are not disembodied”, they are promoted and produced by these actors (Genieys and Smyrl, 2008a: 38). The instigators of change behave like policy entrepreneurs; a notion which widely acknowledged in policy innovation literature (Lawrence et al. 2004; Mintrom & Norman, 2009).

In addition, actors must fulfil three conditions in order to become agents of change. First, “actors need resources to influence public policies. Institutional position, legitimacy, strategic capacity, and expert knowledge are among the most relevant resources for policy-making capacity” (Hassenteufel et al, 2010: 528). The second condition refers to new policy ideas themselves. Actor’s ideas should be presented in a kind of policy proposal in a policy or political arena –e.g. inclusion in the governmental agenda—, and be an alternative to those already implemented in a given context (e.g. sub-national entities or in the country in which it reside in). In other words, actors’ policy ideas should challenge the status quo. The third dimension is motivation or purpose of change. For Hassenteufel et al, 2010, the driver for change is “the competition for legitimate authority, which is a permanent incentive for policy innovation largely because of the perceived prestige that comes from being the ones that shape policy” (Hassenteufel et al, 2010: 528).

We content that apart from pursuing the recognition as the authority in a policy field—, actors may hold other non-materialistic (or not exclusively) motivations, such as the commitment or zeal to pursue certain principles or values (e.g. social justice, among other), or they may have strong ideological or ethical commitment against existent policy legacies (Béland and Wellan, 2012). Moreover, these actors can be agents of endogenous policy change in “the absence of either radical institutional change or of a significant alteration in social “demand” for policy” (Genieys & Smyrl 2008a: 76). In addition, although non-materialist motivation could be the main motor of change, this may not exclude that actors’ may also, at some point,

also pursue an material interest. In sum, we assume that there is a diversity of motivations at the core of actors' choice to promote change, including ethical, moral or normatively political reasoning Sen (2002; 1977). The clear (and even) dominant presence of non-materialistic motivations do not rule out that to certain extent, these motivations may combine or reinforce with materialistic interest.

The second assumption of actor-centred approaches is that policy innovation lays on to the conflict among different ideas. Genieys and Smyrl (2008) and Hassenteufel et al. (2010) suggest that at the core of policy change is the performance of "collective actors who share policy ideas and compete for legitimate authority over sectoral policy making" (Hassenteufel et al., 2010: 518). As explained before, the instigators of policy innovation may have other non-materialistic motivations; they may even pursue material interests, but not exclusively – or at least not predominantly—. Indeed, material interests as such are not considered to exogenous and fixed structures, but also dependent on the actors' perception of their environment and subject to revision (see Sen 2002). The common feature is that agents of change hold contending or alternative ideas that they seek to materialise (e.g. in the form of a policy instrument or piece of legislation), and what ultimately explain this conflict rely on the actor's motives to generate (or contribute) to such innovation.

The third assumption of the analytical framework applied to this study is that policy entrepreneurs display particular activities that directly influences different stages of policy innovation process. The main type of actors' activities in the process of innovation can be subsumed in the main two functions or roles described in the literature of policy innovation. First, actors can be intermediaries, mediators or "runners", that is, actors essentially perform as informing conduits of ideas from one arena to another (for instance, from academia to government). Second, actors can be translators, combiners or bricoleurs; in this case, actors translate ideas from one arena to another (for instance, to include an abstract theoretical argument into policy idea), as well as combine ideas to create something different (Lawrence et al. 2004; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Bergeron et al. 2013). Policy entrepreneurs are described as sagacious actors that take advantage of a window of opportunity –exogenously created— to promote a given policy idea that ultimately creates change (Kingdom, 2003).

Furthermore, actors can also push for change and even create the juncture for it, which may involve a particular kind of leadership.

Finally, the interplay between ideas and power in different phases of policy innovation shapes the causal mechanisms based on ideational factors – that is, actors that actively advance ideas due to particular motivation (Parsons, 2016). Parsons (2016: 448) summarised three ways in which about ideas shape “the exercise of power”, and therefore, policy process, which are the following:

1. Influence of their own: ideas impart a distinct shape or element to action that is not merely an echo or embellishment of responses to other aspects of the context.
2. Not completely by themselves: ideas nonetheless interact with other aspects of the context. Their uptake and influence on action is affected by other conditions.
3. Ideational influence on other conditions: an important elaboration of Biernacki’s point is that the ‘not by themselves’ requirement must be a two way street. Besides acknowledging that other conditions affect ideas, we must show that the ideas’ influence ‘of their own’ affects the configuration of other conditions. Otherwise ideas might just be decorative eddies alongside the main currents of power and politics.

Additionally, in order to actually offer evidence in which ideas exert influence “of their own but not by themselves” (Parsons, 2016: 565), Alan Jacobs’s (2015) identified three ways in which ideas as explanatory factors can be process-traced in policy process; Parsons (2016) synthesised the in the following notions: “ideas of the powerful”; “ideas empowering actors”; and “ideas forming coalitions”. Based on Parsons (2016) and Jacobs’ (2015) insights on how to process-trace ideational factors as explanatory variables in policy process, these recommendations are summarised as follows:

- 1) Ideas of the powerful. “The simplest sort of intersection between ideas, other conditions and power in policy is that we can sometimes see that ideas gain influence because their ‘hosts’ gain policy-making authority, though the host’s authority is not derived from these ideas” (Parsons, 2016). Once actors gain an influential position, the ideas they decide to support and advance in the policy or political arena became influential. In order



to proof that is the case –that is, the existence of ideas of the powerful— analysts should offer evidence of the pre-existence of ideas before the policy outcome actually took place (Jacobs, 2015).

- 2) Ideas empowering actors. Ideas can also empower “leaders and agendas” (Parsons, 2016: 454). The reasons for this to happen are complex that the first case. Overall, this scenario may involve a double-arrow relationship between ideas and actors, that is, in reality may operate in reinforcing process of empowerment: actors should be able to be in a position to advance their ideas, but, at the same time, the ideas they promote can already enjoy prestige or influence in spite of the actors that promote them. Additionally, the ideas that actors promote may gain support or create strong constituency for several reason; for instances, ideas could resonate or fit easily with the concerns or demands of particular actors or groups (Parsons, 2016: 454). Hence, empowering ideas are those that, for whatever reason, attract other actors’ support, so that their promoters benefit from it – e.g. they can easily implement them and take credit of it.
- 3) Ideas forming coalitions. Overall, the influence of ideas in forming coalitions is a sub-category of ideas empowering actors, that is, because ideas can well received by other actors, their promoted are able to build coalitions around them. (Parsons, 2016: 456).

In this analytic framework, other political, financial and institutional factors are relevant contextual variables, but are not considered to be sufficient to explain the policy result under study (e.g. the creation of an innovative policy instrument in Mexico City). These factors are explained in the results section.

This analytical framework is applied to analyse the surge of the non-contributory pension in Mexico City. In order to identify the causal mechanism that brought about this policy instrument, we applied process-tracing methods, which is explained in the following section.

## **1. Methods**

This research uses causal-process tracing (CPT) methods to analyse the creation of the non-contributory pension in Mexico City, from 2001 to 2003. This process is divided into two phases that occurred in two different periods of time (2001 and 2003). The rationale for this methodology is twofold. First, this research is based on one case study (the creation of the

non-contributory universal pension in Mexico City). Second, causal-process tracing (CPT) is used to test the main hypothesis proposed to explain the creation of this policy instrument, which is derived from an actor-based explanation for policy innovation, as explained before. In addition, this study aims to contribute to the theory-building of the causal mechanism ideas in policy innovation process, that is, how ideas contributes to explain policy innovation, particularly in the intersection of ideas and power in this processes. Therefore, the proposed causal mechanism to explain the policy outcome under analysis is based on ideational factor.

Before explaining the main strategies used to process-tracing the causal mechanism proposed here, some of the main characteristics of CPT are explained before. In general, CPT process-tracing methods (see Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Collier 2011; Bennett and Checkel 2015; George and Bennett 2005) is widely used to analyse decision-making processes and events that occur within case studies. One of the main characteristics of this method is that seeks to elucidate the causal mechanism(s) involved in the processes through which a particular policy outcomes take place. The causal mechanism –that is, the hypothesis proposed to linked explanatory factors and a particular outcome– is deconstructed into different parts, which as a whole describe the processes through which outcomes take place. Hence, once the general hypothesis is determined, the following step consists in identifying the causal mechanism explaining the policy outcome.

According to Beach and Pedersen (2013: 44 and 49), a causal mechanism is “a system of interlocking parts that transmits causal forces from X to Y”, hence, each part of which is an entity entering in activity to transmit a force that ends up producing the outcome to be explained (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 49). The description of the causal mechanism implies the description of how agents or actors operate in a particular context. This means that the actor’s activities that contribute to create (or generate) a specific outcome are clearly identified in each part of the mechanism proposed. In sum, actors and activities are the main building blocks of each part of causal mechanisms.

In order to clearly identifying each part of the causal mechanism proposed to explain a particular policy outcome, CPT requires to provide the observable evidence that proof that

each part of that mechanism were actually taking place for producing a particular outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). The sources of observable manifestation can both qualitative evidence (e.g. interviews, events as reported in the media, and government or organizational documents) and quantitative data (e.g. demographic or economic metrics, and statistical data gathered by governments or international organizations, among other). Hence, different kind of evidence, should be used to test a given hypothesis (preferable gathered from different sources). In fact, triangulation of information is a desirable practice to add robustness to the analysis (Beach & Pedersen, 2013).

Finally, in order to empirically testing the causal mechanism proposed in this work, we depart from Jacobs (2015) also explained specific strategies to apply in order to show how ideational factors operate as causal mechanism. These strategies are explained in the methods section. Analysts should put into practice particular evidentiary tasks in order to provide the evidence to sustain the validity of the causal mechanism proposed to explain a policy outcome (i.e. policy innovation). These strategies are the following and the related evidentiary task are summarised in table 1.

Table 1. Strategies of process tracing ideational effects

Strategy	Evidentiary task	Empirical test or evidence	Examples of evidence
1.Measuring the independent variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying decision makers' sincere ideational commitments.</li> <li>- Stable beliefs more likely to be sincere than rapidly changing ones.</li> </ul>	-Observing actor's statements under reduced strategic pressure.	-Recorded evidence of the actor's communication of statements (preferably private communication) that reflect their ideas.
2. Establishing the exogeneity of the	- Identifying the ideational source external to the	-Analysing ideational	-Evidence of the persistence of actors' ideas over time.

independent variable	choice situation being explained.	stability over time.	
3.Finding evidence of a causal mechanism	-Establishing that the relevant ideas were applied to the choice being explained.	-Application of ideas to decision (e.g. design of policy instrument)	-Evidence that actors' ideas were included in the design of policy instrument.

Source: Own elaboration based on Jacobs (2015).

As mentioned before, this study applied causal-process tracing (CPT) methods to analyse the creation of the non-contributory pension in Mexico City, from 2001 to 2003. This process is divided into two phases that occurred in two different periods of time (2001 and 2003). The rationale for this methodology is twofold. In the following section, the main results of this analysis are presented.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Context of the case study: Mexico City

Mexico is a federal Union with three tiers of government (federal, state and municipal). Mexico City (formerly Federal District) is the capital city and the seat of the powers of the Union. Mexico City has always been the most populated and developed federal entity in Mexico. In 2000, the total population of this capital was 8.9 million (the national population was over 103.9 million). It also has the higher GDP per capita in the country, as well as the highest score of the Human Development Index (HDI) in the country, with a score of .87 and .83 in 2000 and 2010, respectively. However, a few states are not far behind Mexico City in terms of HDI, such the northern states of Nuevo León or Baja California, which had a score of .84 and .82, respectively, in 2000.

Apart from these main socioeconomic characteristics, the innovation process that took place in Mexico City occurred in a context of broader changes at national level. These changes refer to the political, administrative and fiscal decentralization that the Mexican federal government started to implement mainly in the 1990s. Until the 1980s, the Mexican federal system was highly centralized in practice (Cabrero, 2010). For almost seven decades, one single party: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional in Spanish, PRI) ruled the country. This party was the main beneficiary of a non-competitive electoral system, and enjoyed a near monopoly of all levels of public office in Mexico.

In 2000, this monopoly crumbled, when the first democratic federal elections took place and Vicente Fox won the presidential election as the candidate of a coalition of the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN is the acronym in Spanish), which is the traditional right leaning party in the country, and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM) (Emmerich et al, 2010). In fact, political alternation started at subnational level. In 1989, the PAN won its first state-level electoral victory. By 2000, the PAN ruled in five states (Baja California, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Morelos y Querétaro). Between 1989 and 2010, the former hegemonic party (PRI) lost governor elections at least once in 23 of 32 federal entities, including Mexico City (Torres & Hernández, 2013). Furthermore, divided government started to be part of state-level politics in Mexico. In synthesis, in the political domain, decentralization resulted into increasing political competition and alternation at federal and sub-national levels.

In Mexico City, political decentralization has also meant a long battle for greater autonomy. Unlike the states, the capital city lacked a Constitution; it had a Statute of Government, and the federal government had veto point in key economic and political issues of the capital, such as the approval of the level of debt of the capital. Nevertheless, the capital city has increased his autonomy in the last two decades. In 1997, Mexico City's inhabitants were able to vote their local authorities for the first time since 1928. The first elected head of government was Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the leader of a coalition of different left-leaning political parties and groups. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was also leader of the main political leftist political party in Mexico (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD is the acronym in Spanish), which had ruled Mexico City to date. The city's government (and local political

groups) have pushed for greater autonomy since 1997. The flagship of the battle for Mexico City's autonomy was the approval of a local constitution. At the beginning of 2017, the constitution was approved, and it will be enacted in 2018. The Federal District was officially renamed Mexico City to mark the gained autonomy of this capital city.

In fiscal area, decentralization mainly signified more resources to spend for the states. The Mexican federal government started to increase federal transfers (conditional and unconditional) to states in the late 1990s; this augmentation was notably during the 2000s (Tépach, 2012), due to the rise in the oil prices during those years, particularly from 2000 to 2006. It is important to notice that, in Mexico, states heavily rely on federal transfers to spend (Reyes, 2012; Sour, 2008), as most of states hardly rise taxes. In fact, the tax revenue has always been very low in this country due to over-dependence of the federal Mexican government on oil revenue. In 2000, tax revenue (% of GDP) in Mexico was reported at 9.9126 %, according to the World Bank. Moreover, states also increased their debt during the last two decades (Sour, 2008). In sum, decentralization brought about more political influence and financial resources to states of the Mexican union.

In this institutional, economic and political context, the government of the Federal District introduced the non-contributory pension in 2001. In 2000, Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the local elections and became mayor in Mexico City. His government launched ambitious social programs, which, in the Mexican context, were a policy novelty, such as the non-contributory social pension. This kind of policy instrument was not part of the social policy repertoire of any level of government in Mexico –nor was part of any governmental agenda or public discussion in the country. Moreover, a universal social pension did not figure in the list of social demands in Mexico City, in spite of the fact that most elderly people lacked access to any pension scheme in early 2000s. Why did the government of the Federal District decide to create a universal non-contributory pension in 2001? To answers to this query, as mentioned before, we applied process-tracing methods to identify the causal mechanism that lead to this particular policy result.

In order to understand this causal mechanism, it is important to take into consideration some contextual variables that, as mentioned before, are relevant but not sufficient to explain the policy innovation process under analysis. These variables are related to the decentralization processes afore mentioned, and are the following:

a) *Financial resources available to the government of Mexico City from 2000 to 2006.*

Overall, the implementation of social policy usually require investment of financial and other public resources. Therefore, the availability of money to spend in any area, including welfare, is a key factor to implement practically any policy, particularly those related to the provision of social benefits or services. As mentioned before, from 2000 and 2006, the Mexican federal government increases the conditional and unconditional federal transfers to all Mexican states and Mexico City (Reyes, 2012). In the case of Mexico City, the level of autonomy to raise debt is less than that enjoyed by states. However, it raises more taxes than other federal entities, that is, it is less dependent on federal transfers than most states in Mexico (Reyes, 2012).

b) *The existence or absence of divided government in Mexico City.* The existence of divided government—that is, that one party controls the executive branch while another party controls local congress—generally increases the likelihood of blocking the legislative initiatives of the local executive—i.e. Mexico City’s mayor. For this reason, this variable is relevant to understand the politics of policy innovation at subnational level. As mentioned before, in the 2000s, Mexico witnessed an increasing political competition and alternation of power at state level in Mexico. In 2000, the main leftist party at the time, PRD, won the elections in Mexico City, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador became mayor (2000-2006). However, PRD did not get the majority of seats at the local congress (Legislative Assembly of the Federal District, *Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal* in Spanish) in 2000. In 2003, this scenario changed as the PRD won the majority of seats at the local congress. In addition, the ruling party in Mexico City, PRD, was different to that at federal level (PAN), from 2000 to 2006, which signified a complex political game between both levels of government due to deep ideological and political differences between the executives at federal and local level, as it will be discussed later.

- a) *Social policy legacy at subnational level.* This factor refers to the particular characteristics of the social policy established in the subnational entity before any policy change is introduced at the subnational unit. In following the assumption that past policies can generate a situation of path dependence that limits the available choices for policymakers to make future policy decisions (Pierson, 2000; 2004), it is important to identify the potential influences of policy legacies in subsequent policy initiatives. In other words, as any policy innovation has to depart from a previous policy arrangement, such arrangements may influence the direction of innovation.

As far as the particular characteristics of the social policy in Mexico City established before 2000, in 1997, Cárdenas' administration (1997-2000) started the development of Mexico City's social policy. Overall, one of the trademark features of Cárdenas' administration was his interest in established a direct dialogue with civil organizations, individually and as part of networks (Canto, 2000). People from academia –public universities— and civil organizations were appointed in his cabinet. Clara Jusidman, an academic and renowned founder of civil organizations and that advocate social rights and democracy, was the head of Secretary of Education, Health and Social Development during Cárdenas administration, the main agency in charge of designing and implementing social programs. Overall, social policy focused on helping vulnerable groups in the city, by territorial areas, which lacks access to different social services –education, health, social assistance, among other. In addition, this government had very limited financial resources –nationally, public budget was very restricted during those years because of the severe economic crisis in 1994. In accordance, the coverage the programs was modest.

In spite of its limited resources, this administration left a key policy legacy: the Social Development Law of the Federal District. The local government was open to civil organizations that supported the introduction of an innovative social policy in Mexico, which had a rights approach, and advocate the participation of the civil citizenship in the city's policymaking (M. Canto, personal communication, May 14, 2013; P. Yanes, personal communication, May 20, 2013). In 2000, the creation of this law –which was a



result of the collective effort of actors from governmental, academic and civil organization sectors—established the main normative principles and goal of city's social policy, such as the protection and promotion of social rights for all Mexico City's all citizens.

These institutional, socioeconomic and political factors are necessary to understand the policy innovation process under analysis in Mexico City. However, these factors are insufficient for explaining the surge of the universal social pension in Mexico City. The constitutional design of the city was actually more limited than that of states in terms of autonomy; for instance, state governments could take debt without practically any federal government intervention. However, Mexico City can rise more taxes than states. In addition, electoral competition and alternation of power was present in several states by 2000. In other words, these variables were not exclusive of Mexico City.

Furthermore, by the end of the 1990s, and particularly during the 2000s, all federal entities enjoyed a sustained augmentation of the federal transfers (Reyes, 2012; Sour, 2008). Hence, while Mexico City is the richer region of the country, all states increased their spending capacity due to the increased in federal transfers. In other words, as state governments increase their financial resources, they could potentially spend more in social programs if they wanted to do so (as many eventually do). Moreover, while Mexico City is the most developed entity, other states are not that far in terms of wealth (e.g. Nuevo León, Baja California or Jalisco). In sum, decentralization was an enabling scenario for policy innovation at subnational level in Mexico, but it was not a sufficient explanatory factor for the surge of a particular policy instrument –the universal non-contributory pension in Mexico City. Hence, we need to look at other variables. We contend that the specific performance of key policy actors –their ideas and purposes—constituted the main factor of policy innovation in Mexico City.

#### 4.2 The proposed hypothesis

This study aims to explain why and how the government of the federal District decide to embark in the creation of a universal non-contributory pension. As mentioned before, there

was not a social demand of social pension nor a previous known policy proposal to introduce a social pension in Mexico (Lajous, 2009). In 2000, only 22% of the Mexican population of 65 years old and older had access to a contributory pension (Wilmore, 2014). This lack of access to contributory pensions was due to, among other reasons the high proportion of people working inform economic activities. Social pensions were not part of the pension system in Mexico circa 2000 nor before. In spite the clear problem of access to pension for most of the population, the Mexican federal government did not has any intention to create any non-contributory scheme at the time. In this context, in 2001, the government of the Federal District decided to launch a social programme to provide an economic stipend and free health services and medicines to all Mexico City's residents of 70 years and older (López & Blanco, 2008: 328).

Why did local actors decide to create this policy instrument? The proposed hypothesis to explain this policy outcome is divided into two main phases of the creation of the universal non-contributory pension in Mexico City. The first phase refers to the process of the formulation of the original proposal of this policy instrument (e.g. the provision of economic support for the elderly, as well as free medicines and healthcare) in 2001. The second phase refers to the process that lead to the creation of the law of the social pension in 2003. This law institutionalised the benefits provided by the original social programme. In the first stage, the proposed causal mechanism is the following:

H1: Policy entrepreneurs (e.g. Mexico City's mayor and his close social policy inner circle (in particular, Dr A. C. Laurell), hold particular ideas (theoretical stances and normative beliefs), which they decide to include into the governmental agenda of Mexico City, once they reach power. In other words, these ideas of the powerful became a policy proposal by virtue of the position and will of their promoters. Hence, once policy entrepreneurs arrived into power, they formulated a specific policy proposal (e.g. a social programme to help elderly people) that incorporated their ideas. Figure 1 summarises this hypothesis.

Figure 1. Causal mechanism of the creation of the original universal non-contributory pension for the elderly in Mexico City in 2001.

Factors	Causal mechanism			Outcome
X	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Y
<b>Activities of actors</b> 	<i>Advancement of policy ideas</i>  Policy entrepreneurs promoted policy ideas, which included theoretical stances (e.g. universalism, social rights, and construction of welfare system) and normative principles (e.g. helping the poor and vulnerable groups) before and after arriving into government.	<i>Inclusion of ideas in governmental agenda</i>  The key decision maker (Mayor), and his social policy team, included their ideas as priority in the governmental agenda (to help the elderly and other vulnerable groups).	<i>Formulation of the original policy proposal</i>  Mayor asked to policy entrepreneurs and members of his cabinet (particularly, the dead of the Ministry of Health) to put into practice the idea; these actors promoted a universalistic and social rights approach to the proposal.	<b>Creation of the social social Pension program</b>

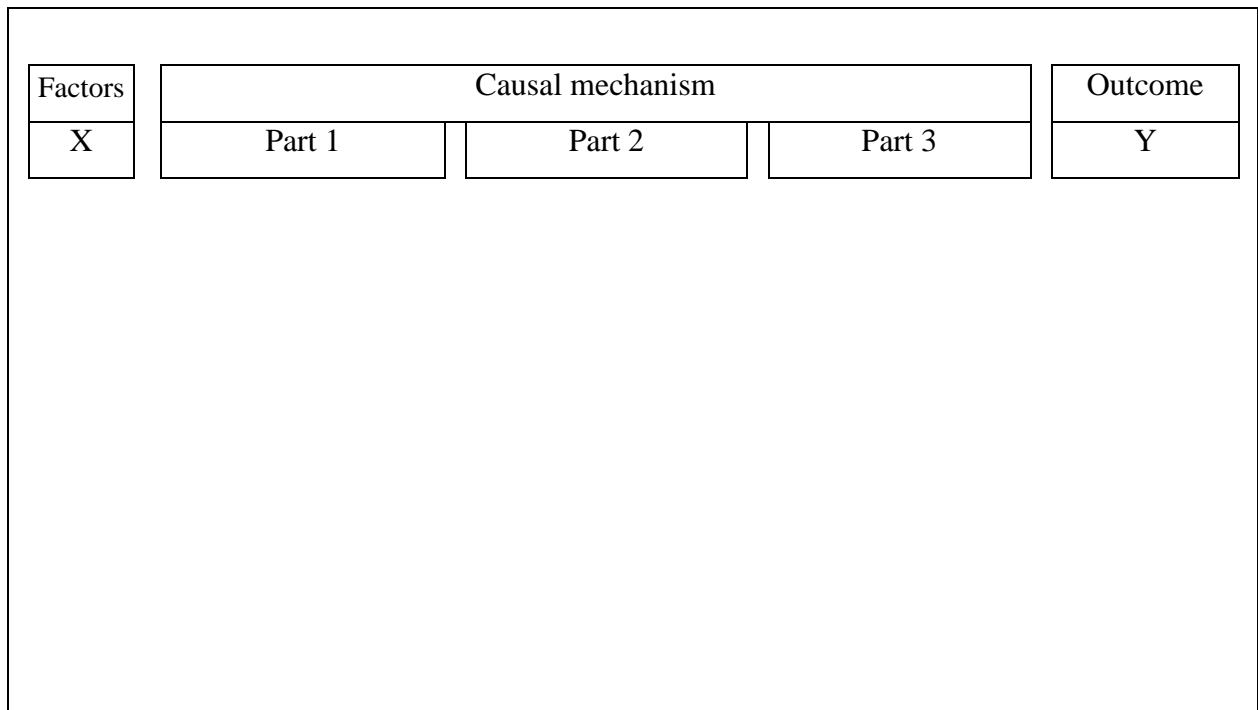
Source: Own elaboration based on compiled evidence.

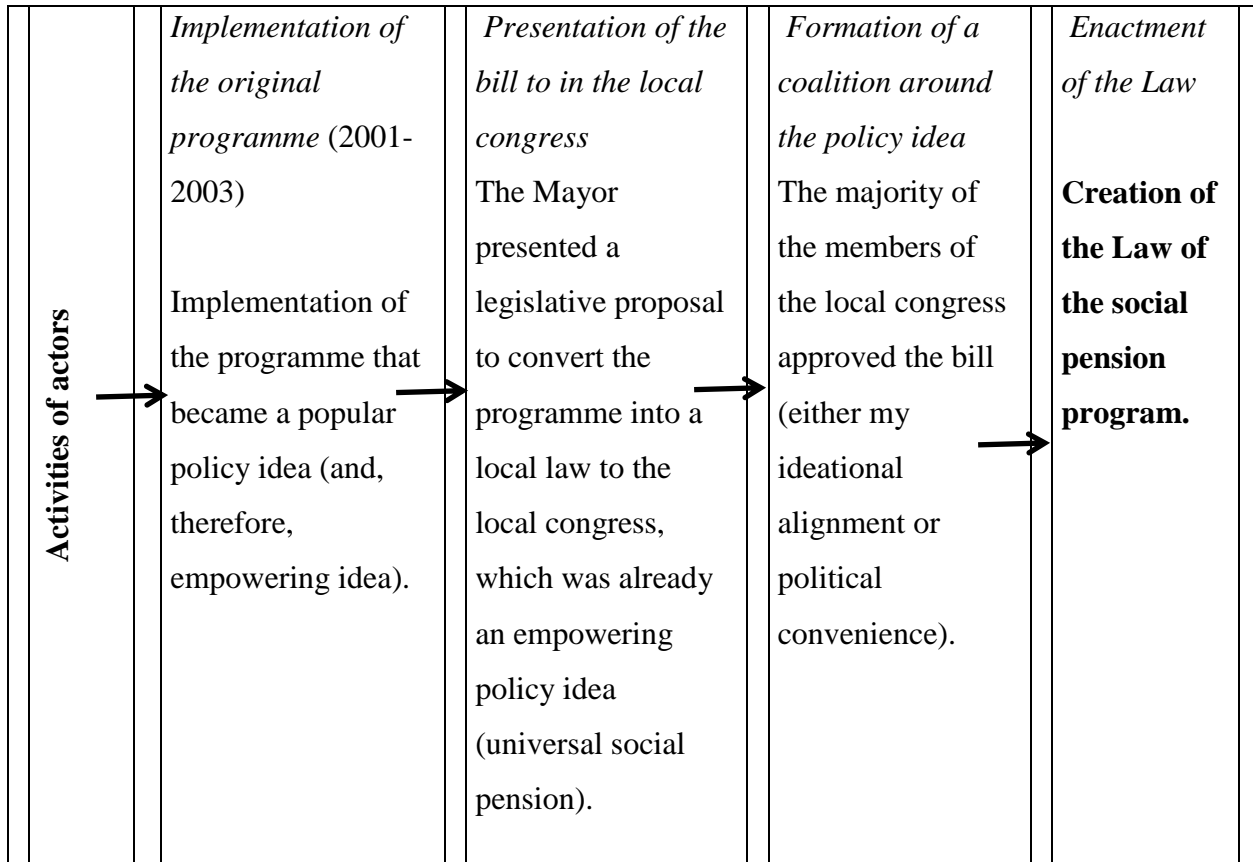
Once the policy entrepreneurs implemented their policy idea, and, therefore, create an innovative policy instrument (a universal non-contributory pension for the elderly), such idea quickly gained popularity and generate a constituency (e.g. the beneficiary population group of the social program in question). By virtue of its popularity, this idea became a powerful idea in time, that is, it started to gain legitimacy among the population and other actors. But this program also incited tremendous negative feedback from political actors at local and federal level. Nevertheless, the path to the creation of the universal non-contributory program

was in motion. Hence, the hypothesis of the second stage of the creation of this policy instrument is the following:

H2. The policy entrepreneurs put into practice the policy instrument, which became very popular among population, and created a new constituency (the elderly people that benefited from the programme). Hence, the social pension became an empowering idea, which helped the Mayor to increase his popularity, and then to advance his legislative proposal (to provide a social pension by law) into the legislative agenda, as well as to gain support to pass his bill, in a context of a favourable local congress. In other words, the mayor was able to create a policy coalition around this policy idea in 2003. Figure 2 summarises this hypothesis.

Figure 2. Causal mechanism of the creation of the Law of the social pension in Mexico City in 2003.





Source: Own elaboration based on compiled evidence.

#### 4.3 Process-tracing the surge of the social pension in Mexico City

The administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador signified the arrival of policy entrepreneurs committed to particular social policy ideas. These ideas included theoretical stances (e.g. universalism, social rights, and the construction of welfare system at local level) and normative principles (e.g. helping the poor and vulnerable groups) that they support before and after arriving into government. Furthermore, these ideas overall aligned with local social policy framework implement by the previous administration.

In order to empirical testing of the proposed causal mechanism proposed to explain the creation of the social pension in Mexico City, we must show evidence of three aspects. The first refers to show evidence of the activities and characteristics of the actors as policy entrepreneurs, that is, their ideas a motivations. This aspects related to the measurement of

the independent variables –the specific activities of policy entrepreneurs—, and requires to provide evidence of their sincere ideational commitments. The second aspects refers to demonstrate the pre- existence of the ideas that informed the design of the policy instrument. The third aspects refers to proof that the actors’ ideas were included in policy.

Andres Manuel López Obrador<sup>1</sup> (AMLO) and his inner circle fit the main characteristics of policy entrepreneurs. First, they have clear influential position. Although AMLO won the local elections with a tight victory in 2000, he placed social policy at the centre of his government agenda –his administration’s slogan was “the poor ahead” (“primero los pobres”, in Spanish)—. The idea of helping the most vulnerable groups of the city’s population was set as one of the top priorities, even before he won the elections (Vite, 2005: 358). From the very beginning of his administration, AMLO took distance from Vicente Fox –who won the presidential elections the same year— and his right-wing model in the economic and social realms. AMLO, and the PRD, had explicitly criticized the neoliberal model implemented by the PRI –and to be continued by the PAN— and expressed the necessity to replace it. (Lajous, 2009). Additionally, during his campaign, AMLO also criticized corruption and the exorbitant cost of the Mexican high bureaucracy –which, apart from unreasonably high salaries also have enjoyed several benefits— (Grayson, 2007).

AMLO himself was directly involved in the formulation the general orientation of the city’s social policy and specific programs, such as the non-contributory pension for the elderly. He promoted this ideas right from the beginning of this administration, even though some of his collaborators disagreed. According to the Dr Asa Christina Laurell, “the programme of the universal pension was an idea and was strongly promoted by López Obrador”, that is, the monetary transfer to the elderly of 70 years old and other benefits; “this was one of his most important priorities.[...]” (A.C. Laurell, personal communication, Junio 4, 2013). Even other actors that did not agree with the mayor’s idea overall coincide with this assertion. According to Clara Jusidman, “the first thing that AMLO said to us was that we wanted to us to distribute benefits”, and “we disagreed because we were on an intermediary position between a totally

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<sup>1</sup> Like, Cárdenas, AMLO left office to run for president in 2005; the presidential elections took place in 2006. His successor was Alejandro Encinas.

pro-market perspective of the social policy and total state-controlled perspective of social policy” (Jusidman, C, personal communication, July 4, 2013). Jusidman eventually quitted.

The mayor appointed key figures in the social policy areas (Lajous, 2009). One of the most prominent was Dr. Asa Cristiana Laurell, a renowned academic and political activist, born in Uppsala, Sweden. Dr. Laurell was active in the campaign of AMLO. Furthermore, she was advisor of the PRD before she was appointed in the head of the Mexico City's Ministry of Health (Lajous, 2009), in December of 2000. She support particular social policy ideas, such as the promotion of social rights, the necessity to reach universal coverage of basic services in Mexico, among other, well before she became a top civil servant in the government of Mexico City (Lajous, 2009). These ideas are also present in her publications, which date from the 1990s, that is, before her participation in the local government (Laurel, 1992, 1993, 1997, 2008, 2015).

During her tenure as head of the Ministry of Health, Dr. Laurell directly got involved in the design and implementation of two of main social programs of AMLO's administration: the non-contributory pension and the program of free health care and medicines for all Mexico City's residents not covered by the (employment-based) social security system. Actually, the Mayor asked to develop a program of the elderly (Lajous, 2009). Furthermore, other members of the social cabinet of were sympathetic with Dr. Laurell's ideas, as they main have similar academic backgrounds or behold similar ideas. For instance, Raquel Sosa, an academic who was appointed as Mexico City's Secretary of Social Development, and Pablo Yanes, General Director of Equity and Social Development, who also participated in the former administration in a similar position.

Under AMLO's direct and clear leadership, which is often characterised as authoritarian (Yanes, 2013; Grayson, 2007), policy actors of this government design and put into practice the original proposal. The main characteristics of this programme were the following: to provide a monthly cash transfer equivalent to half of the minimum salary in Mexico City, and the provision of free health services and medicines, in 2001. The design of the programme included some of the main ideas hold by the policy entrepreneurs that promoted

(e.g. helping the poor and vulnerable groups, and promoting social rights). This programme became very successful in Mexico City and nationally (Laurell & Cisneros, 2015). The popularity of this programme (among others) contribute to the rocketing popularity of the Mayor. In this sense, the ideas proposed by the policy entrepreneurs (the mayor and his inner circle) became also empowering, as they gain acceptance among the overall public and other political actors. In this context, AMLO presented the bill to the local congress in 2003. At the time, the social pension was very popular, and already has a universal coverage. In spite of the criticism, most of the members of the local congress (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal in Spanish) approved the bill (Becerra, 2005).<sup>2</sup> The members of the congress may approved either for personal sympathy for the ideas, or due to a political calculus. As the social pensions became very popular among the overall public, as well as the beneficiaries, and their families, those who dare to opposed the bill, may face public disapproval (Laurel, 2013). Furthermore, by the time the bill was presented, the programme had already a firm constituency. Therefore, it would be highly costly in political terms to oppose the bill.

Furthermore, the availability of financial resources make it possible the successful implementation of the programme. Unlike the period of Cárdenas, roughly between 2000 and 2006, the whole Mexican government –especially the federal and state tiers— benefited from the increment in oil prices in the international market, which mean more resources available to public budget (Grayson, 2007). In the case of Mexico City, government took advantage of these resources to fund its ambitious and innovative social programs. In addition, as part of AMLO’s government policy, he put into practice and austerity program to save administrative costs (Basurto, 2010). Among other initiatives, the salaries of the high posts of the local bureaucracy were halved, including the mayor, and many of their benefits –including private health insurance, which is a common practice among Mexican bureaucracy — were eliminated. Corruption was also meant to be reduced. This austerity policy allowed for greater social investment.

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<sup>2</sup> On July 6, 2003, the local elections were held; in the this elections AMLO’s management of the PRD government was evaluated in the polls (Becerra, 2005: 123:). The PRD gained 43.3% of the total vote, and the absolute majority of the local Legislative Assembly, with 56.06 of the vote (Becerra, 2005: 125-128)



AMLO explicitly placed Mexico City's social policy as alternative to that implemented by the federal government. The purpose was to show that a different socio-economic model was feasible, that was possible to make something different and better to benefit most population, especially the poor (A.C. Laurell, personal communication, May 31, 2013). Social policy then became a key element to positioning the local government as an effective alternative to the federal government's neoliberal approach. In fact, AMLO gained an amazing popularity in the city during his term (Basurto, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, the city's social policy was subject to intense debate and opposition from local actors and above all from federal authorities. One of the most emblematic political struggles between federal and local governments was related to the universal pension for the elderly. This issue fuelled the recurrent conflict between local and national authorities during this administration (Lajous, 2009: 74-79). This program was severely attacked by right-wing sectors, including the very same president of Mexico at the time –Vicente Fox—, who considered it to be a populist and an electoral strategy of the Mexico City's mayor (Lajous, 2009). The implementation of the free health services and medicine also faced fierce opposition (A.C. Laurell, personal communication, May 31, 2013). At the core of this opposition were keen ideological differences.<sup>3</sup> While the federal government –and, in general, right-wing sectors— favoured a neoliberal social policy approach (basically, focalized social programs for the extremely poor), the government of AMLO advocated a social-rights approach.

The conflicts generated by the introduction of Mexico City's social programs showed the heated debate over alternative ideas held by actors from both local and federal levels. In addition, this conflict was intertwined with the electoral dynamics in the local and national political arenas. AMLO's increased popularity during also fuelled criticisms to the city's social policy. Furthermore, all the noise generated around AMLO's programs enable the introduction of social issues –e.g. non-contributory pensions—in the national agenda, which

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<sup>3</sup> Another example of this was the opposition of the city's government to implement the Seguro Popular, a health federal program (López-Arellano & Gil, 2008: 230), because its design includes the imposition of fees, which was considered to be against the principles of universality and free access to health care promoted by city's social policy.

eventually lead to the introduction of similar programs across the country. In other words, beyond the ideological battles, Mexico City's policy innovation has had an impact on national level, as discussed before.

In sum, the policy entrepreneurs and decision makers that hold and advance the ideas that were included in the design of the universal non-contributory pensions had in common a commitment to put into practice a different social policy paradigm to that dominant at federal level. They ultimately shared a commitment to make it possible a true social change in Mexico (A.C. Laurell, personal communication, May 31, 2013). Although they do not share the same policy ideas, they coincide in values (e.g. helping vulnerable groups), and support a rights-based approach of social policy, under the principles of universality and enforceability of social rights—. Because of their post, they directly participate in the decision and implementation processes of social programs, and they held their post in the local government during the whole administration.

## **5. Discussion**

This study proposes a causal mechanism aims to explain the creation of the universal non-contributory pension scheme in Mexico City, based on an ideational actor-centred hypothesis. This innovation process is divided into two main stages: 1) the formulation of original social programme: a universal non-contributory pension (as part of a more comprehensive social programme for the elderly, which included free health services), in 2001; and 2) the process that lead to the creation of the law of the social pension of Mexico City, in 2003. In both stages, ideational factors exert direct influence to shape the policy outcome, that is, the performance of the key actors of this process display the role of their ideas into shaping their policy chooses. In the first stage, policy entrepreneurs put into practice activities that involve the clear innovation process, in the sense of “inventing” a policy instrument; their ideas were included into the design of this policy instrument, and they showed commitment to materialise such ideas before and during this process. The evidence provided showed the policy entrepreneurs and decision-makers' ideational commitments.

In the second stage, actors decide to make a legislative proposal to provide the universal social pension by law. Ideational factors also influenced this decision, although other factors were also important. Actors may have decided to continue to implement the programme as they do in the past; they could obtain the same political –e.g. public support. At the time of the introduction of the bill into the local congress, in 2003, the programme had practically reached universal coverage. The political context also helped to create law: ruling party (PRD) won the majority of seats in the local congress in 2003, which meant majoritarian support to the Mayor's legislative proposal. In fact, the popularity of the Mexico City's mayor helped to win the local elections to this party.

While an ideational factor (e.g. the commitment with the policy ideas) influence the decision to propose the bill, other factors may also influenced it –the political benefits of further promoting a popular policy idea. The approval of bill by the members of the local congress was a more complex issue, in which their political interests may be more relevant: the political cost of not supporting a popular idea proposed by an empowered mayor was very high. Nevertheless, many or some members of the congress could truly support the idea for not materialistic or political reasons, and agreed with the idea because they deemed such ideas as appropriated in moral or ethics terms. At the end, the mayor's bill gained the support (and the votes) of the majority of the members of the local congress.

In both stages, there were contextual variables that although are necessary were not sufficient to explain the policy outcome. The policy outcome of the first stage (e.g. the formulation process of the original social programme) was precisely the introduction of an innovative social programme in Mexico City. In this stage, the contextual variables –the social policy legacy from previous administration which favour the universalistic character of the pension; the availability of fiscal resources; and the objective existence of social problem (e.g. insufficient pension coverage— were undoubtedly important, but were not sufficient to explain the outcome. The decisive factor was the performance of policy entrepreneur and decision makers that truly commit—and which ideas converge—to certain policy ideas or normative principle –to help the poor and vulnerable groups and to promote citizens' social

rights—. This commitment seems to be fuelled not only for a genuine zeal with these normative principles or values but because they believed in creating an alternative way to social policy paradigm or, even bigger, an alternative model of development in Mexico.

## **6. Conclusive remarks**

This analysis attempt to open the black box of innovation decision-making at subnational level in Mexico. The proposed causal mechanism proposed to explain the creation of an specific policy instrument (the universal non-contributory pension in Mexico City) elucidate the specific activities that actors perform and which directly shape the design of such policy instrument. This analysis also explains the influence of contextual variables in contributing for bringing about the policy outcome under analysis.

The causal-process analysis of the creation of the social pension in Mexico make it possible to disentangle the activities of key actors, as well as contextual factors, in the innovation process. Hence, the analysis showed that policy entrepreneurs did not behaved as such just because there was an compelling social issue at hand (e.g. a great majority of the Mexican elderly population lacked of access to any kind of pension scheme). In fact, before the arrival of the agents of change into the Mexico City's governments other actor failed to see this problem a public issue. For this reason, the proposal of a non-contributory pension was not in the public agenda.

Moreover, actors did not react automatically to the contextual variables (for instance, the political environment, or the availability of fiscal resources) so that they decide to implement a particular policy instrument. This analysis showed that ideational factors explain the motivation and the actual content of the policy instrument at hand. Finally, the analysis showed that the actor's strong motivation for change and the commitment to particular ideas that are alternative to status quo are determinant for bringing about policy innovation.

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