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[The Fight for Democracy](#)

Finally on the Right Track?

In Latin America, the Desire for Greater Participation
Is Swirling up the Party Systems

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Excessive violence, rampant corruption and defective democracies still dominate Latin America's image around the world. But the reality has, in fact, been somewhat different long since. Education, the internet and globalisation have produced a great deal of progress on the continent. Strong civil societies have developed, and they are calling upon their governments to provide answers to their problems. Politics is no longer the exclusive domain of the politicians. Citizens demand their say. Are the political parties ready for this? Can they reinvent themselves? If they want to survive, they have no choice.

Uruguay is once again consulting a physician, just as it did between 2005 and 2010. And it is, in fact, the same doctor as half a decade ago, oncologist Tabaré Vázquez, who is now 77 years of age. When he resumed the presidency on 1 March 2015, it seemed to be merely another triumph for a left-wing politician on the continent, like one of so many since the turn of the millennium. The socialist Vázquez took the baton from José “Pepe” Mujica, the “poorest president” worldwide according to (his own, well-tended) legend. Mujica, a former guerrilla fighter and leader of Uruguay's popular movement, had been a shining light among the left-populist club of Latin-American heads of state. His fellow office holders were Cristina Kirchner (Argentina), Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Ollanta Humala (Peru) as well as Luiz “Lula” da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (Brazil). They won elections and then steered the people and the country onto a leftist course, both politically and economically; they promised new beginnings, set up programs for the poor and were successful in their efforts – seemingly, as we know them today. The summits of the regional organisations, be it *Unasur* or *Mercosur*, turned into great socialist-communist reunions. Sometimes, even the eternal Daniel Ortega from Nicaragua and the movement's Cuban father figure, *el Comandante* Fidel Castro, called in.

While Vázquez' election victory in 2014 was hardly surprising, two and a half years on it has taken on much greater significance: it was the last leftist victory to date. Whereas the doctor had always had a style of his own: he is immaculately dressed at all times and observes etiquette. He does not give hour-long public speeches or think in the friend-or-foe paradigm. Nor does he try to curb press freedom; he even refers to the legal certainty in his home country when campaigning for support abroad. Detecting a populist aspect in his agenda takes a long time. In his campaign spots, one could actually see him railing against Uruguay's old elites, those families with domestic staff, large swathes of land and income from inherited wealth. Now, as many as 18 years on from the transition of power after the historic victory of the left coalition of the *Frente Amplio* over the perpetually ruling conservatives at the presidential elections at the end of 2004, the country has become one of the most stable democracies in Latin America. While the alliance of almost 40 parties, including Trotskyist, communist and Christian-democratic parties, do not seem to offer convincing solutions for the typical Latin-American issues of crime and corruption, inflation and economic downturn, it is at least solid and may even defend its hold on power at the next presidential elections scheduled for the end of 2019. Currently, such a victory would make headlines as rather unusual news.

After all, the left-wing populist cadres on the continent have weakened dramatically. Two important members, the Brazilian Rousseff and the Argentinian Kirchner, have already fallen from power, as has Humala in Peru. Ecuador's three-time president Correa is set to hand over power soon as he was not allowed to stand for election again (although he is dreaming of returning to office as others among his former colleagues). Those remaining in power include above all the two heads of state in Venezuela and Bolivia. But Maduro has become highly unpopular, even among the left. Doctor Vázquez himself avoids being pictured with him.

A Continent that's Always Good for a Surprise

For Latin America, 2016 was the 35th year since the beginning of the so-called third wave of democracy.¹ After the end of the military dictatorships of the seventies and eighties, democracy found its way in, but those in government engaged in a great deal of trial and error. The withdrawal by the state in the course of the economic reforms of the Washington Consensus of the 1980s went as far as political experts started to speak about defective democracies. The *marea rosa* – the pink tide that began at the end of the 1990s – entailed an abrupt U-turn, producing a state that considered itself omniresponsible and, it has to be said, omnipotent. For over a decade, three-quarters of all Latin-Americans were governed by left-wing governments, committed to the 21st century socialism born in Caracas to a greater or lesser extent. This tide has been ebbing for just over a year now; its battle cry *¡Vamos por todo!* (Let's go all out!) is fading away, virtually without any violence – another first on this strongly polarised continent.

Latin America has, in fact, always been good for a surprise. Politics and society are polarised, and it always seems to be a case of going all out. People there don't do nuances and compromise, which may in part be due to the fact that the middle class, which could act as a balancing force between the huge numbers of poor and the

tiny number of rich, is still too small and primarily concerned with its own survival. Changes in government on the continent have also often been difficult, even bloody, affairs, particularly if the changeover did not only involve people but also power and ideas. However, Latin America appears to have matured in this area as well. In some places, power now changes hands almost smoothly. The outcome of the Argentinian presidential election (2015) was as close as that of the referendum about a constitutional change to allow the incumbent Bolivian head of state to stand for a fourth time. But the losers – in the former case the Kirchneristas, in the latter Morales and his supporters – accepted the result. Even in Brazil, where parliament deposed Rousseff in a questionable process prompting millions to take to the streets, the protests remained peaceful on the whole. However, there is no cause for jubilation. There is still plenty of bad news reported from the continent. Violence erupted in Brazilian jails at the beginning of the year due to two drug gangs looking to settle scores. Apparently, it has cost 120 lives so far, while politicians and large parts of society watch the slaughter or even welcome it.²

Civil societies on the entire continent are demanding good governance and reliability from their politicians.

One does not have to search intensively to find problems elsewhere either: open violence on Mexico's streets, illegal mining in Colombia, car smuggling on a large scale at the Peruvian-Bolivian border, the globally largest marijuana production in Paraguay, starving children and political prisoners in Venezuela, the abolition of press freedom in Ecuador, as well as corruption scandals of gigantic dimensions and

Ghosts of the past: The wave of left- → populist successes that have characterised Latin America since the turn of the millennium has faded away in the meantime. [Source: © Reuters.](#)





Shining light: Argentina's President Mauricio Macri with his party PRO are one of Latin America's greatest hopes. [Source: © Marcos Brindicci, Reuters.](#)

natural disasters of every kind, from droughts and flooding to fires, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.³ But that is only part of the story about life on the continent. There is one trend that is sweeping virtually all over Latin America: civil societies are growing stronger and demand good governance and reliability from their politicians. If all fails with loud protests, as the innumerable mass demonstrations of the last few years have shown. Latin America is “back on the right track”, as *The Economist* stated recently, albeit adding the sceptical addition, “mostly” in brackets.⁴ Venezuela’s Maduro may ignore the

parliament and plan to rob the opposition of its rights. Evo Morales may believe that all courts of law should be instruments of his government. But to most people in Latin America democracy is “the only game in town”.⁵ Even if some presidents do not want to admit it.

Politics as an Elite Project?

As recently as July 2013, the US professor of politics Kurt Weyland wrote the following in *The Atlantic* newsletter: “For the first time in decades, democracy in the region is facing a

sustained, coordinated authoritarian threat.”⁶ The Venezuelan President Chávez had died only a few months previously and was resurrected – or more accurately laid out – immediately after drawing his last breath: as the continent’s saviour of the populist left. In later life, Chávez had become more radical, evolving from an admired man of the people into a feared autocrat and simultaneously demonstrating to his counterparts elsewhere in Latin America how to secure and maintain power: take the holding of referenda to abolish term limits; have a few internal and external enemies, who demand things such as freedom of speech and press freedom and do not want the people’s will to be done; and finally weaken all other state powers and throw money down the drain for social programmes until resources run out. This is 21st century socialism at its best. Its imitators from Buenos Aires to Managua attempted to dismantle their own democracies, albeit with different levels of intensity and success.

The great majority of Latin Americans believe the political elites act in their own personal interest.

Latin America has learned its lessons. After all, people have followed know-it-alls, supposed reformers and jacks-of-all-trades and even self-proclaimed saviours long enough. But that did not help the continent to get on the right track. Perhaps there is no “right track”. Things were, are and will probably always be complicated. Certainly, the enormous inequalities that are an enduring constant in the region can be reduced by initiating social programmes, but only if they are above board and not only help those people whose favour and votes are in return expected by those dispensing the aid. Of course, a president can uncouple his or her country from the global economy – or attempt to do the exact opposite. But neither extreme approach has resulted in a particularly good outcome on the continent. Latin America has

recently come to appreciate the benefits of what people elsewhere in the world are currently struggling to master: making compromises, balancing opposing positions, and the laborious, lengthy wrangling for a solution that can win the support of all opponents without them losing face. But politics still has a difficult time. While surveys indicate that over half of all Latin Americans regularly support the idea of democracy and consider it the best form of government,⁷ the great majority – 73 per cent on average according to a 2015 survey – believe the political elites act in their own personal interest; that was the highest percentage in twelve years.⁸ And that is grounds for a certain degree of pessimism. Citizens are worried about a number of issues, including the economic uncertainty, corruption and – particularly in Central America – violent crime. And yet, they want their countries to open up economically and work together more closely. Integration, currently definitely not a popular topic in election campaigns in Europe and the USA, promises hope, a way out of the economic crisis that the continent has been suffering from for at least six years, since the end of the natural resources boom.

In Latin America, politics remained an elite project for a long time. The independence heroes themselves predominantly originated from the upper class, and the people followed them. So the liberation from the colonial masters was definitively not a textbook revolution. This is where the ruling principle of *caudillismo*, the unwavering trust in the creative power of the leader who looks after one’s family like a patron, has its roots. But now, the continent is about to liberate itself a second time, but this time from the figure of the *caudillo*, the authoritarian father figure. What people want now is to have a say, participate, take their future into their own hands. Given that, maybe the widespread mistrust of politicians is actually in tune with the zeitgeist, probably even important and at the very least, understandable. It appears the times of lethargy and pessimism, during which people were resigned to accept whatever was happening, are over. The *Latinobarómetro* shows that there has been an increasing willingness

on the part of the people since 2013 to take to the streets and organise themselves in support of transparency, better healthcare, democratic rights and against abuses of power and mismanagement; at a value of six to seven on a scale from zero to ten, this willingness is rated to be “very high”.⁹ The leaders themselves are also learning and practicing the abdication of power. While government forces still frequently deal rather harshly with demonstrators, the heyday of military coups now lies in the distant past. The military as a political actor have been retreating for quite some time. It appears that Latin American democracy has finally come out of puberty – it was about time! And all of a sudden, one topic interests political scientists and politicians alike: does a democracy need political parties? Because according to the textbooks, political parties are meant to channel numerous different opinions and translate them into policies. In Europe and North America, they have been absolutely crucial (to date).¹⁰ Latin America, on the other hand, has been conforming to old clichés in its recent past. Time and time again, one encounters strong men like Sebastián Piñera in Chile for example, who win elections almost single-handedly, social movements that are looking for an alpha male to lead them (Morales in Bolivia, Lula da Silva in Brazil) as well as people such as Guatemala’s comic actor Jimmy Morales, one of those upstarts who outshine the staid establishment politicians. But there is hardly any sign of stable party systems and structures, not even further towards the front of the history book.

Despite democracy, the number of consolidated political parties in Latin America is limited.

A number of younger political scientists have therefore recently examined the conditions under which political parties emerge – and the reasons why only very few stay the course. Latin America was the ideal location for conducting

some field studies as the number of consolidated parties there is limited despite democratic systems being in place. In many countries, traditional forces with a long history have virtually disintegrated; out of the 255 parties that formed since the beginning of democratisation from 1978 to 2005, only eleven have taken root, a mere four per cent.¹¹ Hardly any of the rulers have taken an interest in establishing reliable, stable party structures. Particularly the left-wing populists believed (and still believe) that a ruler must communicate with the people directly to appear truly democratic. The tasks that political parties are actually meant to perform in democracies, which academics describe by terms such as policy formulation, policy implementation, parliamentary control and recruitment for public office, are carried out by the traditional Latin American leader on his or her own, with his or her entourage, without any attempt at transparency. There is no party-internal decision-making process in the classic sense. The candidates for parliamentary elections, for instance, are not nominated at a party conference but by *la mesa chica*, in other words, the leader him- or herself, possibly in consultation with a small circle of confidants. The Argentinian newspaper *Clarín* described the selection process that was common under the left-wing Peronist president Kirchner, as reaching for the *lapicera y guadaña*,¹² ballpoint pen and scythe. Parties are consequently predominantly instruments for exerting power. People are rewarded for their loyalty, not to say obedience. Debates are undesirable, positions change and are adjusted to the chances of success.

Outsiders, who only set up a political party to be able to stand in the next election, benefit from the fact that civil societies no longer stick to the left-right spectrum, and religion hardly plays a role any more as content-related uniting force. Social networks, however, have great influence. In this area, the continent is definitely part of the First World. Eight out of every ten Latin Americans live in cities; not everybody there has access to drinking water, but life without a smartphone is hard to imagine. 60 per cent of the people now have access to the Internet.¹³

The ten countries whose citizens spend the most time online include Argentina, Mexico and Brazil, even ahead of the USA and any European country.¹⁴ At 50 per cent, more people in Latin America use social networks than in Europe. Over half of the more than 600 million Latin Americans actively use Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.; only in North America and some Asian countries are the figures higher.¹⁵ Facebook alone has 322 million users in the region.¹⁶

The great influence of social media also offers opportunities for the political parties.

The digital revolution is changing politics, and with it, the political parties, and not only in the way parties communicate with their voters or members. Debates and meetings akin to party conferences could take place in the digital sphere. On a continent that is twice the size of Europe and more inaccessible in the truest sense of the word, that need not be a disadvantage. On the contrary. It represents an opportunity for finally overcoming barriers such as paternalistic organisational structures and the lack of member participation.

In the course of the research for their study on Latin American political parties, political scientists Steven Levitsky, James Loxton and Brandon Van Dyck defined when such forces can be deemed to be stable. And they only included parties in the list at all if they had received at least one per cent of the votes in a national election. In their opinion, a party cannot be considered successful until it has won at least ten per cent of the vote in five or more consecutive national legislative elections, and also survived the departure of its founding leader.¹⁷

However, the figures constituting the database do not go up to anywhere near the study's publication date; it is consequently difficult to say how many political parties are currently in

existence in Latin America. Reliable numbers are missing. Some parties are thus classed as "incomplete" cases although they have been in government for over a decade. These include the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) of Bolivia's leader Morales and the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PUSV), which Maduro inherited from the founding president and "Eternal Leader"¹⁸ Chávez.

Learning from Soccer

Seeing the large number of political parties that have come and gone over the last few years, one may well ask: How do they emerge? Why do they frequently disband very quickly? And what needs to happen for them to survive and ultimately strengthen democracy and its rules? The political scientists around Harvard professor Levitsky make one thing clear: neither democracy as a system of government nor electoral laws and the functioning of state institutions appear to have any influence on a country's political party system. And that is bad news for all those whose work starts precisely there. Some authors, for instance, even describe the link between percentage thresholds at elections and the strengthening of parties as "trivial".¹⁹ The assumption that parliamentary systems strengthen parties therefore does not apply to Latin America. Also, the rules governing elections change so frequently in Latin America that they cannot even be used as constants in the examination of the matter.

One other aspect is typical of Latin America: it is not a stable democracy that encourages new parties to be set up. As was the case in Europe and the United States, many of the historically grown parties were formed in times of violent conflict; "polarization and violence were also a major source of party-building during the third wave" of democratisation.²⁰ Examples cited in the above-mentioned studies include the MAS in Bolivia and *chavismo* in Venezuela. Today, other parties have taken their place: the *Demócratas* in the Andean country and *Primero Justicia* in the Caribbean republic. The current Argentinian president's party PRO also fits the mould,

although it is still categorised as “incomplete” in the analyses of Levitsky and his team. One thing becomes clear particularly in this context: parties that operate in an autocratic environment, and are therefore restricted not only in their scope for political action but also in their access to the media and state apparatus, can only survive and grow if they organise themselves.

According to Levitsky and his colleagues, there are three simple things that all those who wish to make a party successful need to strive for. *Firstly*, they must cultivate a strong partisan identity. In other words, the party must stand for something and its supporters and members must identify with the party. *Ponerse la camiseta* is the way this is referred to in Latin America, i.e. put on the shirt and show your allegiance. Because only those who stand behind the party and are loyal to it in the same way as to their soccer team will engage on its behalf and know what differentiates it from other political organisations. “You may be able to change your wife, but never the colours of your club,” goes an Argentinian saying. Soccer fans live in the so-called state of *aguante*, endurance even in difficult times and after heavy defeats. Many parties with a long tradition – the Peronists and the radicals in Argentina, the *Blancos* in Uruguay, the supporters of Mexico’s *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – draw special strength from their followers’ resilience in the face of adversity and from their pride.

Secondly, a party’s success requires presence, not only in the form of the president but preferably throughout the country. That means it needs a reliable structure, be it in official form via bodies and formal membership, via grassroots organisations and social movements, which abound in Latin America, or via informal clientelist structures or systems of patronage. The reasons are obvious: those who are close to the people will find it easier to coax them to the ballot box on election day. A resilient structure also makes it easier to survive crises. And, those who are familiar with local issues can stand for election in cities and regions, thereby demonstrating their capability to serve in government.



The *third* element for a party’s success is, consequently, cohesion. This simply means a solid link between the top echelon and the party members. Particularly in times of crisis, it is important that the leadership stands together so as not to unsettle the party base and the voters.



Unconditional: Only if the party succeeds to – similar to soccer – secure loyal followers also in bad times, they will be successful in the long run. Source: © Mariana Bazo, Reuters.

No doubt the secretary general of a well-organised Western traditional party will just shrug their shoulders wearily at these recommendations because they merely represent the hard graft central to any party's political work. But in Latin America, the realisation that strong and well-organised political parties will be successful in the long term, and can win elections as a

result, is quite novel. Maria Lagos, the director of *Latinobarómetro*, said to *The Economist* that the progress made during the last few decades had raised expectations in Latin America as well, but that citizens still had little trust in the institutions. The parties must counter the dissatisfaction with what the current leadership has to offer by putting forward solutions for the most

urgent problems such as crime, inequality and corruption if they do not want to run the risk of being replaced by less democratic alternatives.²¹ That requires people who are dedicated to this task and can encourage others to join them to serve their country.

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- 2 Cf. El País 2017: El cuarto motín del año en una cárcel de Brasil se salda con 30 muertos, El País, 15 Jan 2017, in: <http://ln.is/elpais.com/BGfaW> [10 May 2017].
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- 4 The Economist 2016: Of growth and globalisation, 22 Sep 2016, in: <http://econ.st/2sGfl74> [10 May 2017].
- 5 Cf. the high level of support for democracy as the best form of government as indicated in the Corporación Latinobarómetro 2016 survey: Informe 2016, 2 Sep 2016, p. 8, in: <http://bit.ly/2sWrvxk> [10 May 2017].
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- 7 Cf. for example Corporación Latinobarómetro, n. 5, p. 8.
- 8 Cf. Corporación Latinobarómetro 2015: Latinobarómetro Análisis de datos 2015, in: <http://bit.ly/2qYFzpy> [10 May 2017].
- 9 Cf. *ibid.*
- 10 Cf. here and further on Levitsky, Steven / Loxton, James / Van Dyck, Brandon 2016: Introduction: Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America, in: Levitsky, Steven / Loxton, James / Van Dyck, Brandon / Dominguez Jorge I. (eds.): Challenges of Party Building in Latin America, Cambridge, pp. 1-150, here: p. 27.
- 11 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 32.
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- 13 Cf. Kemp, Simon / We are social 2016: Digital In 2016, 26 Jan 2016, p.21, in: <http://bit.ly/2sWaLGr> [10 May 2017].
- 14 Cf. *ibid.*, p.25.
- 15 Cf. *ibid.*, p.33.
- 16 Cf. Internet World Stats 2016: Latin American Internet Usage Statistics, 06/2016, in: <http://bit.ly/2sWzbzM> [10 May 2017].
- 17 Cf. Levitsky / Loxton / Van Dyck, n.10, p. 30 f.
- 18 Cf. party's official organisational chart, in: <http://bit.ly/2r8VG2S> [10 May 2017].
- 19 Mustillo, Thomas 2007: Entrants in the Political Arena: New Party Trajectories during the Third Wave of Democracy in Latin America, Chapel Hill, p.80, zitiert nach Levitsky / Loxton / Van Dyck, n.10, p. 36.
- 20 Cf. Levitsky / Loxton / Van Dyck, n.10, p. 44.
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