

Detlef Nolte: The Institutionalisation of Political Parties in Latin America: Continuity and Change

At the beginning of the 21st century, Latin America seems to be undergoing yet another upheaval: Presidents are being chased out of office by people in the street, rightist and leftist populists are gaining power, and some of them even succeed in taking over the presidency. Citizens are dissatisfied with the workings of democracy and deeply suspicious of political institutions and actors. The political parties in the region, so it seems, are not the solution of the problem; rather, they are part of it.

Large parts of Latin America's public watch their political parties with a critical eye, a fact that may be documented in several ways: In an elite survey conducted in 2005, 60 percent of the politicians questioned stated that personalism and lack of internal democracy were the parties' evils. The number of Latin Americans who share the opinion that democracy needs political parties to exist is decreasing constantly. According to the Latinobarómetro poll, the trust ratings which the political parties received in 2005 were lower than any measured in the preceding years.

However, the decline in trust in the political parties differs from country to country. In the countries that returned to democracy in the course of the eighties, the support of democracy immediately after redemocratisation was higher than in 1997, although it may well be that there are several economic factors sharing in the responsibility for these ratings. Nevertheless, we still need to ask if and to what extent the loss of trust in the political parties also reflected or reflects deficits in the functioning of the central communication structures of democracy in each country.

Loss of trust may certainly be interpreted as an indicator of institutionalisation deficits and/or deinstitutionalisation among the political parties and their systems. According to Mainwaring and Scully, institutionalised political parties are distinguished by four factors – stability in the competition between parties, societal integration, public acceptance of democratic elections and political parties as legitimate tools of political actors, and stable and accepted party structures. However, we must distinguish between the institutionalisation of party systems and individual parties. A party may be regarded as institutionalised if it is deeply rooted in society but acts independently of societal groups, has a differentiated bureaucratic apparatus, and appears as a single unit which, however, tolerates dissenters.

This paper certainly cannot address all aspects of the institutionalisation of Latin America's political parties since, on the one hand, it aims to analyse as many parties as possible, and on the other, hard data are quite hard to come by.

If trust in political parties is an indicator of their degree of institutionalisation, it is beyond question that this degree has decreased in the past. If, however, we look at the parties' age, Latin America provides a different though multifaceted picture: There are political parties that are more than 100 years old. There are newcomers that come and go. And there is the sudden implosion of both traditional parties and entire party systems. While in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru, the respective governing parties are more than 50 years old, those in Uruguay and the Dominican Republic are more than 30, and those in Brazil, El Salvador, and Panama more than 25 years old. Upheavals in party politics, on the other hand, may be found in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Throughout the last few years, Latin America experienced great changes which show, among other things, that to analyse the institutionalisation of political parties we need to take their deinstitutionalisation into consideration.

21 of the 38 political parties that held more than ten percent of the seats in parliament in the early nineties still reached this percentage ten years later. The central parties in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay show a high degree of continuity, with the Peronists clearly dominating in Argentina. In Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Paraguay, some of the most important political parties were able to renew themselves by merging with or founding new parties. On the other hand, there were radical changes among the central parties in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. Colombia is the only country where the two traditional parties fragmented while new players emerged at the same time. If we look at the age of the parties represented in Latin America's parliaments at the end of 2005, the new and/or eleven to 20-year-old parties dominate at 60 percent; however, there is also a 'hard core' of traditional parties that are more than 50 years old.

Opinions on Latin America's political parties stated in scientific literature are predominantly critical: For Werz, they are loose alliances that are characterised by a weak organisation, a meagre internal democracy, and personalised power, dominated by a small core leadership. For Alcántara, this picture lacks differentiation: He argues that most political parties in the region have not only a stable organisational structure but also an adequate infrastructure. A survey among Latin American party activists provides yet another picture, in which the majority of the political parties are distinguished more by having permanent structures and less by functioning purely as alliances for election purposes. Among the parliamentarians themselves, three out of four take the view that their own party has a stable structure; one in four holds the opposite opinion.

For the sustainability of the parties' activities, a large number of members and a strong infrastructure will hardly be significant in the long run: 41 percent of parliamentarians rate their own party's activities highly or very highly, with Chile showing the lowest and Nicaragua the highest ratings at seven and 88 percent, respectively. The activities of the parties in general, on the other hand, are rated markedly lower. In this context, it comes as a surprise that the participation level in some parts of Central America is high, whereas values in Chile are low.

As regards the role and importance of national and regional leaders, the party activists state that it tends to be significant and that, indeed, a national core leadership may be identified in most political parties. Moreover, they say that regional politicians enjoy a certain autonomy of action vis-a-vis the national leadership.

What also provides a complex picture is the indicators of the parties' internal democracy, which are perceived very differently by party activists: Whereas some assert that parties are quite happy with discourses on politics and ideology, showing a high degree of pluralism at the same time, others state that those two factors are present only to a minimal degree. A similarly broad spectrum of opinion on this issue may be found among the parliamentary elites, around 43.9 percent of whom talk of a high level of democracy within their parties.

'The history of party research is the history of outdated crisis scenarios.' This dictum by Klaus von Beyme might also hold true for Latin America's political parties: Entire party systems have experienced radical changes, and individual political parties lost importance and/or were replaced. Numerous traditional parties either still exist or experienced a comeback after disappearing for some time. The degree of institutionalisation of the political parties varies considerably. The assumption that Latin America's political parties are loose alliances is questionable since there are quite different forms of institutionalisation to be found.

Low levels of trust in political parties are certainly a sign of crisis, though these result only to some extent from the parties' form of organisation and/or degree of institutionalisation. The reasons for the decline in trust probably lie in other areas, such as the parties' difficulties in responding adequately to social changes and contributing effectively towards the solution of current problems as well as their lack of transparency in internal decisions and the legal or illegal influence of external actors on them. But nevertheless – although the Latin Americans' trust in their political parties is declining, the latter are not threatened by extinction. Thus, it seems that another phrase by Klaus von Beyme applies to Latin America: 'If the political parties were to go down because of the crises they produce, they would be reinvented.'