



Political Parties – Challenges and Perspectives

Strategic Partners under Pressure

Seven Theses on the State of
Party-Based Democracy in Latin America

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As far as its party systems are concerned, Latin America bears a much stronger resemblance to Europe than the so-called Global South. If they are to ride the storm of social protests, populist cure-all promises, and Chinese advances, Latin America's parties will need strategic support from Europe. In a time of global changes, Latin America's shared values makes it an indispensable partner.

The coronavirus hit Latin America while it was amid a stress test for democracy. In various countries on the continent, the pandemic went hand in hand with acute social conflict, distrust in institutions, an eroding political and societal consensus, and populist cure-all promises. In the coronavirus crisis, the already-weakened political parties were scarcely able to control the narrative as bearers of coherent political concepts. This inability is not only due to the prominence of the executive in crisis situations and an increasingly weakened institutional linkage between government and one strong political party on the continent. The pandemic also makes it fundamentally more difficult to provide answers based on the familiar left-right spectrum. Even if structural challenges facing Latin American parties tend to receive scant international attention during the crisis, they not only remain eminently relevant, but also crucially important for the future of democracy in the region. The developments in Latin American party-based democracies should be followed with attention, especially if Europe views the countries of Latin America as strategic partners based on shared values. Below, seven theses will highlight several of these developments, which shall be discussed in more detail.

1. Latin America's Democracies Remain Party-Based Democracies (for Now)

Unlike the decolonisation processes in Africa and Asia, which took place much later, that in Latin America gave rise to political "parties" in practically all countries shortly after their

independence. The groupings that gave themselves the name "party" in the first half of the 19th century were reserved for the elites of Spanish origin. Yet, despite their elite character, they represented opposing ideologies – conservative and clerical on the one hand and liberal and trade-oriented on the other. The first half of the 20th century saw the rise of left, socialist, or even communist parties to join the mix. The advent of mass media embedded the parties more strongly in the middle and lower classes. Over the course of the Cold War, Latin America's parties were often pulled into that conflict's functional logic whether through a strong linkage to the ideology of one side or through the propagation of a "third way" and sympathy for the Non-Aligned Movement. Over the years, additional parties have been founded based on current issues, with some of them being able to establish themselves permanently. However, Latin America's party systems have remained remarkably stable into the 21st century.¹ This is true despite the continent's history having included military coups and dictatorships in practically all countries. After such episodes, it was frequently the old parties that played an important role in re-establishing democracy. Examples of this are Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay.

Even though this theory of stable Latin American party systems is increasingly being called into question today, two things have not changed: Latin American countries have become accustomed to the existence of some type of "parties" over the last 200 years, and existing political groups in most countries can partly be classified according to positions along the ideological

scale from left to right, between authoritarian and libertarian/pluralistic, between nationalist and cosmopolitan. Latin America's ideological schools of thought and the associated parties overall correspond much better to European categories than is the case in Africa or Asia. Moreover, the continent has been home to important ideological parties for many decades, and they continue to have significant influence on the formation of governments. The clearest example of this is the centre-right Partido Nacional, founded as early as 1836, which has headed the government of Uruguay since 1 March 2020. The origins of the Columbian Partido Conservador and Partido Liberal, which continue to be politically relevant, date back to 1848/1849, and Mexico's Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) was formed in 1939. This all gives Latin America exceptional potential for party cooperation.

2. Societal Polarisation Exacerbates the Loss of Reputation of Political Parties and Institutions.

Surveys indicate that, despite three to four decades of civil government in most Latin American countries democratic institutions have failed to overwhelmingly gain the trust of citizens as guarantees of good governance or institutional stability. In 2018, the Latino-barómetro study² showed that only 24 per cent of Latin American respondents were satisfied with democracy in their countries; this was the lowest percentage since records began in 1995. In contrast, 71 per cent were “not satisfied”. Brazil was at one end of the scale with only nine per cent satisfaction with democracy, followed immediately by Peru and El Salvador (eleven per cent each), Venezuela (twelve per cent), and Mexico (16 per cent). Overall, only 48 per cent of respondents indicated that they fully support democracy, while a record number – 28 per cent – declared themselves to be “indifferent”. These weak values directly impact on a wide variety of democratic institutions such as electoral authorities (28 per cent trust), judiciary (24 per cent), government in general (22 per cent), and parliaments (21 per cent). Political parties fared particularly badly, garnering just 13 per

cent support from respondents. That is down from 24 per cent in 2013. Political parties' loss of reputation can thus not be viewed in isolation from falling support for democratic institutions and democracy in itself. Nevertheless, it is notable that political parties have borne the brunt of this damage.

Latin America has increasingly participated in the trend towards eroding basic political consensus.

When searching for an explanation for these trends, it helps to examine global developments. For instance, in recent years Latin America has increasingly participated in the trend towards eroding basic political consensus and polarising the political landscape into two irreconcilably opposing camps. What in Argentina is known as “la grieta” (the fissure) is a feature characterised by a growing number of countries in the region, albeit with varying levels of severity. Countries such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru have moved in a similar direction over the last few years – not to mention countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela that have been or still are subject to “Bolivarian” /autocratic governance styles. Wherever debates are used to paint political opponents as irreconcilable political enemies instead of political competitors, the space for institutionalised parties with their internal discussions and committees serving as articulators of social demands becomes limited. Willingness to defend democratic institutions against any threat from the far left or the far right also often diminishes as societal polarisation increases.

3. Interest Groups – Not Parties – Are Articulating the New Social Protests

In Chile, Columbia, and Ecuador, severe social and sometimes violent unrest shook parts of Latin America just before the coronavirus outbreak. The political crisis in Chile in particular prompted observers to wonder how the “most

prosperous country in Latin America [...] suddenly transformed into something resembling a battlefield”.³ Referring to the situation in Chile, sociologist and author Carlos Peña stated that one of several causes of the crisis was that “the state had scarcely been reformed and was increasingly considered obsolete by a society progressing ever faster”. This gave rise to a situation in which “society has reached a complexity that a state designed in the 19th century is no longer equipped to deal with”.⁴ This diagnosis can certainly be applied to the political parties as part of this institutional design. In none of the above-mentioned contexts were political parties decisively involved as articulators of social demands. On the contrary – protestors frequently perceived the parties, often internally weakened by corruption scandals and disputes, as part of the unjust system they were fighting. In such cases, as early warning systems anchored in society, the parties were unable to include social demands, divert them into institutional channels and thus avoid a violent explosion.

When parliamentary democracy is ultimately replaced by a plebiscite system, parties lose nothing less than their *raison d’être*.

The primary mobilisers for protests were often elusive interest movements that had no clear leaders and operated primarily through social media. Such groups functioned under slogans such as “No más AFP” (No more AFP) in Chile and, a few years before, “Vem pra Rua” (Let’s take to the streets) as part of the 2016 protests against Brazil’s Dilma Rousseff government. Then there are student movements and various collectives for which it is difficult to discern a single driving force. While these movements thus replaced parties in their mobilising function, they were largely unable to provide political solutions or new, democratically legitimised forms of political leadership. On the contrary, they crowd out existing parties

and parliamentary factions with emotionally charged demands that are greatly amplified in virtual space. Substantive discussions about such matters as technical details for designing a retirement or electoral system thus become moralised in a way that is highly detrimental to the absolutely necessary dialogue on these issues. This public moralising also shifts several elements of democratic decision-making that are reserved for parliaments in representative democracies to the streets or the internet. When this process advances to the point where parliamentary democracy is ultimately replaced by a plebiscite system, parties lose nothing less than their *raison d’être*, and cease to function as a buffer against authoritarian ambitions.

4. The Caudillo Keeps Coming Back – in the Analogue and Digital Worlds

Despite all the problems, the current social protests are expressions of demands by a larger and increasingly educated middle class for new forms of social and political participation – and thus, in a sense, for more democracy. It therefore appears even more anachronistic that this dissatisfaction with “politics” and “the political class” benefits a traditional species of “Latin American political fauna”⁵: the “caudillo”. This designation, which originally derives from military jargon for a warlord, is used in Latin America when a charismatic populist leader purports to be a tribune of the people, and assumes or uses power, sometimes by shady means. Today, just as before, Latin America’s contemporary populists see a kind of “binary struggle between ‘the people’ on one side and some sort of corrupt, exclusive elite on the other”⁶ and thus benefit from moralising politics.

It is notable that of the five Latin American countries cited above, which are least satisfied with democracy according to Latinobarómetro’s 2018 survey, three – Brazil, Mexico, and El Salvador – have entrusted their destiny to populist caudillo figures since that survey was published. The new caudillos have learned to use digital media in a targeted manner for their purposes,



branding their style of politics as “modern”, even though it appears to have its origins in the continent’s distant political past.

An especially striking example is the president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, who has become a sort of cyber caudillo. He was elected in 2019

by promising to move away from business as usual, that is, his country’s traditional parties. He initially called himself “the coolest president in the world” on Twitter, then proceeded to resort to the most classic of all Latin American caudillo tactics for consolidating their power: military might. The strategy reached its



Broad dissatisfaction: Protestors frequently perceived the parties, often internally weakened by corruption scandals and disputes, as part of the unjust system they were fighting. Source: © Pablo Sanhueza, Reuters.

symbolic apex with the occupation of the parliament building by armed forces on 9 February 2020.⁷ Given this background, it sounds almost cynical when Bukele calls the party he founded along caudillo lines, in his image, and according to his whims “Nuevas Ideas” (New Ideas) of all things.

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Even though the coronavirus pandemic has shown several populist leaders to be clearly deficient in crisis management,⁸ the idea that the crisis will permanently rein in the caudillos and move the population to elect moderate ideological parties appears to be wishful thinking at best. On the contrary, the impoverishment of large parts of the population caused during the course of the pandemic and the feeling of abandonment by an already weak state structure, may amplify the desire for populist conceptions of politics and the supposedly simple solutions they present.

5. Short Life Spans, Little Cohesion – the “Peruvianisation” of Latin American Parties

While some caudillos are becoming a danger to the democratic constitution of Latin American states, there are also micro-caudillos who determine the direction of their political parties and attract far less international attention. Particularly in countries where fixed party systems are only in the embryonic stages, promising presidential candidates tend to found “parties” themselves. The life span of these organisations is often limited to the duration of the candidate’s own political activity as primary leader. In Peru, former President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski even named a party after his initials (Peruanos Por el Kambio). After the premature end of Kuczynski’s presidency in 2018, his “party” disintegrated, too, and its members

scattered to join new groups. This phenomenon, which has become typical of Peru, has repeatedly prompted political scientists to refer to that Andean country as a “democracy without parties”⁹. The Peruvian academics Fernando





During the coronavirus pandemic, large parts of the population in Latin America suffered from a feeling of abandonment by an already weak state structure. [Source: © Sergio Moraes, Reuters.](#)

Tuesta, Paula Muñoz, Milagros Campos, Jessica Bensa, and Martín Tanaka explain the fundamental characteristics of this model:¹⁰ In ever shorter political cycles, amorphous “political franchises”¹¹ form around leader figures,

dissolving just as quickly. Once these franchises are in government, there is no high-ranking party official to assume important governing roles. This leads to technocratic governments without a clear political direction. There is

also an increased danger that individuals who become involved in such political projects will pursue personal in lieu of political goals. A serious hazard resulting from this is the increased danger of illegal structures influencing politics, a great destabilisation of politics and “mercantilisation”¹² of candidacies and campaigns.

This trajectory of political parties, described here in a Peruvian context, is becoming increasingly noticeable in countries, such as Columbia and Chile, where party politics is comparatively more institutionalised. Other countries, such as Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela, are farther along in the process of party system dissolution. Central American countries are suffering the same fate, except for Costa Rica.



Presence of a new player: The feeling imparted to visitors about their own importance drives the Latin American guests into the open arms of the Chinese Communist Party. [Source: © Ivan Alvarado, Reuters.](#)

The Uruguayan political scientist Juan Pablo Luna therefore sees the Peruvian model as a possible future scenario for other Latin American countries.¹³

6. Latin American Parties Are Looking for their Place in “Digital Democracy”

The term “digital transformation” is still used primarily in business, while its effects on political actors and parties take a much less prominent place in public consciousness.¹⁴ But the challenge is not only for political parties to establish and assert digital space; their capacity to adapt to digital democracy and its dynamics is becoming an increasingly decisive factor in their electoral chances as well. This applies to Latin America in a special way. Although, despite progress, the region remains far behind Europe and the US in expanding digital infrastructure,¹⁵ statistical data show that the continent has the most intensive daily use of social media than any other region worldwide. According to a 2019 study, Latin Americans spent an average of about three and a half hours on social media every day – almost twice as much as North Americans.¹⁶

Latin America’s parties urgently need to find strategic answers to the reality of digital democracy if they are to remain effective in future.

Nevertheless, Latin America’s parties have so far been largely passive with respect to developments in digital communication instead of innovatively harnessing new capabilities for such party work as membership recruitment, programme discussions, and engaging in fundraising.¹⁷ While in Latin America we witness skilled election strategists using very innovative and professional digital electioneering approaches in campaigns tailored strongly towards specific individuals, such techniques are rarely used for the often homespun routine party

communication and party work. Overall, parties often view digitalisation to be insufficient as a future method of shaping politics. For instance, scarcely any political specialists have made digitalisation their area of focus. Party working groups on the matter are even scarcer. All this means that it is easy for the unwieldy traditional Latin American parties, often fraught with internal regulations, to fall behind the highly emotional, personal caudillo style of politics in this point. Because the internet, and especially the many social media platforms, allow leading political figures to directly address increasingly segmented voter groups more than ever before, an important function of political parties – territorial presence and the associated proximity to the citizens – is being called into question at the very least. It is therefore extremely urgent for Latin America’s parties to find strategic answers to the reality of digital democracy if they are to remain effective in the future.

7. China Has Recognised the Weakness and Potential of Latin American Parties and is Trying to Capitalise on it

While political parties in Latin America have frequently been the focus of attention in academic and political circles primarily due to signs of crisis, another global player has recognised the potential of this weakness: the People’s Republic of China. For years, Beijing has been specifically incorporating Latin American parties into its geostrategic power play as part of the “new model”¹⁸ of party relationships touted by China’s head of state and party leader. The model involves parties focusing on their “commonalities” and “respecting” one another instead of concentrating on their differences. In 2015, China’s Communist Party hosted the “China-CELAC Political Parties’ Forum”¹⁹; “more than 60 political parties and organisations” from Latin America and the Caribbean attended a second such event in 2018.²⁰ Beijing’s most important enticement for Latin America’s political parties continues to be personal invitations to travel to China. According to author Juan Pablo Cardenal, such trips and the great hospitality displayed to guests have a “hypnotic effect”

on visitors that can “obfuscate” the impression of the “complex reality of China and its political system”²¹. The feeling imparted to visitors about their own importance, contrasted with the insignificance and hostility that they encounter at home, drives the Latin American guests into the open arms of the Communist Party.

China uses its economic involvement in Latin America to entice partners into political and geo-strategic dependency.

Beijing’s intertwining of party and government leadership in China merely leads to a rhetorical divide between governmental and party relationships. Latin American party representatives do not always realise that there is a direct relationship. It is especially important to China’s strategy to also cultivate close relationships to governments and governing parties of various ideologies.²² Examples here are the links between China’s Communist Party and the governing parties in Brazil (Partido de Trabalhadores, 2003–2016), Ecuador (Alianza País, 2007–2017), Peru (Partido Nacionalista Peruano, 2011–2016), and Argentina (Propuesta Republicana, 2015–2019), which all sent important groups of participants to the above-cited fora or on trips to China.

In all these examples, the Communist Party presented itself, to a certain extent, to be on the same level as the established democratic parties of Latin America and emphasises cooperation and the exchange of ideas and experience. By signing joint documents of “respect” and “solidarity”, the Communist Party uses Latin American parties as a shield of legitimacy. There is scarcely any critical questioning of the strategic interests behind these invitations to China and the pompous declarations, which are difficult to read in Spanish or Portuguese. Since the public at home barely notices the signing of such documents, parties lose very little political capital on the national stage.

China uses its economic involvement in Latin America to entice partners into political and geostrategic dependency. Party representatives are told this directly in the context of assessing political events in China or overlooking human rights issues during official visits. Another example are loans that are sometimes granted only on condition that Chinese companies are commissioned with implementing infrastructure measures, and that the governments in question take a China-friendly position on Taiwan.²³

Party Dialogue Is a Strategic Task in a Partnership Based on Values

As far as party systems are concerned, the Latin American countries bear a much stronger resemblance to Europe than the so-called Global South. Even though the process of erosion (“Peruvianisation”) may even be farther along in some Latin American countries than in European Union countries, for instance, many of the challenges identified here for Latin American parties are relevant for their European partners, too. Because the concept of party in the two regions is fundamentally similar, both sides would reap a lasting benefit from increased dialogue.

This is especially true because authoritarian alternatives to the party-based democracies are clearly evident in both regions as examples of the dangers of failure. The issues that could be delved into in party dialogue include all questions pertaining to linking parties with their societies – whether that be party platforms, the search for an overarching basic societal consensus, and parties’ structural orientation towards the quickly changing communication and debate models in the digital age, for instance.

If Europe neglects party cooperation, it is leaving such work to China and its state party, which supports a dictatorship. China’s engagement in forms of party cooperation, with the associated potential of propagating the Chinese political party model to Latin America, cannot and must not be met with apathy in Europe. Europe should therefore pay closer attention to parties

as indispensable bearers of living, liberal, pluralistic democracies in Latin America, and recognise them as strategic partners with shared values. Europe's willingness to strategically promote such a party dialogue will be a major factor in deciding how Latin America's party-based democracies can survive their stress test.

-translated from German-

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