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A Salvageable Relationship?

Society and Political Parties
in Latin America

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For years, Latin Americans' trust in the established political parties has found itself in a downwards spiral. This brings young movements and political novices to the scene, who have been winning elections all over the continent lately. Nevertheless, doubts are justified as to whether these political outsiders are able to solve the myriad of crises.

"It may be that parties as political institutions gradually disappearing, slowly being replaced by new political structures more suitable for the economic and technological realities of twenty-first-century politics."¹

Latin America has been hit by a wave of corruption scandals that has stained the reputation of state administrations in almost every country in the region. With hundreds of politicians jailed and hundreds more under investigation, these cases have not only shone a light on society's ethical standards by testing the strength of its institutional architecture. They have also shown there is a connection between economic crisis (or at least a slowdown in growth) and the misappropriation of public funds – a link the Internet has done much to publicise. The situation has raised questions about democracy itself and has led to conflict between the system with its governing bodies and political machinery on one side, and newly emerging social movements, political groups and outsider candidates on the other.

What do the latter demand? Some call for urgent, radical change to how politics is conducted, structural reforms to institutions, and improved opportunities for new actors and generations unencumbered by corrupt practices. Others seek recognition and a role in agreeing measures that can be implemented through the existing system. Yet others want to get into government and effect change through new policies.

It is common knowledge that the relationship between political parties and civil society is fraught with complex problems. Today these problems have actually increased exponentially

in the face of social networks having turned into a space, used by a large part of society to argue, ask questions, and/either applaud or condemn what it sees as right or wrong. This sea of subjectivities, in which *post-truth* is the new buzz word, has put public servants and political leaders under permanent scrutiny in a world that is increasingly "transparent" – or at least less opaque.

As a global window on anything that anyone does, the Internet has turned the negative phenomena created by bad action on the part of the government into a powerful body of opinion, which punishes the "bad" in politics on an unprecedented scale. Sartori,² Duverger³ and other theorists taught us that democracy is made possible by political parties. Like society itself, and indeed because of society, political parties continuously change as they strive to become a better version of themselves in order to broaden or maintain their support base in their ongoing quest for power. But globalisation and the exposure of bad political practices via social media have undermined the foundations of that party-base relationship.

In late 2017, *Latinobarómetro* published a study of the political perceptions of over 20,000 people throughout Latin America. It found that even in Uruguay, where society appreciated political parties the most, that level of trust barely reached 25 per cent. The lowest scoring country was Brazil, with seven per cent.⁴

Is the relationship between society and political parties failing? If so, someone else might be filling the void. That possibility raises another question: What is the role of social movements, emerging groups and outsider candidates in contemporary Latin America?

To answer the first question, we must revisit the figures measuring trust in the parties, which have suffered a seemingly inexorable decline since 2011. We must also examine the discouraging figures showing how Latin Americans judge democracy.

Figure 1 measures average levels of trust in political parties over the 1995-2017 period. During those 22 years, the highest point was during the mid-1990s (1996), when the region was plagued by many occurrences of political and economic crises. This score then rapidly declined until 2002, when it began to increase in line with the rising tide of so-called progressive governments throughout Latin America. Only to fall once again in 2011.

The second question concerns the role of social movements, emerging political groups and

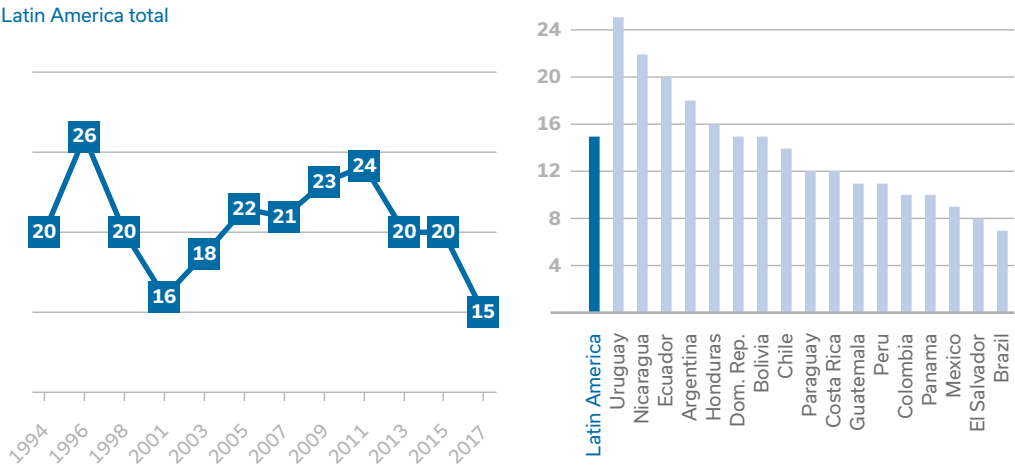
outsider candidates. These actors burst onto the political scene presenting themselves as an alternative to traditional politics and as far removed from corruption and the abuse of power. However, not all of them are new – said categories may include figures who in the past served as elected representatives, stood as candidates or belonged to a party. Nonetheless, their conduct and the way they “do” politics sets them apart from the establishment.

As noted, the scandals surrounding so many leaders are now setting the regional political agenda, with no country escaping the serious accusations levelled against high-ranking politicians and public servants. It is in this context that a space has opened up both for social movements to advocate reforms aimed at cleaning up the system and bringing in new actors, as well as for involving independent personalities in government, too. Let us turn briefly to one such case that will allow us to contextualise this argument.

Uruguay’s *Autoconvocados*

The new social movements emerging in the current juncture give society a non-party voice.⁵

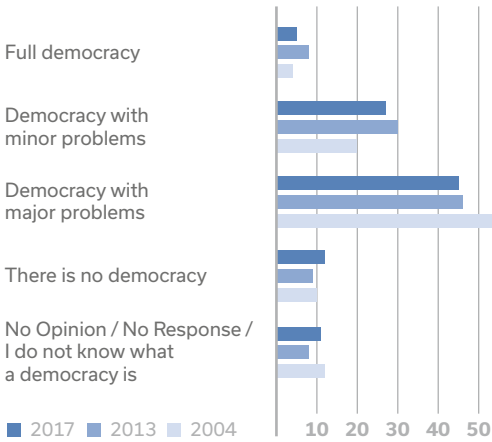
Fig. 1: Trust in Political Parties (in Per Cent)



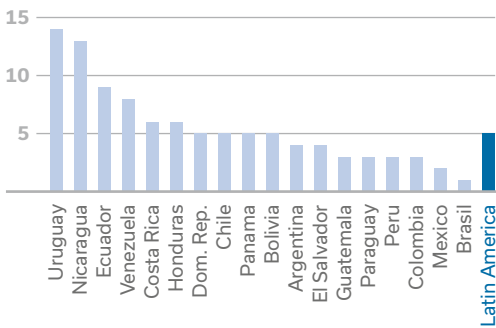
Source: Own illustration based on Corporación Latinobarómetro: Informe 2017, in: <https://bit.ly/2Os1vbE> [1 Oct 2018].

Fig. 2: Evaluating Democracy (in Per Cent)

How would you describe democracy in your country?



Full democracy



Source: Own illustration based on Corporación Latinobarómetro: Informe 2017, in: <https://bit.ly/2Os1vbE> [1 Oct 2018].

They seek to interact directly with decision-makers, exploiting the political opportunity afforded them⁶ and making themselves heard via a mobilising agenda that influences public opinion. One case in point is the movement of the *autoconvocados* (the self-convened) known as *Un Solo Uruguay* (There is only one Uruguay). It first appeared in rural Uruguay at the start of 2018, and it comprises small- to large-scale farmers and ranchers calling for a change to the economic conditions that have stifled growth and generated losses in the sector.

Who could have imagined a social movement on this scale in a country where politicians have

traditionally been linked to the world of farming and cattle breeding, and which stands out as one of the best democracies on the continent?

Un Solo Uruguay's mobilising, action-based agenda was neither initiated nor articulated by parties or producer associations. The party-society link did not function in this case and as a collective behaviour it has expressed itself through protests, vigils, communiqués and alternatives to the usual institutional routes. Playing by the rules but competing on a different terrain with the parties and associations, the *autoconvocados* have achieved widespread recognition and influence in the public opinion. They have used this capital to push for their demands, which not only include economic measures to revitalise rural production, lower fuel and electricity prices, and better conditions for rural entrepreneurs; but also a decline in state spending and an end to government corruption.

This state of affairs arises partly as a result of those in the movement who lie outside the spectrum of traditional parties⁷ but whose involvement in politics is also motivated by electoral ambitions as they seek to take advantage of the situation. Thus, in Uruguay we have the example of Edgardo Novick; a businessman who stood as a mayoral candidate in Montevideo in 2014, and who now hopes to become president through his own party, the *Partido de la Gente* (“the People’s Party”), which identifies with the political centre. Made up of independents as well as leaders from other parties,⁸ it was “borne of a spontaneous clamour on the part of society” and “aims for a transfer of power on the basis that the country is in urgent need of change and transformation”.⁹ That does not, however, mean the *autoconvocados* or similar movements have ended up serving as a platform to directly promote Novick or any other candidate – in fact, they have not managed to get close to any of the presidential favourites. Rather, what we seek to show is that such situations collaterally open a window of opportunity for an outsider discourse centred on renewing political parties, reforming the state, cleaning up public institutions, making



Sitting on a volcano: The risk of a violent escalation amongst the population increases if politicians do not manage to solve pressing social ills. Source: © Carlos Garcia Rawlins, Reuters.

public service honourable again and enabling new faces to enter into politics. Thus, the likes of the *Partido de la Gente* invariably gain a certain amount of ground in circumstances where the traditional parties fail to act as a bridge between social demands and the State.

Thus, the winner of the next presidential election in Uruguay will almost certainly be an established political leader. But there is mounting evidence to suggest that we cannot rule out the possibility of actors currently outside the mainstream parties taking centre stage in the future.



The end of an era: In 2015, there was finally change in Argentina after 13 years of Kirchnerism.

Source: © Martin Acosta, Reuters.

The Outsiders: Different Terrain, Same Game

Peruvian journalist Gustavo Gorriti describes the outsider politician as a “stranger to the system, like the character in an old Western who rides into town and leaves his mark.”¹⁰ Rodríguez, on the other hand, describes outsider candidates as: “Firstly, those candidates who stand for election without any previous experience in politics, and therefore come to it from elsewhere, from different professional backgrounds. Secondly, politicians who do not follow or appear to reject traditional political conventions, presenting themselves as an alternative or as a critic of established practices. And finally, with everything against them and little hope of becoming elected, they manage to get ahead and win.”¹¹

Electing an outsider is becoming the norm across many countries afflicted by serious political and economic crises. One-time Buenos Aires mayor Mauricio Macri was elected President of Argentina on the back of a coalition of parties and movements at odds with the system, which, among other things, called for sweeping changes after thirteen years of *kirchnerismo*. Other figures then began to appear across the region. They include Jimmy Morales, the businessman, actor and comedian who became president of Guatemala, and Lorenzo Mendoza, a successful Venezuelan industrialist who was topping local opinion polls without ever confirming his presidential bid.¹² Also heading that way is regional giant Brazil, where the whole of the political spectrum is in deep crisis. Outsiders popular with Brazilian voters are not a new occurrence: the number of sports personalities and celebrities entering the political arena has been

on the rise for some time; the most prominent amongst them are ex footballer Romário (senator) and comedian Tiririca (federal deputy). But now such figures are aiming higher, setting their sights on the office of president. Entrepreneur and television host Luciano Huck, whose popularity is partly explained by his much-watched programme on the influential *TV Globo* channel, enjoys an enviable 43 million followers on social media and the support of Fernando Henrique Cardoso – one of the region’s most well-liked former presidents. With Huck, the idea of an outsider president has begun to gain momentum in Brazil. Even when he refused to take part in the presidential race,¹³ it was clear that his potential candidacy was quick to attract support. Hence, the surveys of voting intentions put him on eight per cent¹⁴ as expectations of him standing for office grew between January and February 2018. A similar case is that of João Dória Júnior, the TV presenter and businessman elected mayor of São Paulo in 2016 and who is now another non-traditional politician in the running for president.

The electoral success of political outsiders has long ceased to be an exceptional phenomenon.

Donald Trump’s election as US President set a milestone in the rise of outsiders to the top positions in global politics. Trump is essentially the most important outsider in politics today, and his victory has once again highlighted the part played by figures from outside the status quo all over the world. For instance, a poll carried out in the US in January this year, revealed that if Oprah Winfrey were to stand as presidential candidate, she would be backed by 50 per cent of those surveyed.¹⁵

Elsewhere, the majority of candidates standing as deputies in Honduras’ last two electoral contests came from outside the traditional parties.¹⁶ In Paraguay, cumbia singer Nadia Portillo stood for the Chamber of Deputies whilst rancher

Fidel Zavala, famous for being kidnapped by Paraguayan People’s Army guerrillas, ran for Senate. In Chile’s last presidential elections, the Broad Front (left) candidate, Beatriz Sánchez, came not from party ranks but from a background in journalism instead. And in Costa Rica, evangelical singer and conservative candidate Fabricio Alvarado even won the first round of the presidential elections earlier this year, to be later defeated in the run-off.

Mexico is another country that is no stranger to this phenomenon. Former Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador recently made his third bid for president, this time on behalf of the newly created National Regeneration Movement. His victory, on the back of a radical discourse that targeted the traditional political system, has generated huge uncertainty concerning that system’s immediate future. Mexico is in fact teeming with outsider figures. One of the most interesting is 28-year-old Pedro Kumamoto, the first independent legislator for the state of Jalisco, who contested a seat in the national Senate in the country’s most recent elections. Kumamoto is a member of *Wikipolítica*, a left-wing youth movement founded in 2013 that provides a platform for young independent candidates in state and federal elections and which seeks to change traditional politics by winning elected positions. According to Roberto Castillo, a former *Wikipolítica* candidate to Mexico City’s Legislative Assembly: “Growing up in a country governed by the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party], we thought there was only one way to do politics [...]. That meant the politics of cronyism, with personal relationships trumping meritocracy, achievements, education or leadership skills. They convinced us that was the correct and morally acceptable way.”¹⁷

Outsiders are making noise throughout Latin America, attacking the traditional political class and adopting different strategies to those used by older parties. They propagate the idea that outsiders can resolve issues that career politicians cannot, because the latter are implicated in corruption scandals, are incompetent or accountable for poor outcomes when in government.

Being an outsider is no guarantee of positive outcomes when in government.

But is that really the case? Can the region's various political crises be fixed simply by putting a brand new leader in charge? We cannot know for sure, but the experiences are there for all to see. Salvadoran journalist Mauricio Funes, who began his political career only shortly before being elected president, is currently exiled in Nicaragua while his country's justice system investigates him for illicit enrichment and embezzlement. In Guatemala, Jimmy Morales has also been accused of corruption, and his popularity ratings have dipped below 17 per cent. Meanwhile Donald Trump's approval rating

averaged 39 per cent in his first year in office, the lowest ever for a US president over that period. Being an outsider is no guarantee of popularity. Neither does it guarantee positive outcomes when in government. It merely represents a different route to power.

High levels of disapproval of the political class are a feature throughout Latin America. The *Latinobarómetro* survey referred to earlier shows how little political parties are trusted in the region, and its message is loud and clear: The way politics is conducted needs to be rethought and greater efforts are required to re-establish the points of contact between society and formal political organisations. The bridge connecting voters and their elected officials is no longer fit for purpose. The Internet and social networks have uncovered deplorable events that have damaged the relationship between the people



Prototype: Donald Trump's victory shows how extreme outsiders can shake up established democracies.

Source: © Mike Segar, Reuters.

and their representatives. But politics is the art of the possible, and it can use the tools at hand to rebuild that link and reengage with society. It is a tough, complex job and one that will require many sacrifices.

Yet, one thing is clear: Traditional politics no longer has a place in an ever-changing world. The challenge facing the region's political leaders is to adapt to new realities, restore the reputation of political parties as binding and necessary democratic institutions, and prepare to play their role in the uncertain future that lies ahead.

—translated from Spanish—

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This article was first published in issue 1 | 2018 of *DIALOGO POLÍTICO* (dialogopolitico.org).

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- 2 Sartori, Giovanni 1980: *Partidos y sistemas de partidos*, Madrid.
- 3 Duverger, Maurice 1957: *Los partidos políticos*, México.
- 4 Urwicz, Tomer 2017: *Cae confianza en partidos políticos*, *El País*, 28 Oct 2017, in: <https://bit.ly/2wgip1J> [20 Aug 2018].
- 5 French sociologist Alain Touraine argues that a social movement is “the collective, organized behaviour of an agent who is fighting an adversary for the social stewardship of historicity in a concrete collectivity”. Cf. Touraine, Alain 2006: *Los movimientos sociales*, in: *Revista Colombiana de Sociología* No.27, pp. 255–278. Translation into English: Curtin, Faith, in: <https://bit.ly/2C3YO9D> [30 Aug 2018].
- 6 Doug McAdam theorises political opportunities as “opportunities afforded insurgents by the shifting institutional structure and ideological disposition of those in power”. Cf. McAdam, Doug 1996: *Orígenes terminológicos, problemas actuales y futuras líneas de investigación*, in: Mc Adam, Doug / Mc Carthy, John D. / Zald, Mayer (Hrsg.): *Movimientos sociales, perspectivas comparadas: oportunidades políticas, estructuras de movilización y marcos interpretativos culturales*, Madrid, pp. 49–70.
- 7 In this context we would consider the traditional parties to be the Colorado Party (founded 1836), National Party (1836) and Broad Front (1971), which have all governed Uruguay in the past.
- 8 Some on the Uruguayan political spectrum regard the centre as a threat to the democratic system. Thus for Senator Constanza Moreira, a member of the leftist Broad Front, “It is a conceptual and, what is worse, a political error. The conceptual error lies in thinking that those in the ‘centre’ are ‘politically moderate’, when almost by definition the centre is where those with no interest in politics all end up [...]. If politics is the art of taking sides, then the search for the centre is the art of avoiding doing just that.” Cf. Abelando, Victor Hugo 2018: *Los candidatos deben ser de la generación de relevo*, *Brecha*, 16 Feb 2018, p. 3.
- 9 Cf. Partido de la Gente 2016: *Declaración de principios*, in: <http://novick.com.uy/partido> [20 Aug 2018].
- 10 Cf. *El Comercio* 2018: *Análisis: la anatomía del outsider*, 8 Mar 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2Mp8X76> [20 Aug 2018].
- 11 Cf. Rodríguez, Roberto Andrés 2016: *El ascenso de los candidatos outsiders como consecuencia de las nuevas formas de comunicación política y la desafección ciudadana*, in: *Comunicación y Hombre* No.12, p.76.

- 12 It is worth noting that although in some countries outsiders have begun to tilt the electoral balance in their favour, or at least influence voting preferences before the day of reckoning (whether or not they then change), there is enough evidence to indicate that this does not necessarily produce corruption-free governments, which are successful in economic and political terms.
- 13 Télam 2018: Luciano Huck se bajó de la disputa presidencial, 16 Feb 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/2L8KX2L> [20 Aug 2018].
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