

# Party Politics and Elections in LATIN AMERICA

Ronald H. McDonald  
and J. Mark Ruhl

Westview Press

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Westview Press

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# Party Politics and Elections in Latin America

## About the Book and Authors

Latin America has one of the longest histories of active party politics and elections of any region in the world, yet the experiences there have been very different from those of Western Europe and the United States. In Latin America, party politics has produced governments ranging from democratic to authoritarian, with considerable variations among nations as well as fluctuations within countries over time.

This text provides a comprehensive comparative review of party politics in each Latin American country. The evolution of specific parties is examined, and special emphasis is given to the behavioral aspects of voting patterns and party affiliation. In addition, Drs. McDonald and Ruhl discuss each country's distinctive patterns of organizing and holding elections, including the laws and procedures that regulate them. Finally, the authors identify the general experiences the countries share, especially the long-term impact of sustained modernization on national party politics. The book provides students with a general framework for interpreting party politics in individual countries and for understanding how politics is linked to Latin America's economic development, democracy, and political stability.

**Ronald H. McDonald** is professor of political science at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. **J. Mark Ruhl** is professor of political science at Dickinson College.

**To Shirley  
and to Michael and Martin**

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# Preface

This book is an introduction to party politics, elections, and electoral behavior in Latin America. The subject is vast and the available research on it extensive. Our principal purpose is to summarize and conceptualize the subject, making comparisons where appropriate among nations. We try to point out both the specific, parochial experiences of individual Latin American nations as well as the more universal experiences.

We have explicitly limited our focus to political parties and elections, but there are some subjects pertaining to them that we have intentionally excluded. We are not concerned, for example, with revolutionary organizations or guerrilla movements that have not engaged in electoral activity, even though they may term themselves political parties. Neither do we analyze in depth the development of political ideologies, except as they become important in electoral contexts. These subjects have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, and we do not feel they are sufficiently relevant to our objectives for inclusion here. We have tried to give weight to political parties and elections with regard to their importance, prominence, and endurance and to countries according to the political significance of their parties and elections: party politics and elections are more complex, part of a longer heritage, and simply more relevant for generally understanding politics in some countries than in others.

We have attempted, in addition, to avoid imposing ideological or political frameworks on our analysis. It is not our intention to pass judgment on the morality or desirability of specific political parties but rather to assess their political evolution, activities, successes, and failures. Our primary tasks are description and explanation. We leave the right and the responsibility for passing judgment on Latin American political parties to those who must live with them.

Neither is this book designed as a "general theory" of Latin American party politics. Our limited objective is to summarize each country's experience with parties and elections, provide what we trust is a reasonable and coherent interpretation of that experience, and summarize some of our recurrent findings. The analytic terms and concepts we employ are discussed either in the first chapter or as they are introduced in the text.

Our book is intended primarily for those with some background either in political science or Latin American studies, although we assume the references and concepts we employ are sufficiently clear to be accessible to the general reader. The book is not an introductory text on Latin American politics. There are many subjects beyond our scope that would be appropriate for a general introduction. Instead, our effort should supplement general texts by providing greater detail and depth on what we consider to be an essential, interesting, and important aspect of Latin American politics. We have tried to include election results through the time of our writing and expect that subsequent elections will be generally consistent with the long-term trends we identify. Party politics is regularly interrupted in some nations by military coups and repression. Such interruptions are inevitable, but they should not alter the fundamental political analysis presented here.

Our country chapters are divided along similar lines, and similar questions are raised in each. The organization of these chapters, however, varies in response to the realities of the different countries, in recognition of the fact that not all the questions we raise are equally important in all nations. McDonald took primary responsibility for the chapters on Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic and for the Conclusion; Ruhl was responsible for the Introduction and the chapters on Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, Colombia, Honduras, Costa Rica, Peru, Panama, Guatemala, and El Salvador. English names are used for parties throughout the book along with their Spanish or Portuguese acronyms, and a glossary with their Spanish or Portuguese names is provided for those we discuss. We urge those interested in pursuing the subject further to consult the references provided at the end of each chapter.

The quality and quantity of research on Latin American political parties and elections have increased enormously over the past generation, although there are still gaps and inconsistencies in the research and important questions for which there is little evidence or analysis (e.g., the role of women in party politics). Attention to individual countries has been uneven, and research priorities sometimes seem determined by current events. Countries that experience revolutions, political instability, or reformist regimes tend to receive greater attention, and party politics and elections, perhaps more understandably, are studied when civilian governments prevail but are often ignored when military governments replace them. We believe the failures and problems of and impediments to party politics and elections are as important as their successes, and we try to demonstrate this in our analysis.

We have surveyed for this book 19 countries, more than 365 political parties, hundreds of elections (285 have been held since 1946 alone), and



countless political leaders. We have reviewed parties, elections, and politicians that, in our view, have been of lasting importance to the countries involved and that illustrate our major analytic themes. Notwithstanding our best efforts and the efforts of those who have kindly read our manuscript, errors will undoubtedly remain. We encourage readers who find errors to write to us so that we can make corrections in future editions.

Many individuals have been of assistance to us in preparing this manuscript. We wish to express our special thanks to John Martz, Robert Dix, William LeoGrande, Enrique Baloyra, John Booth, Steve Ropp, John Peeler, Yaw Akuoko, Vickie Kuhn, Sandra Woy-Hazelton, Gary Hoskin, Kim Fryling, Kristin McCarthy, Shirley Hall, Neale Pearson, June Dumas, Judith Jablonski, and Martha Leggett. Errors of fact or judgment are, of course, our responsibility alone.

*Ronald H. McDonald  
J. Mark Ruhl*

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# INTRODUCTION

## Conceptualizing Party Politics in Latin America

In the 1970s, the great majority of Latin Americans lived under military dictatorships. Only in the handful of civilian-ruled countries did political parties and electoral politics receive the attention of academics or journalists. The redemocratization process of the 1980s, however, has dramatically refocused attention on competitive elections and party politics throughout the region. With the reestablishment of civilian governments in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and many other countries, parties have reemerged as subjects of central concern to analysts of Latin American politics (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986:57; Drake and Silva, 1986). Accordingly, academic research on Latin American parties and elections, which had stagnated after a promising beginning, now shows healthy signs of renewed activity.<sup>1</sup>

### The Significance of Party Politics in Latin America

Although the importance of party politics has increased during the 1980s, the recent proliferation of elections should not lead us to exaggerate the role of political parties. The significance of parties in the political process varies widely in Latin America, and in only a few countries such as Venezuela or Costa Rica have these institutions become as politically influential as their counterparts in Western Europe or the United States. In the majority of Latin American nations, the armed forces, not the parties, remain the most powerful political actors. In addition, many key foreign and domestic private-sector groups continue to bypass party politics in favor of more direct governmental contacts. In fact, in some parts of the region, parties

TABLE 1.1  
Political Significance of Party Politics in Latin America:  
Country Comparisons, 1968-1988

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Category one: Parties as dominant actors

Costa Rica	Venezuela
Colombia	Mexico

Category two: Parties as primary but non-dominant actors

Argentina	Cuba
Brazil	Nicaragua
Chile	Dominican Republic
Uruguay	

Category three: Parties as secondary actors

Peru	Honduras
Ecuador	Guatemala
El Salvador	Bolivia

Category four: Parties as marginal actors

Paraguay	Haiti
Panama	

---

still are relegated to peripheral roles even during periods when elections are permitted.

Nonetheless, the current redemocratization underscores some of the reasons that political parties remain important in Latin America in spite of the military's power. Parties are an indispensable element of competitive electoral politics, and the popular enthusiasm that has greeted redemocratization reaffirms that political legitimacy is inextricably bound to democratic elections in the Americas (Rouquie, 1986:120). Because they lack legitimacy, military regimes generally are viewed as "temporary," regardless of how long they endure or how many plebiscites they stage. Sooner or later, when the armed forces restore free elections, parties invariably reemerge even in countries in which they have been persecuted. Indeed, their durability and lasting popular appeal suggest that parties are a more salient feature of the Latin American political landscape than many observers have previously recognized.

Over time, the importance of party politics has fluctuated within Latin America as a whole and within each nation in the region. Table 1.1 offers a subjective ranking of Latin American party systems in terms of their political significance from 1968 to 1988. During this period, parties have been consistently dominant political actors in Costa Rica, Colombia, Ven-

ezeuela, and Mexico. In each of these four countries in category one, national politics has clearly revolved around the civilian parties. In four of the seven nations in the next and largest category (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay), parties also traditionally have played central roles; however, in each of these countries, the military has frequently suspended party activities. In the Dominican Republic, too, where parties have become politically relevant only since the late 1960s, the army remains powerful. Cuba and Nicaragua also fall in category two (not the first one, where they belong today) because (1) the Cuban Communist party has only lately assumed a major role after many years of less-institutionalized revolutionary politics, and (2) parties did not figure prominently in Nicaragua until the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) came to power in 1979.

Six Latin American countries (Peru, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Bolivia) are in the third category—nations in which parties generally have been actors of secondary importance even when the government has not been under formal military control. At present, political parties are cautiously attempting to enlarge their influence in nearly all of these nations, but the armed forces remain dominant. Finally, the fourth category encompasses the three nations in which parties have been of least consequence since the late 1960s: Paraguay, the area's last personalist dictatorship, military-controlled Panama, and traditionally partyless Haiti.<sup>2</sup>

The tentative rankings in Table 1.1 indicate that parties are more significant political actors in nations where democratic elections have become entrenched (Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela) than in countries where authoritarian military rule has always been the norm (El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia). As Huntington (1968:408–409) has observed, the significance of the party system is closely associated with the subordination of the military to civil authority. But, as we can see in Table 1.1, the association is an imperfect one. Authoritarian Mexico falls in category one because of the centrality of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary party (PRI), and Communist Cuba merits a similar ranking now that its vanguard party has gained ascendancy. Political parties can obviously play dominant roles in democratic and nondemocratic contexts.<sup>3</sup>

### The Functions of Latin American Political Parties

The best way to evaluate the significance of parties is to examine their specific functions. Political parties, defined simply as groups that seek to elect officeholders under a given label (Epstein, 1967:9), vary radically in function depending on the political system they inhabit and their relative strength within it. Only a few of the more than 125 parties active in Latin America today play all of the roles attributed to them in the general theoretical literature—literature that is based on Western European and Anglo-American systems in which military obedience and legislative power are taken for granted (Duverger, 1954; Key, 1964; Epstein, 1967; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Sartori, 1976; Sorauf, 1984).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, parties are an

essential component of Latin America's electoral process and perform a variety of other functions, the most important of which include political recruitment, political communications, social control, and government organization/policymaking.

### *Political Recruitment*

Parties have always played a major part in integrating potential leaders, political activists, and newly relevant social groups into Latin American politics (Chalmers, 1972:123-124). Most of Latin America's contemporary leaders, such as Alan García (Peru), José Sarney (Brazil), and Raúl Alfonsín (Argentina), entered political life through partisan channels. Ambitious individuals who seek government positions and the benefits of having influence in the public sector are attracted to parties because these organizations usually control patronage and nominations to public office. Other citizens with strong political opinions join parties in hopes of affecting policy outcomes.

### *Political Communication*

Parties are valuable intermediaries between elites and mass publics in Latin America. In electoral campaigns, competing party elites present their views to the mass electorate and mobilize voter support. Even though the typical Latin American election campaign involves more slander than policy analysis, some political education and political socialization do occur. Campaigns can also produce increased social mobilization<sup>5</sup> and popular demands for government action.

Party leaders try to manipulate public opinion and to channel political participation to suit their own designs. But in their drive to capture votes, they also adapt party platforms to reflect popular attitudes. To the degree that democratic practices are present, elites are compelled to respond at least rhetorically to the concerns of the public. In addition, for citizens unalterably opposed to the existing government, parties provide an outlet for expressing their dissatisfaction with elite policies.

### *Social Control*

Parties have regularly been employed as instruments of social control. Today this function is most evident in Communist Cuba where the ruling party is responsible for indoctrinating and regimenting the mass population. To a lesser extent, the official parties of conservative authoritarian governments have also sought to enforce mass compliance with the directives of the regime. Of course, official parties of whatever stripe rely on co-optation as well as coercion. Mexico's centrist Institutional Revolutionary party (PRI) has long been recognized for its success in aggregating diverse interests through co-optation. In addition, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986:58) point out that parties also act as instruments of social control in many of the

nations now experiencing redemocratization because party leaders restrain their followers' demands in order to prevent renewed military intervention.

### *Government Organization and Policymaking*

Under military governments, parties generally have little to do with policy formation unless they are explicit allies of those who have seized control. Civil-military cabinets are quite common, but in recent years civilian officials have tended to be nonpartisan technocrats drawn from the private sector or the state bureaucracy. Conversely, when formal governmental authority rests with elected civilians, the armed forces tend to retain substantial influence over policy.

Except in a handful of Latin American nations, parties do not dominate the policymaking process as they do in Western Europe. Latin American parties do not represent all of the powerful groups in society, and party resources for influencing government decisions (votes, mass demonstrations) are limited compared with those of their rivals (Chalmers, 1972:120-121). Still, democratic elections do increase the role of parties in policymaking because they place partisan politicians in the presidency, the legislature, and in much of the bureaucracy.

Only a few Latin American parties have developed the coherent programs and organizational strength necessary for party government on a Western European model. Yet, when in power, most Latin American parties do play important roles in enhancing the chief executives' ability to implement their policies. In contrast, opposition parties play only a marginal role in policy formation because of the enduring tradition of executive dominance in most of Latin America.

### **Origins and Common Characteristics**

It is difficult to offer generalizations about Latin American political parties because they vary so widely in origins, ideology, organization, and mass support. According to Charles Anderson (1967), Latin America is a "living museum" that contains exhibits of nearly every type of party that has ever emerged there.

Once Latin American countries became independent, rival aristocratic elites in different countries created informal political groups that gradually evolved into competing Liberal and Conservative parties by the mid-nineteenth century. Influenced by political thought in France, Britain, and the United States, Liberals often adopted these more modern nations as models. Liberal intellectuals commonly promoted the separation of church and state, the federalism, and the free-trade economics that they admired abroad. In contrast, Conservatives remained loyal to Spanish authoritarian traditions and fought to preserve the Catholic church's privileged status as well as a centralized state with strong economic controls. Most of the Liberal and Conservative parties of the past century have disappeared, along with the issues that divided them. A few of these old parties, however, have



maintained their influence. They continue to dominate electoral politics in both Colombia and Honduras, and vestiges of Liberal or Conservative parties still compete in Nicaraguan politics.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a modernized, urban middle class began to enter politics. It formed the principal base of support for new reformist parties that drew on European liberalism. Advocating universal male suffrage, educational reform, and liberal democracy against military rule, these parties became significant actors first in the Southern Cone and later in other parts of Latin America. The Chilean Radical party was the first of such parties, but the Argentine Radical Civic Union and Uruguayan Colorados became the most influential. Having extended their appeal to some working-class elements, these latter two parties remain key political players to this day.

By World War I, parties based on Marxist revolutionary principles were active in Argentina, Cuba, Brazil, and Mexico (sometimes in competition with anarcho-syndicalists). But Latin American socialism was soon disrupted by the factionalization of the world socialist movement that followed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Although severely repressed, the Communist parties that emerged in the 1920s became the most important of the hemisphere's Marxist parties for many decades. Notwithstanding the fact that orthodox, pro-Soviet parties acquired influence over organized labor and even won some legislative seats, Communists never attained government control except as junior partners in a small number of multiparty coalitions (Chile, Costa Rica). Although the Communists eclipsed the few right-wing parties that adopted European fascism (e.g., Brazil's Integralistas) in the 1930s, the small size of the industrial proletariat and internal divisions caused by further international Communist schisms (e.g., Trotskyism) proved to be permanent obstacles to party expansion.

After 1945 many revolutionaries who were attracted to Marxism organized new political groups outside of the staid and dogmatic Communist parties. The triumph of Marxist guerrilla leader Fidel Castro in Cuba in 1959 convinced many other radicals to follow his independent example, but the movements they formed were fraught with ideological and personalist divisions. By the late 1980s, Latin American Marxism had spawned a bewildering variety of parties, factions, and guerrilla organizations. Marxist parties are in power in Cuba and Nicaragua, and a Marxist coalition constitutes a major electoral force in Peru. Elsewhere, Marxist political groups play only minor roles in electoral politics because they (1) enjoy only modest popular support (Argentina); (2) are suppressed (Chile); or (3) are involved in guerrilla movements seeking the violent overthrow of the existing government (El Salvador).

As Latin American electorates swelled to include new social strata, a great many indigenous nationalist/populist parties appeared between the 1920s and 1950s,<sup>6</sup> inhibiting the growth of Marxist parties. Beginning with Victor Haya de la Torre's American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) in 1927, these homegrown parties used platforms combining nationalism