

**DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA, CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS:
POLITICAL PARTY AND PARTY SYSTEM INSTITUTIONALIZATION
AND WOMEN'S LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Latin America countries face a number of challenges to their democracies. Although the situation varies from country to country, the six major challenges in the region as a whole, emerging from a survey by the Inter-American Development Bank, are:

- Little enforcement of rules and accountability for politicians
- Weak democratic culture
- Crisis of representation
- Political intimidation and violence
- Traditional parties losing traditional constituencies
- No real separation of powers

The quality of democracy in Latin America varies considerably by country. The Freedom Score (the lower the score, the more democratic the country) is a useful measure of the quality of a democracy. Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay all have scores of 1 (with Panama at 1.5), showing their democracies are on a par with those of Western Europe and North America. With scores of 2 and 2.5, a second group of countries (Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, El Salvador, Guyana, Jamaica, Mexico and Peru) are still classified as free, but have some important deficiencies.

Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Guatemala have scores of 3 and 3.5 and are classified as only partly free. Finally, Venezuela stretches the concept of democracy to its limits. Clearly, although there are problems in the region, the extent of these vary considerably from country to country.

The two key challenges I consider in this paper are the weak (and declining) institutionalization of political parties and party systems, and the dramatic under-representation of women in national legislatures. Many of the lessons drawn from analysis of this second challenge are equally applicable to other under-represented social groups.

POLITICAL PARTY INSTITUTIONALIZATION: THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION, BACKGROUND

In most instances, an institutionalized party system is considered to have a positive effect on the functioning of a country's democracy. In such a system, parties are far more likely to have consistent programs and to compete against each other on the basis of policy proposals. This provides for greater policy consistency and better accountability to the electorate, whereas in a weakly institutionalized system parties are based more on personal appeals and indulge in short term populist proposals which are soon forgotten after the election.

Weakly institutionalized parties tend to have short life spans, are far less accountable and make it difficult for voters to know what to expect once they are in power. If political elites have little commitment to their parties or the party system in general, this provides a fertile breeding ground for anti-system politics.

There are four key components which together influence the level of party system institutionalization, and I briefly look at each of these below.

Stability in inter-party patterns of competition

In institutionalized systems, parties tend to be the same over long time periods and to garner relatively similar shares of the votes and seats in election after election. This is the situation in countries such as Chile, Honduras and El Salvador, whose levels of volatility are comparable with those of Western Europe.

In more volatile systems, on the other hand, parties can go from important to inconsequential or even disappear over a short space of time. This situation is typified by Peru, Guatemala and Bolivia.

Party roots in society

In institutionalized systems, parties generally have strong roots in society, and voters tend to cast their vote for the same party in successive elections. In a weakly institutionalized system, voters tend instead to choose on the basis of individual candidate appeal or campaign message, and parties have ephemeral links with society.

In Latin America, countries with parties deeply rooted in society include Paraguay, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay, whereas in Chile, Guatemala and Brazil parties are quite shallowly rooted.

The legitimacy of political parties and elections

For a party political system to become institutionalized, both the parties and the elections in which they compete must be seen as legitimate by the population. Measures of this legitimacy can be derived by surveying citizens about their confidence in parties and their importance and how they rate elections. Aggregating these results, Uruguay, Venezuela and Chile have parties and electoral systems which enjoy considerable legitimacy among their populations. At the other extreme, we find Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, where there is a serious crisis of legitimacy.

Political party organization

In institutionalized party systems, parties are well resourced and the organization takes precedence over any one leader. In weak systems, parties have few resources and are dominated by individual leaders. Some measure of the difference can be found by looking at the age of the various parties in the system and surveying legislators on their views about the strength of party organization. Party organization is strongest in El Salvador, Uruguay and Argentina, and weakest in Bolivia, Guatemala and Colombia.

Party Institutionalization Index

Aggregating these four factors gives a Party Institutionalization Index. On this measure, countries including Uruguay, El Salvador, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Panama and Chile have well institutionalized party systems, while countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Guatemala and Bolivia are weakly institutionalized. Argentina, Paraguay, Nicaragua, Mexico, Costa Rica and Brazil occupy an intermediate position.

There is a strong relationship between these scores and important factors such as the quality of a country's democratic system and the level of corruption. Freedom House Freedom Scores are 1.8 for the strongly institutionalized countries, but only 3.2 for the weak ones, and corruption indicators show the same pattern.

POLITICAL PARTY INSTITUTIONALIZATION: THE SOLUTION

There is great diversity among Latin American democracies. Some have the basic building blocks in place necessary for a well institutionalized party system comparable to Western European democracies, while at the other extreme it is possible that the system is so degraded that there is currently little chance of that reforms will result in the establishment of an institutionalized party system.

A set of general reforms is proposed in order to increase the level of party and party system institutionalization in the region. These focus on increasing the value of the party label, boosting incentives for politicians to help build strong parties and improving the legitimacy of political parties and elections.

The political party marketplace

Existing legislators and politicians have little loyalty to their political parties and no real concern for the public reputation of the party. The barriers to new party formation are low as are the thresholds for party survival. A number of reforms could improve the situation.

The first is to make party formation a non-trivial matter, without raising the bar too high. Specifically, except for countries where entry barriers are already higher, a party should have membership equal to 1% of the number of registered voters in a country's largest sub-national territorial units, and an overall membership of 1% of the whole country's voters. It should also meet certain organizational requirements.

The second reform relates to extinction of existing parties, to avoid crowding the ballot or simply being parties of convenience. The proposal is that, to remain registered, a party should receive at least 4% of the national vote for the lower legislative house and contest at least half of the available seats.

Thirdly, all political alliances should be national in scope and agreed by the parties' national leaderships.

Party and campaign finance

The first reform proposed is for all political parties with a certain threshold of the national vote to be generously funded by the state to strengthen ties with the electorate and encourage politicians to stay with their parties. The exact figure will vary between countries, but could be 0.25 to 0.5% of the national budget.

Secondly, the state should also provide ample campaign financing at election time and thirdly, this support should extend to provision of a generous amount of national television and radio time in proportion to the number of legislative seats occupied.

Candidate selection

To ensure that elected representatives follow general party positions once in office, the party leadership should control the candidate nomination process, followed by a mixed-electorate, multi-stage selection process. Some countries could also follow the more radical example of Mexico and prohibit immediate re-election to national office.

Voting reforms

To increase the linkages among candidates for public office and encourage party-oriented voting, constitutional reforms should be introduced where necessary so that presidential and legislative elections are held on the same day.

The second proposal is to link the votes for different offices to make them more party- than individual-oriented. This could, for example, follow the example of a number of US states in allowing voters the option of a straight party ticket vote.

Taken together, these various reforms would increase the degree of party institutionalization, make parties more programmatic and reduce short-term populist policies and personalist appeals to voters.

POLITICAL PARTY INSTITUTIONALIZATION: A SUMMARY OF BENEFITS AND COSTS

The more programmatic approach arising from greater institutionalization should also result in more consistent policies and greater accountability. It should also increase the linkages with the electorate and increase the overall credibility of the democratic system.

There would be a modest drain on national budgets to fund the reforms. There is also a danger of an institutionalized system becoming ossified and unrepresentative (for example, in Venezuela prior to 1998) or that the extra resources could merely consolidate clientist politics in the more corrupt countries. This risk would be highest in countries such as Venezuela, Paraguay, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Guatemala, and lowest in countries like Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay, El Salvador, Colombia and Panama.

The costs and benefits estimated, and benefit-cost ratios derived from them, are relative, and have no absolute meaning. Nevertheless, they show the countries where reform is likely to be most justified. Uruguay and Nicaragua, for example, top the list with scores of 5, with Costa Rica, Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Panama following. Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua come at the bottom of the ranking, which suggests that reform of this type is not justified in these countries at present.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION: THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION, BACKGROUND

The low representation of women in legislatures is considered not only to be a flaw in the functioning of democracy, but also means that women legislators are unable to bring their intrinsically different behavior and policy approach into play. Although the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 recommended positive action by governments to correct this, there has been little real progress in Latin American countries since then. This is despite 11 countries in the region adopting legislation requiring minimum percentages of women on parties' national electoral lists.

It is clear that setting quotas is not in itself sufficient. One important factor is the use of closed candidate lists, in combination with medium to large sized electoral districts. This ensures that, for a party achieving electoral success in a district, a minimum proportion of those elected will be female. For open lists, there is no such guarantee.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION: RESEARCHING A SOLUTION

In order to analyze the situation further, I gathered data on recent elections across Latin America. Closed lists predominate in the region. Of the 19 countries in the survey, nine have some form of national quota legislation for at least one of their legislative houses.

These legislative requirements are of three types: those requiring a minimum percentage of women on the lists, with a placement mandate, those setting a minimum percentage but with no placement mandate (because they have open list systems) and those with no minimum percentage or placement mandate. The prescribed minimum percentage is most commonly 30%. Since systems with no minimum legislated percentage of women candidates are easy for parties to work round, they are considered here as though they had no legislative requirement. Compliance with the other two systems has generally been good.

The electoral data was analyzed in terms of three independent variables: the electoral system configuration (combinations of closed/open lists with and without quotas), party magnitude and party ideology. All variables resulted in a significantly lower percentage of women elected than the baseline electoral system of closed lists and quotas. The Closed List/Quota system is expected to return 30% of women; the next best system is Open List/Quota, expected to return 22%. Party magnitude makes little difference over the full range, but the Closed List/Quota system is much superior to the Open List system primarily when the party magnitude is 2.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION: THE SOLUTION

This survey points to three areas where reform should be adopted: quota legislation, list format and party magnitude.

The most fundamental reform is for countries to adopt the most effective gender quota legislation for members of their national legislature. Specifically, candidate lists should be equally split between the genders. In closed list systems, the candidate lists should be zippered, ie candidates must alternate by sex. Legislation must, of course, have rigid compliance standards.

Although the results of this for closed list systems are predictable, this is less so for open lists. However, moving from open to closed lists is expected to increase the percentage of women elected by about 10%. For countries with no quota legislation (or flawed systems), introducing the Closed List/Quota system should result in women representing about 20% more of those elected.

However, in districts which only return one legislator of a particular party (party magnitude of 1), a closed list system with quotas returns only 15% of women. Increasing the party magnitude to 2 has a dramatic effect, increasing this to 48% (although this drops back at higher magnitudes). The main determinant of party magnitude is district magnitude, and therefore a fundamental reform needed is the elimination of all small magnitude districts. The proposal is to promote the creation of district magnitude values greater than 5, though ideally below 20 (between 6 and 10 should be adequate). Secondary electoral law reform to revise PR formulae and adopt thresholds would also boost party magnitude.

Adoption of this package of reforms would boost women's representation considerably. Although the exact impact would vary between countries, the percentage of women in most legislative bodies can be expected to reach approximately 40%.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION: SUMMARY OF BENEFITS AND COSTS

These reforms would have three primary benefits. First, the descriptive representation of women in legislatures will immediately be improved, which will enhance the legitimacy of democratic governments. Second, an autonomous and powerful cadre of women leaders will be created in each country. Third, issues of importance to women will come higher up the policy agenda.

There are direct political costs associated with this reform, which will depend on how much the electoral system needs to be changed and how deeply embedded the current rules are. It also in principle limits the ability of male candidates to run for public office, but I consider these costs to be extremely limited. There is no evidence that women elected via a quota system have diminished status or credibility vis a vis their male colleagues.

Given the reforms proposed, three general solutions can be considered for the governments in the region. Solution A implements the ideal gender quota legislation discussed, closed party lists and electoral rules conducive to moderate sized party magnitudes. Solution B implements the quota legislation only. Solution C implements the ideal quota legislation together with closed lists (but makes no changes to party magnitude).

Solution A would provide the greatest benefits in terms of female legislators, ensuring they comprise 40 to 50% of the total legislature. For systems which already have medium to large electoral districts and closed party lists, solution B would increase the percentage of women elected by about 20%. In other cases, its effect would be weaker. Solution C would boost women's representation by 15-20% in systems which do not have effective quota legislation but use medium to large electoral districts. All solutions carry indirect costs related to the reforms needed to increase party magnitude and the type of party list.

Each combination of reforms would have an impact on the degree of Representativeness, Effectiveness and Participation of the electoral system. In general, those reforms which would increase the percentage of women elected would increase Representativeness, have a mixed to negative effect on Effectiveness and a neutral and at times negative effect on Participation. The benefits would be greatest for those countries which do not currently have effective quota legislation and follow Solution A.

CONCLUSION

Latin America's democracies are facing a number of challenges, and I have proposed solutions to two critical ones. Nonetheless, needs vary widely across the region, from the exemplary democracies of Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay to countries such as Guatemala and Venezuela where there is a severe democratic deficit.