

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA AFTER TWENTY FIVE YEARS OF DEMOCRACY.

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“If both elites and followers can be modernized, the existing integrating political structures –parties, party systems, legislature and presidency- will adjust themselves to the changes, or new working structures will evolve to perform the function” (Scott, 1967:134).

After having left behind oligarchic and/or military regimes of an excluding and authoritarian nature, the current political situation of Latin America is much different than it was when Lipset and Solari (1967) published their influential work on elites in Latin America. In the preface to their book, the authors pointed out that independently of the differences of social systems, one of the requirements for development was a competent elite, motivated to modernize society; at that time, the role of politicians, at least those of a democratic origin was practically irrelevant. Today, however, Latin American politics is in the hands of politicians whose power emanates directly from a competence that is basically party-based, through free and fair periodic elections. For such a thing to have happened simultaneously in so many countries and to have lasted for a continuous period of, on average, close to a quarter of a century is unprecedented in the region.

Almost three decades after democratic transition have witnessed numerous political reforms. No country in the region, with the obvious exception of Cuba, has been left out of this wave of political transformations. Profound constitutional reforms, decentralization processes, and changes in the relationships between the branches of government, in electoral laws and in rules regarding political participation are just some of the transformations experienced by Latin American polities.

As of 2007, the agenda of political reforms is patently open in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, and also important in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Peru.

Moved by a sort of constitutional obsession, institutional and political reforms have derived from a combination of several factors. In the first place, from the 1980s on, the abundant and fertile academic literature on constitutional engineering, as the influential book by Sartori (1994) included these two words in its title, informed by the development of neo-institutional theory in political science, has supplied the intellectual energy necessary to address this issue. In the second place, this trend toward political reform was facilitated by the malleable character of formal institutions, which could easily be manipulated by political reformers. In the third place, skilful and ambitious political leaders used reforms to advance their political goals, as in the case of constitutional changes, to enable the reelection of presidents, as has happened in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic and Venezuela. Finally, the sometimes irresponsible policy of international cooperation organizations and donor countries, in combination with the ambition of international consultants, has stimulated all kinds of institutional reform projects, without much consideration to whether or not they are feasible or not.

In the 1980's, discussions started to center on the advantages and disadvantages of presidentialism. Later on, debates focused on electoral representation, and led to the introduction of ballottage in presidential elections and of mixed electoral systems. Institutional debates addressed other aspects and types of elections and electoral systems (such as reelection, electoral thresholds or preferential vote) and the implications of uni- and bicameralism. Although it is impossible to propose here an accurate and all-encompassing picture of all these reforms, it is possible to say that most of them were designed in an improvised manner and without careful study of their implications and alternatives. Reforms were effected without a systemic consideration of political problems, and were driven by unrealistic expectations regarding their short-term effects.

These results must not lead to the conclusion that neoinstitutionalist theories were wrong; it was, rather, their narrow minded application to Latin American politics that failed. In an intellectual context dominated by structural class-based and dependence theories, neoinstitutionalist theories had the advantage of drawing attention to political institutions. However, following this period of focus on institutions, it now becomes necessary to shift the focus to the key players in the democratic system. Institutions matter, but politicians matter as well. I should say even more. Political elites push changes in institutions, and are the critical factor affecting political democratization and modernization.

The great importance accorded to institutions in the study of politics over the past fifteen years can be perceived in the widespread use of the phrase “institutions matter”. Thus it is possible that the moment has come in which we should pay more attention to actors that move in the institutional arena on a day-to-day basis. Espousing this approach does not imply that we should cease to pay attention to the general rules that govern human interaction. Rather, focusing on politicians permits us to see these human interactions in a new light, for the rules behind this interaction do not exist independently from individual people. Furthermore, institutions are constantly modified by the actions of individuals. In addition, after a quarter of a century of uninterrupted democracy in the majority of Latin American countries, the daily practice of politics within a reasonable stable set of rules has facilitated an unmistakable learning process, thanks to the mechanisms of democracy. The challenge posed by having frequent elections, the struggle within political parties to obtain important positions, and the intense life in the different levels of representation and of political management are factors that increasingly contribute to converting politicians into frantic actors of vital importance in every aspect of politics.

Politicians matter. Political actions are influenced by the institutional framework established, there are cooperative games made pressing by the existing rules between actors, and different strategies end up imposing themselves, but after all is said and done, there is no process

without players. Politicians have a family, social and cultural origin and they are marked by socialization processes that have a serious individual impact. Their belonging to a political party can affect them, but they--politicians---also affect the political party.

For studying politicians I have conducted during more than a decade a research project that, focused on the opinions of representative samples of Latin American representatives, has provided empirical evidence. This project, called PELA, is being carried out since 1994. The project is based on a questionnaire of more than 80 questions and 320 variables. As of 2007, a total 4,573 personal interviews of Latin American representatives have been effected. See Tables 1 & 2.

The premise of the PELA, then, is simple: politicians matter. The importance of politicians brings us, in this case, to look at them in a double sense. Politicians here, to a great degree, are causal factors that explain different political problems, and above all, are focused on the world of political parties that constitutes their natural habitat. In turn, the characteristics of politicians are the result of other causal processes, first and foremost among which are their own processes of professionalization.

Calling a selection of persons “political elite” continues to be complicated, inviting disagreement over the selection process, the people, and the very term “elite;” nevertheless contextualizing the problem within the limits of the Legislative Power helps simplify things. This is the focus adopted in this research. In the first place, the political elite is put on the same level as the parliamentary elite. Legislators are clearly identifiable, and their functions and role in the political system are known and, in representative democracies, are judged to be relevant. In second place, the use of sampling techniques in specific universes enables the elimination of disagreement over the selection process. Finally, the term “elite” is used in one of its simplest senses, as “someone who occupies a relevant place,” which is undoubtedly the case of Latin American national legislators.

TABLE 1. Distribution of interviews by country and year

| First Round | Legislative Term | Number of Interviews | % of the Chamber (sample error) | Second Round | Legislative Term | % of the Chamber (sample error) | Number of Interviews | Third Round | Legislative Term | % of the Chamber (sample error) | Number of Interviews | Fourth Round | Legislative Term | % of the Chamber (sample error) | Number of Interviews |
|-------------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Argentina | 1995-1997 | 68 | 26.5% (±11.93) | Argentina | 1997-2001 | 49.8% (±6.39) | 128 | Argentina | 2003-2007 | 40.9% (±7.51) | 105 | | | | |
| Bolivia | 1993-1997 | 74 | 56.9% (±9.05) | Bolivia | 1997-2002 | 75.4% (±5.18) | 98 | Bolivia | 2002-2007 | 61.5% (±7.45) | 80 | Bolivia | | 75.3% (+5.24) | 98 |
| Chile | 1993-1997 | 93 | 77.5% (±5.18) | Chile | 1997-2001 | 74.2% (±5.58) | 89 | Chile | 2001-2005 | 73.3% (±5.71) | 88 | Chile | 2005-2009 | 75% (+5.52) | 90 |
| Costa Rica | 1994-1998 | 52 | 91.2% (±4.22) | Costa Rica | 1998-2002 | 86.0% (±5.56) | 49 | Costa Rica | 2002-2006 | 89.5% (±4.80) | 51 | Costa Rica | 2006-2010 | 100% | 57 |
| Colombia* | | | | Colombia | 1998-2002 | 54.7% (±10.47) | 88 | Colombia | 2002-2006 | 57.2% (±6.93) | 95 | Colombia | 2006-2010 | 64.4% (±5.14) | 107 |
| El Salvador | 1994-1997 | 46 | 54.8% (±10.23) | El Salvador | 1997-2000 | 69.0% (±7.82) | 58 | El Salvador | 2000-2003 | 76.2% (±6.50) | 64 | El Salvador | 2003-2006 | 95.2% (±2.5) | 80 |
| Ecuador | 1996-1998 | 72 | 87.8% (±4.43) | Ecuador | 1998-2002 | 92.6% (±2.65) | 112 | Ecuador | 2002-2006 | 98.0% (±1.50) | 98 | | | | |
| Guatemala* | | | | Guatemala | 1995-2000 | 78.8% (±5.96) | 63 | Guatemala | 2000-2004 | 69.9% (±6.44) | 79 | Guatemala | 2004-2008 | 76.6% (±4.62) | 121 |
| Honduras | 1994-1997 | 67 | 52.3% (±8.65) | Honduras | 1997-2001 | 55.5% (±8.09) | 71 | Honduras | 2001-2005 | 79.7% (±4.58) | 102 | Honduras | 2005-2009 | 71.1% (±5.78) | 91 |
| México | 1994-1997 | 123 | 24.6% | Mexico | 1997-2000 | 25.2% | 126 | Mexico | 2000-2003 | 24.8% | 124 | Mexico | 2003-2006 | 24.8% | 124 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|------------|
| | | | (±8.09) | | | (±7.84) | | | | (±7.92) | | | | (±7.92) | |
| Nicaragua* | | | | Nicaragua | 1996-2001 | 75.3% (±6.08) | 70 | Nicaragua | 2002-2006 | 65.2% (±8.06) | 60 | Nicaragua | 2006-2010 | 76.7% (±6.15) | 69 |
| Panama* | | | | Panama* | | | | Panama | 1999-2004 | 90.1% (±4.02) | 64 | Panama | 2004-2009 | 87.2% (±4.4) | 68 |
| Paraguay | 1993-1998 | 47 | 58.8% (±9.78) | Paraguay | 1998-2003 | 81.3% (±5.46) | 65 | Paraguay | 2003-2008 | 70.0% (±7.75) | 56 | | | | |
| Peru | 1995-2000 | 87 | 72.5% (±5.96) | Peru | 2001-2006 | 69.17% (±6.70) | 83 | | | | | | | | |
| Dom. Rep. | 1994-1998 | 62 | 51.7% (±9.72) | Dom. Rep. | 1998-2002 | 69.1% (±5.64) | 103 | Dom. Rep. | 2002-2006 | 78.7% (±4.31) | 118 | Dom. Rep. | 2006-2010 | 52.8% (±7.12) | 94 |
| Venezuela | 1993-1998 | 69 | 34.0% (±10.26) | Venezuela | 2000-2005 | 60.6% (±6.58) | 100 | | | | | | | | |
| Uruguay | 1995-2000 | 73 | 73.7% (±6.22) | Uruguay | 2000-2005 | 68.7% (±7.08) | 68 | Uruguay | 2005-2010 | 86.86% (±4.15) | 86 | | | | |
| TOTAL | | 933 | | | | | 1371 | | | | 1270 | | | | 999 |

* It was not possible to obtain a representative sample.

TABLE 2: Axes of analysis and variables-indicators included in this study

| Axis of Analysis | Indicators-Variables |
|--|---|
| Democracy, elections, and form of government. | Definition of democracy and evaluation of its advantages; factors linked to democratic consolidation and risks of democratic breakdown; satisfaction with democratic stability and trust on electoral processes; definition and preferences of form of government; democratic stability; assessment of majoritarian and proportional electoral systems; advantages and disadvantages of the presidential regime when compared to the parliamentary one. |
| Political parties. | Party identification, level of party activism, role of political parties, levels of popular mobilization, militancy levels, democracy and internal organization, trust in political parties, political participation in party life, legalization of political parties, vote discipline, opinion on party leaders |
| Armed Forces | Opinions on the civilian control of the Armed Forces. Assessment of the roles played by the Armed Forces. |
| Role of the state and public policies. | Identification and evaluation of problems, evaluation of economic policies: public expenditure, taxes, privatizations, social expenditure by sectors, level of state economic intervention, role of the state, direct and indirect taxes, privatizations. |
| Regional integration and foreign policy. | Foreign policy, regional integration and international arena, conditionality, origin of foreign investment, priorities in foreign policy, role of the European Union in Latin America, bilateral relationships between Spain and Latin America |
| Political trajectories and parliamentary activity. | Socio-economic origins, political trajectories, party militancy, parliamentary activity and experience, elected public offices held, problems faced in parliamentary life, reasons to be elected, identification of individuals and groups whom the parliamentarian believes she or he represents, decision-making evaluation of parliamentary services, political background of the family, compatibility with other personal economic activities, respondent's evaluation of his/her income |
| Left-right ideological axis. | Ideological self-placement, ideological distance among parties and leaders in the left-right continuum. |
| Values and socio-demographic characteristics. | Gender, age, income, profession, religion and religious practice, attitudes towards abortion and divorce. |

The study of politicians requires, at the very least, the intellectual effort demanded by paying attention to five different kinds of questions: their position in the general framework of power elites; their own process of education, socialization and structuring in the development of their representative roles; their shared and differentiated values; their evaluation, from ideological standpoints, of different public policies as proposals of solutions to societal problems; and their positioning vis-à-vis the smallest group of which they form part in terms of common strategies in both organizational and symbolic aspects.

Politicians, and by extension, legislators, are merely a part of the so-called power elite. Term coined by Wright Mills (1981), who, influenced by Weber, Parsons, Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and, above all, Aron (1989:195) was very careful to distinguish between elite, political class, and ruling class. PELA, however, chooses to focus on the scene of formal party political life and Congress.

It is also important to take politicians into account in the analysis of the shifts in economic policies that took place in the 1980's. Here too, politicians' perceptions and attitudes regarding economic issues and problems matter. However, with a few exceptions, the study of promarket economic policy reforms has so far ignored this facet to focus on economic conditions and the role of international multilateral organizations. In this sense one exception is Stokes (2001), who centered her study on the perceptions of those politicians who switched from statist to market oriented policies. Her study focuses, however, on changes by incumbents in national executives

Years ago, Scott (1967: 117) pointed out that political elites played a key role in the transition from traditional to modern politics. Even more important was their role in the construction of democratic regimes and the profound economic reforms Latin American countries have experienced in the past few decades. The generalized renewal of the political elite makes it even more urgent to focus our analysis on its characteristics, attitudes, and evaluations.

A key change in Latin American politics during the past twenty-five years lies in the increasingly important role played by a political elite formed by professionals with access to power through elections, most of the times under the umbrella of political parties. Legislators are an important part of this elite. They play a crucial role in democratic political systems both as legislators and as prominent members of their parties. And they play their legislative roles for fixed terms that range from three to six years. It must be also kept in mind that, in contrast to the executive powers, legislative powers have kept a total stability. In no situation have legislators witnessed a shortening of their mandates. Their knowledge of institutional, political and substantive issues contributes to the professionalization and specialization of the political class. Where reelection is possible, legislators develop in addition a feeling of belonging to a political elite.

After more than two decades of representative democracy, the routinization of democratic politics in Latin America makes the study of opinions, values, and socialization processes especially important. Political parties became key players in democratic politics as channels for the formation, aggregation, and articulation of interests. In turn, politicians over time developed new political identities, personal goals, professional careers and strategies for action.

One of the most critical issues of political life concerns the values and identities of political actors. Focus on strategic and instrumental considerations have often led to the denial of the role played by values and ideology. However, the analysis of politics reveals the important role values play in shaping political actions and events. Studying legislators' perceptions and values helps us to understand both intraparty politics and interparty competition.

Latin American elites share many political values, particularly their support of democracy. The values and perceptions of political elites are also linked to those of Latin American citizens, particularly when it comes to the definition and evaluation of the most urgent problems faced by Latin American countries.

One of the reasons for the feelings of political alienation of many Latin American citizens relates to the public perceptions of the democratic channels for representation. Public opinion studies reveal that legislatures and political parties are the two institutions receiving the worst public evaluations. Doubts about or criticisms of the representative mechanisms of democracy account for the interest in establishing formal mechanisms for citizen participation, and were behind the constitutional reforms in Colombia (1991) and Venezuela (1999). Artificial debates opposing representative and direct democracy have become so important due in part to public dissatisfaction with the performance of politicians. Inclusion of participatory mechanisms in institutional designs may serve the interests of populist leaders. Still, this does not eliminate the importance of public grievances about the functioning of representative mechanisms and the performance of political elites.

Support for democracy has been constant and widespread among Latin American politicians. This support is one of the fundamental reasons for the success of democracy in the region, what coincides with Mainwaring's and Pérez Liñán's (2005:46) argument on the virtuous circles created by changing attitudes towards democracy among both the Latin American right and left. Latin American legislators see democracy as a regime protecting individual rights and liberties, and consider consensus around the Constitutions and their basic institutions to be the crucial factor in democratic consolidation. Politicians hold thus a procedural rather than substantive or economic view of democracy. In spite of this, Latin American legislators assign the highest importance to economic problems.

However, as PELA shows, many politicians put into question the role of parties as a fundamental institution of democracy. This is particularly the case of three Andean countries: Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. In these three countries, party systems have experienced severe crises, leading, in the case of Bolivia and Venezuela, to the disappearance of the old party system. In these three countries, profound political turmoil and institutional crises took place. In Venezuela,

pronounced political polarization paved the way for failed coup attempts, and in Bolivia and Ecuador, five presidents were replaced in the past decade.

The idea that parties are not always necessary for democracy, in combination with the relativization of the role played by elections in channeling the demands of the population, puts some limits on the development of fully democratic orientations among the Latin American legislators. These limitations are parallel to the existence of a significant political divide around democracy, which, in turn, overlaps with left-right divisions and differences on the role of the military.

The issue of legislators' putting somewhat in doubt the necessity of political parties to democracy can be complemented by the analysis of their opinion about representation. In spite of the fact that constitutions emphasize the national character of representation, particularist interests prevail among Latin American legislators. The resulting prevalence of clientelist and particularist practices leads to public dissatisfaction with politicians. Ironically, clientelism does not lead to public approval but to the alienation of citizens. According to legislators, they tend to be guided by mandates, particularly from voters in their constituencies, rather than their own personal views and assessments. This, however, does not make citizens' evaluations of their representatives more positive.

The low legitimacy of political parties can be connected to the absence of inclusive and participatory mechanisms. As our data shows, both political elites and citizens must have incentives in order to create and participate in democratic decision-making processes. As it was stated years ago by Scott (1967: 127), the absence of communication between Latin American political leaders and their followers gives rise to independent and frequently irresponsible political elites.

The professionalization of politicians concerns both legislative and party life. The study of party life shows that interparty competition prevails over intraparty participation. This fact has negative consequences for the vitality of party life. When parties focus strictly on electoral contests

and disregard internal organization, it is very difficult for legislators to have a professional life within a party. By contrast, political and personal opportunities have flourished in the often well funded legislatures. High salaries and logistical and physical resources have facilitated and encouraged legislative careers. In spite of this, more than one third of Latin American legislators consider their remuneration too low even if there are wide crossnational differences in this respect.

Two elements that can help identify the level of professionalization of Latin American legislators are previous political experience and degree of dedication to legislative activities. In both cases, the situation of Latin American legislators is far from that of complete political professionalization. As far as dedication to legislative activities is concerned, the most extreme cases are those of Honduras, where only one out of six legislators are exclusively dedicated to their legislative careers, and Colombia and Peru, with more than eighty per cent of legislators dedicated exclusively to parliament. Overall, most Latin American legislators dedicate themselves part time to their legislative activities. Data shows the low legislative experience of most legislators. The most important exceptions to this situation are those of El Salvador, where terms last three years, and Chile. In these two countries, more than one half of legislators have been in parliament for more than three legislatures. With the exception of Colombia, less than one half of Latin American legislators had had previous experience as representatives in other institutions.

Formal education is essential to both the professionalization and the quality of the activities performed by legislators. On the average, the educational level achieved by Latin American legislators is high. Nine out of ten legislators have some type of university degree, while more than one third of them have done at least some graduate study.

PELA shows an interesting association between the quality of legislators and the quality of politics. Whereas the cases of Chile and Uruguay are marked by the high quality of their legislatures, those of Guatemala, Ecuador, and Bolivia are characterized by their low quality levels.

These defining characteristics of legislatures and legislators are connected to individual features as well as to party system and party organization characteristics.

The most traditional route leading to politics in Latin America is having received a university education, most often in Law, and having had ties to other family members who are or were politicians. This last trait indicates a strong tendency to inbreeding in the parliamentary elite, half of which have relatives who are dedicated to politics. It is also indicative of ways of fitting into politics depending of the politician's country and of the existing party system. In addition, it is important to emphasize the importance that local politics play in the profiles of representation of Latin American legislators.

The background of shared values is one of the primary elements that helps to identify politicians, giving them strong distinguishing traits at the same time as it directs their behavior by allowing them to interpret politics in the framework of party competition

In this way, politicians give structure to a purely ideological component through which they can draw up answers to existing challenges. Their position regarding different public policies, in which the importance of economic factors prevails, demonstrates this ideological component and, at the same time, makes it possible to discover to what degree different programmatic axes are interconnected and the level of cohesiveness within parties.

Finally, in this sense, politicians play different roles within their own parties, depending also on the type of party leadership present, the existence of intraparty democratic norms, their territorial location and their access to funds for financing campaigns and party life. Although participation in party life is not very low in Latin American, internal democracy and a more intense inter-party life are far from having been achieved to the same degree by all parties.

Table 3. Socio-demographic and socio-political characteristics of Latin American Legislators

| | Third Round (n) | | Second Round (n) | | First Round (n) | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|--------|------------------|--------|-----------------|-------|
| Sex % | | | | | | |
| Men | 84.1 | (1239) | 87.2 | (1192) | 85.5 | (634) |
| Women | 15.9 | (234) | 12.8 | (175) | 14.5 | (107) |
| Average age | 47.4 | (1456) | 47.5 | (1355) | 47.2 | (772) |
| Education % | | | | | | |
| None | 0.1 | (2) | 0,1 | (1) | 0.8 | (6) |
| Primary school | 1.1 | (17) | 1,4 | (19) | 3.0 | (23) |
| Secondary school | 8.5 | (126) | 9.5 | (131) | 11.9 | (92) |
| 2-3 years of University | 11.9 | (177) | 15.1 | (206) | 10.3 | (80) |
| Bachelor's degree | 46.1 | (689) | 47.5 | (652) | 48.4 | (376) |
| Graduate studies | 32.3 | (481) | 26.5 | (359) | 25.7 | (199) |
| Religious believer % | 89.5 | (1326) | 88.3 | (1198) | 92.6 | (692) |
| Legislative experience % | 32.7 | (487) | 33.6 | (458) | 42.3 | (327) |
| Political experience % | 41.1 | (609) | 39.8 | (446) | 25.0 | (30) |
| Family members in politics % | 54.0 | (803) | 53.3 | (724) | 49.1 | (381) |
| Ideological self-placement | 5.05 | (1461) | 5.04 | (1345) | 5.15 | (750) |
| Exclusive dedication % | 57.7 | (859) | 59.9 | (820) | 54.7 | (425) |
| Salary insufficient % | 36.1 | (535) | 38.6 | (526) | 46.2 | (358) |
| Economic improvement % | 39.1 | (577) | 40.9 | (463) | 37.6 | (45) |
| Number. Legislatures | | | | | | |
| One | 68.0 | (1002) | 67.1 | (917) | | |
| Two | 19.1 | (282) | 17.1 | (234) | - | - |
| Three | 8.5 | (125) | 11.1 | (152) | | |
| Four or more | 4.4 | (65) | 4.8 | (65) | | |
| Av. number legislatures | 1.5 | (1474) | 1.5 | (1368) | - | - |

These questions can be approached using biographies, official declarations or manuscripts belonging to the individuals who make up the object of our study. If the purpose of a study is to learn about the past, using this type of information is a research strategy of unquestionable validity. However, this kind of material is not always readily available and its content tends to be dispersed and difficult to standardize on a case by case basis. On the other hand, the use of personalized interviews with a questionnaire that is mostly closed allows the systematization of the information sought and facilitates the adding of more data at a later date, the comparison of this data and its analysis using statistical techniques. The negative side, however, is that this approach can only be used to study the present.

The research on PELA clearly reveals the persistence and importance of the left-right dimension in Latin American party systems. Individual positions in the left-right dimension provide us with consistent information about Latin American politics. These positions also clarify the characteristics of political parties. Abstract ideological positions account for issue preferences and perceptions of the problems of everyday political life. Since the 1980's, the persistence of these connections has contributed to organizing and anchoring Latin American political life. Ideological differences clearly structure axes of competition, as data on the dimensions of programmatic polarization shows. Our study demonstrates the importance of five basic dimensions: state intervention, Armed Forces, democracy, religion and values and, to a lesser degree, social background.

On the other hand, there are quite significant differences among political parties. There are important crossnational differences in levels of ideological coherence, understood as agreement among party members on several issues. These differences are also connected to party organizational models. High levels of militancy go hand in hand with high levels of consensus on ideas, programs and organizational strategies. By contrast, parties with low militancy levels display low consensus on substantive issues. It can be also taken into account the importance of links

between the ideological characteristics of parties and the perceptions of legislators regarding their party structures. Our study shows in addition that opposition parties are more coherent than governmental parties, a result of the fact that governmental decisions on political issues are not always compatible with ideological consistency and unity.

The ideological placement of Latin American parties in the left-right dimension helps us to predict the attitudes and perceptions of legislators regarding issues ranging from the economy to religious and moral values. In addition, the positions of legislators allows us to identify higher levels of homogeneity among the Latin American right in different dimensions. By contrast, the Latin American left displays significant differences in its attitudes towards the military and democratic institutions. Exploring similar problems across parties in their levels of agreement regarding the evaluation of problems and the definition of political strategies allows us to identify two key elements that we label as evaluation and strategy components. The analysis of programmatic coherence, which focuses on parties with high levels of electoral success in the past decade, shows that left-wing parties display higher levels of coherence. The analysis also shows a relationship between programmatic incoherence and party dependence on external funding.

Data show the crucial role played by state economic intervention among left parties, whereas the role of socioeconomic, cultural, and political attitudes is relevant among legislators of right parties. Both types of party families display very important internal differences. However, a more comprehensive understanding of Latin American party systems would also demand the future analysis of center parties, a topic that we have not yet addressed.

Democratic institutions are now a solid reality in Latin America, but the efficient functioning of democratic institutions requires the presence of certain types of politicians in general and legislators in particular. In contrast to the past, in this day and age politicians do not gain access to positions of political responsibility as a result of their membership in the agrarian elites, the Armed Forces or oligarchic groups, nor is it enough for them to enjoy the support of the Catholic

Church, business circles, or the US embassies. The political game consists primarily of regularly held electoral processes. It is through these elections, which are on most occasions fair and competitive, that citizens participate and candidates get elected. Politicians know the rules and they know that their political future will depend on their performance and on how voters evaluate them. Under a democratic system, severe efficacy and efficiency problems in addressing social issues will lead to public alienation and political crisis.

The new political situation experienced by Latin American countries directs our attention to the quality of democratic politics, understood as the ability of politicians to respond to public demands and solve social problems in a framework of equal rights and liberties. Addressing these tasks is impossible without the existence of a highly qualified political elite. Politicians act now in a context characterized by freedom, autonomy, and, to some degree, meritocracy. Political learning, and the assimilation of the basic institutions of democracy by politicians are now critical to the quality and stability of political systems.

Once a fair and impartial institutional framework has been achieved, democratic quality requires that political leaders have certain characteristics. Particularly important are the socialization and professionalization of politicians and the development of the skills necessary to carry out political life in the legislative arena. Professionalization here refers to the presence of appropriate institutional mechanisms and incentives for the development of a stable, consistent and predictable legislative career.

Politicians belong to party organizations. These organizations are typically prior to the activities of politicians. They socialize politicians and shape their behavior according to historical legacies and organizational dynamics. In some cases however, political leaders enjoy the freedom necessary to shape the character of political parties. The relationship between politicians and parties is one of the most important aspects of political life. Differences between individual preferences

and party positions are part of this interactive game in which party organizations and politicians act. Also crucial in this regard are the trade-offs between hierarchical and democratic organizations.

One useful way of approaching the interactive dynamic between politicians and parties consists of the direct analysis of the political elite. This type of analysis will also be benefited by the development of contextual studies considering the importance of both parties and nations, and will probably entail the development of multilevel analyses of Latin American politics. Thus, if we consider party levels of ideological heterogeneity, they are not only shaped by individual characteristics, but also by national political-institutional characteristics (such as political trajectories and electoral volatility) and party features.

Reforms advocating for an increase in internal party democracy often focus on internal electoral processes and candidate selection, but do not address the elaboration of party platforms and programs. Democratic reforms in the elaboration of party platforms would lead to party programs and the average positions of legislators coming closer together. Theoretical models on representation, mandates and representative autonomy are also relevant to the analysis of the conceptions of representation held by legislators. Still, it must be kept in mind that differences between revealed preferences and actual behavior are always possible, and also that Latin American legislators may have different conceptions of representation.

The Latin American legislative elite is an important, though numerically small, part of the total set of Latin American politicians. Findings regarding Latin American legislators must be complemented by the study of other groups of politicians, such as the local and regional legislative elites, with which national elites might share some important traits. These findings could also be contrasted with those of analyses focusing on governmental elites. A comprehensive knowledge of Latin American politicians will also require the study of these two different types of politicians.

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