


## Critical Debates

# *Parties and Civil Society in Latin America: The Dominance of Contingent and Frayed Linkages*

Matthew Singer 

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- Edwin F. Ackerman, *Origins of the Mass Party: Dispossession and Party Form in Mexico and Bolivia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index, 197 pp.; hardcover \$74, ebook \$72.99.
- Juan Pablo Luna, Rafael Piñeiro Rodríguez, Fernando Rosenblatt, and Gabriel Vommaro, eds. *Diminished Parties: Democratic Representation in Contemporary Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index, 341 pp.; hardcover \$120, paperback \$29.99 (forthcoming), ebook \$120.
- Fernando Rosenblatt, *Party Vibrancy and Democracy in Latin America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index, 276 pp.; hardcover \$96, paperback \$34.95, ebook \$31.82.
- Brandon Van Dyck, *Democracy Against Parties: The Divergent Fates of America's New Left Contenders*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021. Figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index, 276 pp.; hardcover \$55, ebook \$48.45.

Scholars have long recognized the weakness of parties in the Latin America. Some parties still struggle to institutionalize themselves and to build stable electoral bases (Mainwaring 2018). Some parties have diluted their brands by betraying their promises or by forming coalitions with erstwhile political rivals (Lupu 2016). Some parties avoid taking consistent, meaningful stances on issues (Kitschelt et al. 2010). The result is that many party systems in the region have either collapsed (e.g., Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012) or been hollowed out, with the public in many countries becoming increasingly disenchanted with parties and turning their political activism to nonparty channels (e.g., Álvarez et al. 2017; Moseley 2018). At the same

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time, many parties have found ways to survive electoral setbacks (Cyr 2017) and to develop meaningful roots in society (e.g., Anria 2018; Rosenblatt 2020). This variation in party system responsiveness is likely to shape system responsiveness to citizen demands and how citizens perceive that their political system is functioning.

The books reviewed here contribute to these ongoing discussions. Two provide troubling diagnoses of the strength and responsiveness of political parties in the region, even as they show that pockets of representation and interest aggregation exist. Then three of the books propose explanations of why some parties are better able to form ongoing relationships with the public and to unify elites. Work remains to expand the analysis to parties not covered by this collection and to link the specific trends identified here to divergent outcomes in public opinion or in political representation, but these books confirm that scholars concerned with the quality of democracy in the region need to continue to emphasize processes of party building and strengthening.

## THE WEAKNESS OF REPRESENTATION IN LATIN AMERICAN PARTIES

Two works reviewed here examine whether political parties are working effectively as vehicles of representation. Both confirm that most parties fall short of the ideal. The most explicit diagnosis is by Juan Pablo Luna and his colleagues in their edited volume, *Diminished Parties*. They argue that many electoral vehicles do not perform the functions implied by the ideal type of “political parties” that theories of political representation have constructed. Political parties should provide horizontal coordination of politicians during the campaign and when in office while also engaging in vertical aggregation to mobilize the public and present their collective demands. Yet many electoral vehicles are a diminished subtype of political party, failing to perform one or more of these representational tasks.

Case studies by the contributors to Luna et al.’s volume detail the variance in how parties function. Several chapters explore parties that successfully perform both core party activities, like Uruguay’s Frente Amplio and Venezuela’s Voluntad Popular (in its brief history). Bolivia’s MAS has strong connections to the electorate and coordinates elite actors during and between elections, although that coordination was weakly institutionalized and was arranged through Evo Morales’s executive offices. Mexico’s PRD was similarly successful at aggregating public demands and coordinating campaigns and elite actions before its fragmentation.

Yet most of the 18 parties the contributors study fall short on one or both dimensions. Paraguay’s Colorado Party and Argentina’s Peronist Party are examples of vehicles that have strong connections to civil society and mobilize popular demands (through both programmatic and clientelist channels) while having weak capacity to coordinate elite actors in campaigns or in office. Ecuador’s Alianza País and Venezuela’s Primero Justicia, in contrast, are examples of movements that successfully coordinate elites while in office and while campaigning but lack clear and stable connections to civil society. Primero Justicia is worried about offending

any party of the anti-*Chavista* coalition, so it tries to be all things to all people, while Alianza País explicitly weakened corporatist structures and organized civil society groups because strong, formal ties to social organizations limit executive authority. Furthermore, many electoral movements, like Guatemala's UNE and Peru's various Fujimorista vehicles, provide none of the linkages; they have weak pragmatic ideologies, few connections to civil society, and few structures that prevent members from defecting to other parties. The volume's rich case studies detail the strengths and weaknesses of parties along these dimensions by relying on historical evidence, archival work, or elite interviews.

While Luna et al. focus on the wide range of party activities, Fernando Rosenblatt's focus in *Party Vibrancy and Democracy in Latin America* is on party vibrancy. He defines vibrant parties as ones that "are persistently active" and "engender attachment from [their] members" (5). Vibrant parties must perform coordinating activities outside of electoral cycles, involve activists from distinct levels in their meetings, and generate sufficient commitment that electoral setbacks do not result in activists' abandoning the party. Parties can survive without generating this kind of passion and can be electorally successful; Chile's Renovación Nacional (RN) and Socialist Party (PSCH), for example, are each coded as having low levels of vibrancy and yet they controlled the presidency from 2006 until 2022. Party vibrancy can help parties reproduce themselves, but many long-lasting parties have exhausted former levels of vibrancy, and many new parties emerge and never form the intense connections that vibrancy entails.

Rosenblatt limits his analysis to political parties in Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, three countries often held up as having the strongest democracies and most deeply institutionalized party systems in Latin America. That is what makes his analysis so disconcerting: based on interviews with party elites between 2010 and 2013, Rosenblatt codes only 5 of the 12 parties he examines as politically vibrant. Chile and Costa Rica each had only one party he considered vibrant at the time of his study. Most parties in those two countries do not perform the kinds of actions and activities that would facilitate strong connections with activists or the public.

These two volumes suggest that while there are some pockets of party strength, many major parties in the hemisphere struggle to fully articulate public demands or to coordinate elites. This weakness should be concerning for those who believe that responsive parties facilitate democratic representation, stabilize electoral competition, and constrain the rise of populist outsiders.

For both volumes, their strength is in the richness of the historical details. Both books are likely to be particularly valuable reading for advanced undergraduates and new graduate students wanting in-depth primers on some of the major parties in the region. Their richness stands as another reminder of the power of elite interviewing and archival work to go beyond official figures that may be misleading (such as counts of registered local party offices that authors' fieldwork and interviews show are not staffed or are staffed by co-opted local caciques) and to illustrate political phenomena that cannot be otherwise observed. Then the concepts for measuring

political representation and coordination they introduce are important additions to the canon of party characteristics and are further evidence of troubling trends in the region.

The flip side of the rich measurement detail both approaches entail, however, is limited case selection. As a result, how other parties would be classified remains an open question. I suspect that many parties that Luna et al. code as fulfilling the core tasks of political parties would generate sufficient attachment from activists that Rosenblatt would code them as being vibrant, while most diminished subtype parties would not. Yet both analyses limit their attention to the largest parties. I am curious about whether small parties tend to be less vibrant and less able to meet the prescribed tasks of a political party, or if they might be better positioned to do so. On the one hand, small parties lack access to resources they can use to coordinate campaigns across the country; to maintain local offices, especially between campaigns; and to coordinate with civil society. Small parties are unlikely to have access to clientelist resources that can reinforce their organizing efforts. Their limited electoral prospects might also limit their ability to recruit allies in civil society or to provide the access to power that, Rosenblatt argues, helps parties maintain their vibrancy. On the other hand, small parties have fewer elites to coordinate, especially between elections, which may make it easier to present a coordinated front. Their small size may create opportunities for new politicians to carve out a space in the party. Furthermore, small parties may be positioned to carve out a specific electoral niche within the electorate, channeling a specific set of demands and representing a targeted constituency. Therefore, further work from scholars to apply these frameworks to a wider set of parties would enhance our understanding of party systems in the region and the conditions that help parties fully develop as agents of representation.

The other question Luna et al. particularly leave unanswered is what explains why some electoral vehicles consolidate as full political parties when others evolve into diminished subtypes. Rosenblatt, as described below, develops a theory of how vibrancy forms and evolves over time, but the analyses in Luna et al.'s book are designed to be descriptive. I do not raise this as a critique; accurate description of how parties vary is a necessary precondition to theorizing about why they diverge and the consequences of that divergence. But I left the volume wanting to know why some parties are more effective in coordinating elites and connecting with civil society than others, and why some parties, like Mexico's PRD, which formerly fulfilled these roles, seem not to be able to do so any longer. To answer these questions, we need to turn to the other works reviewed here.

## THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY

One explanation for why parties fail to develop organizations that can connect effectively with the public is that the public is difficult to organize and mobilize. Edwin Ackerman adds to this literature in his monograph by arguing that mass

parties can succeed only if peasants have become sufficiently atomized that they can be reoriented from local concerns and mobilized around larger political projects. Ackerman identifies the breakdown of traditional subsistence agriculture as a key moment in party construction in Latin America. Where traditional structures were broken, he argues, new civil society structures emerged, and nascent mass parties had success in developing their political base. Where traditional structures remained entrenched, in contrast, party-building efforts were met with either apathy or resistance.

Ackerman develops this argument in the context of party-building attempts by the PRI in Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s and the MNR in Bolivia in the 1950s, and by explaining variation across and within countries in these parties' development. For example, commercially focused agriculture was much more established in Mexico than in Bolivia, and the agrarian reforms that created the *ejidos* worked explicitly to undermine traditional forms of local authority over land. In regions like Veracruz and Tabasco, where these reforms were most successfully enacted, more peasant unions formed, and the PRI had greater success in mobilizing peasants to support it in elections. In contrast, the agrarian reforms were less extensively implemented in Morelos and Michoacan; attempts there to form peasant unions floundered, and the PRI faced strong resistance.

Conditions in those states mirrored those in the Bolivian Altiplano, where much of the peasantry worked either at traditional subsistence agriculture with community-based collective governance through *ayllus* or as feudal labor on haciendas. Ackerman links those local-focused orientations to the difficulties the MNR had in forming permanent peasant-focused organizations. The exception was Cochabamba, where traditional forms of governance were less entrenched and wage-based agriculture was more common. The result was that peasant unions subsequently emerged and connected with the MNR in Cochabamba more strongly than they did in the Altiplano. Ackerman establishes these patterns through his review of internal party communiqués and minutes, which provide rich first-person insight into the early interactions between the parties and the public.

In crafting this narrative, Ackerman succeeds in questioning another frequently cited narrative, that atomized societies are inimical to constructing mass parties. His analysis is also a powerful reminder that structural conditions limit what political entrepreneurs can accomplish. Parties are unlikely to generate mobilizing cleavages or to create political movements in regions where demands for greater representation or for inclusion in a larger sociopolitical project are absent.

The question, however, is whether Ackerman's project can inform us about the challenges of building parties in the modern day. Modern capitalism's creation of an atomized public has generated a wide range of new social movements articulating new demands. These articulable citizens should be potential subjects for parties to mobilize, and as their number has grown, the construction of mass parties should have grown easier over time. Indeed, in the conclusion to the book, Ackerman considers how the breakdown of traditional farming structures, as Bolivia embraced neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s, created the space

that Indigenous activists, *cocaleros*, and the MAS could operate in. But the dominant trends Luna et al. and Rosenblatt document has not been vigorous attempts to construct a mass party but instead the construction of catchall parties, with much more limited attempts to mobilize civil society, or reliance on caucus parties that are, at most, elite coordination tools. So while an atomized society can contain the building blocks of a mass party, it is up to political entrepreneurs to successfully construct that party, and that has been the exception instead of the norm in modern Latin America.

## POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

While Ackerman points to the opportunities that modern capitalism created for party building, Brandon Van Dyck argues that the modern advent of political democracy, the mass media, and a resource-rich state have often undermined incentives for political entrepreneurs to construct parties with deep connections to civil society or activists. Although Luna et al. argue that a core purpose of parties is to aggregate public opinion and build networks that can mobilize society, building and maintaining this kind of networks is labor-intensive. Politicians are most likely to make these investments when other ways to compete for power are limited.

Van Dyck argues that parties that formed during authoritarian periods when open campaigning was restricted or that labored for a long time before winning office are most likely to make this choice. Parties that emerge under democracy and that can mobilize easily through media-based appeals, in contrast, may be tempted to forego building a permanent local presence. The same is true of parties that win control of the state soon after they form and gain access to patronage-based resources for distribution early in their electoral development, as state agencies can become substitutes for party-based institutions. These parties fail to develop roots in society and then are prone to collapse when their political fortunes change.

Van Dyck evaluates this argument by looking at the trajectories of new left parties that have emerged in Latin America since the 1970s. He does this through extended case studies of both successful and unsuccessful movements. For successes, he develops lengthy case studies of organization building by the Brazilian PT and the Mexican PRD and then brief cases of the FA in Uruguay and the FMLN in El Salvador.<sup>1</sup> While these parties differed in the kind of authoritarian regime they faced, all faced repression, were excluded from media coverage by outlets connected to the state, and lacked access to state resources. Each then constructed extensive local networks of activists.

Van Dyck contrasts those trajectories with several examples of parties that failed to invest in party building. The most extensive case study is of Argentina's Frepaso, which rose quickly to prominence through widespread coverage of its charismatic leadership and then chose not to engage with the unions that had been alienated by the Peronists' neoliberal turn under Carlos Menem. Through a review of party archives and interviews with party leaders and activists, Van Dyck documents the

party's explicit choice to emphasize a nimble, flexible ideology and to avoid being restrained by activists' demands, and how the party's ability to win power without these investments facilitated that choice. He documents similar choices by Fernando Collor in Brazil and Alberto Fujimori in Peru to use the media and control of state resources as substitutes for party building, and the weakness their parties faced when the economy weakened or corruption scandals occurred.

The descriptions of party building by the PRD and the PT are consistent with what others have written about these parties, but the central trend across all the cases is persuasive. While the harsh conditions of being in the political wilderness kills many nascent political movements, those that survive are likely to have developed infrastructure that newer actors may choose to forgo. Parties that develop an extensive local network, like Bolivia's MAS or Venezuela's Voluntad Popular, might be the exception, not the rule. The case of the MAS provides partial confirmation of Van Dyck's argument, as its tendency under Evo Morales's administration to coordinate elites via informal mechanisms instead of through more formalized and routinized party structures is consistent with the idea that the spoils of state control can substitute for investment in party structures.

Yet while entrepreneurs forming parties under democracy may have the option to sidetrack developing party structures, new parties can and do build extensive grassroots networks. Difficulty in winning office early may explain some of this variation, but so, too, might the specific ideological project and purpose that drives party construction. So further attention to successful parties that defied history is needed to clarify the scope conditions of this argument.

## PARTY HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION

Ackerman focuses on the opportunities parties have to build connections with the public, and Van Dyck focuses on the incentives that parties have to do so. But there is no guarantee that activists and elites will choose to respond to parties' invitations to be vertically integrated or horizontally coordinated. How parties maintain themselves and reproduce is the major theoretical project of Rosenblatt's book on *Party Vibrancy*. Rosenblatt argues that four factors tend to reinforce vibrancy. Vibrancy may come from a purpose: a set of long-term policy goals around which elites and activists can coalesce. Historical experiences with repression or conflict can generate trauma that breeds loyalty among party members. Parties that provide opportunities for new leads to rise through the ranks create channels of ambition that may attract more loyal members. And vibrant parties tend to have barriers to exit that keep elites from abandoning them.

Rosenblatt diagnoses how parties meet these four criteria through interviews with party elites. The chapters are organized by country and then by party, providing in-depth descriptions of how elites see their parties having evolved. Most elites argue that their party's sense of unifying purpose has weakened over time; in only 3 of the 12 parties Rosenblatt studies did elites have a strong sense of common purpose. Trauma reinforces the sense of purpose and helps it last, but trauma also

fades with generational replacement as political violence (thankfully) fades into the past in most countries in the hemisphere. Purpose also seems to fade as parties moderate policies to win office or face the compromises of governing as they are in office for an extended period of time. Yet vibrancy can exist in parties without a common unified purpose if parties combine strong exit barriers with opportunities for political advancement.

Just like the other books reviewed here, the strength of this book is the richness of the qualitative details. While readers may need to have a working knowledge of key events and political figures in the three countries to fully understand the trajectory of the parties, the illustrative quotes provide depth on how weak many parties are. The weakness of party purposes in Chile and Costa Rica is also probably connected to the pressure for new forms of representation in these countries and to growing informal forms of political participation.

The most difficult part of Rosenblatt's analysis is separating the concept of barriers to exit from his dependent variable of vibrancy. Exit barriers can arise from formal institutions and rules (e.g., the permissiveness of the electoral system) but they also emerge from politicians' perceptions of the value of the party brand to their electoral success and also the perceived "benefit from tapping the reputation, organizational know-how, and machines that parties count among their assets" (72). These informal exit barriers all stem from the party's current level of vibrancy: parties with strong commitments from voters and activists will be better positioned to retain strategically ambitious politicians.

This endogeneity is part and parcel of the phenomenon that Rosenblatt studies; party vibrancy is a self-fulfilling prophecy while it lasts, but a perceived loss of vibrancy can create an exodus that further undermines the value of the party brand and machine for those who remain. And Rosenblatt is correct to focus on these informal rules, because the formal rules cannot explain differences in how well parties maintain discipline in the same country setting. Yet this endogeneity and the emergence of exit barriers as the only consistently necessary condition for vibrant parties makes it difficult to truly anticipate why some parties will remain vibrant when others will not.

## CONCLUSIONS

The four books analyzed here explore challenges that party systems face in the region, the structural conditions that make party formation difficult, and the organizational choices parties make either to enhance or to limit their shared purpose and channels of recruitment. And yet each of these books illustrates the thesis that parties that mobilize organized civil society still can emerge, as political entrepreneurs articulate previously underrepresented cleavages. Ackerman and Van Dyck point to structural conditions that make the latter process more likely to occur, and Rosenblatt highlights the types of connections parties must create to maintain that initial energy, but further work is needed to describe the specific ways that parties make these connections and the barriers that prevent parties from forming connections with civil society. Greater



attention to civil society actors' perceptions of their interactions with the party system will further strengthen the analyses in these volumes.

Then while these books focus on party elites and activists, the perceptions of the public are largely ignored. This is a defensible choice; all four works are interested in macro-trends and elite–civil society linkages, and accurately describing party organizations and linkages is a necessary precursor to understanding how the party system shapes the way the public engages with the state. Yet individuals in countries where most political parties struggle to coordinate elites or aggregate interests should face particular difficulties in identifying parties' positions and in connecting their personal issue positions to their electoral preferences. The dominance of parties that do not fulfill their roles may also create greater willingness to participate in nonparty channels and may generate disenchantment with the political system. These books hint at these possibilities, but further work should explore the implications of the current constellation of political parties for the people who live in the region.

## NOTE

1. He also outlines the history of Mexico's PAN to show how opposition from an authoritarian regime and exclusion from resources can encourage party building on the right.

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