

Research Notes

Why Latin American Parties Are Not Coming Back

Omar Sánchez-Sibony 

ABSTRACT

This essay documents growing partisan social uprootedness across Latin America over time, manifested in diminishing social trust toward parties, debilitation of links between parties and social collectivities, lowering levels of partisanship, and rising incidence of personalism in the electorate. It focuses on some unrecognized and undertheorized causal factors behind partisan involution in the region, putting emphasis on mutually reinforcing processes. First, it identifies forces endogenous to the traits of origin of diminished parties that foster their uprootedness and decay; second, it lays out some of the manifold ways that the weakening of political parties fuels regime malperformance, in a mutually reinforcing vicious circle; third, it outlines the existence of mutual feedback loops between political agency and structure; fourth, it identifies various agential sources of party decay. There are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to expect continued party deinstitutionalization across Latin America going forward.

Keywords: Party uprootedness, structure, political agency, political parties, personalism, institutional trust

The twenty-first century has not been kind to Latin American political parties. Systemic parties collapsed in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, while once-central parties broke down in Costa Rica and Argentina. Since transformational recent elections, Chile and El Salvador no longer display some of the most institutionalized parties in the hemisphere. Similarly, Mexico's systemic political parties were shunned by voters in the 2018 elections, following overtime dismal incumbent performance. The trajectory of increasing party system institutionalization observed in Brazil until the mid-2010s reversed in dramatic fashion post-2014. Partisan deinstitutionalization continues to grip Colombia, where personalist populism reigned supreme in the 2022 general elections, and much the same was true of Argentina's 2023 presidential

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contest. Barren party landscapes continue to self-reproduce in Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru. Arguably, only the Uruguayan systemic parties have proven resilient up to the present day—albeit signs of vulnerability are perceptible.

Almost everywhere in the subcontinent, personalism is on the rise, at the expense of party-based politics. Since the publication of Mainwaring's *Party Systems in Latin America* (2018), much damage has been visited upon political parties in the region, such that the scholarly work's overall assessment about the condition of parties has been superseded by all that has transpired during just the last half-decade. Writing in the mid-2010s, Levitsky et al. (2016) made inventory of just how scarce party building in Latin America has been during the Third Wave era, identifying only 11 political parties as successful at this task. Only a few years later, several of those political parties (in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, and Mexico) underwent steep declines in electoral support and face uncertain prospects going forward. What the past 30 years show is that path-dependency frameworks of party system evolution (see Kitchelt et al. 2010; Roberts 2014), while illuminating, underpredict change in the contemporary world historical time. Empirically speaking, party change (toward involution) is occurring—in Latin America and elsewhere—much more rapidly than historical institutionalism paradigms allow for.

Far-ranging partisan deinstitutionalization has become a measurable *fait accompli*. Latin Americanists did not anticipate this party-weakening overarching trend. Instead, we have been regularly surprised at the speed, and the cross-country scope, of party decline. As Mainwaring (2018, 59) notes, “nobody foresaw the extraordinary upheavals that would face so many Latin American party systems. We expected that most countries with institutionalized party systems would remain in that category.” Ditto for individual parties. This essay implicitly seeks to provide analytical clues as to why Latinamericanists have been surprised by the deinstitutionalization trend. I submit that we have not taken a wide enough view of the full range of converging agential and structural forces driving decay, as well as their mutually reinforcing interaction.

The political landscape of the region is painted here with broad brushes, eliding country specificities. While case-specific reasons can be found to explain why the party landscape is weaker in each of the polities, from Argentina to Mexico, case-centered analyses can cloud or obviate broader forces at work that operate across the entire subcontinent. To operationalize the multifaceted concept of party institutionalization, the discussion centers on party rootedness, furnishing four indicators to gauge its evolution through time. The essay then delves into four sets of structural reasons to expect further erosion in partisan rootedness and outlines existing structure-derived disincentives for party-oriented political agency.

WEAKENING PARTISAN SOCIAL ROOTEDNESS: FOUR EMPIRICAL MANIFESTATIONS

This section documents generalized partisan decay across Latin America. While party institutionalization is a multidimensional concept, I focus on one key constituent

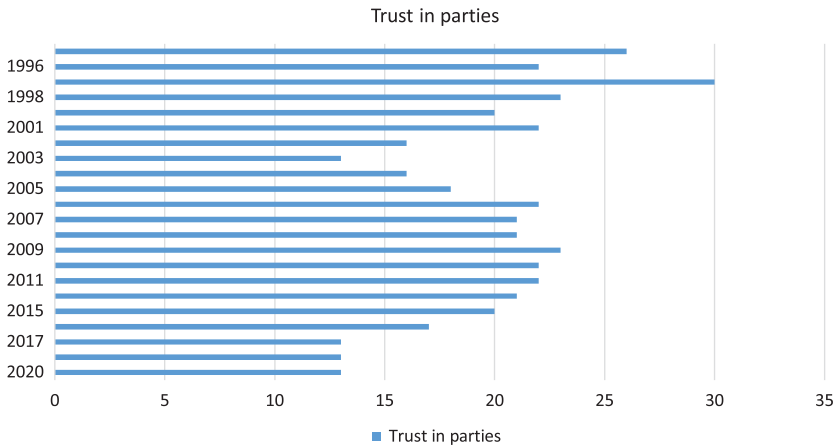
component: social rootedness. This attribute alludes to the degree to which political parties are anchored in society writ large, among both citizens and civil society organizations (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, 9–14; Randall and Svåsand 2002). When voters feel connected to a political party, they regularly vote for its candidates and help stabilize political competition. Similarly, when parties establish substantive linkages with organizations, they become more anchored to society, aiding vote stability systemwide as well as the political longevity of individual parties (Mainwaring and Scully 1995). A key advantage of using this attribute of party institutionalization is that it can be measured empirically and appraised from different angles, which can collectively provide a greater degree of certainty as to whether partisan decay in the electorate is unfolding and how rapidly. Political parties can be “uprooted but stable”—as seen in Chile (Luna and Altman 2011) or Brazil (Zucco 2015)—for a limited amount of time only. Electoral vehicles unanchored in society are bound to decay, rendering uprootedness a leading indicator of party deinstitutionalization.

Four empirical manifestations of growing partisan uprootedness in Latin America are here outlined: lower trust in political parties, weakening ties to collective actors, lower levels of partisanship, and a higher level of personalism in the electorate. Together, these factors reveal an unmistakable picture of deinstitutionalizing party landscapes across the region.

Latinobarómetro polls paint a canvas of secular overtime decline in trust toward political parties since measurements began in 1995. During the first decade of the 2000s, social trust in parties hovered around the (already low) 20 percent mark. Over the past three measurements (2017, 2018, 2020), the average trust in parties sits at a meager 13 percent (see figure 1), with as many as eight countries in the region at or below the 10 percent mark in the 2020 poll—including Peru (7%), Chile (7%), Ecuador (9%), Guatemala (9%), Paraguay (9%), Honduras (9%), Costa Rica (10%), and El Salvador (10%). Only three countries register above the 20 percent mark (Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua). In a related question, Latinobarómetro asked citizens whether they would be ready to vote for a political party or are not ready to vote for any. Measured this way, the proportion of antiparty citizens has steadily climbed over time since 2005, reaching 63 percent in the 2020 poll (Latinobarómetro 2021, 90). Additionally, the proportion of Latin Americans who believe that “there can be no democracy without parties” has declined significantly over the past decade, from 58 percent in 2013 to 44 percent in 2023 (Latinobarómetro 2023, 47). That is, most citizens now (wrongly) believe a democracy without parties is workable.

Recorded absolute levels of trust depend on how surveys phrase questionnaires and operationalize responses, but what is relevant to note is that the downward secular trend in trust is also evidenced by other pollsters, such as Gallup World Poll. It mirrors an intertemporal decline in social trust toward other key democratic institutions—like legislatures, judiciaries, and mass media outlets. There is little that is surprising in the status of political parties as the least trusted among surveyed political and state institutions, for reasons Juan Linz (2002) delineates. As players in a fiercely competitive game, individual political parties are inevitably in the line of fire of party

Figure 1. Trust in Political Parties in Latin America, 1995–2020 (Latinobarómetro)



Source: Latinobarómetro 2021

rivals intent on discrediting them. Additionally, in this antipolitical age, populists and new political entrepreneurs accrue political capital from relentlessly debasing parties, portraying them as elitist, self-serving, and corrupt (Schedler 1996). Studies of the determinants of trust in Latin America and other developing regions point to governmental responsiveness, corruption, and perceptions of fairness, or macroeconomic performance, as key independent variables (Van der Meer 2017). All in all, “performance seems an inherent element of political trust” (Catterberg and Moreno 2005, 46; for Latin America, see Bargsted et al. 2017).

A second manifestation of partisan uprootedness can be found in the growing scarcity of stable party linkages with social organizations. In the past, many key interest groups were integrated into the state and the party system via corporatist arrangements. The implementation of neoliberal reforms proved a critical juncture in the realm of interest regime configurations. Relatedly, the neoliberal era caused political parties that violated their ideological identities by enacting free market reforms or colluding with ideological foes to lose social rootedness (Roberts 2014; Lupu 2016). The new interest regime in Latin America features social organizations with weak ties to political parties, showcasing linkage patterns that are generally more “distant, fluid, and instrumental” (Collier and Handlin 2009, 59). Popular associations have partially supplanted political parties in their representational functions—albeit they confront enormous collective action problems. Indeed, “civil society remains fragmented,” and “popular organizations often remain small, atomized and dependent on external largesse” (Oxhorn 2012, 255).

In a burgeoning number of national contexts, linkages between electoral vehicles and organized interests are becoming weaker. Amid environments where parties and electoral vehicles are beset by widespread social disrepute, social organizations face few

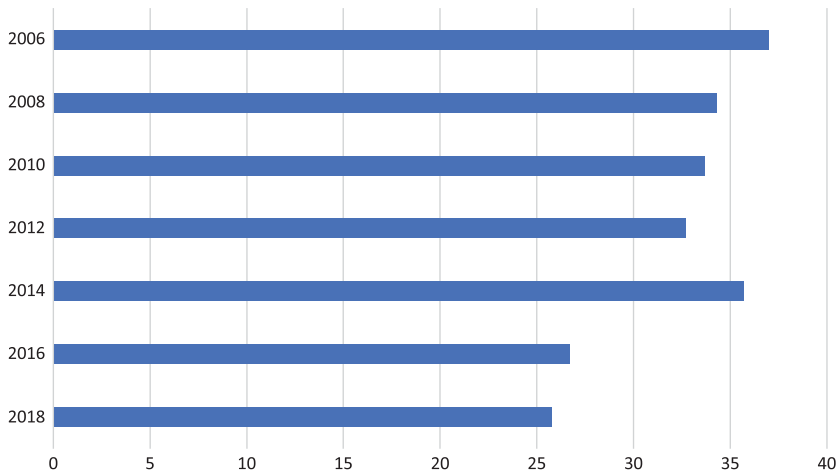
incentives to link up with such entities, shunning them instead. Social movements in many Latin American countries are increasingly divorced from political parties (Abdala 2018). A mode of interest representation Philip Oxhorn has called neopluralism, whereby economic criteria for political and social inclusion replace the political criteria of times past, has had “a negative impact on the ability of civil society to organize itself” (Oxhorn 2012, 256). The increasing electoral prominence of independent electoral vehicles (many created anew by outsiders and mavericks, others the product of party decay) implies less dense and less organic party links with social collectivities.

Another way of appraising how rooted parties are in society is to measure levels of partisanship. Lupu (2015) documented “tremendous variation” in levels of partisanship across Latin America with survey data up to 2012. The range of that variation, however, has narrowed over the past decade, as cross-country levels of partisan identity continue to undergo secular decline. A generalized picture of lessened partisanship since 2006 emerges clearly from examining LAPOP polls tapping societal party identity levels. While, on average, 37.2 percent of Latin American citizens identified with a political party regionwide in 2006, by 2018 (latest date available) partisanship had decreased to 25.8 percent (see figure 2).

Delving into the evolution of partisanship in individual country cases furnishes a sobering canvas, underscoring the comprehensive nature of the trend. That is to say, the average regional statistical decline is not a product of sharp decreases in a few countries and stability in others; instead, virtually all Latin American polities evince diminishing levels of partisanship. Over the course of the 2006 to 2018 time frame, Brazil witnessed an 11-percentage-point decline, Honduras 17 points, Jamaica 8 points, Bolivia more than 10 points, Mexico almost 30 points, Chile 15 points, Costa Rica 16 points, Nicaragua 23 points, the Dominican Republic 24 points, Paraguay more than 23 points. Significantly, given that they may foreshadow the region’s partyless future, countries starting from a low baseline experienced further decline. Only 5.9 percent of Guatemalans professed to identify with a political party in 2016, down from 14.7 percent in 2006, while in Peru only 10.8 percent of respondents could identify with a party in 2018, down from 19.2 percent in 2008 and 29.9 percent in 2006. Uruguay, showcasing the most institutionalized party landscape, comports with the declining trend, albeit in more moderate form (five-point decline). Only Argentina, Panama, and El Salvador fail to showcase a clear intertemporal trend. Nevertheless, other indicators point to partisan uprootedness in all three cases, not least growing personalization in the electorate. In another sign of parties’ becoming divorced from society, partisan activism is on the decline across the region (see Meléndez and Umpiérrez de Reguero 2021). Inasmuch as committed activists enhance political parties’ capacity to vertically integrate societal interests (see Van Dyck 2021), this empirical trend is worrisome.

An important characteristic of partisanship in Latin America bears mentioning. It is more suffused with unreliable partisans than in developed world regions. According to Baker and Greene (2015), “around 40 to 70 percent of declared partisans fit the partisanship-as-identity mold in Latin America,” which means that the remaining percentage of partisan voters are more volatile in their preferences, fitting the mold of

Figure 2. Level of Partisanship in Latin America, 2006–2018 (LAPOP)



Notes: Percentage of respondents who answered yes to the question, “Do you currently identify with a political party?” The averages above comprise 14 countries in Central and South America (i.e., those in table 1) and the Dominican Republic.

Source: LAPOP.

evaluation-based partisanship (i.e., running tally type). All in all, self-declared partisans in the region are less faithful to their party than in developed countries (where identity partisanship comprises 85 percent of partisans), such that absolute partisanship levels may be said to overstate the degree of partisan social rootedness—if partisanship is conceived in terms of identity. While negative partisanship is found to be prominent amid several Latin American polities (Meléndez 2022), and this form of political identity can help lower instability in voting patterns under certain circumstances, there is little evidence that it helps to societally root or build political parties.

A fourth manifestation of burgeoning partisan uprootedness is the rise of personalism in the electorate. Voting based on the political personal brands of candidates constitutes a telling sign of weak party roots in society. Amid increasingly fluid party universes, the personal brand heuristic is shaping voting outcomes independently of party and programmatic preferences. While the march toward party decline continues, more polities come to resemble complex political environments (Marinova 2016) that are more difficult for voters to parse out—because political supply is more fragmented and unintelligible, and new electoral vehicles are more insubstantial (devoid of content) than those they come to substitute. Hence, the political information demands made of voters become greater. The upshot is the rise of personal brands as an informational shortcut. Voters read issue-based content in the socializing experiences and biographies of candidates, and also evaluate personality brands and ascriptive traits (Guzmán and Sierra 2009).

One way to assess levels of personalistic voting is to ascertain whether the average share of the vote won by outsider presidential candidates is increasing through time (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; King 2002). But a more complete portrayal of personalism in Latin America is obtained if we include political mavericks who ditch their old party affiliations to run on their own personalist electoral vehicles—for example, Álvaro Uribe, Jair Bolsonaro, Gustavo Petro, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or Nayib Bukele.¹ It was political personal brands that got these leaders elected and likewise fueled the rise of many other candidates running atop impromptu electoral vehicles on account of their biographies, personality qualities, and ascriptive traits. Table 1 tabulates vote shares for political outsiders and mavericks in 13 Latin American countries during the post–Third Wave democratic period. In all cases, personalism has been higher in the second half of countries’ democratic life than over the first half (2002 is used as the cut-off between the two periods). Indeed, the ubiquitousness of the trend is worth noting, suggesting that broad forces operating across all polities are driving personalization. A steep rise in personalism is recorded in some democracies that were once very party-centric, including El Salvador, Mexico or Chile.

The data displayed in table 1 underestimate the full scope of personalization (i.e., increased personalism) in Latin America because personal brands are more influential than in times past in shaping the electoral performance of established political parties, prompting more such parties to place individuals who project an image of independence and newness at the front of presidential election party tickets—as well as down-ballot candidacies.² Without the benefit of fielding externally appealing personal brands, establishment political formations are electorally vulnerable to their own tarnished party brands—for illustration, witness the performance of the PT without Lula da Silva.

A further manifestation of personalism lies in the electoral appeal of candidates whose electoral competitiveness depends upon the sponsorship of central political figures who cleave the national space—for example, stand-in figures such as Iván Duque in Colombia, Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico, or Andrés Arauz and Luisa González in Ecuador. Political outsiders continue to succeed in Latin America, but evidence of personalism in the electorate goes well beyond this standard measuring yardstick.

CAUSAL STRUCTURAL FORCES BEHIND PARTISAN UPROOTEDNESS

The factors that underlie weakening party landscapes across Latin America can be disaggregated into two analytically distinct components:

1. Some *variant* structural and agential forces are actively uprooting political parties
2. Some extant features of the structural landscape are already highly inimical to embedding parties in society.

Table 1. Vote for Outsiders and Mavericks in Latin American Presidential Elections, 1985–2023

| | Elections Included | Percentage of Vote Won by Outsider/Maverick Candidates | Percentage of Vote Won by Outsiders/Mavericks in Latest Election |
|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Argentina | 1983–2002 | 10.8 | 13 |
| | 2003–2019 | 27.2 | |
| Brazil | 1985–2002 | 13.4 | 50 |
| | 2003–2022 | 29.8 | |
| Bolivia | 1985–2002 | 22.1 | 44.8 |
| | 2003–2020 | 47.4 | |
| Chile | 1989–2002 | 11.2 | 74.1 |
| | 2003–2021 | 26.5 | |
| Colombia | 1986–2002 | 28.5 | 93.6 |
| | 2003–2022 | 57.5 | |
| Costa Rica | 1985–2002 | 5.9 | 33.4 |
| | 2003–2022 | 13.9 | |
| Ecuador | 1988–2002 | 17.5 | 56.2 |
| | 2003–2021 | 69.3 | |
| El Salvador | 1989–2002 | 0 | 53.8 |
| | 2003–2019 | 16.4 | |
| Guatemala | 1985–2002 | 25.9 | 38.9 |
| | 2003–2019 | 54.7 | |
| Honduras | 1982–2002 | 0 | 0.4 |
| | 2003–2021 | 8.5 | |
| Mexico | 2000–2006 | 3.1 | 60 |
| | 2007–2018 | 30.0 | |
| Panama | 1984–2002 | 4.2 | 5.3 |
| | 2003–2019 | 11.3 | |
| Peru | 1985–2001 | 32.7 | 65.3 |
| | 2002–2021 | 40.6 | |

Notes: Schisms, mergers, and alliances among previous parties are not considered new parties. A repeat outsider/maverick party candidate whose vote is driven by a personal brand is calculated as a vote for an outsider (i.e., Gustavo Petro in Colombia's 2022 elections or Marco Enríquez-Ominami in Chile's 2013 and 2017 elections).

Source: Author calculations using Mainwaring and Torcal (2006, 223) coding criteria.

In conjunction, these two elements are responsible for why the rate of institutionalized party destruction continues to far outpace the rate of successful party building—in the dimension of social rootedness as well as other dimensions of institutionalization. This essay points to structural (institutional, sociological, and technological) and political agency elements that are changing in ways conducive to partisan deinstitutionalization. Yet not all drivers of party uprootedness need to be variant. There are “unmoved movers” as well. For example, state capacity need not be declining for its low baseline level to undermine the electoral performance or survival prospects of incumbent parties; nor do landscapes with few usable mobilizing structures need to become more barren to have a similar effect; and fervently antipolitical attitudinal environments (including scant partisanship) need not get worse to destroy political parties’ electoral fortunes in short order. The link between state capacity and partisan decay is mediated by mechanisms of deployment. Certain inputs are required for state capacity to translate into a range of public policy outcomes, not least political leadership, institutionalized political parties, and sustained coalitions. Indeed, “the quality of decisionmaking is critical in the deployment of state capacity” (Centeno et al. 2017, 11).

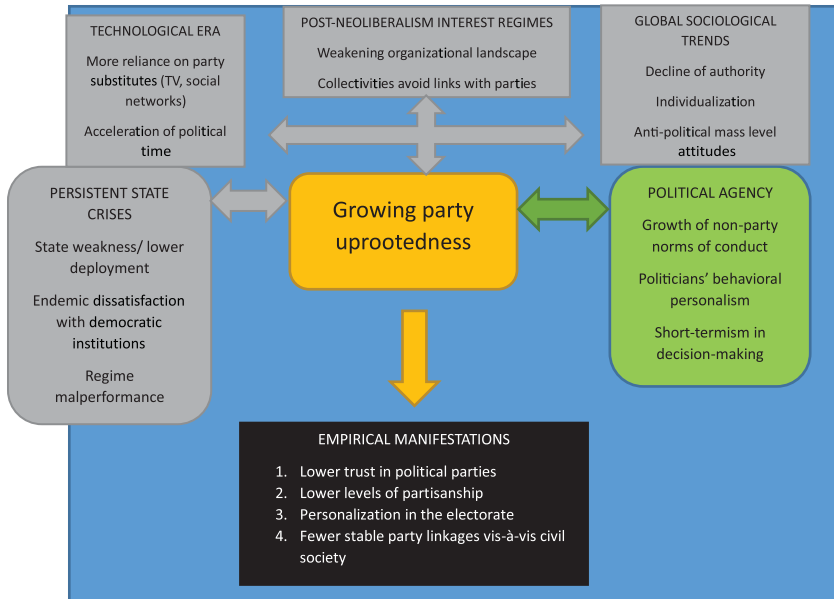
It stands to reason that in countries where more dealigned and fragmented party landscapes obtain, or where amateur as well as rent-oriented chief executives and legislators are predominant, *deployment of existing state capacity* is diminishing. State crises—defined as ineffectiveness in the ability to provide goods and services coupled with deep dissatisfaction with the functioning of basic public institutions (Handlin 2017, 38)—are becoming increasingly frequent, as public dissatisfaction with the workings of democracy and incapacity to deliver outcomes that match public expectations becomes endemic. Thus the term *persistent state crises* used in figure 3. This is manifested both in public opinion data and in cross-country waves of mass protest (Murillo 2021; Martí i Puig and Tricot 2023).

The powerful trend toward growing party uprootedness may be best understood when scholars are armed with a multifaceted matrix of causal drivers and their mutually reinforcing interactions. Explanations eliding the (intense) interaction between political agency and structure provide incomplete accounts, unable to convey the irrepressible dynamics fueling partisan decay. This is not least because political supply and demand factors interact in novel ways amid changing technological and mass attitudinal environments, while enhanced endogeneity (i.e., partisan self-destruction) is also at play. Figure 3 provides a pictorial summary of the forces outlined in the remainder of this essay. Structural factors are depicted in gray boxes; agential factors are detailed in the green box.

Interest Regimes After Neoliberalism: A Weaker and Atomized Social and Organizational Environment

A first set of structural reasons for expecting continued deinstitutionalization of parties going forward relates to the nature of Latin America’s current social-organizational environment. This structural context includes less expansive mobilizing structures as

Figure 3. Structural and Agential Forces Producing Party Social Uprootedness (or Hindering Rootedness) in Latin America



well as atomized electorates, which are exceedingly difficult to represent, let alone encapsulate. The neoliberal era of free market reforms damaged some key mobilizing structures, particularly labor unions (Murillo 2001). Labor unions across Latin America have lost membership and mobilizing capacity. The neoliberal reform era also involved extensive privatization and outsourcing efforts that diminished the size of the public sector during the 1980s and 1990s. Standard linkage decay frameworks point to the enormous representational consequences generated by socioeconomic transformations when political parties do not adapt to them (Morgan 2011, 54–60). The rise of informality in Latin America (Centeno and Portes 2006) was *not* accompanied by traditional party systems that reconfigured their incorporation strategies. In consequence, the ranks of floating voters increased. Political parties saw their ability to sustain interest group (corporatist) linkages diminished during the neoliberal era (Morgan 2011; Roberts 2014), a linkage type also undermined by the economic “lost decade” of the 1980s (Cameron 1991).

The regional landscape of organized interest groups, and their relationship with the state and political parties, were also transformed. As a result, “parties play a much less central role in the A-net [new interest regime, comprising associational networks]” in comparison to the preneoliberal interest regime, write Collier and Handlin (2009, 5). All in all, neoliberalism bestowed a legacy highly inimical to interest group–party linkages. The enormous size of the informal sector in Latin America, comprising about

50 percent of the overall working population—in some countries as much as 70 percent—dovetails with truncated welfare states and contributes to vast state-society chasms and attendant support for populism (De la Torre 2017), as well as rentier populism. Not only does this feature of the economic landscape seriously limit interest group incorporation into institutional politics, but it also renders more difficult the forging of programmatic links with (informal sector) voters. In many countries, the size of this informal sector need not keep growing for its existing enormous scope to hinder the viability of constructing party-centered incorporation linkages based on class, or worker-capital divisions, or other such basis.

Sociological Trends: Decline of Authority of Social and Political Institutions

A more overarching development undermining the staying power of political parties in Latin America involves a worldwide phenomenon: the global decline in the authority of traditional social and political institutions, with inexorable consequences for politics. This global trend encompasses the full range of mediating social structures, including political parties, business corporations, churches, labor unions, families, media outlets, voluntary organizations, and the like (Fukuyama 2020). Transparency norms, as they apply to the abovementioned institutions, are changing dramatically, because citizens place less *a priori* trust in political parties, judiciaries, legislatures, and other political and social institutions. The new transparency standards test the capacity of political parties to meet (heightened) public expectations.

The political culture literature has long revealed that as societies modernize and attain higher levels of education, traditional value systems decline and self-expression values become more prevalent (Inglehart 2018). Electorates imbued with self-expression and secular values are less accepting, and more questioning, of authority. Research on value change in Latin America shows that self-expression values are expanding in the region because of social globalization (De Castro et al. 2020), which has exerted a stronger impact on the decline of traditional authority than the rise in material well-being. In other words, there is a crescent mass-elite convergence of values in the region, such that attitudes and values hitherto exclusive to elites have been disseminated across large swaths of the population.

Another social development permeating Latin America and other regions is the individualization of society, a concept expounded upon by famed sociologists Zygmunt Bauman (2013) and Alain Touraine (2016). Individualization is the process whereby society becomes institutionally and socially organized around individuals, whose behavioral patterns obey that narrow frame of reference. Institutions such as schools or the family, hitherto key agents of socialization of individuals, are losing that role, surrendering terrain to individualization instead. In this new context, social norms become more random and capricious, and the ability of institutions (political parties included) to shape societal values and customs vanishes in tandem. According to Touraine, this environment makes for unpredictable societies dominated by arbitrariness and flexibility as pertains to their guiding social, moral, and political codes. Bauman (2013), for his part, defines today's modernity as "liquid,"

characterized by a dissolution of links between individual decisionmaking and collective projects.

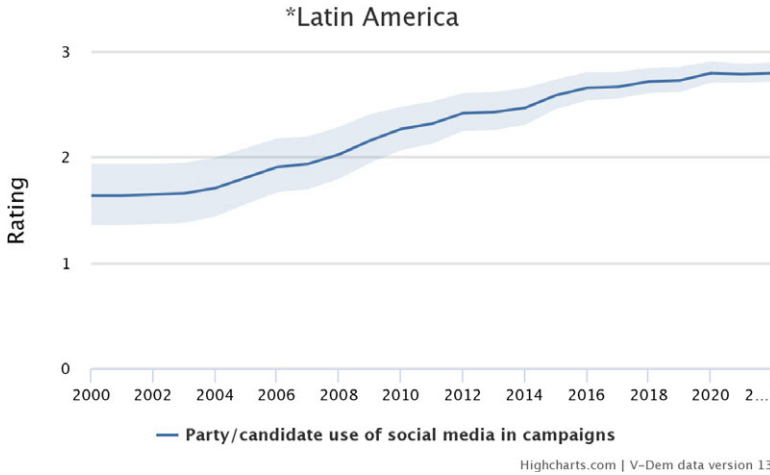
Latin America partakes in these global trends. Two renowned sociologists with expertise in Latin America note that “processes of social differentiation in the region are becoming more complex as societies are individualized. Individualization is associated with consumption and sustained alienation” (Calderón and Castells 2020, 67). It would be implausible to conceive that the realm of politics is unaffected: these sociological changes dovetail with the observed increase in “political orphans,” or free-floating voters. The social and political culture patterns (individualization, distrust of authority) underpinning continued citizen outmigration from political parties are themselves on the march. There is much room for the evolving transformation of Latin America’s culture to play out in ways that further erode party-voter linkages.

A Technological Era Supplying Party Substitutes

A powerful theoretical rationale for forecasting weaker party systems going forward lies in the technological landscape wherein politics is inserted in the contemporary era. Several developments have changed the terrain on which electoral vehicles and democracies operate. The technological environment of the twenty-first century provides effective ready-made party substitutes that obviate the need to engage in the costly, arduous, and time-consuming tasks associated with party building. Social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Tiktok, YouTube, or WhatsApp) allow politicians to reach a wide audience and communicate with followers without party infrastructure (Zulianello et al. 2018). *Políticos* wielding a populist strategy are fond of using these party substitutes because they enable the circumvention of traditional mass media outlets controlled by the economic establishment.

The new technological environment also fuels the shortening of political cycles; new technologies spread information rapidly and without filters. This background contributes to rendering the stock of legitimacy accruing to governments and political parties more evanescent. *Ceteris paribus*, the advent of television as a mass consumer phenomenon emerged as an invaluable political instrument for antiparty political outsiders (Boas 2005). Ominously, the advent of social networks further augments technological advantages for nonparty politicians. What is more, these technologies can act concurrently as sources of misinformation and fake narratives. It is unsurprising that empirical research assessing the impact of social networks on Latin American attitudes finds that they heighten mistrust in political institutions (Bandeira et al. 2019; Lupu et al. 2020, 160). Political parties find themselves among the chief targets of societies’ heightened mistrust. Amid this new technological ecosystem, political parties *qua* electoral entities have lost, and stand to continue losing, electoral competitiveness vis-a-vis nonparty political outsiders and mavericks. The use of social media during campaigns has increased markedly over the past two decades in the region (see figure 4), signaling its ubiquitous role as a tool of communication going forward.

Figure 4. Use of Social Media in Campaigns in Latin America, 2000–2021



Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) data. Available at <https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset>.

Some of the technology-related causal factors undermining party-based politics are becoming increasingly clear (Tucker et al. 2017). New social media instruments contribute to the creation of fact-free echo chambers, which chip away at the cognitive foundations of democracy—chiefly, a fact-based standard of truth that is widely shared by citizens. Additionally, social networks generate another, less-acknowledged effect: they function as (flawed) accountability instruments that shorten de facto elected officials’ constitutional and legal timetabled mandates, including those of chief executives, rendering them “lame ducks” early on—concurrently contributing to incumbent party deinstitutionalization. Evidence is mounting to demonstrate that the new technological environment accelerates political time in such a way as to overwhelm political parties’ (limited) adaptation capabilities. For example, in the absence of effective gatekeepers of informational flows—given the hyperfragmentation of the informational ecosystem writ large—political parties find that damage control becomes a more elusive task.

The increased flow of political information (and disinformation) afforded by these technologies comes at a high cost for party-based democracy. Additionally, social media facilitate populists’ quest (and not infrequently, that of nonpopulist outsiders, mavericks, and other political entrepreneurs) to delegitimize party politics and undermine party norms (Siles et al. 2021). Populist candidates find it easier than in the past to circumvent traditional mass media outlets, allowing them to wage politico-informational warfare against traditional political parties and politicians. The ascent of Jair Bolsonaro and Nayib Bukele (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021) are notable cases in point, illustrating how “social media lays a foundation for the flourishing of populist discourse” (Cesarino 2020). Moreover, much as occurred with television’s irruption into mass politics (Sartori 2012), social media outlets act as party substitutes, sharply

lowering incentives for political entrepreneurs to engage in the painstaking, arduous work of constructing on-the-ground party organization. Armed with social media and TV, political outsiders and independent electoral vehicles can thrive electorally without troops of activists, militants, and party workers to canvass political territory, knock on doors, or talk to voters face to face, as done in traditional campaigns. On balance, then, new social media instruments constitute a boon to personalism and to antiparty populism.

Infrastructural State Weakness, Regime Malperformance, and Weak Parties: Mutually Reinforcing Phenomena

A fourth structural rationale to prognosticate the continuing decay of political parties centers on the relationship between regime performance and partisan social rootedness. *Ceteris paribus*, inasmuch as electorates become more dealigned in relation to parties, regime and incumbent performance emerge as increasingly more relevant determinants of voting decisionmaking. Coming to terms with the centrality of infrastructural state weakness is essential to comprehend why many democracies perform poorly, almost irrespective of the identity of incoming governments (Fukuyama 2015). Mass-level attitudes adverse toward democracy can be a powerful driver of party system collapse, even in a context of institutionalized political parties benefiting from strong ideological linkages (see Perelló and Navia 2022).

In his empirical work, Scott Mainwaring found state deficiencies to be “at the core of the contemporary crisis of representation” in the Andean region (Mainwaring et al. 2006, 302). There is, of course, every reason to believe that this is true wherever states are weak across Latin America, delivering sustained poor performance. Thus his admonition to “focus political reforms first and foremost on creating more effective states” (2006, 302). It is difficult to conceive how Latin American democracies can deliver better performance across a range of issue areas (job creation, education, health care, public safety, corruption control) without a protracted process of (democratic) state building. Simply put, the baseline structural constraints on output performance posed by low infrastructural state power are formidable.

There are strong reasons to be pessimistic about prospects for state building in Latin America. Party system developments impinge on a polity’s state-building prospects, as well as its problem-solving capacities more generally. The level of party system institutionalization shapes actors’ incentives to provide public-regarding policies (Hicken 2018). Wherever party universes do not foster intertemporal agreements among actors, “investments in state capabilities tend to be lower” (Tommasi 2006, 2). Relatedly, weak party systems and party nonsystems facilitate the rise of populism, a form of exercising power with measurably deleterious effects on state capacity and public administration (Bauer et al. 2021). Moreover, inchoate party systems disarticulate executive-legislative relations (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, 25–27), contributing to ungovernability and the muddling-through, policy-cycling political dynamics that impede tackling important problems or addressing societal demands. The intertemporal coherence of public policy also suffers when party

universes are in flux. Absent state capture, policy cycling and economic policy volatility are more prominent in polities where the identity of the most important electoral vehicles changes with regularity (Flores-Macías 2012). In sum, the “mechanisms for deployment” of state power (parties, Congress, political coalitions, etc.)—to use Centeno et al.’s (2017) terminology—will continue to erode.

The upshot of these political and public policy performance-related quandaries is that insofar as party systems deinstitutionalize and fragment, they are weakened in their problem-solving capacities *just as retrospective valence-oriented voter evaluations* (centered on problem-solving results) *become a more important evaluative criterion*—amid reduced overall partisanship levels. Should congressional and party universe fragmentation increase because of more unaligned electorates, as I here predict, the collective action dilemmas confronting state building and public-regarding public policy will become more daunting, affecting the deployment of existing state infrastructural power. In consequence, regime performance across all manner of issue areas voters care about will deteriorate—or otherwise languish. The record of sustained state building in Latin America over the recent post-1978 democratic era is poor (Mazucca and Munk 2021). If political parties continue to decline, prospects for purposeful state building going forward will worsen. Furthermore, there are factors beyond party decay that will damage state capacity and policy effectiveness in the future. Doyle (2017) expounds upon four such factors: migration, labor informality, the rise of the new middle class, and organized crime.

Because of the prominent role that corruption plays in affecting trust in political parties, it merits special analytical attention. Weak, self-constraining states (i.e., lacking effective horizontal accountability and self-monitoring Weberian bureaucracies) foster systemic corruption, for such states both incentivize the scourge and are institutionally incapable of curtailing its metastasis and reproduction through time. The increased political visibility and politicization afforded to the corruption *problematique* in the Latin American region is, *a priori*, a healthy development, in that it should, *ceteris paribus*, enhance political accountability via electoral retrospective voting. But the agents who reap the benefits from voter valence-type evaluations of past political corruption tend to be antiparty populists and outsiders (Barr 2017), because heightened citizen perceptions of political corruption motivate a search for alternatives outside the established party system (Seawright 2012, 144–64). Moreover, research shows that high-corruption democracies’ ability to mobilize voters to solve corruption-fighting collective action problems is hampered by the tendency of politically alienated voters to withdraw from all types of political involvement (Davis et al. 2004; Carreras and Vera 2018).

This alienating side effect of corruption not only blunts democracy’s vaunted self-correcting capabilities but also contributes to partisan dealignment. For these and other reasons, elections across Latin America are, empirically speaking, poor anticorruption mechanisms; in practice, the instrument of elections is actively reproducing the corruption scourge. The corruption control impotence of the electoral instrument is particularly pronounced amid inchoate party systems (see Schleiter and Vozyana 2018). This is worrying because perhaps no other phenomenon undermines social capital and the bonds

of trust between citizens and political representatives more than corruption. Corruption perceptions are empirically found to diminish social trust (Richey 2010) and trust in political institutions in general (Morris and Klesner 2010), with predictable consequences for the level of partisanship writ large. Absent democratic state building to enhance the performance, transparency, and accountability of state institutions and political systems, sustainable reductions in corruption levels become unattainable.

In conclusion, it is not difficult to envisage how a vicious cycle of decaying parties, state weakening, lower deployment of state capacity, and sustained regime malperformance (in corruption control and other areas) intertemporally reinforce one another, in a mutually destructive dynamic. There are strong reasons to focus on regime performance to gauge the future of political parties because, *ceteris paribus*, performance evaluations will increasingly shape voter behavior in tandem with the continuing decline in partisanship and growth of free-floating electorates. If state decay does ensue, holding the reins of government will shorten the functional lifespan of incumbent political parties more and more.

Building a party brand on the basis of either performance or programmatic orientation is becoming more problematic. It is difficult for Latin American parties to keep programmatic commitments intertemporally because governments sit atop states with scant autonomy (from internal and external actors), limited fiscal resources, and restricted economic policy latitude, given Latin America's continued dependence upon foreign savings and investment (Campello and Zucco 2020)—and thus subject to perennial “stop and go” business cycles. Rapidly shifting mixes of incentives and constraints dictate parties' changing policy stances over time. Programmatic brand dilution—especially for the partisan left—is thus difficult to avoid. Even if infrastructural state power does not decay and remains roughly at its (low) current baseline level, the phenomenon of “incumbent disadvantage” (Klašnja 2015) will become more widespread if fewer voters profess partisan sympathies—depriving incumbents of an electoral cushion. Indeed, this dynamic is already playing out throughout the region. Brazil's 2022 general elections marked the 15th straight victory of opposition parties across Latin America, an unprecedented wave of anti-incumbency voting (Stuenkel 2022); in 2023, incumbent parties in Guatemala, Ecuador, and Argentina were also defeated.³ This ongoing empirical tendency is in keeping with the arguments advanced in this essay.

Endogenous Institutional Sources of Diminished Party Reproduction

There exist powerful endogenous determinants of party destruction and nonbuilding among diminished political parties, which are more prone than full-fledged parties to succumb to internal political entropy. Legal entities born as personalistic vehicles or as “coalitions of independents” (Zavaleta 2014) rarely escape their initial institutional fecklessness; that is, they rarely transmute into bona fide institutions. The genetic origin of a political party—that is, its constituent traits at birth—is essential in accounting for its future organizational evolution, as Panebianco (1988) expounds.

This insight can extend to the level of partisan institutionalization itself. At least four endogenous causal factors fuel the destruction of diminished parties. First, personalistic electoral vehicles, lacking solid sources of internal cohesion, are prone to suffer damaging internal scuffles, divisions, splits, and defections that prove electorally and organizationally damaging. Second, personalistic vehicles depend for voter loyalty upon the political personal brands of their leaders or creators, which are more vulnerable to dilution than party brands (Sánchez-Sibony 2022, 189–96). The personal foibles, revealed corruption, informational incongruencies, and faux pas of leaders constitute all-too-common causal factors that fatally damage political personal brands.

Third, diminished parties are more likely to make electoral and strategic mistakes than full-fledged ones, because internal decisionmaking is much more ad hoc; it does not rely on organizational processes and is less informed by institutional memory. Fourth, the paucity of loyal voters renders mistakes on the part of unrooted parties more electorally costly than they would be for (increasingly fewer) party formations that can rely on partisans. While more institutionalized political parties endowed with social rootedness possess some electoral cushion against political headwinds, uprooted parties face self-inflicted or exogenous political storms nakedly, accelerating their marginality or demise. In sum, diminished political parties are inherently vulnerable to decay because of their uprootedness, paucity of horizontal coordination, lack of institutionally driven decisionmaking, or leader-dependent nature. Among electoral vehicle types, independents are the most vulnerable to endogenous sources of self-destruction.

Most of the relevant electoral vehicles in Latin America today showcase important limitations in their horizontal coordination and vertical aggregation capabilities (Luna et al. 2022, 17–23), such that they do not qualify as full-fledged political parties. To the extent that endogenous sources of deinstitutionalization are more powerful among diminished political parties than among more functional ones, the present (low) average regional level of partisan institutionalization bodes ill for party building prospects. Cases such as Peru or Guatemala (and Ecuador, to a lesser extent) provide a long track record of partylessness self-reproduction (Levitsky 2018; Sánchez-Sibony 2022, 2024). Where free-floating electorates exist, politicians have incentives to develop informal institutions and party substitutes to survive (Hale 2005, Levitsky and Zavaleta 2016). These entrenched political practices, which dovetail with institutional and behavioral personalism, preclude the construction of bona fide political parties. In conclusion, if all the endogenous sources of diminished party decay are duly considered, a more complete understanding emerges as to why successful party building has been so rare.

Even the (few) vibrant parties that remain in the region will find it difficult to instill “purpose” (prospective loyalty) among its cadres “in the context of a region where parties confront huge structural challenges,” as Rosenblatt (2018, 230) writes. There are powerful theoretical and empirical reasons to think that a nontrivial number of Latin American polities will fall into the self-reproducing status of “democracies without parties” (Levitsky and Cameron 2003) or party nonsystems (Sánchez 2009).

Once enmeshed in that predicament, it is difficult to escape. Indeed, the region does not yet offer examples of countries that have escaped that condition during the Third Wave (post-1978) era.

AGENTIAL FACTORS: INCENTIVES FOR PARTY-SHUNNING POLITICAL AGENCY

Another set of reasons for predicting further party weakening relates to the incentive structure facing many active and would-be politicians today—and for the foreseeable future. Four features of the incentive structure prevailing in Latin America that work at cross purposes with party building and party-centered political agency are here emphasized: antiparty mass public dispositions, compressed temporalities, the diffusion of nonparty norms fostered by the success of personalist political entrepreneurs, and post-collapse scenarios that offer opportunities to prey on the weakness of the party opposition. The composition of a nation's political “fauna” is also of importance for understanding just what repertoire of political agency tools, actions, and strategies can be expected to predominate in the future: political outsiders, mavericks, and newer cohorts of political amateurs are rarely party builders.

Overall trust in parties, while never high, has diminished over time. Negative legitimacy environments—wherein political capital is accrued mainly on the basis of what a political entrepreneur is not (personal brand) or what he or she stands against (see Sánchez-Sibony 2022, 199–228)—are gaining ground across the subcontinent. Across several Latin American national electorates, negative identities are certifiably more prominent than positive ones (see Meléndez 2022). It is a measurable identity landscape that should become more widespread across countries. These attitudinal environments select for political outsiders or mavericks who run atop personalist electoral vehicles, not programmatic, party-building politicians, because, *ceteris paribus*, they render the former more electorally competitive. Over time, outsiders and mavericks come to dominate the political supply, compared to establishment *políticos*, once party systemwide deinstitutionalization crosses a certain threshold. Promising newcomers to the political scene—that is, those who display externally appealing political personal brands—understand that their political future is more promising by way of crafting political careers that circumvent existing party labels, particularly traditional ones.

Political outsiders are less socialized into democratic and party politics and generally discount the value of party organization to advance their political ambitions (Barr 2009). Brand building is a key avenue to achieving partisan social rootedness. But “outsider presidents have almost no incentive, and usually no disposition, to prioritize brand building” (Mainwaring 2018, 78). One central reason why outsiders and mavericks are less inclined to invest in party building than party insiders is that these political entrepreneurs are less predisposed to accept the check-and-balance function and restraining effects that party organization imposes (Mayorga 2006), and because they probably discount the future more. Worryingly, there are strong reasons to think that political landscapes will be increasingly inhabited by populist *políticos*.

The supply side of populism has changed irretrievably on account of the weakening of political establishments (i.e., networks of organizations and individuals necessary to get a candidate elected), as Levitsky (2022) underscores. Hence, antiparty populists confront much-debilitated gatekeepers, which can be easily circumvented in the realms of mass media, campaign finance, or political endorsements. Inasmuch as repeated voting exercises continue to expel party insiders from democratic institutions and presidential palaces, we can expect fewer agency-driven investments in the very organizational and ideational resources known to be important for social rootedness, party survival, and resurgence (Van Dyck 2014; Cyr 2017).

A second important feature of the prevailing incentive structure facing politicians relates to the nature of political time. Political horizons in the contemporary era are not what they once were. Luna (2021) shows that Latin America exhibits much compressed temporalities because political legitimacy has become much more transient. Today, the measured legitimacy of incumbent chief executives declines more precipitously than in times past. For illustration, at the onset of the Third Wave it took an average of about 40 months for Latin American presidents to suffer a 10 percent drop in popularity, whereas more recently (i.e., across the most recent three general elections) it has been reduced to less than half of the original timespan—that is, less than 20 months (Luna 2021, 13). This study's results unambiguously show that virtually all Latin American polities have suffered compressed temporalities, manifested in the increasing transience of presidential approval levels. An even more drastic compression of political time affects party-scarce or partyless countries, such as Peru, where incumbents face public opinion in naked fashion, without the cushion afforded by partisanship. To be sure, this compression of political time can extend to political actors other than chief executives. The acceleration of the competitive politics game inevitably shapes the strategic calculations of political entrepreneurs across the board.

Shortened political cycles, indicative of an era in which political capital is more evanescent, reduce operative time horizons and channel political behavior away from party norms. Newcomers to the political scene are more likely to discount the future, which, in turn, reinforces the acceleration of political time. In contexts of ever-shifting political winds (i.e., changing preferences, fickle popularity ratings, and high electoral volatility), political entrepreneurs are incentivized to do what is expedient in the very short term—i.e., defecting, switching parties or electoral vehicles, or creating a new political outfit. Partly as a result, nonparty norms of conduct become more prevalent, accepted, and ultimately entrenched. Individual politicians' imperative to instrumentally adapt to rapidly shifting political scenarios trumps party-loyal forms of conduct. When such behavior becomes generalized, it lowers prospects for party durability, not least because it weakens internal party coherence, deprives parties of valuable cadres, multiplies splits and defections, and renders brand building or brand maintenance much more challenging.

The shortening of political cycles also enhances overall political uncertainty—which can be disaggregated into political, economic, and institutional variants—posing steep challenges to parties' adaptation capabilities. Systemic uncertainty shapes

the strategic decisionmaking calculus of party leaders (Lupu and Riedl 2013). Indeed, political elites facing short time horizons “invest less in programmatic appeals, consistent party brands, and institutionalized party organizations” (Lupu 2015, 135). Thus, where time compression obtains, a mutually destructive vicious circle between short-term guided political behavior and party deinstitutionalization will afflict more Latin American democracies.

Diffusion and imitation play a third role in accounting for the absence of party building. Because political neophytes atop feckless electoral vehicles are increasingly triumphant in electoral contests across Latin America, current and future independents are enticed to take a page out of the winning partyless strategic playbook (Levitsky and Zavaleta 2016). Given that campaigns are public in nature, would-be politicians are provided with ready-made templates of, and vehicles for, successful electioneering (Boas 2016). The cross-pollination of experiences and political learning across national boundaries has long been documented among established politicians, but it is also common among political outsiders (see De la Torre 2017).

The fourth agential factor detrimental for political parties relates to how leaders exercise power—for example, whether they engage in extensive institutional self-dealing or not. This feature is of consequence for our dependent variable. Political agency has been undertheorized as a source of party destruction. That party weakness can reflect conscious individual choices in institutional arenas and elsewhere (McFaul 2001) often goes unrecognized. An important reason to predict weaker parties and party systems is the kind of human agency we can expect to be on display across more national political stages going forward.

The identification of presidential political agency as a party-destroying causal factor (Tanaka 2006) can no longer be considered a curiosity limited to Alberto Fujimori’s Peru or Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela; new episodes of presidentially orchestrated delegitimation and destruction of opposition parties have, over the past two decades, transpired in Honduras, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, and it is a process currently underway in Guatemala and El Salvador. Presidential institutional reforms and noninstitutional maneuvering purposefully destructive of parties have become all too common (see Carrión 2022). Scenarios in which party oppositions are very feeble, such as post-party system collapse conjunctures, facilitate incumbents’ antidemocratic comportment. Agency and structure are thus intimately intertwined: where the unraveling of party systems unfolds, both catapulting antisystemic political entrepreneurs to high office and creating permissive environments for executive aggrandizement, presidentially engineered (opposition) party weakening often follows. In short, top-down presidential agency aimed at party destruction is a phenomenon endogenous to decaying party landscapes. Regression analysis shows that political elites atop uprooted electoral vehicles are less prone to make investments in value infusion and routinization than those atop more rooted parties (see Boyeller and Ruth 2018). This suggests that a vicious dynamic is at work: inasmuch as party landscapes become less societally rooted for a variety of reasons, party-averse political

agency deepens this pattern over time. On balance, then, there are good reasons to expect agency not to be a party-building force going forward.

MUTUAL FEEDBACK LOOPS BETWEEN AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

Broadly speaking, what heralds the continued party system decay across the region is how structure and agency are, at this historical juncture, vectors *working in the same direction* in terms of their effects: both weaken political parties (diminished or full-fledged), spawning plebiscitarian modes of political representation. Moreover, structure and agency are *mutually reinforcing each other*, such that purposeful political agency compounds highly adverse structural conditions for the institutionalization of political parties because these conditions disincentivize party-based behavior, promoting instead institutional and behavioral personalism. Political entrepreneurs find the cost of party building too onerous and unnecessary for short-term electoral success. Instead, person-centered strategies become much more attractive, given the configuration of perverse incentives that most national structural environments increasingly provide for politicians. In turn, most political entrepreneurs who enter the political arena exhibit human agency of the sort that helps entrench and deepen a party-hostile structural environment.

In tandem with increasingly unstable party universes, more and more amateurs and elected novices come to shape the operative systemwide political practices and norms (Mainwaring 2018, 85–98). The majority of these newcomers mold the mass attitudinal environment by socializing mass publics into antiparty attitudes, as well as socializing current and would-be politicians into nonparty norms of conduct. New political entrepreneurs and political outsiders are more likely than party system insiders to exhibit behavioral and institutional personalism; consequently, as they come to constitute the lion's share of the electoral supply, reach executive branches, and hold seats in legislatures, systemwide personalism rises accordingly. Person-centered comportment has been common over the past two decades and is nowadays widespread. While creators of independent electoral vehicles generically display broad-based personalism (Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid 2020), so do many politicians atop comparatively more institutionalized parties, who demonstrably prioritize their personal careers and power over the vibrancy (and prospects) of their political formations. Politicians such as Alan García, Evo Morales, Cristina Kirschner, Orlando Hernández, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or Daniel Ortega (among many others) have regularly evinced personalism as a *modus operandi*: undermining party internal coherence, failing to nurture successors, committing partisan mandate reversals, or ignoring party organs and statutes, among other nonparty behaviors. Trends in Latin America are not unique, inasmuch as the rise of personalism in political life constitutes a worldwide phenomenon (see Frantz et al. 2021).

CAN THIS OMINOUS TREND BE REVERSED?

What have we learned from party-building theory that could derail the remarkably broad deinstitutionalization tendency observed over the past two decades? Well-designed institutional reforms can render the rules governing party registration, participation, and representation less permissive and less open, aiming to “raise the bar” for electoral vehicles that want to join or remain playing competitive politics. But party-friendly rules cannot foster durable voter-party linkages or refashion the antipolitical mass attitudes characteristic of low trust settings, among other key limitations. What is more, electoral law and other relevant rules are endogenous to the existing party landscape. Amid more fluid party landscapes, feckless electoral vehicles, greater numbers of amateur legislators, and compressed political temporalities, it is difficult to foresee stability in the rules of the game, let alone well-designed institutional reform aimed at party building. Instead, reform cycling, acceleration of serial institutional replacement (Levitsky and Murillo 2013), and incongruous legislation, are the much more likely prospect.

An overarching insight derived from recent scholarly literature points to ideological polarization as conducive to party construction (LeBas 2011; Levitsky et al. 2016). The Latin American Left Wave (1998–2010) furnishes a reminder that this may be a facilitating factor for party building, but it is hardly a sufficient condition. The Pink Tide saw increasing levels of ideological polarization (Levitsky and Roberts 2011) and class-oriented voting (Mainwaring, Torcal and Somma 2015), but it did not leave in its wake a surfeit of rooted, institutionalized political parties. On the contrary, the Left Wave bequeathed much party wreckage—with few exceptions, such as the Bolivian MAS. Recent years provide a reminder that ideological polarization can proceed along personalistic and populist lines and, at excessive levels, usher in electoral authoritarian regimes that destroy the extant party opposition (Weyland 2021). It is well to note that greater levels of *affective* polarization have come to beset several polities (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, etc). But the negative partisanship and negative political identities this type of polarization engenders contribute little to building political parties. New research finds that growing affective polarization lowers general societal trust (Torcal and Comellas 2022), heightening antipolitical attitudes that feed antiparty populism.

What about the role of political agency? Can a new batch of political entrepreneurs committed to programmatic politics and party building change the current trendline? This always remains a hopeful possibility that cannot be discarded. But if the intertwining of structure and agency is as innate and intimate as described here, party builders will be rare—even more so than nowadays—and they will confront evermore daunting structural factors hindering party building.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON PARTY UPROOTEDNESS

The study of legitimacy has been given short shrift by comparativists and students of party politics, perhaps because, as Huntington pointed out, it is a “mushy concept,”

saddled with conceptual and operationalization quandaries. Yet no actor and no political system trapped in a low-trust attitudinal environment can escape its pervasive effects (see Keefer and Scartascini 2022). In the quest to come to grips with the nature of contemporary party politics, scholars need to appraise more systematically the sources of low-trust environments, as well as their consequences for party social rootedness and other outcomes. Increasingly, Latin American structural environments and voters are becoming “vertiginous consumers of political capital,” to recall an evocative expression the late Carlos Iván Degregori used to describe Peruvian political dynamics.

Many of the structural factors underscored in this essay are global, such that the decay of parties bedevils other regions, including Western Europe (Mair 2013; Chiamonte and Emanuele 2022). But students of party politics need to ascertain whether the broader sociological and technological forces at work are impacting voter-party attachments across regions and polities to a similar degree. It stands to reason that the impact upon social rootedness is mediated by institutional partycentric and structural nationcentric characteristics, yielding differential effects. But how and why remains *terra incognita*.

The broad relationship between agency and structure in the shaping of partisan uprootedness remains quite unexplored. No efforts have been made to uncover in systematic fashion the role self-inflicted errors of political agency play, nor the role of outsiders and novices in the acceleration of political time or in the diffusion of nonparty norms amid the electorate. Given the continuing personalization of party politics alongside time compression, there is evidence to suggest that agential sources of decay are today, and will be, more prominent than in the past. Beyond descriptive accounts of individual political parties or countries, Latinamericanists (or students of party politics generally) have not paid enough theoretical consideration to endogenous sources of partisan decay (for exceptions, see Wills-Otero 2016; Rosenblatt 2018; Sánchez-Sibony 2022), or to identifying the interrelated features of the contemporary structural environment that systematically foment counterproductive political agency, contributing to partisan uprootedness. Politicians’ ill-considered decisions, or errors of commission or omission, do not take place in a vacuum, but in more complex and inscrutable structural environments.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay relies on four standard indicators to assess the evolution of partisan social rootedness in Latin America, which are convergent in evincing widespread party deinstitutionalization across the subcontinent over time. The effort to understand this unexpected deinstitutionalization trend benefits from a wide-angle view incorporating a broad spectrum of forces and their interaction. Some structural forces are global in nature, others are more region-bound.

A key structure-originating source of growing party uprootedness in Latin America is serial governmental malperformance, stemming from state weakness—in

both infrastructural and self-restraining dimensions. Crucially, two contemporary developments have acquired the makings of structural features on account of their permanence: a high baseline level of antiparty mass attitudinal dispositions and widespread dissatisfaction with central democratic institutions, amid higher social expectations of political systems; and the acceleration of political time (aided by the new technological environment). Identifying how the key structural features that configure the Latin American political landscape interact with political agency sheds light on the pervasiveness of the cross-country party decay already observed. The extant agency/structure configuration, evincing self-reproducing traits, portends greater party uprootedness going forward, as well as scant future investments in party building. In addition, the identification of diminished party traits of origin driving endogenous decay dynamics also elucidates why parties fail to become socially rooted and to survive.

I have maintained that the weakening of political parties is rendering structural challenges (low state capacity, systemic corruption, antipolitical mass-level attitudes) even more severe, and *concurrently more politically difficult to tackle*, because the feebleness of intermediary entities augments collective action problems and hampers the deployment of state capacity, entrenching and deepening regime malperformance. One of the more novel arguments here advanced is that structural and agential forces moving polities toward partylessness are reinforcing one another. The bulk of future politicians will *not* be agents of party brand or organization building, for at least two reasons: first, important structural forces (i.e., attitudinal and technological landscapes, time compression, sociological trends, low state capacity and deployment, and associated regime malperformance) disincentivize party-building political agency; and second, those same structural forces have favored, and will continue to select for, party-shunning *políticos*. In turn, political agency increasingly worsens the structural landscape: mavericks, novices, and free agents shape mass attitudinal settings, political time, the deployment of state infrastructural power, and regime performance in ways destructive to party-based politics. In sum, the forces reproducing a perverse antiparty vicious circle between structure and agency are becoming stronger.

Some readers may well deem the thrust of this essay to be overly deterministic. Its title should not be construed to imply that no new political parties with social rootedness and staying power will emerge, or that no existing political outfit may grow to become a bona fide political party in Latin America. Rather, the overall prediction relates to the *direction* of change: on balance, the region will continue to move away from party-based politics. Political parties in Latin America are unlikely to come back. Ominously, political societies will move ever more comprehensively toward personalistic forms of elite-citizen interaction, such that political personal brands substitute party brands in importance. On current trends, and as the mutually reinforcing structural and agential forces here delineated continue to play out, partyless or party-scarce polities crowded by free agents and novices will be the empirical norm in the region.

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NOTES

1. I adopt Robert Barr's definition (2009, 3–34) of a political maverick as a “politician who rises to prominence within an established party, but then abandons his affiliation to either compete as an independent or in association with an outsider party.”

2. Consider examples such as the Mexican PRI's selection of independent technocrat José Antonio Meade for the 2018 general election or Paraguay's Colorado Party selection of newcomer businessman Horacio Cartes in 2012 to lead the presidential party ticket.

3. In Paraguay, the Colorado Party attained reelection in the 2023 presidential elections, bucking the regional trend. However, there are legitimate questions surrounding the fairness of electoral contests, given the substantial fusion between party and state. In some respects, Paraguay continues to display a hegemonic party system, as Mainwaring and Scully (1995) described it three decades ago. It is a polity that needs to democratize to allow for more consistently competitive elections.

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