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978-0-521-01697-1 - Transforming Labor-Based Parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in Comparative Perspective

Steven Levitsky

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CHAPTER I

**Labor-Based Party Adaptation in the Neoliberal Era:
Rethinking the Role of Party Organization**

The new world economic order has not been kind to labor-based political parties. Changing trade and production patterns, increased capital mobility, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc dramatically reshaped national policy parameters in the 1980s and 1990s. Traditional left-wing programs were discredited, and policies based on Keynesian and “import-substituting” models were increasingly dismissed as populist and inflationary. At the same time, long-term changes in class structure eroded the coalitional foundations of labor-based parties. The decline of mass production and expansion of the tertiary and informal sectors weakened industrial labor organizations, limiting their capacity to deliver the votes, resources, and social peace that had been the foundation of the traditional party-union “exchange.” These changes created an incentive for labor-based parties to rethink their programs, redefine their relationship with unions, and target new electoral constituencies. Such change is not easy. Because adaptive strategies generally run counter to parties’ traditional programs and the perceived interests of many of their constituents, party leaders often prove unwilling or unable to carry out such strategies. Yet if they do not adapt, labor-based parties face the prospect of electoral decline and political marginalization. Party adaptation may have important implications for democracy. In Latin America, the failure of established labor-based parties to respond effectively to the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s at times resulted in party system decomposition and the breakdown, or near breakdown, of democratic regimes.

By virtually any measure, the Argentine (Peronist) Justicialist Party (PJ) is a case of successful labor-based adaptation. Closely aligned with the powerful General Labor Confederation (CGT), Peronism had opposed liberal economic policies since its birth in the 1940s. Yet beginning in the mid-1980s, the PJ underwent a dual transformation. First, it redefined its relationship with organized labor, dismantling traditional mechanisms of union participation and replacing its union-based mass linkages with patronage-based

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territorial organizations. By the early 1990s, the PJ had transformed itself from a labor-based party in which unions were at times the dominant partner into an increasingly clientelistic party in which unions played a relatively minor role. Second, the PJ adapted its socioeconomic program. After taking office in 1989, the PJ government of President Carlos Menem dismantled the statist, inward-oriented economic model established under Juan Perón in the 1940s and implemented a set of neoliberal policies that sharply contradicted the party's traditional program. These changes were carried out with striking political success. The Menem government faced little opposition among party leaders and cadres, and the party retained the bulk of its traditional working- and lower-class base. The PJ won four straight national elections after 1989, including Menem's landslide reelection in 1995. Peronism's adaptation and survival contributed in an important way to democratic governance during the 1990s. The PJ's linkages to working- and lower-class society helped the Menem government carry out radical economic reforms within a democratic context, and party's electoral success helped to stabilize the party system, which allowed for relatively smooth executive-legislative relations and limited the prospects for antisystem outsider candidates.

Although labor-based parties in a variety of countries adopted market-oriented programs in the 1980s and 1990s, the PJ case stands out in several respects. First, the reforms carried out by the Menem government were more radical than those of most comparable cases. According to one crossnational study of economic liberalization, the Argentine reforms were the second most far-reaching in the world in the 1990–5 period, and they were faster and more far-reaching than those of Margaret Thatcher in England, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and Solidarity in Poland (Gwartney et al. 1996).¹ Second, unlike similar cases in Chile, France, and Spain, where socialist parties downplayed their shift to the center and continued to present themselves as the least conservative option in the party system, the Menem-led PJ leap-frogged its main rivals and positioned itself as Argentina's principal pro-market party in the 1990s. Finally, the PJ stands out in terms of its electoral success. Whereas many historically labor-based parties in Latin America – including the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) in Peru, and Democratic Action (AD) in Venezuela – experienced steep electoral decline during the 1990s,² the PJ's electoral base remained remarkably stable.³ Hence, although the PJ's

¹ Also Inter-American Development Bank (1997).

² The PRI electoral base eroded by nearly a third during the 1990s, and AD and APRA saw their electoral support decline by more than 50 percent.

³ The PJ averaged 44.0 percent of the presidential vote during the 1990s, compared to 43.7 percent during the 1980s. The Chilean Socialist Party and the Bolivian Revolutionary Nationalist Movement also maintained stable electoral bases in the 1990s.

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transformation entailed abandoning key aspects of its traditional program and loosening ties to core constituencies such as organized labor, these changes may have contributed in an important way to the party's survival in the neoliberal era.

Drawing on an analysis of the Peronist case, this book seeks to explain the capacity of labor-based parties to adapt to the opportunities and constraints posed by a changing socioeconomic environment. Building on recent research on parties in the advanced industrial countries (Koelble 1991, 1992; Kitschelt 1994a), it adopts an organizational approach to party change, treating parties' internal structures as intervening variables that mediate their responses to environmental change. Yet it also refines this literature by highlighting the importance of informal and noninstitutionalized party structures. The dominant literature on party organization, which is based almost entirely on studies of advanced industrialized countries, tends to take institutionalized party structures for granted. Yet in Latin America and elsewhere, many parties – including some very important ones – are characterized by informally structured and internally fluid organizations. As this book demonstrates, variation on the dimension of institutionalization may have important implications for party behavior. A central argument of the book is that lower levels of institutionalization – though often a source of inefficiency, disorder, and ineffective representation – tend to enhance parties' flexibility during periods of crisis. Thus, loosely structured party organizations, such as those characteristic of many populist parties, are often better equipped to adapt and survive in a context of economic crisis or change than are well-institutionalized party structures such as those characteristic of many social democratic and communist parties.

The Argentine case illustrates this argument. The PJ's rapid adaptation was made possible by a party structure that is mass-based but weakly institutionalized. Although the PJ maintains a powerful mass organization with deep roots in working- and lower-class society, it differs from more prototypical working-class parties in that its internal structure is fluid. Due in large part to its populist origins, the PJ lacks a central bureaucracy, effective party organs, and routinized internal rules and procedures. Though often a source of inefficiency and disorder, such internal fluidity provides the party with a substantial degree of strategic flexibility. This flexibility contributed in at least three ways to the PJ's adaptation and survival in the neoliberal era. First, the weakly institutionalized nature of the Peronist party–union linkage permitted the rapid dismantling of traditional mechanisms of labor participation when union influence began to hinder the party's electoral performance. Second, the absence of stable career paths and secure tenure patterns facilitated the removal of old-guard leaders and permitted the entry and rise of new blood into the party leadership. Third, the absence of stable norms of accountability or routinized decision rules provided President Menem with substantial room

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to maneuver in designing and implementing a radical economic reform program.

The book thus seeks to bridge the predominantly European literature on party organization with Latin American cases. Notwithstanding the long tradition of research on party organizations in Europe and the United States,⁴ Latin American party organizations have received remarkably little scholarly attention.⁵ As a result, we know very little about how even some of the region's largest and most successful parties function internally. Theoretically informed analyses of Latin American party organizations will help to broaden the scope of a literature that has traditionally been based on studies of a few advanced industrialized countries. Although research on European and North American party organizations has generated important knowledge and insights, the fact that it captures only a narrow slice of the empirical universe of party organizations limits the generalizability of the concepts and theories that emerge from this literature.

This introductory chapter is structured as follows. First, it outlines the programmatic and coalitional challenges facing contemporary labor-based parties and examines the implications of party adaptation (or nonadaptation) for regime stability in Latin America. It then presents a basic framework for analyzing party change, making the case for an approach that focuses on party organization. It shows how the PJ case may help us refine contemporary theories about the relationship between party organization and adaptation. The chapter then presents the central theoretical argument of the study: that lower levels of institutionalization may, under certain conditions, facilitate party adaptation and survival. It concludes with an overview of how this argument is applied to the Peronist case.

A NEW CRITICAL JUNCTURE: THE DUAL CHALLENGE FACING LATIN AMERICAN LABOR-BASED PARTIES

Labor-based parties are parties whose core constituency is *organized labor*.⁶ Such parties depend to a significant extent on trade union support (in the form of financial and organizational resources, the delivery of votes, and social peace when the party is in office) for their political success, and as a result, unions exercise an important degree of influence over the party leadership in

⁴ On European party organizations, see Michels (1911), Duverger (1954), Panebianco (1988), Kitschelt (1989a, 1994a), Koelble (1991), and Katz and Mair (1992, 1994). On U.S. party organizations, see Ostrogorski (1902), Key (1949), Eldersveld (1964), Mayhew (1986), Shefter (1994), and Aldrich (1995).

⁵ Exceptions include recent work by Coppedge (1994), Mainwaring and Scully (1995), and Mainwaring (1999), as well as the comparative study of Latin American party organizations currently being undertaken by Manuel Alcántara and his colleagues at the University of Salamanca.

⁶ The term "core constituency" is taken from Gibson (1996: 12–13).

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terms of strategy, the party program, and candidate selection.⁷ While labor-based parties vary ideologically (from communism to social democracy to different forms of populism), they have historically shared an aversion to liberal economic policies. Committed to some type of state-directed redistributionism, usually in the form of demand enhancement policies, labor-based parties of all types have historically played a leading role in efforts to oppose, regulate, or mitigate the negative effects of market capitalism.

The contemporary era of social and economic change, which has been characterized as a new “critical juncture” (Collier and Collier 1991: 772–4; Collier 1992: 2–7), poses a fundamental challenge to labor-based parties. Postwar party-labor alliances were sustained by the constellation of production patterns, international political and economic conditions, and macroeconomic and social policies associated with the Keynesian or import substituting industrialization (ISI) era. During this period, a steady global economic expansion provided governing labor-based parties with the resources and policy-making autonomy to carry out expansionary policies based on wage growth and redistributive social welfare programs. At the same time, mass production patterns created conditions under which relatively homogeneous working classes could be organized, and in which organized labor could deliver both social peace and working-class votes to their party allies (Pizzorno 1978; Howell and Daley 1992).

The decline of the Keynesian-ISI model posed a twofold challenge for labor-based parties: a *programmatic* challenge and a *coalitional* challenge. In the programmatic realm, the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, the increased volume and competitiveness of international trade, and the economic shocks of the 1970s eroded the foundations of the postwar economic order (Piore and Sabel 1984). As lower growth rates generated fiscal crises and inflationary pressure, national economic models came under increasing strain. In Latin America, these developments were exacerbated by the debt crisis, which imposed severe fiscal constraints on governments and substantially reduced their leverage vis-à-vis international financial institutions. In the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other financial institutions began to condition debt refinancing on the implementation of orthodox stabilization and adjustment programs. These changes dramatically reshaped policy parameters, reducing the feasibility of traditional pro-labor policies (Roberts 1997a). When in power, labor-based parties found their policy-making autonomy limited by an increasingly uncertain, competitive, and globalized economy. In Western Europe, the limits of

⁷ This definition includes parties in which trade unions hold a dominant position within the party (labor parties) and parties in which labor holds a privileged, yet still subordinate, position (such as many European social democratic parties and Latin American populist parties). It does not include parties that depend on working- or lower-class votes but in which trade unions do not play significant role.

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policy-making autonomy were seen in the failure of the French Socialist government's expansionary policies in the early 1980s and the difficulties faced by the Swedish social democratic government as it pursued a "third road" in the early 1990s. In Latin America, the comparative weakness of national economies and the constraints imposed by debt obligations reduced government autonomy even further. The costs of breaking with orthodox policies were clearly seen in the case of Peru, where the APRA government's heterodox program resulted in a cutoff of international finance and a deep hyperinflationary crisis in the late 1980s (Pastor and Wise 1992).

In the coalitional realm, evolving class structures have eroded the social bases of party-labor alliances, making close social and organizational linkages between parties and unions more difficult to sustain. The globalization of production, the decline of mass production forms, and the growth of tertiary, informal, and self-employed sectors have weakened industrial unions and centralized labor confederations. As workforces have become less concentrated in large factories and more heterogeneous in their skills, work experiences, and interests, organized labor's capacity to represent them has eroded. Membership in industrial unions has declined in most countries, and even where it has not, the capacity of unions to mobilize or negotiate on behalf of their bases has been reduced. As a result, labor organizations have less to offer parties in terms of the traditional party-union "exchange": They can deliver fewer votes, they are less necessary to ensure social peace, and they have fewer resources to invest in the political arena (Howell and Daley 1992).

Changing class structures have also eroded labor-based parties' electoral bases. The decline of industrial unionism and blue-collar workforces, together with increased levels of wealth and education and the influence of mass media technologies, has led to a weakening of class identities and an increase in electoral volatility (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984; Franklin, Mackie, and Valen 1992). In the advanced industrial countries, these changes have been associated with the emergence of an increasingly white-collar, "post-materialist" electorate (Inglehart 1977; Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984). In Latin America, postindustrialism has simultaneously taken two forms. While one segment of the workforce has followed the advanced industrial path toward white collarization, another segment has been pushed into the self-employed and informally employed sectors (Castells and Portes 1989; Tokman 1992). Geographically fragmented, heterogeneous in their forms of work, and generally unorganized, urban informal and self-employed workers tend to differ markedly from blue-collar workers in their interests and political identities (Castells and Portes 1989: 31–2).

To maintain their political viability, contemporary labor-based parties have had to make a twofold adjustment. First, when they are in government, they are under pressure to abandon key elements of their traditional

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socioeconomic programs in favor of more market-oriented policies. Although left-of-center governments – particularly in the advanced industrialized countries – still possess an important degree of macroeconomic policy-making autonomy (Garrett and Lange 1991; Garrett 1998), it is reasonable to suggest that all labor-based parties that seek to govern face pressure to shift toward the programmatic center. Second, to avoid tying themselves to an increasingly narrow social base, labor-based parties must rearticulate their old linkages to the working and lower classes (Howell and Daley 1992; Koelble 1992). In most cases, this has entailed reducing the influence of organized labor and broadening the party's appeal in an effort to capture a larger share of the white-collar and/or informal sector vote.⁸

Yet the existence of new environmental opportunities and constraints is no guarantee that party leaders will have either the will or capacity to respond to them. Indeed, labor-based parties have responded to the neoliberal challenge in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of success (Koelble 1992; Kitschelt 1994a; Burgess and Levitsky 2003). On the one hand, we find clear cases of failure. Some parties, such as the French and Chilean Communist parties, did not adapt and became increasingly marginal players in the political arena. Others, such as the Peruvian APRA, turned leftward initially and suffered steep electoral declines and long periods out of power. In other cases, such as AD in Venezuela, leaders attempted radical programmatic reforms but failed due to opposition both from within the party and from the electorate. Other labor-based parties adapted and fared well in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and the Australian Labor Party, as well as the Argentine PJ, shifted toward market-oriented policies and were able to maintain themselves in power for substantial periods of time. Between these successful and failed cases lies a range of parties, such as the Austrian Socialist Party and the Mexican PRI, which adapted slowly and experienced at least a moderate electoral decline.

PARTY ADAPTATION AND DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA

The question of whether and how labor-based parties adapt to changes in the socioeconomic environment has important implications not only for the parties themselves, but also for party systems and in some cases political regimes. When major parties fail, party systems may fragment or decompose, and young democratic regimes may become vulnerable. The relationship between party adaptation and regime stability can be clearly seen in contemporary Latin America. As in Western Europe, labor-mobilizing parties were central actors in many postwar Latin American party systems, including those in

⁸ This phenomenon has, of course, been observed in Western Europe since the 1960s (Kirchheimer 1966).

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Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela (Collier and Collier 1991). Yet whereas European labor-based parties tended to survive and eventually correct failed strategies in the 1980s and 1990s (Koelble 1992: 52),⁹ often leaving party systems virtually intact, in Latin America, failed party strategies tended to have deeper long-term consequences. In large part, this was due to the depth of the 1980s' socioeconomic crisis, during which failed policies often resulted in massive economic contractions and/or hyperinflation. Not surprisingly, these crises often had devastating effects on governing parties' electoral performance. Electoral failures were exacerbated by the fact that Latin American parties tend to be less deeply rooted in society than their advanced industrial counterparts (Mainwaring 1999: 28–35). As a result, the electoral declines suffered by parties such as AD in Venezuela, the Peruvian APRA, and the Chilean Communist Party in the 1990s were far more precipitous than those experienced by the British Labour Party or the German Social Democrats in the 1980s. In theory, party failure may be expected to lead to a partisan realignment in which old parties are replaced by newer, more representative parties. However, in contemporary Latin America, labor-based party failure has more often resulted in party system *decomposition* (Roberts 1997b). Due to the predominance of media-based, candidate-centered politics and the increasing volatility of electorates, most of the new parties that have emerged in the wake of established party failure have been loosely structured, personalistic, and often short-lived organizations. As a result, emerging party systems are often fragmented, fluid, and highly unstable.

Party system decomposition may have important implications for democratic stability in Latin America. Parties remain central actors in contemporary democracies. Notwithstanding the generalized trend toward weaker party organizations and media-based, candidate-centered politics (Katz 1990; Katz and Mair 1995; Perelli 1995), parties continue to be the most effective available means of structuring electoral choices and organizing the legislative process. Although neighborhood associations, nongovernmental organizations, identity-based social movements, and other nonparty organizations have emerged as important political actors,¹⁰ such organizations cannot effectively substitute for parties as mechanisms for coordinating citizens' political activities, aggregating their interests at the macro- or national-level, or providing them with regular access to the state (Hagopian 1998: 123–6; Roberts 1998a: 70–3). Where parties are weak, politics tends to be characterized by extreme electoral volatility, executive-legislative conflict, policy ineffectiveness, and the rise of “outsider” or antisystem candidates (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring 1999; Levitsky and Cameron 2003). These

⁹ The British Labour Party in the 1990s is perhaps the clearest example of such a recovery.

¹⁰ See Escobar and Alvarez (1992), Oxhorn 1995, Chalmers et al. (1997), Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (1998), and Keck and Sikkink (1998).

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phenomena tend to undermine the quality, and often the stability, of young democratic regimes.

Indeed, evidence from Latin America suggests that labor-based party adaptation and survival may have been critical to regime stability in the 1990s, particularly in countries with “labor-mobilizing” party systems (Roberts 1997b). Where powerful labor-based parties collapsed during the neoliberal era, as in Peru and Venezuela, party systems decomposed and democratic regimes either broke down or were brought to the brink of collapse.¹¹ In Peru, the collapse of APRA in the wake of Alan García’s failed heterodox policies contributed to a process of party system disintegration that made possible both the election of outsider Alberto Fujimori and the 1992 *autogolpe* in which Fujimori assumed dictatorial powers. In Venezuela, the failure of AD president Carlos Andres Pérez’s neoliberal experiment fueled an intensifying political and socioeconomic crisis that resulted in the collapse of the established party system, two coup attempts, and the eventual election of populist military rebel Hugo Chávez. By contrast, in countries where labor-based parties adapted successfully to the challenges of the neoliberal era, such as Argentina and Chile, both party systems and regimes remained relatively stable.

EXPLAINING PARTY ADAPTATION: AN ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACH

These divergent outcomes highlight the importance of understanding why some labor-based parties adapted successfully to the neoliberal challenge while others did not. Party adaptation can be understood as a set of changes in *strategy* and/or *structure*, undertaken in response to (or anticipation of) changed environmental conditions, that contribute to a party’s capacity to meet its “primary goal” (Harmel and Janda 1994: 265). Although labor-based parties pursue a variety of goals, winning elections is clearly a predominant one.

For a party to adapt successfully, it must accomplish three things. First, its leaders must choose an appropriate strategy. Party leaders may fail to respond to environmental change or they may respond too slowly. Alternatively, they may choose ineffective strategies. Second, reformers must sell the strategy to (or impose it upon) the rest of the party. Both programmatic and organizational change may be expected to meet resistance from old-guard leaders, trade unionists, and activists with a stake in the party’s traditional project. Third, the party must sell the new strategy to the electorate. No adaptive strategy can succeed unless it wins votes. Successful adaptation thus requires not only that parties undertake strategic change, but also that they

¹¹ For a comparative analysis of these party systems transformations, see Roberts (1997b, 2002).

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win enough votes to maintain (if not improve) their electoral performance vis-à-vis the precrisis period.¹²

The causes of party change may be analyzed at different levels. The “ultimate” causes of party change lie in the external environment (Katz and Mair 1992: 9; also Harmel and Janda 1982; Panebianco 1988). Although party strategies are shaped by many aspects of the environment (Harmel and Janda 1982), the most important of these is probably the electoral environment. Because winning public office is a primary goal of most major parties, their strategies tend to be heavily influenced by the structure and preferences of the electorate (Downs 1957; Schlesinger 1984: 383–4). Parties that do not adapt to changes in the electorate are likely to suffer defeat and/or decline. Because such defeats generally result in a loss of resources for parties and party leaders, they can be expected to serve as a stimulus for party change. Party strategy is also shaped by the structure of electoral competition. For example, whereas two-party systems create incentives for parties to converge on the center in pursuit of the median voter (Downs 1957), in a multiparty context, parties may be induced to adjust their strategies in response to competition on their own flank (Kitschelt 1994a: 128–30; Harmel and Svasand 1997).

Parties must also respond to changes in the economic environment. In all countries, but particularly in lower- and middle-income countries, economic constraints often limit the degree to which governing parties can pursue vote-maximizing strategies. Indeed, economic crisis may induce programmatic choices that have little to do with the immediate preferences of the electorate. In Latin America, for example, the economic crisis of the 1980s led many governing parties to adopt policies that ran directly counter to the programs on which they campaigned (Stokes 2001). The dramatic policy reversals carried out by governments in Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, and Venezuela were responses to deep economic crises, rather than vote- or office-maximizing strategies. Although these policy switches had important electoral consequences, in some cases benefiting populist parties that successfully stabilized the economy (Gervasoni 1997; Stokes 2001), the link between programmatic choice and electoral preferences in these cases was far from clear. In most of these countries, policy choices were made in a context of high uncertainty and an ill-informed and often skeptical electorate.

Although environmental factors explain why contemporary labor-based parties have incentives to adapt, they cannot explain whether and how parties *actually respond* to these incentives. Analyses that focus primarily on the electoral or economic context have difficulty explaining diverging

¹² Although strategic change and electoral performance do not necessarily go hand in hand, in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, the heavy costs associated with failed adaptation meant that in practice, the two frequently did vary together.